From Affliction to Empathy: Melodrama and Mental Illness in Recent Films from Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract

The subject matter of mental illness has fascinated artists and writers for centuries. Filmmakers have responded in diverse and innovative ways to the artistic challenge of portraying mental illness. In this thesis, I focus on the representations of mental illness in six recent films from Australia and New Zealand: *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989), *An Angel at My Table* (Campion, 1990), *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993), *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994), *Angel Baby* (Michael Rymer, 1995) and *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996). In each film, the protagonist is diagnosed, or treated by others, as mentally ill. Mental illness is portrayed as an affliction which the protagonist struggles to overcome. I argue that these films cultivate a relationship of empathy between the mentally ill character and the spectator. Whereas the related emotion of sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone, empathy involves feeling *with* that person; in other words, rather than feel *for* these mentally ill characters, we are invited to feel *like* they do.

In order to elicit empathy from the spectator, these Australian and New Zealand films employ the stylistic devices and narrative themes of the melodramatic mode. In this thesis, I introduce the concept of ‘the melodrama of affliction’, which is defined by four features of melodramatic style and theme: the externalisation of the protagonist’s internal state; the critical engagement with stereotypes; moral legibility; and the family home as a site of conflict and trauma. I identify each of these features with reference to the theories of melodrama scholars and a range of examples from silent and classical Hollywood melodramas, before closely analysing their function in one or more of the Australian and New Zealand films under investigation. Each of these four features contributes to the melodrama of affliction’s emotional appeal; in particular, the development of the spectator’s empathy towards the protagonist.

The melodrama of affliction offers an artistic solution to the challenge of portraying mental illness on film. These Australian and New Zealand films illustrate melodrama’s ability to secure our emotional identification with the afflicted protagonist. The effect of this empathic relationship is to bring the spectator closer to the experience of living with mental illness – a challenging and confronting position for most viewers. While the majority of mainstream, narrative films portray mentally ill characters as people to be feared or laughed at, the melodrama of affliction insists upon the shared humanity of the mad and the sane. The melodrama of affliction places the spectator in the protagonist’s shoes (metaphorically speaking) so that we may share the sensations and emotions experienced by the afflicted character. These films harness the emotional appeal of melodrama to invoke an empathic response in viewers towards their mentally ill protagonists. I argue that, by calling upon us to empathise with the mentally ill character, the melodrama of affliction bridges the gap between the mentally ill and the mentally well, and thereby demonstrates the power of melodrama’s emotional affect.
Declaration

This is to certify that
(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps,
bibliographies and appendices.
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For Christian & Jackson
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**
- Bridging the gap: Using melodrama to cultivate empathy .................1
  - The portrayal of mental illness in film ........................................7
  - Empathy and melodrama’s emotional affect ..................................11
  - Empathising with madness .........................................................18
  - Diagnosing the melodrama of affliction: overview of chapters ......20

**Chapter 1**
- Creating a Cinema of Empathy: Externalising the internal ...............27
  - The sights and sounds of subjective cinema ..................................28
  - Expressionistic “acting out”: gesture and the performing body .......32
  - The body of the text .....................................................................36
  - Reading style as psychology .........................................................41

**Chapter 2**
- Breakdown, Delusion, Delirium: The melodrama of affliction as hysterical text ..........................................................47
  - Performing madness in *Shine* .....................................................47
  - Empathising with the irrational in *Angel Baby* .........................56
  - Delirious visions in *Heavenly Creatures* .....................................61

**Chapter 3**
- Challenging the Boundary between Self and Other: The critical engagement with stereotypes .............................................71
  - Stereotypes of mental illness in popular culture ..........................72
  - Stereotypes in melodrama .........................................................74
  - Fear and fascination: The ambivalence of the stereotype ...............77
  - Stereotypes in the melodrama of affliction ..................................80
  - Emotional involvement and pathos ..............................................81

**Chapter 4**
- Unravelling the Myths of Madness: Deconstructing social and medical discourses in *An Angel at My Table* ............................85
  - “I’ve got schizophrenia”: Pathologising difference .......................87
  - Playing the part of the mad writer ..............................................92
  - Overcoming the affliction of stereotype .......................................97

**Chapter 5**
- Victims and Villains: The moral legibility of the melodrama of affliction ..................................................................................105
  - The moral occult and melodrama’s theatrical heritage ...................106
  - Bearing witness to suffering and victimisation .............................108
  - Retrieving a lost innocence .........................................................110

**Chapter 6**
- Empathising with Murder: Revealing the moral occult in *Bad Boy Bubby* .................................................................................115
  - “Kid’s completely crackers”: Bubby as mentally ill ......................115
  - “Psycho killer, qu’est que c’est?”: Bubby as villain ......................121
  - “He is the complete innocent”: Bubby as idiot savant .................127
  - Bubby as victim-hero ..................................................................133
  - Breaking the cycle of abuse: recovering Bubby’s lost innocence ....137

**Chapter 7**
- Rage Against the Patriarchy: The family home as site of conflict and trauma ..........................................................145
  - The pleasure of recognition: revealing the ideological contradictions of patriarchy .........................................................147
  - The unruly woman: both cause and effect of ideological conflict..153
Chapter 8  Empathising with Protest: The unruly woman of melodrama in

Sweetie.........................................................................................................................161
Sweetie as a model of unruliness................................................................................162
Problematising moral legibility: the ambiguity of the abuse
narrative in Sweetie.......................................................................................................167
Rebel within the home: the unruly daughters of melodrama ........170
The unruly woman as a figure of empathy.........................................................177

Conclusion  Concluding Diagnosis ...........................................................................183
Bibliography.............................................................................................................189
Filmography............................................................................................................207
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

Introduction

Bridging the gap: Using melodrama to cultivate empathy

“All film turns life into melodrama.”
~ Alan A. Stone (2002) on Shine & A Beautiful Mind

In 1999, two films were released that demonstrated cinema’s ongoing fascination with depicting mental illness on screen. One was the product of a major Hollywood studio, Fox; the other, an art-house film from the Czech Republic. Both films – Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) and Návrat Idiota (Return of the Idiot, Sasa Gedeon, 1999) – feature a protagonist whose view of the world is affected by an unspecified mental illness. In each film, the audience is invited to share the male protagonist’s world view and to empathise with his emotions through various first-person devices such as point of view shots, voice overs, and fantasy sequences. Through these devices, the films encourage a close relationship between the protagonist and the audience. While these two films may seem poles apart in terms of budgets, casting, and style, they share a desire to show the world through the eyes of their troubled protagonists, to foster an empathic relationship between character and audience. These films harness the devices of subjective cinema to take us inside their protagonists’ delusional states, giving us access to their troubled psychology.

This thesis is the end result of a journey that began when I saw these films and first started thinking about the challenges for filmmakers of depicting mental illness on screen, particularly when the mentally ill character is the central protagonist – the figure with whom narrative cinema most often encourages us to identify.

1 Fight Club was adapted from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel of the same name. Towards the end of the film, in a narrative twist designed to surprise the audience, it is revealed that the protagonist and narrator (Edward Norton) has developed a split personality, adopting an anarchic alter ego called Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) as a response to his alienation from corporate and consumer cultures. There is no scene in the film in which the protagonist’s psychological condition is actually diagnosed. Návrat Idiota (Return of the Idiot) is based upon Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel The Idiot. Through flashbacks and dialogue, we learn that the protagonist Frantisek (Pavel Liska) spent several years in an institution for an unnamed mental illness. We know little of his past prior to his institutionalisation and other characters simply refer to him as ‘the idiot’.
This idea of the mentally ill character as hero has been taken further by Richard Kelly in his debut feature *Donnie Darko* (2001). Implicitly in the storyline and explicitly in his commentary, Kelly asserts that his eponymous protagonist, who is on medication and consults regularly with a psychiatrist, is a superhero with the powers of time travel and super-human strength. Donnie is a bright but obviously troubled teenager, lashing out at the apathy and comfortable complacency of white, middle-class suburbia. In *Donnie Darko*’s variation of the mad genius stereotype, the world view of a mentally unbalanced character is portrayed as more truthful, more logical than the supposed ‘normality’ that surrounds him. As with *Fight Club*’s attack on consumerism and *Return of the Idiot*’s exposé of family secrets and betrayals, *Donnie Darko* locates its social critique in the voice of the madman. In doing so, mental illness becomes a vehicle for expressing what is repressed in the dominant culture. These films play upon our fears of the fine line between sanity and madness, and show us just how seductive madness can be, when it gives voice to what is usually unspoken. Mental illness films also engage with a long literary tradition of representations of madness, ranging from the tragic figures of Shakespeare’s King Lear and Ophelia, to the novels of counter-cultural critique by Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), and Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991). These novels, like *Fight Club* and *Return of the Idiot*, were also adapted for the screen, suggesting the enduring appeal of their subject matter.

The mentally ill protagonist received further cinematic attention in 2001, the same year as *Donnie Darko*, with the release of *Iris*, directed by Richard Eyre, and *A Beautiful Mind*, directed by Ron Howard. *Iris* portrays novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch’s (Kate Winslet/Judi Dench) descent into Alzheimer’s disease, while *A Beautiful Mind* chronicles economist and mathematician John Nash’s (Russell Crowe) journey towards a new understanding of his condition.

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2 For example, Kelly’s commentary on the DVD release of *Donnie Darko* (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001) and his interview with Kevin Conroy Scott in *The Donnie Darko Book* (Kelly, 2003: ix).

3 This idea of madness as a tool of social critique is not new, of course, and it is a notion that pre-dates the cinema (Malone, in de Heer, 1996: 9). Perhaps the most enduring examples of these lie in the plays of Shakespeare: the nonsensical ditties of the Fool in *King Lear* and Feste in *Twelfth Night* “gave voice to darker truths denied to sober speech” (Porter, 2002: 69).

4 There is a range of works of critical reflection on this literary tradition (Porter, 2002: 224-225). Elaine Showalter interweaves her analyses of representations of madness by writers such as Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and Antonia White, with a history of the evolution of psychiatry and the treatment of women in *The Female Malady* (1985).
lifelong struggle with the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. These films, based on the biographies of real people already famous within their professions for their academic achievements, explore the popular and persistent myth of the relationship between genius and madness. Upon release, *Iris* and *A Beautiful Mind* were frequently compared with an earlier film, *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996), which portrayed the psychological breakdown and partial recovery of a piano prodigy, David Helfgott. In my view, it seemed that the breakthrough success of this independent Australian film – from the hype following its world premiere at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival to its numerous awards, including the Academy Award for Best Actor for Geoffrey Rush – had paved the way for studios such as Miramax Films (*Iris*) and Imagine Entertainment (*A Beautiful Mind*) to tap into the commercial and critical potential of a narrative in which the main character’s mental illness provokes neither fear nor derision in the audience. Indeed, in films like *Shine*, *Iris* and *A Beautiful Mind*, mental illness becomes an affliction, almost a badge of honour, one that marks the protagonist as virtuous and heroic in their struggle with the condition, thereby encouraging the audience to empathise with his or her plight.

*Shine* is not only the catalyst for this recent proliferation of films depicting mental illness; it is also the culmination of a cycle of six feature films produced in Australia and New Zealand between 1989 and 1996 that share an interest in depicting mental illness from the point of view of the afflicted character and exploring the boundaries between normality and insanity. These are *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989, Aus), *An Angel at My Table* (Jane Campion, 1990, NZ), *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993, Aus), *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994, NZ), *Angel Baby* (Roy Porter provides a useful overview of the mad genius myth is his short history of madness (2002: 66-68, 80-83), while Kay Redfield Jamison devotes a book-length study of artists, writers, painters and composers to a critical examination of this myth (1993). The recent trend of ‘bio-pics’ portraying famous artists and intellectuals afflicted with mental illness, of which *Iris* and *A Beautiful Mind* are the most well-known examples, continued in 2003 with the release of *Sylvia*, directed by New Zealand filmmaker Christine Jeffs, starring Gwyneth Paltrow as suicidal poet Sylvia Plath. Similarly, while its characters are fictional, the adaptation of David Auburn’s play *Proof* (John Madden, 2005) contributes to this trend of mad genius films. Gwyneth Paltrow plays the daughter of a brilliant mathematician (Anthony Hopkins) who suffered dementia, and she fears she has inherited both his gift for mathematics and his insanity. Historically, the figure of the tortured artist has proved popular with filmmakers; Vincente Minnelli’s portrait of Vincent Van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1957) and the French art-house film *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, 1988) are just two well-known examples from different eras and production contexts.

5 For example, in articles and reviews by Steven Hyler (2003), Peter Krausz (2003), Raja Mishra (2002), John Patterson (2002), Alan A. Stone (2002).
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

(Michael Rymer, 1995, Aus), and *Shine*. Harry Oldmeadow describes the Australian films in this group (excluding *Sweetie*) as “a wave of mid 1990s films exploring the problems of ‘madness’ and depicting the perplexities of the psychically damaged who are trying to make their way in the world of ‘normality’” (McFarlane et al., 1999: 264). He includes the ensemble comedy *Cosi* (Louis Nowra, 1996) and the little-known *Lilian’s Story* (Jerzy Domaradski, 1996) in this “wave” of recent Australian films. Oldmeadow’s use of quotation marks for the terms ‘madness’ and ‘normality’ highlights the tendency of these films to take up mental illness as a vehicle for wider social critique. He is not alone in drawing our attention to these films’ shared interest in mentally ill characters. Liz Ferrier (2001) and Con Anemogiannis (1996) have written essays documenting the coincidence of these films in Australian and New Zealand cinema. This recent trend has also been noted by film critic and commentator Father Peter Malone (2001: 81) and is the subject of a journal article by psychiatrists Alan Rosen and Garry Walter (1997). I take this coincidence as the starting point for my research; rather than seeking to establish these films as constituting a cycle or a wave, which these writers have already attended to, I am interested in investigating what these films have in common as *films*. Various reasons have been offered for the appearance of this cycle of mental illness films in the 1990s, ranging from notions of the collective unconscious (Scott Hicks, in conversation with Malone), to an analogy for the state of the Australian film industry as “creatively disabled” (Ferrier), to a common thread of lunacy, quirkiness and madness running through Australian and New Zealand cinema (Anemogiannis). While it may be tempting to generalise about the national cinemas that produced these particular films, or to make essentialising claims about notions of national identity on the basis of their characters, in this thesis I take a different approach by adopting a theoretical framework that focuses on questions of cinematic style and narrative form, on text rather than context. Indeed, the shared, transnational identity of these films as ‘Antipodean’ is largely taken for granted, in order to offer a new perspective on the study of Australian and New Zealand films.
While they are different in style and market positioning, ranging from art-house films and cult movies, to commercial and critical successes, each of the six films I analyse in this thesis portrays mental illness through the eyes and experiences of the afflicted protagonist. In these films, the protagonist is labelled mentally ill. This is usually communicated within the diegesis by the protagonist being medically diagnosed or receiving psychiatric treatment, as depicted in *An Angel at My Table, Shine, Angel Baby* and *Heavenly Creatures*. In *An Angel at My Table*, for example, we see the protagonist, Janet Frame (Kerry Fox), carrying a suitcase as she tentatively walks down the hallway into the small kitchen of her working-class family home, where her parents, brother and sisters are crowded around the table. She hands over a piece of paper and announces “I’ve got schizophrenia.” Her sister inquires, “what’s that?” So begins Janet’s eight-year ordeal as a patient in psychiatric hospitals and a lifetime of coping with the stigma of mental illness, even after it is discovered that her diagnosis was incorrect. *An Angel at My Table* sensitively portrays Janet’s tormented years as the subject of psychiatric discourse and her struggle to overcome the affliction of being regarded as ‘mad’. In those remaining films where this medical discourse is absent, the protagonist may nevertheless be regarded as mentally ill by other characters who, expressing their fear or intolerance of difference, label the protagonist as ‘mad’ or ‘unwell’. The title characters of *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Sweetie* are regarded by others as “crackers”, “schizo” and “a bit mental”. Thus, the protagonist of these narratives is medically and/or socially constructed as mad. He or she is afflicted with the diagnosis, and often the symptoms, of mental illness. These films narrate the journey of the protagonist as she or he struggles to overcome this affliction in search of happiness and social acceptance.

The issues raised by these films – illness and medical discourse, social critique and stigma, the family and the individual’s place within it – are the territory of melodrama. As a mode, melodrama offers an emotionally affective dramatisation of these issues in a form that is commercially oriented towards mass appeal. For a subject such as mental illness, which remains socially marginalised and

7 *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Heavenly Creatures* have acquired cultish devotion over the years, evidenced by the various fan sites dedicated to the films, such as Jon Dunlop’s *Bad Boy Bubby* fan site, Adam Abrams’ ‘Fourth World’ site dedicated to *Heavenly Creatures*, and Anthony Larme’s pictorial tour of locations in and near Christchurch where *Heavenly Creatures* was filmed. Full URLs for these sites are provided in the Bibliography.
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

misunderstood, melodrama is a powerful ally in bringing these stories to the screen as entertainment first and foremost, rather than education. Three of the films in this thesis – **Bad Boy Bubby**, **Angel Baby** and **Shine** – were funded by the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC), which suggests the commercial appeal of these narratives. Writing in 1992, before these Australian films were made, Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer argued strongly for the commercial potential of melodrama and suggested that the failure of Australian films to be commercially successful in competition with Hollywood was attributable to Australian filmmakers’ reluctance to embrace melodrama and the aesthetic norms underpinning classical cinema. More recently, Liz Ferrier describes the Australian films I analyse in this thesis as “commercially viable films about eccentric, non-commercial, artistic characters” (2001: 62). While the actual commercial success of these films varies, as Ferrier acknowledges (2001: 76 n5), their commercial ambitions are evident in their harnessing of the style and themes of the melodramatic mode, a modality which “continues to dominate mainstream cinema” (Gledhill, 1999: 235). These Australian and New Zealand films adopt melodrama as a commercial and aesthetic strategy, one that “delivers … a method of production and marketing, together with a set of visual, gestural, and musical strategies which combine bodily eloquence and spectacle” (Gledhill, 1999: 234).

In this thesis, I examine the ways in which six films draw upon the stylistic devices and themes of melodrama to portray mental illness in a sympathetic and emotionally affective manner for the audience. These features of style and theme include melodrama’s trademark ‘excess’ in performance, mise-en-scène and music; its reliance upon character stereotypes; and its dramatic staging of moral conflict and family dysfunction. Historically, mentally ill characters in mainstream cinema have

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8 Of the two funding bodies in Australian cinema – the FFC and the Australian Film Commission (AFC) – the FFC represents the higher-budgeted “mainstream” while the AFC invests in a lower-budgeted “minor stream” (O’Regan, 1996: 15). **Sweetie** received funding from the AFC.

9 In their discussion of the evolution of melodrama theory, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams argue that early attempts to reclaim melodrama’s alleged ‘excesses’ via irony (as in 1970s Marxist readings of Sirk’s films) betray a persistently pejorative, misogynistic view of melodrama (Gledhill, 1987: 6-13; Williams, 1998: 43-44). In a section titled ‘The Melodramatic Mode: Excess or Norm?’, Williams argues that “if we are to understand melodrama as a system, then we would do well to eliminate the term excess from attempts to describe this systematicity” (1998: 58, her emphasis).
been depicted as sources of horror or comedy (Wahl, 1995). These films, however, seek to challenge the audience by encouraging us to care about these characters, even inviting us to identify with them and to empathise with their emotions and dilemmas. It is through the power of melodrama that this empathic response is evoked. Given their shared stylistic devices, narrative patterns and thematic concerns derived from melodrama and their common interest in portraying mental illness empathetically, I call these films melodramas of affliction.

Whether revealing moral truths through the use of tableaux on the early nineteenth-century stage (Brooks, 1995: 24-25) or betraying characters’ unspoken desires through costume, lighting and other devices of mise-en-scène in the 1950s Hollywood studios (Elsaesser, 1995: 360-376), melodrama has proven a powerful narrative strategy for giving voice to what is repressed, for conveying narrative meaning without words. Melodrama is also an effective strategy for encouraging audience identification with the inner turmoil and dilemmas of characters, through its ability to externalise characters’ emotions and harness the devices of music and visual style in the service of emotional affect (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 193-194). Drawing upon melodrama scholarship, I identify the core features of the melodrama of affliction and demonstrate these features through close textual analyses of six Australian and New Zealand films. These analyses reveal their filmmakers’ desires to encourage the audience to share the emotional journey of their protagonists. I argue that, through their engagement with melodrama’s emotional appeal, these films call on the spectator to empathise with the character portrayed as mentally ill.

The portrayal of mental illness in film

Few scholars from cinema studies have explored the issues raised by representations of mental illness on screen. The challenge of translating the symptoms of mental illness into artistic expression, the cultural association of genius with madness, and the idea of madness as a form of social critique have each been dealt with by scholars from a variety of disciplines including psychiatry, medical history and philosophy. 10 There are only two studies that examine mental illness in

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Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

film from the perspective of cinema studies and in both cases, these authors collaborated with medical experts to produce their analyses of psychiatry in classical and contemporary Hollywood cinema (Gabbard and Gabbard, 1999) and of mental illness portrayals in American and European films (Fleming and Manvell, 1985).

Krin Gabbard, a film scholar, teamed with Glen O. Gabbard, a professor of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, to produce a critical study of the portrayal of psychiatry in Hollywood cinema. First published in 1987, *Psychiatry and the Cinema* was revised in 1999 to take into account the growing number of mental illness films in the 1990s. As its title suggests, the book’s focus is not so much on mental illness as on the figure of the psychiatrist, and the various roles this character plays throughout the decades of Hollywood mental illness movies. Gabbard and Gabbard chart the passage of the psychiatrist from Hollywood’s ‘golden age’ of psychiatry in the forties and fifties, when the psychiatrist was portrayed as a God-like, heroic figure, to the scepticism of the seventies’ anti-psychiatry movement, and the portrayal of the psychiatrist as a father-figure or love object in films of the nineties. They are less concerned with how the patients and their symptoms are portrayed, and more interested in the relationships between patient and psychiatrist.

Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell offer a similar pairing of experts from the fields of psychology and cinema respectively in their study from twenty years ago, *Images of Madness: The Portrayal of Insanity in the Feature Film* (1985). Their wide-ranging study adopts a thematic approach, comparing earlier films with more recent depictions of the same psychological condition that are grouped together in categories such as “Society and Madness”, “Possession as Madness”, “Eros and Madness” and “War and Madness”. Fleming and Manvell employ a broad definition of the term ‘madness’, often examining films with a tenuous link to the subject of mental illness, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). As Thomas J. Schoeneman observes, this tends to thwart the authors’ aim to write a contextual and social history of the portrayal of insanity in the cinema and results in distortions and misreadings: “the subject matter presents a strong temptation to overdiagnose characters in these films” (1987: 512). When demonic possession and drug abuse are equally and uncritically labelled ‘madness’ alongside specific medical conditions
such as schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, the insights of such a broad study seem applicable to almost any film depicting an eccentric character whose behaviour challenges society’s norms. By collapsing mental illness with antisocial behaviours such as alcoholism, delinquency and sexual obsession, Fleming and Manvell’s study tells us more about outcasts and rebels than it does about how the specific experience of mental illness has been portrayed in these American and European films.

Most studies of the cinematic portrayal of mental illness come from authors with a background in psychology or psychiatry. Their main concern is to identify the dominant images of mental illness in films and other mass media such as newspapers and television programs, and to examine the ways in which these images shape public attitudes towards mental illness. While American films have dominated the study of mental illness representations, Sydney psychiatrists Alan Rosen and Garry Walter have published two papers on *Shine* (1997 & 2000). Their first paper included *Shine* in a group of Australian and New Zealand feature films from the 1980s and 1990s portraying mental illness. Several of these films are my objects of inquiry in this thesis. Rosen and Walter’s work is part of a growing number of articles in medical journals that “regard examining the arts, including film, as a legitimate and important arena of professional concern” (Rosen and Walter, 2000: 238). A notable example is Claire Wilson’s study of portrayals of mental illness in prime-time dramas on New Zealand television, which analyses the devices of television production (such as editing, lighting and cinematography) used to construct a portrayal of a mentally ill character as threatening and dangerous (Wilson et al, 1999b). With the exception of these few papers, the critical response to the portrayal of mental illness in Australian and New Zealand film and television is overshadowed by the pervasive cultural influence of Hollywood studio pictures and prime-time US television shows, and this is reflected in the medical literature.

These medical studies of mental illness representations play a part in the growing advocacy of mental illness support networks for more accurate portrayals of mental illness in film and television. However, as Stout, Villegas and Jennings (2004) point out, the nature of these portrayals is often determined by the demands of commercial filmmaking and the expectations of audiences, rather than by the needs of those with mental illness or the experts who study it. The result is often a simplification of complex experiences into stereotypical representations that may not reflect the lived reality of mental health conditions.

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11 Stout, Villegas and Jennings (2004) provide a comprehensive review of 34 empirical studies, published between 1990 and 2003, examining mental illness depictions in mass media, which updates Wahl’s (1992) systematic review of more than 40 years’ research in this area.
people living with mental illness. The identification of stereotypes of mental illness is a common feature in studies such as those conducted by the Glasgow Media Group (Philo, 1996) and by American psychiatrist Otto F. Wahl (1995). As a mental health professional dedicated to combating the social stigma of mental illness, Wahl is predominantly concerned with the inaccurate portrayals and misrepresentations of mental illness in the American mass media that directly contribute to negative stereotypes, which in turn affect real-life sufferers. He examines how filmmakers depict the behaviour of mentally ill characters – whether their behaviour is portrayed as comic, tragic or horrific – and considers how these depictions influence social attitudes towards mental illness. Recently, Steven Hyler (2003) has updated his 1991 essay in which he surveyed the range of stereotypes of mental illness in Hollywood cinema. Hyler revisits this material in the wake of recent, popular films such as *A Beautiful Mind*, *As Good As It Gets* (James L. Brooks, 1997), *Analyze This* (Harold Ramis, 1999) and *American Psycho*. Hyler provides labels for five common stereotypes of characters with mental illness (“homicidal maniac”; “narcissistic parasite”; “seductress”; “rebellious free spirit”; “specially gifted”) and summarises the main features of each stereotype (2003: 33). Like Wahl, Hyler is concerned about the influence of these negative stereotypes on legislators and the community in their perception of and attitudes towards people with mental illness. He shares Wahl’s concern about the impact these portrayals may have on patients’ self-esteem and their willingness to seek treatment.

What Hyler and other mental health advocates often fail to consider is why filmmakers and other media producers use stereotypes and how stereotypes function within these media texts. In contrast with this scholarship in the field of psychiatric medicine, in this thesis I do not focus on the accuracy of common stereotypes of mental illness. My aim is to take an alternative approach to the established literature.

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12 Hyler’s original paper (1991) on stigma in Hollywood films was co-authored with Irving Schneider and Glenn Gabbard, one of the authors of *Psychiatry and the Cinema* (1999), discussed above.

13 Exceptions here are the Glasgow Media Group, who consider the pressures on journalists and television writers to come up with stories that have a dramatic or newsworthy ‘edge’ (Henderson, in Philo, 1996: 18-36) and Wilson and her colleagues, who acknowledge the demands of television production values to create “compelling” depictions of mental illness and the “impression of pace, which means that characters must be introduced (signified) to viewers with little pause” (1999b: 240, 241). Wahl also attempts to account for the appeal of stereotypes (1995: 110-131). I will refer to his arguments in greater detail in Chapter Three.
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

on mental illness in film, which is dominated by medical perspectives rather than cinema studies analyses, and to consider the narrative function of stereotypes in filmmaking, particularly melodrama, and their appeal to filmmakers and audiences alike. To investigate how mental illness is represented in the cinema, we must examine the various cinematic devices used to construct and maintain stereotypes of mental illness, in order to understand their ongoing cultural appeal. This leads me to consider the role of stereotypes in melodrama. Given their centrality to previous studies of mental illness in film and their extensive use in melodrama both on stage and on screen, stereotypes are one of the defining features of the melodrama of affliction. By analysing six recent films through the theoretical framework of melodrama, I present a more nuanced, sophisticated understanding of the functionality and appeal of mental illness stereotypes.

Empathy and melodrama’s emotional affect

In a film where the mentally ill character is also the hero or heroine, the techniques of melodrama – in addition to the principles of classical narrative – prove crucial in encouraging the audience to care about the protagonist and to share their emotions and dilemmas. Melodrama is a powerful tool for producing a particular emotional affect, for evoking in the audience a feeling of sympathy towards the afflicted character who is presented as a victim of forces – whether psychological or social – beyond their control (Williams, 1998: 42-51). Indeed, “[o]ne of the characteristic features of melodramas in general is that they concentrate on the point of view of the victim” (Elsaesser, 1995: 374). Melodrama has a long history of the sympathetic depiction of suffering and victimisation: “If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims […] then the operative mode is melodrama” (Williams, 1998: 42). The portrayal of victimisation is central to melodrama’s emotional appeal to the viewer. This tradition is continued and extended by the melodrama of affliction, which goes beyond eliciting a sympathetic response and actively encourages the spectator to empathise with the afflicted, victimised protagonist.14

The distinction between sympathy and empathy is important, for these two terms are often confused. Empathy is related to but different from sympathy. Both emotions relate to our response to the plight of another person, but where sympathy involves feeling for someone – feeling sorry for them – empathy is feeling like someone – putting yourself ‘in their shoes’.\(^{15}\) Like many writers on empathy, film theorist Alex Neill stresses the distinction between sympathy and empathy as “feeling for” (sympathy) versus “feeling with” (empathy) (1996: 175-176, his emphasis). To share in the emotional and mental feeling of another person is to experience empathy. The English word is an approximation of the German *Einfühlung*, which literally means “in-feeling” (Smith, 1996: 130). Empathy requires a mental ‘entering in’-to the feelings of the other person, such that we share the same emotions that they experience in response to their particular situation: “In empathizing with another, … one imagines the situation she is in from her point of view; one imaginatively represents to oneself her beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and so on as though they were one’s own” (Neill, 1996: 191).

There is a considerable body of writing in the fields of psychology and philosophy concerning our empathic responses to other people in real life, and empathy plays an important role in psychotherapy.\(^{16}\) Philosophers have also examined our ability to empathise with fictional characters in novels, plays and films.\(^{17}\) Cognitive film theorists have recently shown an interest in this particular emotional relationship between character and spectator.\(^{18}\) Throughout this thesis, I will draw upon these theorists’ investigations of empathy in classical narrative cinema to clarify the meaning of the term ‘empathy’ and its intended affective response in the spectator. My project is similar to Carl Plantinga’s study of the human face’s ability to elicit empathy via close-ups and reaction shots in point-of-

\(^{15}\) Murray Smith also stresses this distinction, using the terms of “acentral imagining” and “central imagining” to distinguish, respectively, sympathy from empathy in our engagement with characters in a film (1997: 414-415).

\(^{16}\) Empathy is part of the counselling technique developed by American psychologist Carl Rogers (1959: 210-211).

\(^{17}\) Neill provides an overview of ongoing debates regarding the philosophical investigation of empathy (1996: 175), and focuses particularly on the work of Susan Feagin (Neill, 1996: 182-183). Gregory Currie (2004) is another philosopher who has written about empathising with fictional characters in novels and films.

view editing: “My major concern here will be with elicitors – characteristics of the film that elicit response… This assumes a spectator who has become engrossed in the film and is having the affective response intended by the film’s makers” (1999: 248).

My focus, however, is on the specific ways in which melodrama elicits empathy, so my investigation of the empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator is grounded in theories of melodrama. Consequently, as a result of my investigation of the emotional response elicited by the melodrama of affliction, I offer a melodrama-based model of empathy, one that can co-exist alongside, rather than in opposition to, the philosophical and psychological approaches adopted by cognitive film theorists.

In our engagement with fiction, whether in cinema or other media, empathy involves the mental entering into the emotions and feelings of a character. In the melodrama of affliction, we are invited to imagine what mental illness feels like for the protagonist. It is important to note that we are not being asked to imagine ourselves as mentally ill. Empathy does not involve a complete loss of self in identification with the other: “any sense of empathy […] should not be thought of in terms of a total absorption within the characters” (Smith, 1996: 140-141). As Murray Smith explains, empathy is “frequently – perhaps even necessarily – partial” (1997: 414) and throughout the film, the viewer maintains a “knowledge of the larger situation” (1997: 415), a greater awareness of the social forces working for and against the victimised protagonist. For the purposes of this thesis, empathy “is construed as ‘feeling with,’ as the mirroring of a protagonist’s emotional state by the audience” (Neill, 1996: 177). In other words, we are called upon to share the same emotions being experienced by the character labelled as mentally ill; we are encouraged to emotionally identify with them. I claim that it is the central goal of the melodrama of affliction to elicit our empathy for the mentally ill protagonist.

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19 Berys Gaut also refers to empathy in terms of ‘mirroring’: “through empathy our emotional reactions mirror those of a character” (1999: 213).

20 In relation to novels, plays and films, empathy is often described as the ability to identify with a character (Neill, 1996: 177-178). Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘identify’ in this sense. I am aware of the significance of the term ‘identification’ for psychoanalytic film theory and its critique by cognitive film theorists, but I do not wish to take up those debates here, as they are beyond the scope of this thesis.
In order to clarify the concept of empathy, it must be stressed that the experience of empathy is not necessarily pleasant. Empathy means feeling what another person feels; consequently, an empathic response can be quite painful when the emotions shared are fear, hurt, anger and so on. This is particularly the case in the melodrama of affliction, where the symptoms and social stigma of mental illness are distressing and traumatic for the protagonist and, by extension, the audience. As uncomfortable as our emotional identification with the protagonist may be, this empathic relationship offers us a valuable insight into the emotional experience of living with the symptoms of mental illness, or being treated as mentally ill. In Smith’s account of central imagining or “imagining from the inside” (his term for empathy), he attends to the wider social effects of the experience of empathy in the cinema:

Such emotions are crucial to the larger psychological and social value of fictions: we come to a better understand [sic] of both ourselves, and others, through such central imagining. As [Kendall L.] Walton puts it, “In order to understand how minorities feel about being discriminated against, one should imagine not just instances of discrimination but instances of discrimination against oneself; one should imagine experiencing discrimination.” (Smith, 1997: 426, emphasis in original)

This insight into the experiences of others, derived from the empathic response, has led psychologists and philosophers to argue for the importance of empathy in fostering understanding between people (Neill, 1996: 178): “empathy contributes to our understanding of others” (Neill, 1996: 192). Consequently, I would argue that the melodrama of affliction aims to evoke empathy in the hope of facilitating understanding between the audience and the mentally ill character. I refer to this as ‘bridging the gap’ between the mentally well and the mentally ill character. I refer to this as ‘bridging the gap’ between the mentally well and the mentally ill.21 Neill usefully describes empathy’s ability to bridge the gap between self and other, between what we know and what is foreign to us:

in feeling with another, empathetically rather than sympathetically, we may find ourselves feeling in ways that are

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21 I have adapted this notion of ‘bridging the gap’ to describe empathy from Judith Kegan Gardiner’s study of women writers and feminist literary theory: “a politics of empathy points to strategies for engagement across difference, accessible to men as well as to women and hopeful of bridging the gaps between reading and writing, teaching and criticism, and representation and action” (1989: 6).
not only new to us, but in ways that are in a sense foreign to us. [...] in responding empathetically, [...] we may respond in ways that are not in us at all: in ways that mirror the feelings and responses of others whose outlooks and experiences may be very different from our own (1996: 177-178, his emphasis).

The experiences of mental illness depicted in the six films examined in this thesis represent what is “foreign”, taboo or culturally marginalised in mainstream culture and society, and these are confronting issues for the audience to deal with. This points to the significance of the emotional affect of empathy if the spectator is called upon to identify with a protagonist whose point of view and experiences, as Neill suggests, may be different from our own. Being moved by the plights of the socially challenging and afflicted characters in *Shine* and *Angel Baby*, for example, is not only testimony to the skill of the filmmakers in creating an empathic relationship between audience and protagonist; this emotional response is crucial to these films’ endeavours to bridge the gap between sane and insane, and thereby foster understanding and caring about mental illness.

I acknowledge that not every audience member will experience an empathic response towards the mentally ill characters in these films; indeed, some may resist the filmmakers’ strategic deployment of music, photography and performance, particularly as the experience of empathising with a mentally ill character can be uncomfortable and distressing. This hostile response accounts for melodrama’s reputation as “manipulative” and the origin of the pejorative term by which melodrama is sometimes known: the “tear jerker”. The impulse to cry, to be overcome by emotion, is often resisted and unwanted. One of melodrama’s crucial features is its ability to move the audience, and tears represent the effect of being moved or touched by what is on the screen (Neale, 1986: 6). Linda Williams has noted the critical reluctance to examine the power of melodrama’s emotional affect, “the unwillingness to recognize the importance of melodramatic pathos – of being moved by a moving picture” (Williams, 1998: 47). Scholars such as Williams and Steve Neale have attended to melodrama’s neglected emotional affect by analysing the various melodramatic conventions and devices that elicit emotion from the audience and align us with the feelings and dilemmas of the victimised protagonist.

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22 Both Williams (1998: 43) and Gledhill (1987: 5) discuss melodrama’s pejorative reputation.
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

Their work provides a valuable starting point for understanding how the specific emotion of empathy operates in melodrama.

The concept of empathy underpins these theoretical analyses of melodrama’s emotional affect: according to Williams, the melodramatic protagonist “pathetically suffers in ways that elicit audience empathy” (1998: 59). Despite its centrality to the aims and intended effects of melodrama, the term ‘empathy’ appears less frequently in melodrama scholarship than the related terms of ‘sympathy’ and ‘pathos’. In ‘Melodrama and Tears’ (1986), Neale examines melodrama’s ability to elicit tears in response to the pathos generated by the narrative, regardless of whether it ends happily or unhappily. He focuses on the spectator’s pleasure in giving way to tears in response to melodramatic narration. Neale identifies the narrative devices that elicit such a response, namely point of view and hierarchical structures of knowledge – where the spectator often knows more than the character – and the pathos that arises when the character’s point of view confronts the reality of their situation and the forces conspiring against them. The tears that come in response to this pathos represent the spectator’s sense of powerlessness; they identify with the character’s dilemma but they are unable to affect the course of events: “the longer there is delay, the more we are likely to cry, because the powerlessness of our position will be intensified, whatever the outcome of events, ‘happy’ or ‘sad’, too late or just in time” (Neale, 1986: 12). Melodrama’s deployment of point of view and hierarchical structures of relative knowledge are, according to Neale, crucial to its emotional affect of empathy: “They allow a degree of separation-in-identification with the characters and scenario which binds the spectator into the fantasy and generates empathy with the protagonists” (1986: 22).

Neale’s essay is central to Linda Williams’ (1998) investigation of melodrama’s ability to move the spectator, which she argues has been neglected and under-theorised largely as a result of the pejorative view that regards melodrama as manipulative. Rather than view the spectator who cries as the passive dupe of ‘tear jerkers’ and ‘weepies’, Williams asserts that melodramatic pathos represents a complex emotional response on the part of the spectator, one that requires a negotiation between emotion and thought. When the moment of pathos reveals the gap between character and spectator knowledge, it invites a critique of the social
forces that frustrate the character’s desires: “For unlike tragedy, melodrama does not reconcile its audience to an inevitable suffering, [...] the female hero often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions” (Williams, 1998: 47). Thus, the emotional response elicited by melodrama is defined by Williams as a complex interplay between “viewer identification with pathetic suffering” (1998: 46) and critical awareness: “such moving images also [make] us angry [...] we [are] critical too” (1998: 47).

If Neale’s earlier essay is an important precursor to Williams’ investigation of melodrama’s emotional affect, her 1998 essay, ‘Melodrama Revised’, is fundamental to my concept of the melodrama of affliction and my contention that the melodrama of affliction elicits the spectator’s empathy for the mentally ill protagonist. Williams’ essay is impressive in both its scope and its detailed analyses of melodrama theory and filmic examples, ranging from the works of D. W. Griffith to Steven Spielberg. Her essay documents how the term ‘melodrama’ has evolved, both in its industrial context – its use in advertising and cataloguing films, particularly early cinema – and in its theoretical practice: from its initial role as a genre classification for films concerned with the domestic sphere and addressed to a female spectator, the term’s scope has broadened (as a result of further historical research) to describe a mode of filmmaking that can also be found in more ‘masculine’ genres, such as the western and action films. In this thesis, I adopt Williams’ view of melodrama as a mode, rather than a discrete genre. The melodramatic mode can be traced through a range of film forms, and throughout the thesis I draw upon examples from both the silent era and the 1950s to define its features. While the Hollywood family melodramas of the fifties were foundational in establishing a definition of ‘melodrama’ for film theorists in the 1970s, the attention paid to early cinema by researchers in subsequent decades has extended the application of the term beyond that particular industrial context, thereby illuminating the historical connections between melodrama on stage and melodrama on screen. In addition to consolidating the field of melodrama scholarship through a critical review of the leading theorists writing in the seventies and eighties (such as Thomas Elsaesser, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Laura Mulvey, Peter

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23 Similarly, in his critical examination of Brechtian film theories, Smith argues that “emotional responses do not necessarily cloud the spectator’s critical reasoning and thereby ‘consume his capacity to act’” (1997: 144, quoting Raymond Williams).
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

Brooks, Christine Gledhill, and Neale), Williams makes an important contribution to our understanding of the melodramatic mode by attending to the issue of emotion, which most scholars have either avoided or dismissed as ideologically conservative. Williams’ arguments, particularly her theory of pathos as a complex dialectic of emotion and thought, constitute the foundation of my melodrama-based theory of empathy.

If pathos arises from the gap between character and spectator awareness, it is predicated upon the spectator knowing and sharing the character’s emotions and desires in the first place. This draws our attention to the importance of empathy to melodrama’s emotional affect. In the negotiation between emotion and thought that Williams identifies as central to pathos, empathy represents the emotional engagement of the spectator with the character – in other words, the spectator feels the way the character feels. This is the shared feeling that constitutes empathy. At the same time, the spectator has greater awareness and knowledge than the character. This provides a distanced perspective that leads to a critical judgement of the character’s plight. In melodrama, without empathy there can be no pathos. If pathos is a complex dialectical response of emotion and thought, then without emotional engagement with the character, there is no corresponding social critique of his or her plight. Thus melodrama issues a call to the spectator to respond with empathy towards its troubled characters. In this thesis, I examine the mechanics and cinematic devices behind this call to empathy and its particular relation with the portrayal of mental illness in the melodrama of affliction.

Empathising with madness

Asking the spectator to identify and empathise with a character who is mentally ill presents an aesthetic and narrative challenge for the filmmakers and a potentially confronting experience for the audience. It can be discomforting to think and feel like a person who is regarded as ‘mad’ – does this make us mad, too? This accounts for those viewers who may resist the melodrama of affliction’s call to empathy. Indeed, this resistance points towards empathy’s emotional power, its unique ability to make us experience mental illness ‘from the inside’. The mentally ill protagonist is a trigger point for cultural anxieties about madness, creating
epistemological uncertainty about who or what defines ‘mental illness’. It is far more reassuring to regard the mentally ill as less than human, not one of us, for this keeps the threat of indiscriminate madness at bay. In this context, empathy is a challenging emotion, because it demands the recognition of a shared humanity between self and other, between mentally well and mentally ill, that we might otherwise disavow. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes:

[there is a] recurring suspicion that the mad and the sane may be secret sharers, accomplices in their apparent antagonism, more bound up with each other than either would want to acknowledge. … And our response to their hidden complicity is to try to separate them out; to make the case for their being absolutely different (2006: 61-62).

The significance of empathy is that it forces us to confront our desire to maintain this absolute difference between the mad and the sane, between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

The melodrama of affliction meets the representational and artistic challenge of the mentally ill protagonist by drawing upon melodrama’s ability to encourage the spectator to empathise with the victimised hero or heroine. At the same time, the melodrama of affliction maintains melodrama’s capacity for social critique, enabling the viewer to see the protagonist’s diagnosis of mental illness as a product of questionable medical and social discourses. Thus, the dialectic of emotion and thought that Williams identifies in melodramatic pathos (1998: 46-47) is evident in the melodrama of affliction. These Australian and New Zealand films call upon us to share in the emotions of their afflicted protagonists while maintaining an awareness of the familial and social pressures that lead to the conflicts and challenges faced by these protagonists. In asking us to think and feel like these troubled characters, these films often take us to dark places. The goal of the melodrama of affliction is to make us feel like the protagonist feels; it renders the subjectivity of the mentally ill character accessible and relatable, thereby placing us in a position of identification with the experience of mental illness that we might otherwise reject. This is the power of the melodrama of affliction’s call to empathy.

The melodrama of affliction demands that the spectator care about the mentally ill protagonist. Through its appeal to our emotions, melodrama calls on us to respond with our hearts, not our heads. As Williams observes, “we go to the
movies not to think but to be moved” (1998: 61). Both Neale and Williams argue that this ability to move the spectator, to generate emotion in audiences, is a “crucial” feature of melodrama (Neale, 1986: 6; Williams, 1998: 44). In a similar fashion, I argue that harnessing melodrama’s ability to move the spectator is crucial for films that seek to portray mental illness with sensitivity and from the point of view of the afflicted protagonist. In order to move us, melodrama must cultivate an empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator. It must secure our emotional engagement and identification with the dilemmas portrayed on screen. Underlying melodrama’s complex emotional affect is a shared feeling between character and audience. It is this empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator that is at the heart of the melodrama of affliction.

**Diagnosing the melodrama of affliction: overview of chapters**

In this thesis, I introduce the concept of the melodrama of affliction which, I argue, informs the portrayals of mental illness in six feature films from Australia and New Zealand, and in an array of films beyond these particular examples. The melodrama of affliction is defined by four features drawn from the melodramatic imagination, developed over centuries in plays and novels, as well as films. These features comprise the externalisation of the protagonist’s internal psychological state; the use of and critical engagement with stereotypes; the narrative drive towards moral legibility, towards the identification and recognition of innocence and virtue; and the portrayal of the family home as the site of conflict and trauma. I trace the presence of the four features of the melodrama of affliction in the six films selected for close analysis and I argue that these features are crucial in encouraging an empathic relationship between the afflicted protagonist and the audience. This relationship counters the potentially alienating effect on the audience, as well as the stigmatising effect on real-life sufferers, of mental illness portrayals in fictional film.

The four features of the melodrama of affliction identify particular aspects of melodrama’s style and themes that are pertinent to the portrayal of mental illness in these films. I use these features to structure the thesis in four separate, yet

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Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

interrelated, sections. In each of the four sections, I examine one feature of the melodrama of affliction in depth, beginning with a chapter in which I set out the key theoretical concepts relating to that feature, and following this with a chapter in which I apply these concepts to close analysis of one or more films. In the first section of the thesis, I focus on film style, with a discussion of melodrama’s ability to externalise the internal psychology of its characters. To define this first feature of the melodrama of affliction, in Chapter One I draw upon the critical work of melodrama scholars writing in the 1970s. Thomas Elsaesser (1972/1995), Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1977/1985) and Laura Mulvey (1977/1989) identified the stylistic features of melodrama with reference to the 1950s film melodramas of Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray and Vincente Minnelli. In keeping with this established scholarship, I demonstrate melodrama’s ability to externalise characters’ internal psychological states by using examples from the canonical films of Douglas Sirk, All That Heaven Allows (1955) and Written on the Wind (1956). This first chapter introduces the theoretical and stylistic framework for analysing the externalisation of the protagonist’s internal state in three melodramas of affliction Shine, Angel Baby, Heavenly Creatures, which I examine in Chapter Two. I analyse the scenes of psychological breakdown and hallucination in these three films in order to demonstrate the filmmakers’ desire to place the spectator inside the minds of these troubled characters, thereby encouraging the spectator to empathise with the protagonists. I argue that providing the spectator with access to the protagonist’s psychology, through this stylistic feature of externalisation, is perhaps the most powerful way of producing empathy between character and spectator because it creates a cinematic equivalent of the symptoms of mental illness, thereby encouraging us to view the world and experience mental illness from the visual, aural and emotional perspectives of the afflicted character.

In the following section of the thesis, I examine the second feature of the melodrama of affliction, one that also fosters empathy: the critical engagement with stereotypes. As I discussed above, the use of stereotype in cinematic portrayals of mental illness is the dominant issue in previous studies of this topic, and the films I analyse in this thesis draw upon several stereotypes of mental illness. Stereotypes are a key feature of melodrama, both in its stage and screen incarnations, consequently
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

in Chapter Three, I bring together studies of melodrama with studies of mental illness in film. In this theoretical chapter, I argue for the functionality of stereotypes in melodrama in general, and especially for the challenging way in which stereotypes of mental illness are deployed, critiqued and even undermined in the melodrama of affliction. I draw upon the work of Homi Bhabha (1992) to develop a more sophisticated appreciation of the functionality and efficacy of stereotypes. To achieve the empathic goal of bringing spectator and character closer together, the melodrama of affliction challenges the traditional view of mental illness stereotypes, which are assumed to maintain a boundary between self and other and thereby prevent emotional identification. By harnessing the ambivalence of stereotypical discourse and the emotional appeal of melodramatic pathos, the melodrama of affliction reveals the extent to which the self is implicated in ‘the other’. The melodrama of affliction insists that we see ourselves in the stereotype, that we empathise with the protagonist who is the subject of stereotypical discourse. To illustrate the key theoretical concepts of this critical engagement with stereotypes, in Chapter Four I analyse the bio-pic An Angel at My Table, based on acclaimed New Zealand author Janet Frame’s autobiography. This provides an opportunity to examine the cultural appeal of one of the most persistent stereotypes of mental illness, the mad genius, and to apply Bhabha’s concepts of stigmatisation and the construction of difference to a close reading of Jane Campion’s film. I argue that An Angel at My Table critically engages with the romanticised mythology of ‘Janet Frame, the mad writer’, while encouraging a relationship of empathy between the audience and Campion’s fragile heroine.

In the third and fourth sections of the thesis, I turn towards an examination of two key themes in melodrama that cultivate a relationship of empathy between the afflicted protagonist and the spectator: melodrama’s drive towards moral legibility, and its portrayal of the family as a site of conflict and trauma. In the theoretical discussion of Chapter Five, I define the third feature of the melodrama of affliction – moral legibility – through reference to Peter Brooks’ concept of ‘the moral occult’. As Brooks established in his seminal study of stage melodrama (1976/1995), the narrative of melodrama is motivated by a desire to enact a public recognition of virtue, a revelation of guilt and innocence. Brooks refers to this as the moral occult, to
suggest that innocence remains hidden or misrecognised for much of the plot, until
the narrative climax reveals the characters’ true moral identities. In ‘Melodrama
Revised’ (1998), Linda Williams applies Brooks’ notion of the moral occult to early
and contemporary American cinema. She demonstrates how the courtroom scenes
that are the culmination of the narrative in many American films enact melodrama’s
drive towards moral legibility. Melodrama persistently calls upon us to sympathise
with the innocent victim; I extend this and argue that in the melodrama of affliction,
we are called upon to empathise with the figure of persecuted innocence, whose
suffering we bear witness to. The moral identities of the characters in Shine, for
example, are clearly drawn: David is the innocent victim of a villainous, abusive
father. The film narrates David’s triumph not only over his mental illness, but over
his father and the psychological scars inflicted during his childhood and adolescent
years, which are revealed to us through the flashback device of David’s memories. In
Chapter Six, I apply the theories of Brooks and Williams to a close analysis of Bad Boy
Bubby, which – like Shine – also narrates the journey of an abused child-man
overcoming his past. The moral legibility of Rolf de Heer’s film is established via a
negotiation between two competing stereotypes of mental illness: the psycho killer
and the idiot savant. I argue that despite Bubby’s homicidal acts, the film insists
upon his moral ‘innocence’ throughout his adventures in an alienated, industrial
wasteland, where he endures all manner of physical and psychological suffering, and
the narrative drives towards a typically melodramatic resolution that sees Bubby
finding love and returning to the lost space of innocence, the family. The film’s
didactic assertion of Bubby’s fundamental innocence and its relentless portrayal of
his suffering are essential to its project of cultivating an empathic relationship
between character and audience.

This feature of moral legibility is linked to another melodramatic theme – the
family home as site of conflict and trauma – which is the fourth feature of the
melodrama of affliction and constitutes the final section of this thesis. In Chapter
Seven, I return to the world of Sirk and the melodrama theorists of the seventies to
discuss melodrama’s critical portrayal of the lives of men and women under
patriarchy. In this theoretical chapter, I examine Laura Mulvey’s argument
(1977/1989) that the spectator takes pleasure in recognising the ideological conflicts
played out in spectacular fashion in the family melodramas of the 1950s. I take up Mulvey’s idea and contend that the spectatorial pleasure in recognition she describes here is a response of empathy: the audience shares the protagonist’s feelings of frustration and resentment at the forces that limit the character’s search for their own identity within patriarchy’s narrowly defined gender roles. Our pleasure comes from seeing these ‘familiar’ conflicts (in both senses of the word) brought into the open and given dramatic expression. This pleasure in recognition is not diminished by the forces of narrative resolution that eventually close down these acts of protest. To illustrate this, I examine a figure of protest: the unruly woman. In my discussion of the works of Kathleen Rowe (1995a & 1995b), Mary Russo (1986 & 1994), Henry Jenkins (1992) and Elaine Showalter (1987), I establish that the unruly woman is a figure found in melodrama as well as comedy (where she is traditionally located) and that unruliness is one of the most common strategies for depicting female madness. The recurring theme of conflict between parent and child in the melodramas of the fifties finds its contemporary incarnation in *Sweetie*, which I analyse in Chapter Eight. Through a comparative analysis of *Sweetie* with *Written on the Wind*, I investigate melodrama’s dramatisation of family conflict via the figure of the unruly woman and her antagonistic relationship with her father, who represents the patriarchal control against which she rebels. While Sweetie is a challenging and difficult figure to empathise with, I identify key moments in Campion’s film when she reveals Sweetie’s vulnerability. These moments of pathos displace our previous hostile feelings towards Sweetie and suggest that she is as much a victim of this dysfunctional nuclear family as she is its tormentor. While we may wish to distance ourselves from the extremes of Sweetie’s behaviour, the film invites us to empathise with her rage against the stifling milieu of suburbia. In this final chapter, I argue that Sweetie can be read as an unruly woman, rebelling against the patriarchal authority that infantilises her, and that the unruly woman offers spectators the perverse pleasure of empathising with her moments of protest.
The melodrama of affliction moves us from affliction to empathy. In a literal sense, this movement is evident in the narration. These films begin by portraying the psychological and social conditions of mental illness – from which we may initially distance ourselves – and then, as the narrative develops, they move towards bridging that distance between afflicted protagonist and audience. This movement also describes an emotional affect: we are moved by the plights of these afflicted characters, and this is because we empathise with them. Independent of the actual affects experienced by individual viewers, each of these films strives towards creating an empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator. While the filmmakers’ desire to foster empathy between character and audience is not unique to the melodrama of affliction, this ambition presents particular challenges in the portrayal of mental illness. Given this difficult and often misunderstood subject matter, these films turn towards a mode of filmmaking frequently derided as manipulative of the audience’s emotions and accused of wrenching an emotional response from the spectator (note the violence implicit in the term ‘tear jerker’, which treats the spectator as the unwitting victim of melodrama’s machinations). My aim in this thesis is to expand upon Williams’ project – to rehabilitate and critically analyse, rather than deride, melodrama’s emotional power – by arguing for the value of the melodramatic mode in narrating and staging characters’ experiences of mental illness. By harnessing the emotional appeal of the stylistic devices and themes of melodrama, the filmmakers’ desire to elicit empathy is realised and the gap between the mentally ill and the mentally well is bridged. The six films in this thesis draw upon the conventions of melodrama to place the affliction of mental illness, which is socially and culturally marginalised, at the centre of an accessible and emotionally satisfying cinematic experience. By establishing an emotional bond between the afflicted character and the audience, the melodrama of affliction counters the inevitable resistance towards identifying with a mentally ill character. The journey of

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25 Indeed, one might argue that all mainstream narrative cinema strives towards creating an empathic relationship of emotional identification between protagonist and spectator, but on this point, Neill draws our attention to the work of Noël Carroll, who argues that suspense and horror genres do not elicit empathy; rather, part of the emotional affect of these particular genres relies upon the spectator knowing more than the character and thereby fearing for them, rather than fearing with them. Indeed, often the character in a suspense or horror film is oblivious to the imminent danger, of which the spectator is aware, therefore the character and spectator occupy distinctively different emotional states (Neill, 1996: 176-177).
Introducing the Melodrama of Affliction

these afflicted protagonists is emotionally involving and cathartic, because it is our journey, too.
In the cinema, the subject matter of mental illness poses a representational challenge: how can film make manifest a psychological condition? The melodrama of affliction meets this challenge through its deployment of the stylistic devices of the melodramatic mode. I refer to this as the externalisation of the internal state. By externalising the psychology of the afflicted character, the melodrama of affliction draws the audience closer to the protagonist, giving us access to the character’s emotions and psychological state. Film style in the melodramatic mode is a key element in the melodrama of affliction’s cultivation of an empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator. Throughout this thesis, I argue that the melodrama of affliction encourages the spectator to empathise with a character suffering from mental illness. In order to achieve this emotional identification, the melodrama of affliction makes visible and audible what would otherwise remain unseen or unspoken. This externalisation of the internal state – making the character’s emotions accessible to the audience – is the necessary precondition for empathy: if we are to identify with a character’s feelings, their psychology must be rendered legible to the audience. This access helps to bring the viewer closer to the character. The melodrama of affliction immerses the spectator in the protagonist’s sensory experiences of mental illness, drawing upon visual and aural devices such as subjective shots and sounds, mise-en-scène and music to externalise the internal psychological state. In this way, the film’s style reflects the emotions and psychology of its troubled characters, translating their internal states into cinematic soundscape and spectacle – a representational language which the spectator can read. In drawing upon aspects of film style to portray mental illness on screen, the melodrama of affliction offers an artistic expression of mental illness. This should not be mistaken for a medically sound, accurate representation of a particular psychiatric condition, even when the filmmakers draw upon real-life cases or background research in developing the script and during pre-production. It is not the goal of the melodrama
of affliction to educate the audience about the causes and symptoms of mental illness, but rather, to make us feel like and care about these characters.

In this chapter, I introduce the key devices that the melodrama of affliction employs in order to externalise the protagonist’s internal psychological state. In my discussion, I draw upon the foundational scholarship of 1970s melodrama theorists and I refer to selected examples from the canonical melodramas of the 1950s. In particular, I develop Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s idea of a somatic relationship between character psychology and film style in the melodramas of Vincente Minnelli, to argue that the melodrama of affliction ‘somatises’ mental illness by translating its symptoms into aspects of film style such as sound, cinematography and mise-en-scène. The key concepts that I establish here will be employed in Chapter Two in my close analysis of three Australian and New Zealand films (*Shine*, *Angel Baby*, *Heavenly Creatures*) that are exemplary of the melodrama of affliction’s ability to externalise the internal world of the mentally ill protagonist.

**The sights and sounds of subjective cinema**

From the earliest days of cinema, filmmakers experimented with camera techniques, such as changes in focus and unconventional camera movements, to convey not only the perception of a character – what they see – but the mental state of that character – how they see. German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s represents an early attempt to portray on screen the psychological state of the character. The “benchmark of Expressionism in the cinema” (Elsaesser, 2000: 61), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), features distorted, angular set designs in order to convey the disturbed mind of the film’s storyteller and protagonist Francis, who is actually a patient in a mental asylum. In Expressionist filmmaking, “set design, lighting and the body are all interrelated squeezings-out of a psychology” (Hayward, 2000: 176). The influence of Expressionist techniques upon the style of Hollywood melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s can be traced through the work of German émigré directors, including Douglas Sirk who acknowledges the influence of
Expressionism upon his films. Expressionism is one of the most well-known examples of subjective cinema, an important precursor to the externalisation of the internal state that we see in the Hollywood studio melodramas, and later in the melodrama of affliction.

In subjective cinema, a character’s vision can be clear or distorted; what they see may be presented as real or as imagined. A character’s sense of hearing and/or balance, as well as vision, may be affected by drunkenness, dizziness or, indeed, mental illness. These effects can be conveyed through distortions of the image (for example, the shot may be out of focus) or of the soundtrack (for example, muffled dialogue). While these subjective shots and sounds rely on the context provided by the narrative and the actor’s performance to establish their meaning, the particular devices employed in these subjective moments are intended to convey the effects of this mental state directly to the audience, as if we are seeing and hearing the diegetic space in the same way as the character. These devices, while not unique to melodrama, play an important role in the melodrama of affliction’s ability to externalise the protagonist’s internal state.

Subjective cinematography is one of the devices used by the melodrama of affliction to make the psychology of the mentally ill character accessible to the audience. In discussing subjective cinematography, it is important to distinguish between perceptual and mental subjectivity. Classical cinema frequently uses the point of view shot, showing us a character looking off-screen and then a shot of the object or person she or he is looking at. The order of these two shots can be reversed and yet the effect is the same: we infer that the shot of the object or person represents the character’s vision of that object or person, his or her point of view. If this shot is presented without distortion of focus, angle or movement, it is read as a clear vision of what the character perceives. This is known as perceptual subjectivity (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: 66). The conventions of classical cinema lead us to assume that the character’s perception is accurate and reliable. What the character is thinking or feeling at the moment of that shot is typically conveyed through his or her facial expression or dialogue before or after the shot.

Sirk talks about Expressionism in his 1979 television interview with Mark Shivas from the BBC (included in Criterion Collection’s 2001 DVD release of All That Heaven Allows).
If the point of view shot is combined with distortions of focus, angle or movement, however, this becomes an instance of mental subjectivity, where the shot conveys the character’s mental state through these devices of distortion (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: 66). Edward Branigan observes that “undistorted vision is often the mark of truth and sanity in the classical text” (1984: 79). By implication then, distorted vision connotes unreliability and, often, insanity or impaired mental functioning associated with an intoxicated or drugged state: “Distortion of image space becomes associated with an abnormal condition” (Branigan, 1984: 79).

Branigan cites the example of a shot from Nicholas Ray’s Bigger Than Life (1956) where “the image turns red to represent the psychotic rage” of the protagonist (1984: 79). The distortion of the image through the saturation of colour – a colour culturally associated with danger and aggression – leads the audience to conclude that the character “must be mad [...] the proof being that his vision has been affected” (Branigan, 1984: 79, emphasis in original).

This demonstrates the importance of subjective shots to portrayals of mental illness where the filmmakers wish to convey directly to the audience, without the mediation of dialogue or performance, a sense of the character’s impaired or heightened perception of reality. Subjective shots literally create a shared point of view between protagonist and spectator. Film theorists such as Murray Smith and Gregory Currie have pointed out that the point of view shot does not automatically create a feeling of empathy between character and viewer, citing the frequent use of point of view shots in horror films, taken from the perspective of the killer, which are often employed to disguise the killer’s identity (Gaut, 1999: 204). Smith stresses the importance of context to explain how point of view shots, nevertheless, “can function as powerful prompts to central imagining” – his term for empathy (1997: 417). This context is provided by the relay between point of view shot and reaction shot – which shows the character’s response to the object or person viewed through his or her facial expression – and the wider narrative context in which these shots occur, such as a scene of psychological breakdown:

as part of a larger sequence involving complementary reaction shots – and shots of other sorts – the POV shot plays a role in developing multifaceted alignment with a character: a situation in which we have not only perceptual access [...] but a sense of what
the characters thinks and feels (through the reactions [sic] shots, and indeed the way the shots are edited, juxtaposed with music, and so forth – in short, the way the whole is expressively orchestrated) (Smith, 1997: 417, his emphasis).

In this way, the point of view shot places the viewer in a position of “feeling with” the character (Neill, 1996: 176); we feel what they feel, through seeing what they see. This empathic response elicited by mental subjectivity is acknowledged by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, who observe that “plunging to the depths of mental subjectivity can increase our identification with a character” (1990: 67). It is through the visual devices of distortion that we are encouraged to identify with the mentally ill character’s subjective experience of psychosis, delusion or hallucination.

Sound effects can create the illusion of hearing sound from the perspective of the protagonist, further encouraging the spectator’s empathy. Rick Altman uses the term “point-of-audition sound” – the aural equivalent of point of view – to describe “sound-based identification with specific characters” (1992: 64). Alfred Hitchcock used this device to align the audience with his heroines’ mental subjectivity, by distorting the diegetic soundtrack in Blackmail (1929) and Notorious (1946). In his first sound film, Blackmail, Hitchcock muffles the conversation and isolates a single repeated word (“knife”) to express the character’s intense feelings of guilt about a man she stabbed, while in Notorious, the effects of a drug taken by the heroine are conveyed to the audience by the distorted sounds she hears (Branigan, 1984: 94 & 96). Sound can also be used to align us more closely with character’s emotions, such as the aural flashback in Written on the Wind (Douglas Sirk, 1956) when we ‘hear’ Marylee Hadley’s (Dorothy Malone) recollection of childish conversations with her unrequited love, Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) as she sits by the river, which gives us privileged insight into this character’s hopes and motivations.

Point of audition sound plays a key part in encouraging identification between protagonist and spectator in the melodrama of affliction. Like the examples from Hitchcock’s films, sounds within the diegetic space may be distorted in volume or clarity to represent how the protagonist hears these sounds. In addition, auditory hallucinations – one of the popularly understood symptoms of mental illness – require the melodrama of affliction to represent on the film’s soundtrack the ‘voices’
and other abstract sounds that the afflicted protagonist hears during moments of psychotic breakdown. Music can also be used to express the protagonist’s emotional or psychological state, in keeping with melodrama’s origins in the interplay between music and dramatic action. Like the mental subjectivity of the distorted point of view shot, point of audition sound can increase our identification with the mentally ill character, whether it represents a distortion of the diegetic soundscape or the imagined sounds of psychosis. Together, point of audition sound and the point of view shot can create powerful subjective scenes that position the spectator within the sensory headspace of the protagonist. These are empathic moments of “in-feeling” (Smith, 1996: 130) achieved through film style. Through seeing what the character sees and hearing what they hear, we are encouraged to share the protagonist’s emotions and psychology, to feel with them (Neill, 1996: 176).

**Expressionistic “acting out”: gesture and the performing body**

One of the most potent and affective devices for externalising the internal psychological state of a character is the actor’s performance, particularly her or his heightened, expressionistic use of voice, body language, facial expression and gesture. In this section, I provide an overview of the history of melodramatic performance, from its theatrical origins and its influence upon silent cinema, to the meeting of pop Freudianism with melodrama in the Method and other acting movements of the 1950s. This brief history establishes the importance of melodramatic performance, particularly the role of the body, in making character psychology accessible.

Melodrama is linked to early, silent cinema in their mutual reliance upon the actor’s gesture for signifying a character’s emotions. As Peter Brooks and Robert Lang demonstrate, the body is central to this kind of expression in silent film. Early cinema draws upon theatrical melodrama’s “aesthetics of embodiment” (Brooks, 1994: 17), whereby the actor makes visible a character’s true nature through techniques of bodily expression. Brooks describes the acting in D. W. Griffith’s

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28 Noël Carroll draws our attention to the role of music as a key melodramatic device when he reminds us that “the etymology of ‘melodrama’ is drama plus music”, that is, *melos* and *drama* (1991: 185). I will discuss the role of music in melodrama in further detail in the section below, ‘Music and mise-en-scène: the body of the text’.
melodrama *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) as “an expressionistic aesthetics of the body” (1994: 20); the bodies of Dorothy and Lillian Gish are contorted, twisted, and hysterical in their physical manifestation of the emotional pain of separation. Similarly, Lang highlights the significatory power of the tableau in Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920), which depicts “characters frozen emblematically in mid-gesture” at the moment of the heroine’s banishment from her adopted family (1989: 76). In these films, the exaggerations and distortions of silent film acting are intended to convey to the audience the emotions of the characters, whether they are overcome with joy and love, or terror and fear. In *Way Down East*, for example, patriarchy’s condemnation of the unwed mother is emotively visualised by Squire Bartlett (Burr McIntosh) pointing towards the door and glaring disapprovingly at Anna (Lillian Gish), whose bowed head and downcast eyes express her shame and humiliation. For Brooks, this wordless expression in silent film acting is a form of “bodily writing” (1994: 21), of writing with and on the body, so that the body becomes the most important signifier of meanings (Brooks, 1994: 17). In the melodrama of affliction, this expressionistic manner of performance is concerned with the “acting out” of mental illness, to use the term which Brooks borrows from psychoanalysis (1994: 19). In the convergence of melodrama and psychoanalysis perceived by Brooks (1994: 22), melodramatic acting out demands “the use of the body itself, its actions, gestures, its sites of irritation and excitation, to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression” (1994: 19). Gesture and bodily expression externalise the character’s internal turmoil and distress, literally bringing the symptoms of mental illness to the surface. Melodramatic acting out is charged with the responsibility of conveying what words cannot: “whoever is denied the capacity to talk will convert affect into somatic form, and speak by way of the expressionist body” (Brooks, 1994: 22). Melodramatic performance brings the audience closer to the experience of the mentally ill protagonist, who is often rendered inarticulate or mute as a result of their illness, thereby laying the foundations for an experience of empathy.

With the arrival of sound in the cinema, gesture was displaced from its primary role in the representation of character and became supplementary to dialogue, music and other sound cues. Emotion could now be communicated
through actual words and the modulation of the actor’s voice in their delivery, while the accompanying strains of music would provide cues to the emotional tone of a scene. In this scheme, gesture is supportive rather than demonstrative of a character’s emotional state. When words fail, however, gesture is accorded greater signification: “gesture reveals what words conceal” (Gledhill, 1991: 210). Gesture’s revelatory power can be seen in 1950s melodramas such as *Written on the Wind*, when Robert Stack conveys his character’s self-loathing by throwing a glass of alcohol at his reflection in the mirror. The scene where Stack’s character, Kyle Hadley, learns of his wife’s pregnancy – a child he mistakenly believes has been fathered by his best friend – is a powerful example of expressionistic acting: as Kyle recoils from his wife Lucy (Lauren Bacall), Stack’s body crumples and curls in on itself as he leans against an open window pane. Stack recalls that this psychological gesture was intended to evoke the sense of being buried alive. Linda Williams singles out Stack’s performance, with his “swallowed voice, squeezed frame, and hunched way of holding a martini”, as exemplary of the “eruption of symptoms and unconscious gestures” that characterised melodramatic personification in fifties Hollywood cinema (1998: 79-80). Melodramatic performance is defined by the emotional significance accorded to symptomatic gestures such as these, which communicate what cannot be spoken; in Kyle Hadley’s case, this is the repressed knowledge that he may be infertile, something he cannot disclose or admit to any other character, not even his wife. While the audience is aware that Lucy has been faithful to her marriage and that the child must therefore be Kyle’s, we nevertheless share Kyle’s anger and sense of betrayal in this scene through the emotional force of Stack’s embodiment of his character’s pain. This example illustrates Brooks’ notion of melodramatic acting out, which converts affect into somatic form through gesture, thereby giving the spectator access to the character’s emotions and psychological state.

Christine Gledhill traces the melodramatic personification of character in the development of acting from nineteenth-century theatre to silent cinema to the

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29 In the next section, ‘The body of the text’, I examine the role of music in melodrama.
30 Interview with Robert Stack, discussing the influence of Michael Chekhov’s acting method on his preparation for *Written on the Wind* with acting coach George Shdanoff in the documentary *From Russia to Hollywood* (Frederick Keeve, 2002).
First Feature: Externalising the Internal

embrace of Lee Strasberg’s Method in the fifties. “Like the melodramatic persona, the Method actor embodies conflicts ... [through a] set of personal mannerisms, nervous ticks, inarticulate mumblings and so on” (Gledhill, 1991: 224). This aesthetics of embodiment recalls the representative power accorded to gesture in silent film acting, discussed by Brooks above, and illustrates the legacy of melodramatic personification throughout cinema, in both its silent and sound forms. Like these earlier forms, the Method externalises character psychology through the devices of gesture, expression and stance, rather than dialogue (Gledhill, 1991: 221-223). As Gledhill explains, the Method dissolved the boundaries between acting and psychotherapy: “The psychoanalytic dimension of the Method coalesced with Hollywood Freud to provide intimations of unseen, unconscious forces that activate the psyche and give rise to conflicting desires and emotions” (Gledhill, 1991: 224). These repressed desires and emotions must be externalised and made legible if the spectator is to empathise with them. As demonstrated by the Method’s “process of exteriorisation” (Gledhill, 1991: 213), melodramatic personification makes character psychology accessible to the audience, and this is essential to the melodrama of affliction’s goal of fostering empathy between protagonist and spectator.

As suggested by Peter Brooks’ notion of melodramatic acting (1994: 19), melodrama has long been the vehicle for the expression of symptomatic illness (Hayward, 2000: 218). Characters whose dreams and desires are unfulfilled or thwarted by social and familial pressures exhibit a range of physical symptoms that point to their hidden or unrecognised psychological unease. Symptoms that suggest a deeper psychological distress include headaches (All That Heaven Allows), alcoholism (Written on the Wind), muteness (Possessed, Curtis Bernhardt, 1947), and amnesia (Random Harvest, Mervyn LeRoy, 1942). These symptoms are the outward manifestation of a repressed, internalised trauma or loss. They point to the pressures placed upon characters, who are “divided [as a result of] the unresolved tension between an outer social mask and an inner reality of frustration” (Gledhill, 1991: 225). Symptomatic illness renders this tension both visible and palpable to the spectator. For example, in Written on the Wind, Kyle Hadley’s alcoholism and compulsive spending are symptomatic over-compensations for his failure to live up to his father’s expectations and to be the idealised son embodied by Mitch. Kyle’s
alcoholism increases dramatically upon learning of his infertility, which further compounds his failure to meet patriarchal expectations. As demonstrated by Stack’s performance in *Written on the Wind*, melodramatic acting out externalises internal conflicts and reveals psychic distress through symptomatic display: “psychology has been externalized, made accessible and immediate through a full realization of its melodramatic possibilities” (Brooks, 1976: 204, quoted in Gledhill, 1991: 216). By “building on the metaphoric possibilities of alcohol” (Elsaesser, 1995: 375), Sirk makes the troubled psychology of Kyle Hadley accessible to the spectator. In his analysis of melodrama’s use of symbolisation to transmit meaning to the spectator, Thomas Elsaesser offers the example of Stack’s performance and Sirk’s composition of the frame when Kyle hears of Lucy’s pregnancy: “his misery becomes eloquent by the way he squeezes himself into the frame of the half-open window, every word his wife says to him bringing torment to his lacerated soul and racked body” (1995: 369). Scenes such as these where the character’s emotion “becomes eloquent” provide the spectator with privileged access to the protagonist’s psychology. This access is essential if melodrama is to achieve its goal of empathy: the spectator must be able to read the character’s emotions in order to identify with them. Thus melodrama expresses the inexpressible by conveying characters’ emotions and psychological states through the symbolism of everyday objects, such as whisky bottles; psychosomatic symptoms, such as holding one’s head in pain; and expressionistic gestures, such as curling up tight under the bed sheets. These are familiar and legible ways in which the protagonist’s psychology can be conveyed to the spectator through the actor’s performance. Throughout its evolution from stage to screen, melodramatic personification has externalised characters’ internal psychological states, and this process of exteriorisation continues in the melodrama of affliction, in the Australian and New Zealand films examined in this thesis.

**The body of the text**

Melodrama uses techniques of mise-en-scène other than expressionistic performance to convey what the characters themselves cannot express through words; as Christine Gledhill observes, “melodrama’s mode of personification is not only a question of facial expression and gesture” (Gledhill, 1991: 211). In this section,
I examine melodrama’s ability to communicate meaning to the spectator through non-verbal and non-performative elements within the film’s mise-en-scène. I draw upon essays by Thomas Elsaesser, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Laura Mulvey, which analyse the family melodramas of Douglas Sirk, Vincente Minnelli and Nicholas Ray. The 1950s melodramas of these three directors, particularly Sirk’s, were elevated to the status of canonical texts by these melodrama theorists in the 1970s: “Through discovery of Sirk, a genre came into view” (Gledhill, 1987: 7). Their analyses of these films established the repertoire of stylistic features and narrative themes that constitute our understanding of melodrama as a cinematic form. In this section, I use examples from two of these canonical melodramas, *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*, to demonstrate the ways in which film style – setting, décor, costume, cinematography, lighting, music and editing – can convey a character’s emotions and psychology beyond their physical expression in the actor’s performance.

In melodrama, the particular décor and setting of a scene can reveal unspoken desires just as expressionistic performance can, thereby cultivating a shared emotional feeling between character and spectator. For example, in her analysis of *All That Heaven Allows*, Laura Mulvey draws attention to the way the golden branch given to the widow Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) by her gardener Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), which she places in a vase on her dressing table, sustains the emotion of their first scene together, “so that we, the spectators, share with Cary his secret importance” (1989: 41). The emotion of Cary’s unspoken attraction to Ron is transferred onto the branch, communicating her feelings to the spectator clearly, yet without words. In this way, objects and settings in melodrama reveal and illuminate the psychological state of the characters, allowing the spectator to share their emotional point of view. In the fifties melodrama, window panes have been read as prison bars, providing a visual metaphor for a character’s sense of entrapment and claustrophobia within the family home or the small town (Elsaesser, 1995: 371). Staircases are transformed into battlegrounds between parents and children, and

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31 While Elsaesser’s article was first published in 1972 in *Monogram 4*, it has been republished several times in various anthologies such as Gledhill (1987) and Landy (1991). All direct quotations refer to the 1995 publication of ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’ in Barry Keith Grant’s anthology *Film Genre Reader II* (1995: 350-380).
they provide visual orchestration for a character’s hopes rising and falling (Elsaesser, 1995: 370). In Sirk’s melodramas, in particular Written on the Wind and Imitation of Life (1959), the psychological malaise and spiritual vacuum at the heart of material affluence are conveyed by the ironic commentary of the trappings of wealth surrounding unhappy characters, unable to buy what they truly want. Luxury objects and furnishings in large houses serve to amplify, rather than compensate for, the isolation and loneliness these characters feel.

Melodrama also uses costume to visualise a character’s unspoken emotions and repressed desires. Sirk’s bold use of colour to express his characters’ psychology is evident in All That Heaven Allows. For Cary’s first scene with Ron, she is dressed in a conservative grey twin-suit with pearls, her lack of colour juxtaposed with the warm autumnal tones of his checked shirt and brown trousers. In the next scene, Cary is dressing for a date with Harvey (Conrad Nagel), a middle-aged hypochondriac who is approved of by her children and friends as a suitable replacement for her late husband. Cary’s re-awakened sexual desire, following her meeting with Ron, is symbolised by the bold red colour and low décolletage of her dress. The potential threat of a mother’s sexuality is revealed in the alarm expressed by Cary’s son, Ned (William Reynolds), upon seeing the dress: “Holy cats, mother! … Isn’t it cut kinda low?” In Written on the Wind, Sirk again uses bold colours to signify a woman’s sexual desire, only this time the movement is reversed, as the costumes of the libidinous Marylee Hadley change from a bright pink dress and a flame-red negligee, to the black and grey suits at the film’s end as she mourns her brother’s death and grieves for her own lost love. In its earlier theatrical and silent incarnations, melodrama used costume to communicate moral identity, such as the black cape of the villain and the white dress of the heroine. Robert Lang discusses specific examples from Griffith’s films of costume signifying moral character and observes, “In the melodramatic mode villains are recognizable as such” (1989: 58). As Sirk’s films demonstrate, by the 1950s melodrama’s use of costume was less concerned with the unequivocal signification of moral character – although moral judgements may still attach themselves to emotions such as sexual desire – and more

In Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Hitchcock famously used the symbol of the staircase, combined with cinematography, to convey the protagonist’s twisted psychological state and place the spectator within the sensory headspace of the character’s warped point of view.
interested in the symbolic displacement of psychology onto colour and clothing style. This device is retained by the melodrama of affliction’s use of costume to make the protagonist’s mental illness visible through his or her appearance.

In melodrama, cinematography and lighting offer further strategies for the externalisation of character psychology and a symbolic staging of conflict. In *All That Heaven Allows*, once Cary begins dating Ron, her increasing isolation from her family and friends is symbolised by Sirk’s use of shadows and camera framing. In the confrontation between mother and son, when Ned expresses his disapproval of his mother’s choice of partner, Sirk keeps the figure of Ned in the shadows and often with his back to the camera, an imposing threat to Cary’s emotional happiness. When Cary gives in to familial and social pressure and stops seeing Ron, her sacrifice is ‘rewarded’ by the gift of a television from her children. Cary’s utter despair and loneliness are heartbreakingly visualised by the camera, which tracks in towards the TV screen to reveal the reflection of a solitary Cary, seated on the couch and staring mournfully at the blank screen, her image framed by gaudy Christmas decorations. Through this camera framing, we share Cary’s sense of isolation and her bitter realisation that she is about to be abandoned by her children, for whom she gave up love and companionship with Ron.

In the melodramatic mode, music is “charged with conveying meaning” (Brooks, 1976: 49). Music in Hollywood melodrama, like these other non-verbal signs of décor, costume, lighting and framing, stands in for the inadequacies of language (Flinn in Bratton et al, 1994: 108), “orchestrating the emotional ups and downs” of the characters’ dilemmas (Elsaesser, 1995: 358). In Sirk’s melodramas, music often conveys the characters’ illicit desires. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Frank Skinner’s score expresses the romance of Cary and Ron’s relationship through lush string orchestrations of Liszt’s *Consolation in D*, originally composed for piano. The melody from this well-known Romantic composition acts as a musical motif,

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33 Caryl Flinn’s essay ‘Music and the melodramatic past of New German Cinema’ offers a detailed examination of “how melodrama amplifies – indeed makes excessive – music’s conventional Hollywood function of providing passive, emotional support to film’s visual and dramatic activity”, in order to compensate for what words cannot express (Bratton et al, 1994: 107-8).

34 Flinn incorrectly identifies the composer of this piece, describing it as “Frank Skinner’s endlessly repeated main theme” (Bratton et al, 1994: 108).
recurring throughout Ron and Cary’s scenes together, becoming their ‘theme’ and expressing their shared utopian dream as they struggle to create a new life together. Indeed in one scene, Cary is seated at her grand piano playing this piece, staring dreamily into space while she waits hopefully for Ron to visit. The music here functions as a shared emotional moment of romantic longing between protagonist and spectator.\textsuperscript{35} In contrast, for Marylee’s lower-class sexual forays in \textit{Written on the Wind}, Skinner employs a jazz saxophone, which – particularly for a 1950s audience – connotes nightclubs and ‘loose morals’.\textsuperscript{36} Nowell-Smith argues that music in Hollywood melodrama is often the vehicle for expressing material that is repressed (1985: 194) and in these examples, a woman’s repressed sexual desire is given full expression through the soundtrack. Music is also used in melodrama to orchestrate the dynamics of family conflict. In \textit{Written on the Wind}, Sirk’s use of a jazz record played at high volume to express Marylee’s rebellion against her father’s authority is exemplary of this displacement of dramatic action into symbolic expression. While no words are exchanged between these two characters, their conflict is communicated via the non-verbal device of music.\textsuperscript{37}

Like music, editing in melodrama can communicate conflict between characters and emotional tension. Griffith’s melodramas pioneered the use of cross-cutting to connect two separate physical spaces in an emotional cause-and-effect. Cross-cutting provides a visual analogue for the sudden reversals and coincidences of melodramatic plotting and a potent symbolisation of power relations between characters.\textsuperscript{38} While Marylee’s jazz record in \textit{Written on the Wind} expresses her rebellion, this scene’s orchestration of the power relations between daughter and

\textsuperscript{35} I disagree with Flinn’s reading of this scene, which foregrounds the repetition of this melody: “Though played by [Cary], the music expresses nothing really her own, but simply circles back on itself” (Bratton et al, 1994: 108). The key point is not the authorship or the originality of this piece, but the romantic desire it conveys, an emotion that is legible to the audience primarily through its use in the scenes between Ron and Cary (thus, repetition is essential to the melody’s meaning), and further enhanced for those viewers familiar with Liszt’s original composition and its origins in the Romantic period.

\textsuperscript{36} Barbara Klinger pays particular attention to the social context of the 1950s that shaped \textit{Written on the Wind’s} appeal as “adult entertainment” through its salacious subject matter and use of jazz music, in her chapter ‘Selling Melodrama: Sex, Affluence, and \textit{Written on the Wind}’ (1994: 36-68).

\textsuperscript{37} This important scene will be analysed in greater detail in my final chapter, where I compare the conflict between Marylee and her father with the conflict between Sweetie and her father in Jane Campion’s \textit{Sweetie}.

\textsuperscript{38} Jane Gaines discusses the melodramatic use of cross-cutting and narrative coincidence in ‘Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux’ (Bratton et al, 1994: 236-7).
father is enhanced by Sirk’s cross-cutting between Marylee dancing in her bedroom and her father Jasper (Robert Keith) slowly ascending the stairs to confront her. The erotic frenzy of Marylee’s dancing contrasts with Jasper’s laboured footsteps, setting up a dramatic causal effect when the music and Marylee’s dancing reach their aural and physical peak at the same moment that Jasper falters at the top of the stairs, presumably from a heart attack, and he tumbles back down the staircase to his death. The terms of this family conflict have been unequivocally articulated through music and editing, rendering language obsolete in melodrama’s desire to “express all” (Brooks, cited by Flinn in Bratton et al, 1994: 108). Through the potent symbolism and heightened expressionism of a range of stylistic devices, from mise-en-scène to music, the melodramatic mode conveys character psychology and dramatic conflict with an appeal to the spectator’s emotions that is all the more powerful for being unspoken.

**Reading style as psychology**

The analyses of Elsaesser, Mulvey and Nowell-Smith highlight the ways in which melodrama’s style is integral to – indeed constitutive of – its meaning. These theorists read melodrama’s style critically as the manifestation of characters’ psychological states: “what film melodrama criticism of the 70s produces is a psychologised text without psychologised characters” (Flinn, in Bratton et al, 1994: 114). Developing this idea of melodramatic style as psychologised text, I argue that the melodrama of affliction externalises the protagonist’s internal state by using melodrama’s stylistic devices to portray psychological torment and encourage spectatorial identification and empathy with the emotions and frustrations portrayed on screen.

Film scholars such as Elsaesser (1995: 368-369), Gledhill (1991: 221 & 224), and Thomas Schatz (1981: 226) have noted the effects of the popularisation of Freudian psychology in America in the forties and fifties upon melodrama’s style and the actor’s performance.39 Melodrama’s exteriorisation of character psychology through

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39 The influence of popular Freudianism in the forties and fifties is also evident in the narratives of Hollywood melodramas, such as Vincente Minnelli’s *The Cobweb* (1955) in which Richard Widmark plays a Freudian psychoanalyst working in a mental hospital.
mise-en-scène and other stylistic devices relies upon a mechanism of symbolisation and displacement that, according to Elsaesser, recalls Freud’s analysis of dreams:

[j]ust as in dreams certain gestures and incidents mean something by their structure and sequence rather than by what they literally represent, the melodrama often works ... by a displaced emphasis, by substitute acts, by parallel situations and metaphoric connections (1995: 367-368).

Thus, in the manner of an analyst interpreting the dreams of a patient, the spectator can interpret the stylistic devices of a melodrama in order to diagnose the psychological disturbance at the heart of the character’s symptomatic illness and reveal the frustrated desires repressed by familial and social expectations.40 “Mise-en-scène provides a central point of orientation for the spectator”, Mulvey explains, so that “elements such as lighting and camera movement ... act as a privileged discourse for the spectator” (1989: 41). In this way, melodrama uses film style, rather than narrative, to externalise the character’s internal psychological state, thereby encouraging the spectator to empathise with the character’s emotions. In the family melodramas of the 1950s, the mise-en-scène acts as an outer symbolisation of inner feelings, fragility or torment. These films employ melodrama’s “emotional-pictorial décor” in order “to explore deep psychological phenomena” (Elsaesser, 1995: 356), thereby creating a visual language of symbols and metaphors that is readable for the spectator familiar with popular notions of Freudian psychology.

This sublimation of character psychology and dramatic conflict into mise-en-scène points to the “panic and latent hysteria” that is melodrama’s “emotional pattern” (Elsaesser, 1995: 372): there is “a restless and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and the behaviour of the protagonists [...] with hysteria bubbling all the time just below the surface” (Elsaesser, 1995: 361). This connection between hysteria and melodrama, observed by Elsaesser, is developed further by Nowell-Smith, who uses it as a theoretical framework for reading the operation of mise-en-scène and music in melodrama. In his analysis of Vincente Minnelli’s films, Nowell-Smith argues that the use of setting and décor in melodrama

40 I use the term ‘spectator’ here – rather than ‘theorist’ or ‘critic’ – quite deliberately, in acknowledgement of Mulvey’s assertion that such interpretive work, which reveals melodrama’s social critique, is not the special privilege of the film critic or scholar: “Ideological contradiction is actually the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious thread to be picked up only by special critical processes” (1989: 39).
is analogous to Freud’s notion of conversion hysteria (1985: 193). In conversion hysteria, what is repressed by the patient is revealed via the analyst’s close examination of the patient’s symptoms, which are expressed through the body. Similarly, in melodrama, what is repressed by the character is revealed via the spectator’s close examination of the film’s mise-en-scène. Melodrama and hysteria share this trait of externalising the internal via displacement onto the body: melodrama makes visible and audible to the spectator the character’s emotional state in the same way that hysteria makes physical (and thus legible to the analyst) the patient’s psychological state. Not only does the body of the actor in melodrama give physical expression to their character’s repressed desires, but, according to Nowell-Smith (1985: 194), the ‘body’ of the film itself – the mise-en-scène – reveals what otherwise remains unacknowledged by the characters and the world around them. Drawing upon Freud’s conception of hysteria as the return of the repressed, Nowell-Smith argues that what is repressed at the level of dialogue or narrative in melodrama returns via nonverbal forms such as music and excessive mise-en-scène: music and mise-en-scène do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action; to some extent they substitute for it. […] the energy attached to an idea that has been repressed returns converted into a bodily symptom (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 193-194).

In keeping with melodrama’s capacity to portray symptomatic illness,41 the body of the patient and the mise-en-scène of the film not only express what cannot be spoken, but each becomes the site for the expression of the patient’s/the character’s illness or psychic unease. Convulsions, fainting and muteness are all bodily symptoms associated with hysteria.42 Similarly, a film’s mise-en-scène can reveal the ‘bodily’ symptoms of a character’s psychological disturbance, as well as pointing towards the repressed desires that gave rise to this disturbance in the first place: “[i]t is not just that the characters are often prone to hysteria, but that the film itself somatises its own unaccommodated excess” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 194). Through this

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41 Discussed above, in the section ‘Expressionistic “acting out”: gesture and the performing body’.
42 Elaine Showalter’s chapter ‘Feminism and Hysteria: The Daughter’s Disease’ (1985: 145-164), particularly pages 149-161, discusses the range of symptoms exhibited by hysterics, including convulsions, fainting and muteness.
process of somatisation, often the ‘hysterical’ moment of the text can be identified as the point at which the realist representative convention breaks down” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 194). In Nowell-Smith’s reading, melodramatic excess becomes a symptom of hysteria: the film’s style is affected by the protagonist’s psychopathology.

I have taken up Nowell-Smith’s analogy between conversion hysteria and melodramatic style in order to argue that the melodrama of affliction externalises a character’s mental illness through stylistic devices. In this somatic relationship between melodrama’s style and subject matter, the symptoms of mental illness are rendered visible and audible, in order to draw the spectator into the character’s psychological and emotional space, thereby laying the foundations for a relationship of empathy. Cinematic devices of sound, music, cinematography, costume and mise-en-scène are all ‘infected’ with the symptoms of disorder, chaos and disorientation experienced by the protagonist. Psychic disturbance is externalised through the actor’s appearance and behaviour, their voice and speech patterns, and their gestures and body language. Often, these devices – such as distorted point of view shots and subjective sound effects or point of audition sounds – are employed to position the spectator within the protagonist’s subjective experience of psychological disorder, to create the sense of “in-feeling” (Smith, 1996: 130) that defines empathy. Other devices such as costume and performance (for example, dishevelled clothing or unusual behaviour) make the character’s psychological dysfunction legible for the audience. The actor’s physical expression of their character’s psychological state can range from the performative excess of bodily tics and speech impediments to the minimalism of muteness and immobility. Through the expressionistic aesthetics of melodramatic acting out (Brooks, 1994: 19-20), the actor literally ‘puts in scene’ (‘mise-en-scène’) the otherwise invisible mental state of their character. Through these devices of performance, sound, framing, lighting, costume and setting, the melodrama of affliction externalises character psychology and thereby creates a shared feeling between the protagonist and the audience, a space where we can put ourselves ‘in the character’s shoes’ or, indeed, inside their head.

Somatisation is defined as “the conversion of an emotional, mental, or psychosocial problem to a physical complaint” (Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary, 2002).
In this chapter, I introduced the theoretical framework for the melodrama of affliction’s externalisation of the internal state. I discussed the use of cinematography and sound to create subjective moments in narrative cinema. I outlined the history of melodramatic performance, from theatre and silent cinema to fifties melodramas, and argued for the importance of gesture and bodily expression in conveying to the audience what cannot be spoken, namely characters’ emotions and internal psychological states. I provided examples from fifties melodramas of other stylistic devices such as mise-en-scène and music, and discussed the work of key melodrama theorists, in order to argue that the melodrama of affliction continues the melodramatic convention of a somatic relationship between film style and subject matter. In this way, the ‘hysteria’ of 1950s Hollywood melodramatic style has influenced the portrayal of mental illness in 1990s Australian and New Zealand films.

The following chapter illustrates the various ways in which the filmmakers of *Shine*, *Angel Baby* and *Heavenly Creatures* employ the stylistic devices discussed in this chapter in their portrayal of mental illness. By externalising the symptoms of and the emotions associated with mental illness through melodrama’s style, these films powerfully convey their protagonists’ troubled psychological states. This process of melodramatic externalisation makes the marginalised and misunderstood experience of mental illness accessible to the audience, bringing us closer to these characters and giving us some insight into their condition. This illustrates how film style in the melodrama of affliction contributes to the emotional affect of empathy.
Chapter 2
Breakdown, Delusion, Delirium:
The melodrama of affliction as hysterical text

*Shine, Angel Baby* and *Heavenly Creatures* all harness the emotional affect of melodrama to portray their protagonists’ internal mind states. In this chapter, I take up Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s argument about the relationship between melodrama and hysteria, and apply this to the portrayal of mental illness in these films. In each film, as the protagonist becomes increasingly hysterical and dislocated from reality, the film text itself becomes more hysterical and abandons the conventions of realism. I will demonstrate this somatic relationship between film form and subject matter through close analyses of three scenes – one from each film – that depict psychological breakdown and dislocation from reality. Through their use of music, point of view shots and point of audition sounds, décor and lighting, gesture and costume, these scenes are powerful examples of the melodrama of affliction’s deployment of film style in order to position the spectator ‘inside’ the head of the afflicted protagonist. These films give us access to the troubled emotional states of these characters and encourage us to respond empathetically, to share their emotions of fear, confusion and distress. These are confronting, sometimes disturbing scenes to watch, but their appeal to our emotions through melodramatic style is crucial to the films’ desire to cultivate our empathy for these mentally ill characters.

**Performing madness in *Shine***

Based on a true story, *Shine* portrays the journey of one man, David Helfgott, who begins life as a gifted child prodigy but whose potential for a career as a professional concert pianist is thwarted first by his over-protective father, and then by a psychological breakdown.\(^4^4\) David’s breakdown is apparently triggered by the

\(^4^4\) Director Scott Hicks insists that *Shine*, while based on a real person’s life, is not a bio-pic: “It’s a film inspired by David Helfgott … and it uses a certain set of events and a certain character, but it’s not a documentary, or a biography. It’s a story in its own right” (Hicks, quoted in ‘Production Background’, Sardi, 1997: 144-5). At the time of its release in Australia, the film was criticised by members of the Helfgott family and by one of David’s doctors for its deviation from the ‘facts’ of David’s family life and his illness. In their 2000 article for the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, psychiatrists Alan Rosen and Garry Walter
pressures of performance and the legacy of his father’s emotional and physical abuse. After years in psychiatric care, David slowly begins to reintegrate with society and resumes playing the piano. The film ends triumphantly, with David finding love and returning to the concert stage.

*Shine*’s portrayal of David’s mental illness is exemplary of the somatic relationship Geoffrey Nowell-Smith establishes between melodramatic style and subject matter. The turmoil of David’s damaged mind is expressed through the bodies of the actors, Geoffrey Rush and Noah Taylor (their speech, appearance and gestures), and reflected in the ‘body’ of the film, its mise-en-scène, soundtrack and cinematography. While the performances of Taylor and Rush are intended to show David’s illness ‘outside’ his head, *Shine* employs a variety of camera and sound devices to place the audience ‘inside’ David’s head. These techniques ‘cinematise’ David’s mental illness, constructing a visual and aural equivalent of his symptoms, and encouraging the audience to identify with his emotional and psychological perspective.

The performances of Rush and Taylor (as the young David), combined with their costuming and appearance, illustrate Peter Brooks’ notion of melodramatic performance as “an expressionistic aesthetics of the body” (1994: 20). Rush and Taylor use their body language, specifically gestures, to externalise David’s internal state, rendering his mental illness legible for the audience by “acting out” its symptoms (Brooks, 1994: 19). The two actors were careful to ensure they adopted the same mannerisms, such as the way David nervously pushes his glasses on his nose and his constant smoking (Sardi, 1997: 148). This gives the character a continuity of ‘symptoms’ throughout the film despite the change in actor as David grows up, which is supported by his costuming. *Shine* illustrates melodrama’s symbolic displacement of character psychology onto costume, a hallmark of Douglas Sirk’s films. For example, teenage David’s eccentricity is suggested by his mismatched shoes (one black, one brown), and when he collects the mail wearing only a woollen jumper and nothing underneath. Similarly, the costuming of the older David reflects his odd behaviour: he goes jogging in the park wearing a full set of clothes plus a
trench coat, and in another scene, he jumps on a trampoline for hours wearing nothing but sunscreen and his ubiquitous trench coat. David’s psychological dysfunction is thus made visible for the audience through his nervous gestures, dishevelled or inappropriate clothing and unusual behaviour.

David’s dysfunctional internal state is also audible in his rapid, stream-of-consciousness speech, another symptom of his mental illness acted out by Taylor and Rush. We hear intimations of the older David’s unique speech patterns in the young David’s conversations with his friend Katharine Susannah Prichard (Googie Withers) and his piano teacher Cecil Parkes (John Gielgud): questions are repeated in a hesitant, uncertain manner and he constantly quotes his father. David’s fractured speech is a metonym for his fragile, damaged mind and it gives the audience access to the free association of his seemingly random thought patterns. Illustrating Christine Gledhill’s comment regarding melodramatic personification and Method acting, the bodily expression of David’s mental illness is presented as a “set of personal mannerisms, nervous ticks, [and] inarticulate mumblings” (1991: 224). In the montage of scenes set in London preceding David’s breakdown, Taylor’s performance charts the gradual deterioration in David’s mental health. His long, unruly hair, broken glasses and tattered clothing, together with his tiny flat littered with sheets of music and food wrappings, betray his inability to look after himself. The sense that a psychological breakdown is imminent is established by these various signs of dysfunction and increased by the pressures of David’s rigorous training for the concerto performance.

David’s psychological breakdown during his performance of Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No.3 is the most notable example of Shine’s externalisation of the internal state. Following Jan Sardi’s detailed script directions (1997: 86-90), director Scott Hicks employs slow motion, close-ups and point of view shots, together with subjective sound, to place us ‘inside’ David’s head. This scene is one of the longest in the film and it is the dramatic climax of David’s prodigious talent. The anticipation of this performance has been set up by the montage of rehearsals that precedes it, in a similar way to the training scenes leading up to the fight in a boxing film. Indeed, Sardi consciously drew on Martin Scorsese’s Raging Bull (1980) in writing the
concerto performance scene. Sardi argues, “you do get inside his [Jake’s] head” (Sardi, 2001). *Shine* manipulates sound and image to signal David’s increasing dislocation from reality and to place the audience in the same sensory headspace. In keeping with the idea of musical performance as physical contest, Sardi wanted to convey the sense that David was “wrestling” with the piano, which he likens to “a beast” (Sardi, 2001). The Rachmaninov concerto (colloquially referred to as ‘the Rach 3’ [Sardi, 1997: 70]) is anthropomorphised as an opponent that must be overcome, and this piece of music stands in for Peter (Armin Mueller-Stahl), David’s father, who is his true opponent, as the following analysis demonstrates.

This concerto scene is heavily invested with meaning within *Shine*’s narrative structure; through his performance, David expresses his desire for reconciliation with his estranged father. David was banished from his family when he decided, against Peter’s wishes, to take up a scholarship to study at the Royal Conservatorium in London. To convey David’s desire for reconciliation and heighten the melodrama of this family conflict, Hicks employs the device of parallel editing, which recalls Sirk’s use of cross-cutting and music in *Written on the Wind* to unite two physically separate spaces in his staging of family conflict. Like the scene between Marylee and her father, music plays a key role here in “orchestrating the emotional ups and downs” (Elsaesser, 1995: 358) of David’s reluctant estrangement from his father. Hicks intercuts close-ups of David’s face during the performance with two shots of Peter at home, listening to the recording of David playing the Rach 3. From an establishing shot that shows Peter in the loungeroom with David’s ribbons and trophies adorning the mantelpiece, the camera tracks in slowly towards a close-up on Peter’s melancholy, pained face. Connecting the two locations – London and Adelaide – is the melody of the Rach 3, at this moment played by the piano alone, without

45 “It was very much inspired by that kind of psychological intensity” (Sardi, 2001). While the staging of the concerto performance in *Shine* may be compared with the boxing fights in *Raging Bull*, *Shine*’s montage of training scenes recalls other boxing films such as *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976), whereas *Raging Bull* spends less screen time on Jake LaMotta’s training routine and more time on the fights.

46 Susan Hayward explains the distinction between cross-cutting and parallel editing, which are sometimes confused with each other: “Cross-cutting is limited as a term to the linking-up of two sets of action that are running concurrently and which are interdependent within the narrative … [whereas] parallel editing actually refers to the paralleling of two related actions that are occurring at different times” (1996: 78).
orchestral accompaniment. In his psychoanalytic reading of the family melodrama, Nowell-Smith cites music and dancing as moments of expression for what cannot be said (1985: 194). These performative moments become vehicles for the expression of repressed family conflict. The Rach 3 piano concerto is already heavily symbolic of the difficult relationship between David and Peter, a father who both loves and punishes his son. The father who says to his son “no one will love you like me” (Sardi, 1997: 44), is the same man who whips his son’s back with a wet towel after the boy defecates in the bath. Peter introduces David to the Rach 3, an act which serves as both gift and punishment as we witness the gruelling training that David endures in order to realise his performance. The link between ‘tackling’ the Rach 3 and ‘taking on’ the father is suggested by the parallel editing between the performance space of the concert hall stage and the domestic space of Peter at home. The unbroken link of melody from the concerto, across these cuts, further links the two spaces, despite their separate points in time. David’s desire for his father’s love and approval is ‘spoken’ through his performance of the Rach 3. Peter’s desire to be reunited with his estranged son is ‘spoken’ through his tears as he listens to the recording. This is the essence of melodrama, when music replaces words and is “charged with conveying meaning” (Brooks, 1976: 49). Music provides the emotional connection between these two characters and their conflicting feelings for one another. The plaintive solo piano melody conveys David’s sadness and loss, and his nostalgia for happier times with his father. As his friend Katharine observes, David’s piano playing “expresses … the inexpressible” (Sardi, 1997: 46). Peter Brooks argues that gesture and music in melodrama are “charged with the burden of ineffable expression”, of conveying “that which is meaning-full though unspeakable” (1995: 72-73 & 75). In Shine, music has this melodramatic function of expressing the ineffable, the unspeakable, thereby externalising the characters’ emotions and conveying their repressed desire for reconciliation.

The film’s audience is aligned with David throughout the concerto performance through the devices of subjective cinema. Even before he sits down to play the Rach 3, a first-person camera shows the orchestra and the concert audience

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47 Clearly some time would have passed between David’s performance and Peter’s listening to the recording of the concert, especially as the recording would have to travel from London to Australia to reach Peter’s home.
from David’s point of view as he walks on stage. An example of perceptual subjectivity (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: 66), this clear, undistorted shot ends at the piano keyboard, and is the first of many shots in this scene that show the keyboard from the intimacy of David’s viewpoint. While this is the only actual point of view shot used in the concerto scene, there are several close-ups of David’s hands on the keyboard that approximate David’s point of view looking down at the instrument. The camera is positioned at such close proximity to David that it gives the audience the sense of being seated at the keyboard alongside him.

In addition to these shots that mimic David’s perspective on stage, Hicks manipulates the soundtrack in order to alternate between the ‘objective’ depiction of David’s performance – the orchestra and the piano united in their rendition of Rachmaninov’s piece – and the subjective experience of David’s playing, his point of audition. Rick Altman defines point of audition sound as sound-based identification with a character (1992: 64), and Hicks makes powerful use of this device to secure our empathic engagement with David’s experience during the performance. The melodic and passionate strains of the concerto are interrupted by a series of harsh, unmusical sounds – wooden piano keys striking muted metal strings, scratching violin bows, heavy breathing and a heartbeat – representing David’s point of audition, which is disconnected from the reality of his performance: “All David hears is a thudding, clattering sound” (Sardi, 1997: 89). This also has a jarring effect on the audience, as up to this point we have been immersed in the soaring melody and technical virtuosity of the concerto. The unsettling effect of the intrusion of these point of audition sounds is heightened by the distortion of the image: a slow motion shot shows David’s hands gliding across the keyboard and beads of perspiration trickling from his long hair. In some shots, while David’s hands are shot in slow motion, the soundtrack of his playing continues at normal speed. This separation of image and sound represents the increasing dislocation of David’s mind, illustrating the association of distortion with mental subjectivity (Bordwell and Thompson, 1990: 66). As the music becomes more demanding and David’s performance more impressive, the camera is freed from its grounded relationship with the concert stage and moves vertiginously around David, creating a sense of instability and dizziness. These devices of subjective cinema, of sound and image, somatise David’s
deteriorating psychological state, which is also legible on his body: David’s hands and face are covered with perspiration, and once the performance concludes, he is barely able to stand and acknowledge the rapturous applause before he collapses with a sickening thud on at the stage floor. His eyes wide, David stares blankly back at the camera, which has mimicked David’s collapse so that it, too, is lying on its side on the floor. Characteristic of melodramatic performance’s reliance upon “manifest bodily signs” (Williams, 1998: 78), David’s physical collapse is a symptomatic gesture, conveying his psychological breakdown.

These devices of sound, cinematography and performance are all intended to convey a sense of David’s inner turmoil, of his increasing dislocation from reality. The effect is to put the audience inside David’s head, to experience the disturbing disjunction of sound and time that signals David’s troubled psychological state. We move in and out of the stirring strains of the Rach 3, first sharing in David’s longing to please his father with his performance, then experiencing the disorienting effect of sensory dislocation as the image and the soundtrack are distorted to approximate David’s mental subjectivity. The scene’s oscillation between the ‘reality’ of David’s impressive performance and the subjectivity of his mental state is exemplary of the balance constantly negotiated in melodramatic cinema between objective realism – the apparently seamless “reality-effect” codified by classical cinema norms (Hayward, 2000: 48-49) – and subjective emotionalism. Robert Lang describes this as “Hollywood’s rather flexible standards of realism for the melodrama” (1989: 174). Exemplifying Nowell-Smith’s notion of “the ‘hysterical’ moment of the text … as the point at which the realist representation breaks down” (1985: 194), David’s gradual psychological breakdown during the performance is reflected in the increasingly heightened realism of the film’s cinematic style. Melodramatic style demands a form of expressionist aesthetics, from both the actor and the film text. The rationality and objectivity implicit in the conventions of realism are abandoned for an aesthetics of hysteria and emotion. Illustrating the heightened realism of melodramatic style, Shine’s concerto sequence relies upon music and the devices of subjective cinema, rather than words, to articulate David’s emotions and position the spectator ‘inside’ David’s head at this hysterical moment.
Significantly, David’s psychiatric treatment after this breakdown is given little screen time in *Shine*. In real life, David Helfgott spent some fifteen years in psychiatric care, but little is known about this time. Hicks and Sardi were both reluctant to devote many scenes to David’s diagnosis, treatment and experiences in hospital. For Hicks, David’s story “lay outside the structures of diagnosis, therapy, and the clinical – the TV ‘movie of the week’ fare” (Sardi, 1997: v). As Sardi explains, “we understand that he’s damaged and there’s a problem, now why do we have to be specific, why do we have to put a label on it? […] I think it [diagnosis] alienates the audience” (Sardi, 2001). As Hicks’ and Sardi’s comments illustrate, focusing upon the diagnosis and treatment of David’s condition would potentially alienate the audience and threaten the film’s project of encouraging the spectator to identify and empathise with David. In real life, Helfgott’s condition has proved elusive to diagnosis, but the most common term used by psychiatrists has been schizoaffective disorder which, in Sardi’s opinion, carries negative connotations associated with the term ‘schizoid’: “it sounds horrible, and I thought well, how important is it to this story? … it [the film] wasn’t about dealing with a medical condition” (Sardi, 2001). Sardi’s statement supports the idea that in the melodrama of affliction, medical discourse is a barrier to empathy; it inhibits the recognition of a shared humanity between afflicted protagonist and spectator. To counter this threat to empathy, the melodrama of affliction deals with the language and practices of psychiatric medicine by either holding them up to ridicule, or minimising their presence within the diegesis. This reflects the commercial aspirations of the sub-genre. As I explained in the Introduction, the primary purpose of the melodrama of affliction is to entertain a mass audience, rather than educate us about mental illness. As a product of classical narrative cinema, the melodrama of affliction is not interested in

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48 Of the other melodramas of affliction I examine in this thesis, *Heavenly Creatures* is an example of the ridicule approach, while *An Angel at my Table*, like *Shine*, is economic and restrained in its depiction of the protagonist’s years in psychiatric institutions. Sardi was conscious of “not wanting to have clichéd images of psychiatric hospitals and loony bins” (Sardi, 2001) and so his scripting of David’s hospital scenes is subtle and low-key, without histrionics or dramatic moments. This restrained approach to the portrayal of life in a psychiatric institution ensures the spectator maintains an intimate connection with David, one that is not threatened by the extremities of behaviour typically associated with ‘asylum films’. Consider, by way of contrast, the images of mayhem and the ever-present threat of violence in *The Snake Pit* (Anatole Litvak, 1948), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999).
engaging with medical discourse and psychiatric terminology. The precise etiology of the protagonist’s mental illness is kept vague and their symptoms are rendered in general terms, because the more specific and narrowly-defined the psychiatric condition, the less universal will be the film’s emotional appeal to a diverse audience. This is in keeping with the melodramatic mode, which is “already organised to address different audiences” (Gledhill, 1999: 235).

While the concerto performance is certainly the film’s most powerful instance of externalising David’s internal psychological state, throughout Shine there are other moments when the audience is placed inside David’s head by various devices of sound, cinematography and mise-en-scène, such as the montage sequence depicting David’s years of institutionalisation. Once again, point of audition sounds and point of view shots are powerfully combined to position us within David’s sensory space as he stares transfixed at the leaves rustling outside the hospital window or when he babbles to himself in the bath while gazing at the water reflected on the ceiling. Sardi describes these moments in terms of creating an emotional effect and seeking to achieve “the psychological point of view” (Sardi, 2001). The emotions that empathy evokes are not always pleasant, as I explained in the Introduction. In Shine, we share David’s psychological point of view: his pain and isolation, as well as his joys and triumph. These moments of shared emotion, of empathy, are often achieved by the film’s use of melodramatic style to externalise David’s internal state.

By using stylistic devices to encourage us to “feel with” David (Neill, 1996: 176), the makers of Shine secure a deep emotional bond between protagonist and audience. We see and hear the world as David does, experiencing the euphoria of music and the sensory confusion of psychological breakdown. The melodrama of affliction harnesses the emotive power of music, mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound and performance to externalise the protagonist’s internal state, so that we may empathise with the afflicted character’s emotions and psychology. Shine demonstrates this feature of the melodrama of affliction and attests to melodrama’s ability to evoke empathy for the victims of family conflict and psychological pressures.
Empathising with the irrational in *Angel Baby*

*Angel Baby* is exemplary of the melodrama of affliction’s translation of mental illness into cinematic spectacle and soundscape. The film’s premise of two schizophrenics\(^49\) in love requires the actors (Jacqueline McKenzie and John Lynch) to exhibit a range of emotional and mental states, from the euphoria of sexual passion to the drug-induced stupor of psychiatric treatment. *Angel Baby* depicts Harry and Kate’s struggle to establish a ‘normal’ life together, as they set up a home, find jobs and deal with Kate’s pregnancy. As a love story first and foremost, *Angel Baby* encourages the audience to become emotionally invested in Harry and Kate’s relationship and to care about what happens to them. Director Michael Rymer’s use of subjective cinema devices and melodramatic mise-en-scène ensures that the spectator experiences living with schizophrenia from Kate and Harry’s perspective. Point of view and point of audition shots are employed throughout the film, so that events are often seen and heard as if through Harry and Kate’s eyes and ears, while Rymer frequently uses a scene’s décor “to explore deep psychological phenomena” (Elsaesser, 1995: 356), such as psychotic breakdown.

In keeping with its compassionate portrayal of mental illness, the melodrama of affliction presents the protagonist’s eccentricities and abnormal behaviour as endearing, rather than confronting. Of the two protagonists in *Angel Baby*, it is Kate whose behaviour is more often at odds with social norms, so to minimise the potentially alienating effect of presenting her character in the opening scenes, the film introduces us to Harry first, whose ‘difference’ from normality is signalled only by his delight at standing in the rain in the opening credits sequence. This behaviour is presented as odd and unusual, but also exuberant and harmless, rather like David’s naked jumping on the trampoline in *Shine*. Harry lives with his brother Morris (Colin Friels), Morris’ wife Louise (Deborra-Lee Furness) and their son Sam (Daniel Daperis). He is portrayed as a loving and loved member of the family,

\(^49\) While Harry and Kate are not explicitly introduced in the film as diagnosed with schizophrenia, their psychiatric condition is identified in extratextual materials such as Anna Maria Dell’oso’s introduction to the screenplay (Rymer, 1996: xxiii) and publicity materials at the time of the film’s Australian release (Urban, 1995: 13). The film portrays Harry and Kate as psychiatric outpatients on medication, and the fact that this medication is identified (Stelazine) further specifies the nature of their condition.
although the film is sensitive to the burden he places on Morris and Louise. *Angel Baby* is at pains to demonstrate that, but for his daily medication, Harry is no different in looks or behaviour to someone who is labelled ‘sane’.

In contrast, Kate is marked as different from the outset by her anti-social behaviour. When she arrives at the clubhouse,\(^{50}\) she conveys a hostile demeanour through her black eyes, heavy with eyeliner, and her refusal to smile or engage with people. Her prickly, defensive nature stands out in the crowd of docile clients and it seems this is what instantly attracts Harry to her; he describes her as “fiery”. Yet Kate is also portrayed as fragile and childlike, with her melodramatic costuming – short dresses with bare legs and sneakers – symptomatic of an adult woman who is emotionally immature. Kate is obsessed with watching the television game show *Wheel of Fortune* every day in order to receive secret messages from her guardian angel Astral and she is intensely phobic of knives, of being cut and losing her blood. The film implies that Kate’s phobia is the legacy of violence; like other melodramatic symptoms such as muteness or amnesia, Kate’s phobia about losing her blood is the outward manifestation of a repressed, internalised trauma, one that is never revealed. When Harry sees the scars on Kate’s arms and asks “who cut you?”, she is incapable of answering the question and only responds with a glare that suggests this topic is taboo. Kate’s ritualised behaviour, her delusions and phobias, are more than just eccentric character traits; they are essential to her functioning within society, but the film also demonstrates the extent to which she is debilitated by her dependence upon them. Kate’s seemingly irrational behaviour presents a challenge to the filmmakers in their desire to encourage the audience to empathise with her.

It is her fear of blood loss that triggers Kate’s psychotic episode in the shopping centre. This is the first time in the film that the audience is witness to the full extent of Kate’s psychotic symptoms and this scene demands a melodramatic “acting out” (Brooks, 1994: 19) of Kate’s illness, both in McKenzie’s performance and in the film’s style (cinematography, lighting, sound, décor), so that we may come to empathise with her predicament. The scene occurs halfway through the film, once the audience has become emotionally involved in the couple’s love story. At this

\(^{50}\) Both Harry and Kate attend meetings at “the clubhouse”, a drop-in centre for outpatients with mental illness, which is where they first meet.
stage in the narrative, Kate is pregnant and she and Harry have decided to stop
taking their psychotropic medication, fearing it will cause birth defects.
Unfortunately, this leaves Kate vulnerable to the effects of withdrawal and, as this
scene demonstrates, regression. Kate is accidentally knocked over by a boy on
rollerblades and her leg is cut in the collision. The sight of her blood causes Kate to
panic and she becomes defensive when the boy tries to help her: "Don’t touch me!"
The boy flees the scene and Kate, becoming increasingly distressed, sends Harry off
in pursuit, because the boy has some of her blood on his scarf. Kate then frantically
tries to ‘pick up’ her blood from the floor, attempting to put the blood back in her
body by licking her fingers. This is a distressing image for the audience and it is Kate
at her most desperate and irrational, with blood smeared on her lips. However,
Rymer is determined for the audience to experience this traumatic event through
Kate’s eyes and empathise with her feelings, so it is at this point that he cuts to a shot
from Kate’s point of view as concerned customers approach her and ask “are you
alright?” The customers are lit from behind by the bright glare of the store’s
fluorescent lights; as they come closer towards Kate / towards the camera (us), they
appear as dark, threatening figures. An example of mental subjectivity (Bordwell and
Thompson, 1990: 66), this shot is further distorted by Director of Photography Ellery
Ryan’s extensive use of Vaseline around a filtered lens “to create a halo around them
[the customers], to suggest the feeling of alienation and complete disassociation with
reality, that somehow these people are like ghosts or they are threatening, they’re not
helpful figures” (Ryan, 2002). This subjective cinematography powerfully conveys
Kate’s sense of threat and danger, despite the customers’ benign intentions, and she
yells at them “keep away from me!” She becomes animalistic, growling like a dog
defending its territory, before running away from the scene of the accident. By
showing us Kate’s terrified perspective of the crowd of onlookers, Rymer provides us
with insight as to why Kate runs away from people who are trying to help her and
encourages us to empathise with her fear and sense of threat, no matter now
‘irrational’ her behaviour may appear to others.

Throughout the rest of this scene, Rymer immerses the audience in Kate’s
traumatic sensory experience by using point of view shots, melodramatic mise-en-
scène and subjective sounds. As she stumbles into a closed-down food court, Kate is
engulfed by a ‘forest’ of upturned chairs on tables. Like the staircase banisters and window frames in the family melodramas of the 1950s, these chair legs become symbolic of Kate’s sense of entrapment. Ryan’s cinematography emphasises this feeling: our view of Kate is obscured by the chair legs as the camera circles around her slowly, suggesting a predator surveying its trapped prey. Like David during his concerto performance, we suddenly hear Kate’s point of audition – but this time, rather than a distortion of the diegetic soundtrack, we hear imaginary, non-diegetic sounds that suggest auditory hallucinations, a common and well-known symptom of schizophrenia (Bloch and Singh, 1997: 164). The dulcet tones of shopping centre ‘muzak’ are replaced with eerie, echoing sounds, such as the scrape of a table leg on the floor, clock chimes, whispers and childlike female singing. The cinematography alternates between tight close-ups of Kate’s distressed face, her eyes cautiously surveying the scene, and shots from Kate’s point of view of the chairs and the menacing shadows they cast on the floor, shadows which seem to be moving. This relay between close-up and point of view shot is important for conveying to the audience Kate’s response to what she sees. The reaction shot is crucial in point of view editing because it enables the audience to identify the emotional state of the character through his or her facial reactions towards the object or person(s) viewed (Plantinga, 1999: 239). Carl Plantinga describes this relay between point of view and reaction shots as “the scene of empathy”: “Such scenes are … intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator” (1999: 239). The reaction shots of Kate in the food court ensure that we know what her emotional state is, and when combined with shots from Kate’s point of view, these shots help establish a relationship of shared emotion – “feeling with” (Neill, 1996: 176) – between character and audience. The cinematography in this scene is intended to evoke a shared feeling between protagonist and spectator. For example, the camera whips around, in a disorienting manner, in one unbroken shot from Kate’s perspective (a point of view shot) to the back of her head. She then turns and looks straight at the camera, her eyes wide with fear and shock (a reaction shot). Kate falls backwards on the chairs, which create an almost deafening thunder as they crash onto the floor. The disorienting effect of the camera’s movement here, combined with the unpleasant sound of chairs crashing on tiles, mimics the perceptual confusion that accompanies psychotic episodes (Bloch
and Singh, 1997: 164), positioning the audience ‘inside’ Kate’s dislocated and confused sensory experience. This scene’s use of point of view and reaction shots is exemplary of Plantinga’s “scene of empathy” (1999: 239).

McKenzie’s performance in the food court also contributes to the externalisation of Kate’s internal state and demonstrates the role of symptomatic gestures in melodrama’s “process of exteriorisation” (Gledhill, 1991: 213). After putting her hands over her ears and turning in circles several times, Kate collapses into a foetal position on the floor, a gesture that recalls a delirious Robert Stack curling up under the bedsheets in Written on the Wind. Through “extravagant gesture” (Gledhill, 1991: 212), melodramatic personification takes precedence over verbal language in the expression of meaning and externalisation of character psychology. McKenzie’s body language in this scene articulates her sensory confusion, her terror and her eventual withdrawal into a fragile, childlike state. As with David’s collapse on the stage floor in Shine, the actor’s body and the camera are synchronised in their portrayal of psychological distress. Once Kate’s physical movements stop, the camera also becomes still and focuses on Kate curled up on the floor, while a persistent pattern of abstract vocal sounds continues on the soundtrack.

It is instructive to refer to Rymer’s shooting script for this scene in the food court, as it reveals his intention to place the audience in Kate’s position. The scene directions are written from “Kate’s point of view”, and they refer to the distortions and amplifications of sound as well as Kate’s behaviour as she “moves through the forest of black chairs” and then “freezes and stares … with a mixture of fear and fascination” at the moving shadows (Rymer, 1996: 56). Rymer’s desire to immerse the audience in this disorienting space is explicit in the following description: “We move through the rows of black chairs … We turn one way, then another, but everywhere we go, more chairs” (Rymer, 1996: 56, my emphasis). “We” stands for the camera, for Kate’s point of view and for the audience. By collapsing these three separate ‘units’ of filmmaking into one, Rymer demonstrates the ability of subjective cinematography to put the audience inside the character’s head. He also draws on the power of melodramatic mise-en-scène by using the food court chairs as “emotional-pictorial décor” (Elsaesser, 1995: 356) in order to externalise Kate’s internal psychological state and express her sense of entrapment. Together with the
subjective sounds of her auditory hallucinations, these melodramatic devices make visible and audible Kate’s psychological symptoms and emotional state during this traumatic experience. Encouraging us to look beyond her seemingly irrational behaviour, this scene calls upon us to empathise with Kate’s fear, confusion and panic.

**Delirious visions in Heavenly Creatures**

The breakdown scenes in *Shine* and *Angel Baby* reveal the potential of the melodrama of affliction to become hysterical text, through the cinematic externalisation of the protagonists’ internal psychological states. Similarly, *Heavenly Creatures*’ fantasy sequences demonstrate Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s notion of a somatic relationship between character psychology and film style in melodrama: as the protagonists become increasingly hysterical, the film text itself becomes hysterical and fantastical. *Heavenly Creatures*’ mise-en-scène embodies the fantasy-scape of the protagonists’ minds. By somatising the girls’ emotions and states of mind, the film text invites the audience to share in these delirious moments of rapture and girlish exuberance. We are immersed in their fantasy world and we are encouraged to empathise with their moments of pain and distress, as well as joy and pleasure. *Heavenly Creatures* achieves this call to empathy through its melodramatic use of mise-en-scène and music.

*Heavenly Creatures* is based on events in New Zealand in 1954, when Pauline Parker (Melanie Lynskey) and Juliet Hulme (Kate Winslet) were tried and found guilty of the murder of Pauline’s mother, Honora (Sarah Peirce). The girls had formed a close friendship over a period of two years, and when threatened with separation (Juliet’s family were returning to the United Kingdom), they planned to murder Honora and run away together. In the film, the intensity of the girls’ relationship arouses the suspicions of Juliet’s father, Dr Hulme (Clive Merrison), a university professor who describes their friendship as “unhealthy” and Pauline’s attachment to Juliet as “unwholesome”. He encourages Pauline’s parents to take her to a physician, Dr Bennett (Gilbert Goldie), to prevent her developing “in a wayward fashion”. Dr Bennett diagnoses Pauline’s ‘affliction’ as homosexuality, which he explains to Honora is “a mental disorder”.

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*First Feature: Externalising the Internal*
For the purposes of this thesis, *Heavenly Creatures* is of interest in its exploration of the social and medical construction of homosexuality in the 1950s as a mental illness. The film establishes a critical distance between the events of the 1950s and the audience of the 1990s, in order to illustrate the medicalisation of social deviance and the instability of classifications of psychiatric disorder.\(^{51}\) Ironically, in their murder trial (which is not depicted in the film), the girls’ lawyers sought to raise the defence of insanity, only to have this rejected by the jury.\(^{52}\) As I argued in the Introduction, the melodrama of affliction encourages the audience to empathise with the afflicted character, while simultaneously cultivating in the spectator an awareness of the social forces conspiring against the protagonist. Thus, our emotional identification with the afflicted protagonist is all the greater for this social critique. *Heavenly Creatures* illustrates this dual cultivation of social awareness and emotional empathy through its externalisation of the imaginary worlds of Pauline and Juliet.

*Heavenly Creatures* successfully interrogates and critiques the notion of homosexuality as a mental illness. However, this does not stop the film exploring notions of insanity and entertaining the idea that Pauline and Juliet are, in fact, mad. Ann Hardy notes that the “relationship between the film makers and their characters … seems to remain close and understanding [as the film progresses] while still allowing for the possibility that Pauline and Juliet are ‘Mad’” (1997: 8). In one of her diary entries spoken in voice-over, Pauline acknowledges this possibility: “We realised why Deborah and I have such extraordinary telepathy and why people treat us and look at us the way they do. It is because we are MAD. We are both stark raving MAD!”\(^{53}\) The girls’ elaborate fantasy world of Borovnia, recorded in their letters and in the pages of Pauline’s diary,\(^ {54}\) is recreated on film for the audience via elaborate sets, costumes and special effects, and music (particularly the arias of

\(^{51}\) Homosexuality was not removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s taxonomy of mental disorders until as late as 1975. As Roy Porter wryly observes, “it is not only cynics who claim that politicocultural, racial, and gender prejudices still shape the diagnosis of what are purportedly objective disease syndromes” (2002: 214).

\(^{52}\) The film’s closing titles inform us of the outcome of the trial: “In August 1954, a plea of insanity was rejected by the jury in the Christchurch Supreme Court trial and Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme were found guilty of murder.”

\(^{53}\) Deborah is Juliet’s fantasy name; Gina is Pauline’s.

\(^{54}\) Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson used the girls’ letters and Pauline Parker’s diary as the basis for their screenplay’s recreation of Pauline and Juliet’s shared fantasy world “Borovnia.”
Mario Lanza, their matinee idol). Our access to the girls’ hysterical emotions and heightened psychological states is enhanced by Pauline’s voice-over narration, based on extracts from her diary. The girls’ internal, imaginary world is externalised – made visible and audible – thereby immersing the spectator in their sensory headspace. The girls’ hallucinations are presented without the mediation of medical discourse, so that their symptoms escape the categorisation and labelling practices of psychiatry. Despite the absence of a framing psychiatric diagnosis, it is still possible to read Pauline and Juliet as mentally ill, suffering from a form of hysteria that collapses the boundaries between fantasy and reality, producing dazzling and delirious visions. What is of particular interest is director Peter Jackson’s willingness to embed the symptomatology of the girls’ hysteria within the mise-en-scène of his film, so that the audience is both witness to and participant in their fantasy world. Illustrating Nowell-Smith’s somatic notion of melodrama’s mise-en-scène, the film text ‘embodies’ the girls’ hysterical visions.

For Pauline and Juliet, the realm of the imagination acts as a refuge from the traumas of reality. The film visualises the girls’ fantasies, literally constructing their place of refuge. Both Pauline and Juliet enter Borovnia, or the Fourth World, during moments of emotional distress and/or physical pain. The girls’ fantasy world comprises a lush garden filled with flowers and giant butterflies, and a medieval castle surrounded by a green fields. These conjured images of the garden and rural landscape carry melodramatic significance. As Linda Williams has argued, gardens and rural spaces are the loci of innocence in melodrama, to which the victimised protagonist longs to return in order to escape the forces of oppression and persecution (1998: 65). While Williams uses D. W. Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920) as her primary example of the opposition between the innocence of the country and the evil of the city, Sirk’s melodramas are exemplary of this antinomy between the freedom of nature and the outdoors, and the claustrophobia of society and interiors.

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55 This distinguishes *Heavenly Creatures* from *Shine* and *Angel Baby* in their externalisation of the characters’ internal states; only *Heavenly Creatures* uses voice-over narration, no doubt because Pauline Parker’s diaries were crucial to the evidence presented at trial (Laurie and Glamuzina, 1991: 76) and because her writings are quite compelling, often poetic. As Sarah Kozloff has argued in her study of voice-over narration in American fiction film (1989), the voice-over can be a powerful device in encouraging an empathic relationship of intimacy between character and spectator, but it can also produce a sophisticated irony when used in a different genre, such as film noir.
Indeed the persecuted couple of *All That Heaven Allows* shares obvious parallels with the illicit love between Pauline and Juliet. Both couples seek to create a utopian space amongst nature where their love can escape social and familial pressures. Similarly, several of the protagonists in the melodramas of affliction I analyse in this thesis are drawn to creating their own private garden, a utopian space away from the pressures of social conformity and harsh economic realities. However, Kate’s rooftop garden in *Angel Baby* and the idyllic family backyard in *Bad Boy Bubby*, for example, are constantly under threat from the urban, industrial landscape bearing down upon these green spaces. Likewise, the lush, fertile gardenscape of Pauline and Juliet’s imaginings is a threatened, fragile place where reality and snooping parents constantly intrude.

The girls experience many fantastical visual aberrations during the course of the narrative, each vision representing an increasing dissolution of the divide between reality and fantasy. Corinn Columpar describes the relationship between the girls’ psychological state and the film’s mise-en-scène:

> Not only do the girls fail to distinguish between the empirical and the fictional (a condition that Pauline first fears and then celebrates as a sign of madness), but the film renders their dreamscape by integrating the two realms seamlessly at the level of the image (2002: 337).

This tenuous boundary between the empirical and the fictional that constitutes the girls’ dreamscape is evident when Pauline escapes from the emotional distress and physical pain of her first experience of sexual intercourse with John by imagining herself waking up in a fairytale landscape of green grass and bright red and blue flowers, with the sound of birds singing. As the audience, we also escape the discomfort of watching this intimate, awkward moment with John, which is clearly painful and unromantic for Pauline. In her fantasy world of vibrant colours and sunshine, Pauline sits up and sees a life-size version of the medieval castle she and Juliet had fashioned in their minds and built out of sand on the beach. This magical sight is accompanied by the distant, festive sounds of a male tenor and operatic chorus. With an impressive mountain vista behind her, Pauline enters the castle. As she passes under the portcullis, the camera shows the name carved in stone, “Borovnia”. Pauline emerges into a town square, a festive, carnivalesque space
bustling with life-size clay figures that replicate the models made by her and Juliet. In the middle of the square, a clay figure of Mario Lanza is singing the jovial, rousing song ‘Funiculi, Funiculà’. In the early stages of their friendship, the girls bond over their fanatical adoration of Lanza, effusive in their praise as they play his records. Throughout the film, Lanza’s songs and arias function as a musical motif, conveying the girls’ shared euphoria of girlish hysterics (for example, when they boisterously sing ‘The Donkey Serenade’ while riding bikes and cavorting in a forest in their underwear) and the raptures of romantic desire (when they waltz arm-in-arm, accompanied by ‘The Loveliest Night of the Year’). Like the motif of Lizst’s *Consolation in D* in *All That Heaven Allows*, Lanza’s music in *Heavenly Creatures* expresses the couple’s shared romantic dream of a creating new life together and escaping the social pressures that keep them apart. In Pauline’s fantasy, the festive atmosphere of Borovnia is heightened by Lanza’s hearty singing and the music encourages Pauline – and the spectator – to temporarily forget the stark reality of events in John’s bedroom.

Through the empathic effect of point of view editing, we are invited to share Pauline’s wonder and joy at the sight of her imaginary world apparently come to life, as Jackson cuts back and forth between Pauline’s point of view and her reactions to what she sees. This is exemplary of Carl Plantinga’s “scene of empathy” (1999: 239). After surveying the festive town square, she is welcomed by Charles, the king, and hears laughter like Juliet’s. Following the sound, Pauline pursues a female clay figure across the square, calling out Juliet’s fantasy name “Deborah!”, but her pursuit of Deborah/Juliet is suddenly blocked by a seething mass of clay figures coming towards the camera, which adopts Pauline’s point of view. This disturbing image is accompanied by low-pitched growling on the soundtrack, which threatens to overwhelm Lanza’s aria. Jackson cuts between the grotesque, distorted faces of the clay people in Pauline’s fantasy and the similar expression on John’s face in reality, as he looms over the vulnerable Pauline in bed. With each cut there is a white flash, a visual metaphor for the violent thrusting of John and the wrenching of Pauline’s psyche between reality and fantasy. These edits also interrupt the infectious enthusiasm of Lanza’s singing with the persistent groans of John mid-coitus. In Borovnia, Pauline appears to faint but she is caught by the clay figure of Diello, who
uses her fantasy name: “careful Gina, we almost lost you”. The female clay figure finally turns towards Pauline and she becomes Juliet in human form. Pauline smiles, with tears of relief displacing her tears of pain in the real world, while Diello comforts her: “You’re crying. Don’t be sad, Gina”. The camera assumes Pauline’s point of view, allowing the audience to share in this erotically charged moment as Juliet, the romanticised object of Pauline’s adoring gaze, smiles back, “initiat[ing] an exchange of loving looks” (Columpar, 2002: 336). Once again reality intrudes, as a clay figure resembling John taps her on the shoulder and a male voice calls out “Yvonne!”.

Another white flash and Pauline is pulled back from fantasy to confront her post-coital reality. Pauline’s fantasy proves too fragile to withstand the physical and psychological trauma of her first experience of sexual intercourse, and the euphoria of Pauline’s experience in Borovnia is replaced with tearful disillusionment.

Pauline’s fantasy in Heavenly Creatures, Kate’s breakdown in Angel Baby and David’s collapse in Shine, demonstrate the melodrama of affliction’s externalisation of the internal mind state of the protagonist. While in Shine and Angel Baby this feature conveys to the audience the distressing symptoms of psychosis, in Heavenly Creatures the empathic effect is more pleasurable, for both the protagonists and the audience. The Fourth World offers an escape from painful realities and the idealised world of Borovnia provides an opportunity for social critique. The fantasy scenes comment upon characters and events in the real world, particularly when fantasy and reality merge, such as when Pauline conjures the vision of Diello slaying Dr Bennett as a silent protest against his insinuating questions, or when she fantasises about Juliet while enduring the pain and awkwardness of her sexual initiation. These scenes illuminate the film’s “thematic clash between imagination and a repressive culture” (Jones, in Verhoeven, 1999: 162), demonstrating melodrama’s capacity for social critique. Heavenly Creatures reveals the seduction of madness in a claustrophobic environment of class division, restrictive gender roles and intolerance of difference:

The beguiling, carnivalesque atmosphere of the girls’ private Xanadu is understandably appealing in the context of an

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56 Yvonne is Pauline’s middle name, which is used exclusively by her working class family and the boarders who live with them.
otherwise rather dull world of fishmongers, unwelcome boarders and boring school lessons (Grant, 1999: 17).

We understand and empathise with the girls’ desires to escape from their oppressive reality into fantasy, even if later in the film their murderous plans challenge our emotional identification with them. Eva Rueschmann describes this relationship between empathy and critical distance in Heavenly Creatures as:

the “dual narrative mode” of the film, which allows the viewer to be both inside and outside the characters, to sympathetically identify with the girls’ trials of adolescence and states of mind as well as to critically distance herself from their violent crime (2000: 104).

We may endorse the social critique implicit in the girls’ fantasies, while refusing to condone their recourse to violence.

The girls’ hysterical visions can also be viewed as the emotional extremes of adolescence, rather than the symptoms of mental illness per se. Rueschmann reads the girls’ fantasy world not as a symptom of mental illness or psychosis but as a sign of their sisterly relationship. Drawing upon the work of psychoanalytic theorists, Rueschmann comments that “in describing the intimate bonds between adolescent female friends, Louise Kaplan highlights the importance of shared fantasies in the girls’ creation of mutual self-definition and an exclusive relationship” (2000: 100).

Melodrama is the ideal mode for rendering the girls’ emotional and psychological landscape, as Peter Jackson explains:

when you’re 15 years old, everything’s a melodrama. Everything’s heightened. That’s what we set out to do with the film. We deliberately styled the film in a heightened way. Everyone was a little bit exaggerated, a little larger than life (Barr and Barr, 1996: 157).

Barry Keith Grant refers to these comments by Jackson when he observes that “the camera’s perspective throughout the film is the kind of heightened melodramatic view typical of an emotional teenager” (1999: 16). Much of the film’s cinematography evokes the perceptual and mental subjectivity of the heroines, from point of view shots, both static and moving, to objective shots that reflect the girls’ emotions in the camera’s movements. Grant links Jackson’s mobile cinematography with Hollywood’s melodramatic tradition, particularly to the director of Letter from an
Unknown Woman (1948), Caught (1949) and The Reckless Moment (1949): “Like Max Ophüls, Jackson tracks and cranes, swirls and swoops, expressing a giddiness that matches the girls’ private rapture and, beyond that, the buoyant joy of an unfettered imagination” (1999: 17). Heavenly Creatures’ cinematography thus plays a key role in encouraging the audience to empathise and identify with the girls’ delirious emotions.

While Heavenly Creatures enlists the affective devices of melodrama to convey Pauline and Juliet’s emotions and psychological states in order to encourage the spectator to empathise with them, the film does not foreclose the question of the girls’ morality in terms of guilt or innocence, despite their legal status as ‘guilty’ of murder. Jackson and co-writer Fran Walsh resist classifying their heroines into binary categories of heterosexual / homosexual, sane / insane, good / bad. While several authority figures (teachers, doctors, priests) are portrayed as stereotypically ‘bad’ or ‘villains’, the film is not simply reducible to a melodramatic morality of innocence and guilt, good and evil when it comes to the girls and their parents. The filmmakers encourage our sympathy and understanding for the parents, especially Honora, who is visibly distressed by Pauline’s antagonism towards her, which often seems unjustified. This is poignantly illustrated when Hilda Hulme (Diana Kent), Juliet’s mother, visits Mr and Mrs Rieper to discuss the girls’ relationship. A bewildered Herbert Rieper (Simon O’Connor) shamefully admits his daughter has “cut us out of her life”, while an emotionally exhausted, over-worked Honora breaks down and sobs uncontrollably, the camera tracking up and away from this poignant moment as she collapses in an armchair and Hilda is quietly ushered from the room. As Rueschmann argues, although Heavenly Creatures “draw[s] self-consciously on the genre of the women’s melodrama”, the film “eschew[s] its Manichean opposition of good versus evil … [offering instead] a far more nuanced, psychological exploration of the murderers’ perspectives and motivations” (2000: 103).

Our empathic relationship with Pauline and Juliet does not preclude a more considered or complex understanding of their plight and their parents’ responses than the girls appear capable of: “the spectator is positioned to empathically enter the protagonists’

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57 I will discuss melodramatic morality, in particular Peter Brooks’ notion of the moral occult, in greater detail in Chapter Five.
internal worlds but permitted critical distance from the dramatic action” (Rueschmann, 2000: 59).

Ultimately, Heavenly Creatures resists melodrama’s drive towards moral legibility, refusing to explain or excuse the girls’ crime. Similarly, the film refuses to confirm or dismiss the possibility of mental illness as a cause of, or an explanation for, the girls’ actions. While ridiculing the pronouncements of Dr Bennett regarding homosexuality as a mental disorder, the film nevertheless invites a contemporary diagnosis of Pauline as, at the very least, depressed with suicidal tendencies, if her diary entries are any guide. Regardless of whether we view Pauline and Juliet as sane or mentally ill, Heavenly Creatures attests to the power of melodrama in externalising the girls’ internal psychological states and cinematising their most hysterical, fantastical visions. As witness to the girls’ creation of a fantasy, utopian space, the viewer is invited to share in the dazzlement and delirium that are symptomatic of the seductive appeal of madness.

Shine, Angel Baby and Heavenly Creatures illustrate the various ways in which film style can be employed to facilitate the viewer’s emotional identification with the afflicted character, enabling audience members to experience what mental illness is like ‘from the inside’. In this chapter, my close analyses of the breakdown scenes in Shine and Angel Baby and the fantasy scene in Heavenly Creatures revealed how the subject matter of mental illness demands a melodramatic style, in which the director and his collaborators must use their artistic ingenuity to portray these subjective moments with powerful emotional affect. These scenes encourage the audience to empathise with the characters by placing the audience in the same sensory space. Creating shared emotional affect between character and spectator is one of the goals

58 This ridicule is conveyed by the unflattering, extreme close up of actor Gilbert Goldie’s mouth, with his stained and crooked teeth, as Dr Bennett hesitantly pronounces his diagnosis: “h-h-homo..sexuality”.

59 Pauline’s appetite declines and her school grades plummet (at the film’s opening, we learn that she is an ‘A’ student; towards the end, she is failing English). On more than one occasion, Pauline writes in her diary of her desire to die, until this death wish is redirected towards her mother. These symptoms and behavioural changes match the diagnostic criteria for depression (Bloch and Singh, 1997: 102).
of melodrama and these scenes demonstrate the power of melodrama’s stylistic
devices to evoke empathy, to make us feel like the characters feel. We share David’s
desire to be reconciled with his father, through his performance of Rachmaninov’s
Piano Concerto No.3, while also experiencing the disorienting sights and sounds of
David’s increasing dislocation from reality. We feel distressed, confused and
frightened, just as Kate does, when a cut to her leg becomes the trigger for her
psychotic breakdown in a shopping centre. And we share Pauline’s desire to be
someplace else, somewhere better, with Juliet, during her joyless sexual initiation
with John.

As these three films demonstrate, melodrama proves a powerful tool for
narrating stories of mental illness from an empathetic point of view. The emotive
force of melodrama is such that the audience comes to *feel with* the afflicted
characters, despite the gulf that may exist between their own experience in everyday
life and the dramas being staged on screen. Through melodrama, one can trace the
strategies by which filmmakers seek to guide their audience’s response towards
these afflicted characters. By externalising the protagonist’s internal state, the
melodrama of affliction issues a call to empathy.
Chapter 3  
Challenging the Boundary between Self and Other:  
The critical engagement with stereotypes

In the previous chapter, I analysed how the melodrama of affliction elicits empathy from the audience through a range of stylistic devices that externalise the internal psychological state of the protagonist. One of these devices is the actor’s performance, which I introduced in Chapter One and analysed in Chapter Two in relation to the performances of Geoffrey Rush and Noah Taylor in *Shine* and Jacqueline McKenzie in *Angel Baby*. I will now expand upon this notion of ‘performing’ mental illness by considering the function of stereotypes, which provide actors with a pre-established repertoire for performing mentally ill characters. Stereotypes also influence how a mentally ill character is dressed, framed, and lit by the filmmakers. In this chapter, I establish a theoretical framework for examining stereotypes of mental illness in film and I consider their relationship with the melodrama of affliction’s ability to elicit empathy from the spectator.

The melodrama of affliction explores long-established stereotypes of mental illness that are the legacy of representations of madness in film, television, literature, theatre and art. The orthodox view, held by psychiatrists and mental health scholars, is that these stereotypes establish and maintain a distance between character and audience; while stereotypes may elicit an emotional response from the audience, such as fear or pity, they inhibit emotional identification and the cultivation of shared feeling. They prevent us from seeing ourselves in the character. In the melodrama of affliction, however, the stereotypes of mental illness are critically engaged with, in order to foster an empathetic relationship between protagonist and spectator. The gap between self and other, between the sane and the mad – which the stereotype is assumed to maintain – is not as wide as we may think. The stereotypes of mental illness, rather than protecting ‘us’ from ‘them’, reveal the ambivalence of popular culture’s fascination with the subject of madness.

The melodrama of affliction takes one of the more notorious features of both melodrama and mental illness films – their limited character types, or stereotypes – and challenges the assumptions we make based upon stereotypes of mental illness.
These Australian and New Zealand films explore the existential dilemma ‘who or what defines madness?’. Through its critical engagement with stereotypes, the melodrama of affliction answers this question, revealing the extent to which social norms and expectations are implicated within the medical discourse concerning mental illness. The ambivalence of stereotypical discourse and the emotional complexity of melodramatic pathos are central to this critical engagement.

In order to establish the theoretical framework for this section of the thesis, I begin by surveying the stereotypes of mental illness in popular culture, then I discuss the function of stereotypes in the melodramatic mode. I bring these two issues together in my examination of the role of stereotypes of mental illness in the melodrama of affliction. In order to move beyond debates about the accuracy or inaccuracy of mental illness stereotypes, I adapt Homi Bhabha’s model of stereotypical discourse, which examines the legacy of colonialism, and argue that stereotypes of mental illness cannot simply be judged negatively or positively. Rather, they present an opportunity to explore our ambivalent relationship with the issue of madness. The melodrama of affliction cannot ignore the persistent stereotypes of mental illness that pervade popular culture; instead, it invites us to re-examine our prejudices and misconceptions about mental illness through its sensitive portrayal of the effects of stereotypical discourse upon the protagonist. The melodrama of affliction achieves this critical engagement with stereotypes through the complex emotional response of pathos, identified and analysed by Linda Williams, which invites the audience to identify with the protagonist’s suffering while, at the same time, cultivating a critical awareness of the social forces that have led to this suffering (Williams, 1998: 49). Through the combined effect of the ambivalence of stereotypes and the emotional appeal of pathos, I argue that the melodrama of affliction’s critical engagement with stereotypes brings the spectator closer to the protagonist, bridging the gap between self and other, thereby giving rise to empathy.

Stereotypes of mental illness in popular culture

As I explained in the Introduction, there is a long history of characters with mental illness being reduced to stereotypes in the mass media, especially cinema.
Similar to the visual address of melodrama, physical appearance is one of the key signifiers in establishing a stereotype. This explains the persistent association of torn and dirty clothing, unkempt hair and wide eyes with portrayals of mental illness in paintings and drawings, as well as plays, films and television shows: “dishevelment has become a key icon of madness” (Wahl, 1995: 117). In addition to this reliance upon physical appearance to convey a character’s psychological state, mental illness in film and television is often signified by unusual or anti-social behaviour and the absence or excess of speech. Consider, for example, the combined effect of dishevelled or mis-matched clothing, the rapid speech of free association, and childish behaviour in Shine’s presentation of David Helfgott as mentally ill.

Stereotypes of mental illness draw upon generalisations and prejudices that a ‘crazy’ person will dress badly, walk strangely, have poor grooming and hygiene, and talk differently. These bodily signifiers have emerged over the centuries as a result of the artistic challenge of representing “visually what is basically an unobservable mental phenomenon” (Wahl, 1995: 117). Like melodrama’s desire to express the inexpressible, which results in the somatisation of character psychology through film style, stereotypes of mental illness answer the need to ‘see’ what is essentially unseeable by making psychological dysfunction legible on the body.

These stereotypes also answer the need for reassurance; they assuage the fear that mental illness does not discriminate. Psychiatrists Sidney Bloch and Bruce S. Singh observe that “the distinction between the mentally well and the mentally ill is not a matter for easy definition and, by its nature, cannot be” (1997: xii). In popular culture and the mass media, when mentally ill people are portrayed as dangerous and violent (the psycho killer stereotype) or comic (the idiot savant or wise fool stereotype), these stereotypes serve to mark the mentally ill as different from the rest of us, and thereby contain the threat they pose to our sense of self:

Media depictions of people with mental illness as distinctly different from others, even in physical appearance, provide a reassuring message to the public that mental illness won’t happen to them or to people like them (Wahl, 1995: 125).

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60 Sander Gilman has exhaustively studied artistic representations of mental illness in his Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness (1985) and Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS (1988).
By presenting those with mental illness as “distinctly different”, stereotypes are adopted as a form of psychic defence against the traumatic knowledge of the undifferentiated threat of madness. They are intended to block any recognition of the self in the other. By contrast, empathy demands the recognition of sameness, of common feeling between self and other. When presented with a stereotype of mental illness in a film, we may feel sorry for the character, we may laugh at them, or we may feel afraid of them, but it is assumed that we don’t feel like they do. I wish to re-examine this assumption. The persistence of stereotypes in the melodrama of affliction, which actively fosters a relationship of empathy between protagonist and spectator, suggests that the distance between the mentally ill character and the ‘sane’ viewer may not be as great as Wahl and other medical scholars assert.

**Stereotypes in melodrama**

Stereotypes are an important feature of the melodramatic mode. Characters in melodrama are usually described as “stock figures” (Gledhill, 1985: 77), “ciphers” (Hayward, 2000: 216), or “stereotypes” (Lang, 1989: 24; Klinger, 1984: 39-40). Melodrama relies upon character types to transmit dramatic action (Elsaesser, 1995: 351), with the resulting perception that these characters “lack depth” or “developed personalities” (Hayward, 2000: 216). Thomas Elsaesser describes melodrama’s character types as “the nonpsychological conception of the dramatis personae” (1995: 351). In similar terms, Laura Mulvey refers to melodrama’s use of “limited characters with restricted dramatic functions”, which forces the mise-en-scène to provide a “wordless commentary” upon the narrative, in order to express what the characters cannot (1989: 41).

This reliance upon character types is attributable to melodrama’s theatrical inheritance. Stereotypes are “a carry-over from traditions of performance in stage melodrama” (Hayward, 2000: 358), when theatrical performers codified a precise body language of gesture, facial expression and intonation as a means of conveying character and emotion. For example, falling upon one’s knees and clasping one’s hands would signify a plea for forgiveness (Gledhill, 1987: 19). The repetition and codification of particular gestures and expressions established a repertoire of physical stereotypes, whose signifying force could be further enhanced by the
symbolism of costumes and props, such as the villain wearing a black cape (Brooks, 1976: 16). Certain features of appearance and iconography are the tools with which stereotypes are constructed and by which a character is made legible for the audience in an efficient and effective manner. Stereotypes act as a form of shorthand, communicating to an audience with brevity and clarity both the emotional state and the moral worth of a character. Stereotypes also provide narrative clues as to the expected plot trajectory for a character and determine the extent to which she or he elicits sympathy or hatred from the audience.

As it relies upon the actor’s body language and costuming for its meaning, the stereotype forms part of melodrama’s visual address. Melodrama’s visual address arose out of the shift from verbal to visual demonstration, which Gledhill describes as “the pictorialisation of the nineteenth-century stage” (1987: 22-23). Stereotypes represent a powerful form of knowledge, a condensation of information about a person into a series of instantaneous judgements based on physical appearance and behaviour. This over-determined sign of the stereotype demonstrates melodrama’s “dramatization of vision – knowing from seeing” (Lang, 1989: 24). Stereotypes “serve an economic function in relation to the narrative. We ‘know’ what they stand for so there is no need to elaborate their characterization” (Hayward, 2000: 358). We ‘know’ whether a character is good or evil, sane or insane by seeing how they are dressed, how they express themselves through gesture and facial expression, and how they behave in relation to other characters. Knowledge in melodrama is more often gleaned from the visual than the verbal register; in other words, what characters do and what they look like, rather than what they say.

As illustrated by its role in melodrama, the purpose of the stereotype – whether on stage, in film or television – is to signify with force, clarity and brevity a character’s background, their motivation and their moral worth. This relies upon the audience recognising the stereotype and its corresponding features. This recognition is predicated upon the audience’s exposure to other texts that have made use of a similar stereotype. In fact, it is only via a consistent and sustained pattern of repetition that a stereotype is established. We can get some idea of the importance of

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Note: The use of musical motifs in the stage melodrama offered a further symbolisation of character, albeit through an aural rather than visual register (Gledhill, 1987: 17-18).
Second Feature: Stereotypes

repetition to stereotypical discourse if we consider the term’s original use in the context of printing from metal plates. As Susan Hayward explains, “originally, stereotype was a printing term used to refer to a printing plate taken from movable type, to increase the number of copies that could be printed” (2000: 358). By its very nature, the stereotype facilitates reproduction and multiple copies. If we consider its ideological function, a stereotype gains greater force and influence the more often it is reproduced. It is the consistency and frequency of stereotypes of mental illness that concern psychiatrists and medical scholars like Otto Wahl:

Those with mental illnesses do sometimes kill others; they do sometimes behave in ways that others find humorous. How is it inaccurate to portray this? The answer [...] is that the specific work is only one contributor to a pervasive pattern of portrayals that together create an inaccurate stereotype. (1995: 114)

Given that a stereotype is the product of a consistent pattern of portrayal across multiple texts, the presence of a stereotype in one film may be established by comparing the character with portrayals of similar characters in other films. The visual, aural and behavioural cues used to construct a stereotype of mental illness rely upon audience familiarity with previous representations of mental illness for their construction of meaning. Claire Wilson and colleagues emphasise the importance of intertextuality in facilitating audience recognition of mental illness stereotypes, citing by way of example the use of horror conventions in the portrayal of a mentally ill character prone to unpredictable outbursts of violence (1999b: 246). Wilson’s notion of intertextuality highlights the importance of the repetition and reiteration of stereotypes. This has also been noted by Wahl, who demonstrates how people with mental illness are consistently portrayed in the mass media as either the source of fear or the object of derision. The role of repetition and reiteration in stereotypical discourse has also been attended to, albeit in a different context, by Homi Bhabha. While his analysis of stereotypes pertains to colonial discourse, Bhabha’s theorisation of the stereotype offers a valuable tool for analysing the operation of mental illness stereotypes in film and popular culture generally.
Fear and fascination: The ambivalence of the stereotype

As Bhabha has shown in his analysis of the racist stereotypes of colonial discourse, the stereotype is a figure of ambivalence. While mental health campaigners and medical scholars evaluate stereotypes according to their positive or negative connotations, Bhabha advocates a more complex understanding of the operation of stereotyping, one which refuses to read the stereotype as simply an agent of oppression and discrimination. Rather, he asserts that the stereotype represents the complex negotiations of fear and fascination, of dread and desire that characterise relationships between the coloniser and the colonised, or more generally, the dominant and the dominated, the mainstream and the marginalised. If we are to understand the continuing appeal of mental illness stereotypes in the mass media, particularly cinema, Bhabha’s model provides a rich basis for appreciating the ambivalence that lies at the heart of our culture’s fascination with portrayals of mental illness.

Like Wahl, Bhabha observes that the stereotype is dependent upon pattern and repetition; it represents something which is “already known … [but] must be anxiously repeated” (1992: 312). Through repetition, the stereotype soothes the anxiety of the threat of the other. This endless repetition of an assumption that is regarded as probably true (for example, that the mentally ill are violent and dangerous), but which can never be proven, is fundamental to both the empowered and the disempowered subject (Bhabha, 1992: 312). In demarcating the boundaries of what is other, the stereotype simultaneously defines the self. This is the process of “subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse”, which Bhabha argues must be engaged with if we are to understand the “effectivity” of stereotyping (1992: 313). Bhabha claims that the stereotype is an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power, expressing multiple, contradictory feelings simultaneously (1992: 322-323). The stereotype combines anxiety and assertion (Bhabha, 1992: 316); it speaks of what is both desired and derided. Fundamentally, the stereotype combines knowledge of the other with the maintenance of a sense of self.

This ‘knowledge’ of the other, which the stereotype signifies, is loaded with mythical meanings of such psychic and social power that long-held and deeply-felt
beliefs about mental illness remain firm in the face of evidence to the contrary. Despite the detailed research of writers and the use of real-life experiences as source material, films of mental illness persist in reinforcing clichés and stereotypes, such as the presumed relationship between artistic or intellectual genius and madness. This is the pervasive pattern of stereotyping: a single idea is repeated and reiterated across a range of texts. What is known about mental illness, drawn from evidence and experience – that, apart from their affliction, people with a mental illness are not fundamentally different from others – is displaced by what is believed about mental illness. These beliefs are the product of centuries of representations in literature and art as well as in cinema.

The various cinematic stereotypes of mental illness demonstrate Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence, which he argues is central to the stereotype’s effectivity. They betray the fear and fascination that haunt literary and artistic representations of madness. For example, the stereotype of the psycho killer – “the ‘deranged’ mental patient who is dangerously violent and requires incarceration lest he or she wreak havoc upon society” (Hyler, 2003: 33) – has been the source of terror and thrills for writers and readers for centuries before his translation to the screen. The persistence of the psycho killer stereotype illustrates Bhabha’s argument that “[t]he ‘stereotype’ requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. […] the same old stories […] must be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time” (1992: 323, his emphasis). Cinematic stereotypes of mental illness are simply a continual reiteration

Recognising the influence of popular culture and the mass media, medical researchers have conducted experiments using various media in an effort to dispel misconceptions about mental illness (Stout et al, 2004: 555).

In the Introduction, I discussed the persistent cultural appeal of the relationship between genius and madness. In addition to the films I mentioned there (A Beautiful Life; Iris; Sylvia; Lust for Life; Camille Claudel), here are some further examples of films that tap into our ongoing fascination with the stereotype of mad genius (in chronological order): Rain Man (Barry Levinson, 1988), Immortal Beloved (Bernard Rose, 1994), Van Gogh (Maurice Pialat, 1994), Pollock (Ed Harris, 2000).


I use the masculine pronoun when referring to this stereotype of mental illness as in the vast majority of portrayals, the psycho killer is male, reflecting the statistical dominance of males in serial killing (Dyer, 1999: 37). This is not to suggest, however, that there have been no cinematic portrayals of women as psycho killers. Consider, for example, Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003).
of pre-existing cultural constructions; they are testimony to the ambivalence – the attraction-repulsion dynamic – of the subject of madness. Wahl acknowledges the cultural appeal of films depicting violent characters with mental illness, even as he struggles to account for it: “current audiences, especially youthful ones, seem to have an increasing appetite for blood and gore. Psycho-killer movies seem to satisfy these desires” (1995: 111). With the repetition and pervasive patterns inherent in the subgenre and made explicit by the proliferation of sequels, these “psycho-killer movies” epitomise the fear and fascination at the heart of mental illness stereotypes.

Apart from providing visceral thrills and shocks, films about mental illness also appeal to an existentialist anxiety about the fine line dividing sanity and madness. This is where the ambivalence of mental illness stereotypes is most apparent. Their repetition and reiteration throughout popular culture reveal that we are fascinated by what we fear most: going mad. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips describes our relationship with madness as “profoundly ambivalent” (2006: 49). “There is a tremendous fear in our culture about madness”, Phillips observes (2006: 6), and this is as much a fear of ourselves as it is a fear of ‘the other’: “We have much to fear about ourselves” (Phillips, 2006: 9). The stereotypical discourse of mental illness attempts to differentiate the mentally ill from ‘the rest of us’, but as Bhabha’s analysis demonstrates, the stereotype is a flawed defensive strategy that only serves to further implicate the self in the other: “in many of the attempts to sort out the sane from the mad there is a sneaking suspicion that the differences between them may not be quite as convincing as we want them to be” (Phillips, 2006: 42-43). Despite the protective stance adopted by stereotypical discourse, the fear of madness can never be assuaged: “people are always persecuted by what they protect themselves from” (Phillips, 2006: 61). The stereotypes of mental illness reveal our ambivalent relationship – the unresolved contradictions between fear and fascination, between protection and persecution – towards a subject that is closer to ourselves than we would otherwise like to admit.

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66 Wahl is referring to films such as *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980).
Stereotypes in the melodrama of affliction

A film seeking to portray mental illness from the point of view of the afflicted protagonist needs to counter the presumed ideological effects of stereotypes, such as maintaining a distance between character and audience. Yet stereotypes are a powerful means of signifying a character’s identity with clarity and efficiency. They are fundamental to the style and narrative demands of melodrama, which strives towards a clear designation of moral identities during the course of the narrative.67 This suggests that the melodrama of affliction does not, and cannot, abandon stereotypes entirely. Instead, it deploys familiar stereotypes of mental illness to facilitate audience recognition of character identities, and then proceeds to undermine or challenge the assumptions associated with these character types. In the melodrama of affliction, “the sane man sees something of himself in the mad; that there are connections and affinities … where we would rather not see them” (Phillips, 2006: 62). The melodrama of affliction relies upon ambivalence and pathos to critically engage the stereotypes of mental illness and thereby encourage the audience to identify and empathise with the afflicted protagonist, despite our initial reluctance to do so.

The melodrama of affliction’s critical engagement with mental illness stereotypes can be attributed to melodrama’s tradition of tackling issues of difference, such as the conflict between classes, between genders, between races and between generations.68 Issues of normality and difference, and the conflicts that arise, are explicitly staged in any film dealing with the boundary between sanity and madness. The melodrama of affliction explores the question ‘what is normal?’ through its sensitive portrayal of the social disadvantages suffered by the afflicted protagonist. The way a character is treated by others is a key signifier of difference in melodrama, particularly when that character is ostracised or stigmatised. For

67 Moral legibility, the third feature of the melodrama of affliction, will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six.
68 While the family melodrama of the 1950s (for example, The Long, Hot Summer [Martin Ritt, 1958] and Giant [George Stevens, 1956]) was primarily concerned with generational and class-based conflicts, the woman’s film of the 1930s and 1940s (such as Stella Dallas [King Vidor, 1937] and Mildred Pierce [Michael Curtiz, 1945]) explored conflicts over gender roles. Jane Shattuc has demonstrated how melodrama’s affinity with the victimised protagonist makes it a powerful form for dealing with not only women’s issues but issues of race (Bratton et al 1994: 147-156). During melodrama’s ‘heyday’ of the 1950s, Imitation of Life (Sirk, 1959) was the most explicit treatment of racial conflict.
example, *All That Heaven Allows* is concerned with the pressures of social conformity and the protagonist’s struggle to assert her independence and her desire in a culture where difference is punished by isolation and alienation from community. Similarly, the melodrama of affliction is concerned with the costs of difference: institutionalisation, incarceration, medication, electro-shock therapy and homelessness are all examples of the price the protagonist has to pay for her or his difference from society’s norm. Through its critical engagement with mental illness stereotypes, the melodrama of affliction reveals the social costs of difference and stigmatisation, and appeals to our emotional involvement with the protagonist in order to expose the deleterious effects of stereotypical discourse.

**Emotional involvement and pathos**

Melodrama is a powerful tool for evoking emotional involvement in the protagonist’s plight. According to Robert Lang, “[h]uman identity and human relationships are treated by melodrama morally and emotionally” (1989: 49, his emphasis), and in this way “[m]elodrama appeals to the viewer’s emotion, not his or her reason or intellect” (1989: 49). In the Introduction, I discussed Linda Williams’ investigation of melodrama’s capacity to generate emotion in audiences. She seeks to lift the critical taboo on examining emotion and affect by analysing the function of pathos in melodrama (1998: 44): “I am struck by the unwillingness to recognize the importance of melodramatic pathos – of being moved by a moving picture” (1998: 47). Thomas Elsaesser identifies what constitutes pathos and explains its function in melodrama: “pathos results from noncommunication or silence made eloquent […] Such archetypal melodramatic situations activate very strongly an audience’s participation” (1995: 377). Pathos is thus a useful tool for eliciting the audience’s emotional involvement, in order to overcome the resistance to empathy built up by stereotypes. Its emotional power comes from affective nonverbal devices, such as gesture, tableau and facial expression; what Williams refers to as “mute pathos” (1998: 54, 71). Williams rehabilitates pathos – where the audience identifies with the protagonist’s suffering – from the feminist orthodoxy that views it as an enslaving, masochistic emotion, and she insists that we acknowledge the power that lies in

The protagonist of the melodrama of affliction, whether female or male, exemplifies the emotional appeal of virtuous suffering identified by Williams. The melodrama of affliction calls upon us to empathise with the protagonist, and as a result of the emotional affect of pathos, we are moved by their plight. We are moved ‘closer’ to the protagonist; in this way, melodrama’s emotional appeal helps to bridge the gap between self and other that stereotypes attempt to maintain. Empathy represents the apotheosis of this emotional involvement, for not only are we responding emotionally to the protagonist’s plight (such as when we feel sympathy for or pity towards them), but when we empathise with the protagonist, we are experiencing the same emotions they are experiencing. Through the audience’s emotional investment in the protagonist’s journey, the melodrama of affliction challenges the traditional view of stereotypes and dares to assert that “the sane and the mad may have things in common” (Phillips, 2006: 43).

It is crucial to melodrama’s emotional affect that we do not lose sight of the larger forces at work that have contributed to the protagonist’s suffering. This is the relationship between empathy and pathos that I identified in the Introduction. Williams draws upon the work of Christine Gledhill, who “embraces melodrama’s central feature of pathos” (Williams, 1998: 48) and argues that “pathos involves us in assessing suffering in terms of our privileged knowledge of its nature and causes” (1998: 49). Alongside our emotional identification (empathy) with the protagonist, Williams argues that the audience has a greater awareness than the protagonist of the

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69 Jane Shattuc also notes the obvious discomfort of feminist film theorists in addressing the emotional appeal of melodrama (Bratton et al 1994: 147-148).
circumstances and forces that have conspired to victimise him or her, and thus the audience’s emotional response is considerably more complex and critically aware than has been acknowledged: “It is never a matter of simply mimicking the emotion of the protagonist, but, rather, a complex negotiation between emotions and between emotion and thought” (Williams, 1998: 49). As Williams demonstrates, our emotional identification with melodrama’s victims does not preclude our critical awareness of their plight; indeed, the dialectic of emotion and thought that defines pathos heightens the stakes of our investment in the dramatic conflicts played out on screen. Our emotional involvement with the victim intensifies our condemnation of their suffering; we cannot remain distanced from or indifferent towards their victimisation.

The spectator’s critical awareness that results from this negotiation between emotion and thought is fundamental to the melodrama of affliction’s critical engagement with stereotypes. Through its encouragement of the audience’s emotional investment in the protagonist’s journey, the melodrama of affliction harnesses the complex emotion of pathos – this negotiation between emotion and thought – to prompt a critical awareness of the social and medical discourses, exemplified by stereotypes, that define the protagonist’s mental illness and deny their humanity and individuality. In the emotional complexity of pathos, this critical awareness is bound up with the empathic relationship that the melodrama of affliction cultivates between protagonist and spectator. In order to achieve this dialectic between emotion and thought that defines pathos, the melodrama of affliction relies on the affective power of empathy to transform its stories of difference into universal tales of struggle, hope and the search for love.

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In this chapter, I brought together melodrama theorists and medical researchers to examine an issue of common concern: stereotypes. I illustrated how stereotypes of mental illness in film are both the legacy of melodrama’s theatrical inheritance, a feature of the melodramatic mode, and the product of wider social anxieties about mental illness. I proposed an alternative model, based on Homi
Bhabha’s work, for analysing the operation of stereotypes, one that advocates investigating the ambivalence – the dialectic of fear and fascination – that drives stereotypical discourse, rather than judging stereotypes as accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative. I concluded with a discussion of melodrama’s emotional appeal to the spectator, in particular the critical awareness inherent in the emotion of pathos, which is central to the melodrama of affliction’s critical engagement with stereotypes and the wider social and medical discourses that frame and often constrain the protagonist’s identity.

It will be apparent, in several of the films examined in this thesis, that the melodrama of affliction still employs stereotypes as a means of conveying succinctly and forcefully a character’s ‘difference’ from others. Despite this persistence of stereotypes, I argue that the melodrama of affliction is not committed to using stereotypes as a way of maintaining distance between the protagonist and the audience. On the contrary, the melodrama of affliction hopes to encourage a feeling of empathy and emotional identification between audience and protagonist that speaks to a common humanity regardless of mental health. It achieves this via the spectator’s emotional involvement with the protagonist’s journey as they struggle to overcome the forces – whether psychological or social – that afflict them. I will analyse how the melodrama of affliction achieves this emotional involvement in the next chapter, where I will examine *An Angel at My Table* and its critique of the stereotype of the mad genius.
Chapter 4
Unravelling the Myths of Madness: Deconstructing social and medical discourses in *An Angel at My Table*

Jane Campion’s 1990 adaptation of Janet Frame’s autobiography *An Angel at My Table* invites close examination of one of the most pervasive and persistent stereotypes of mental illness: the mad genius, which assumes a close and necessary connection between artistic or intellectual achievement and psychological dysfunction. In this chapter, I explore the social and medical discourses that collude in the construction of the mad genius stereotype. I revisit the terms set up by Homi Bhabha in his analysis of stereotypical discourse, by examining the various ways in which the afflicted protagonist, Janet Frame (Kerry Fox), is stigmatised and constructed as ‘different’ during the course of her life. Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence is evident in Janet Frame’s own conflicted response to being labelled a ‘mad writer’. *An Angel at My Table* critically engages with the mad genius stereotype of mental illness, revealing both the attractions and limiting effects of stereotypical discourse for the person constructed as different. Campion ensures that Janet’s perceived ‘difference’ from those around her does not prevent the spectator from empathising with her emotions and her dilemmas. Indeed, Campion challenges the construction of Janet as different and uncovers the universal in her heroine’s experiences of childhood and adolescence, securing the spectator’s emotional identification with Janet’s journey towards an independently defined selfhood.

*An Angel at My Table* is based on New Zealand author Janet Frame’s three-part autobiography *To the Is-land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1984) and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985). Preserving Frame’s three-part structure, scriptwriter Laura Jones originally adapted the autobiography for television as a mini-series of three 50 minute episodes. The New Zealand Film Commission then encouraged Campion and producer Bridget Ikin to release the mini-series as a feature film (Cairns and Martin,

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70 To make the distinction between the character in the film and the author in real life, I refer to the character portrayed on screen as ‘Janet’, and I use ‘Frame’ to refer to the actual person, particularly her writings.
1994: 195), and it went on to win numerous awards at international festivals, most notably the Venice Film Festival (Martin and Edwards, 1997: 148).

In Campion’s film, Janet is portrayed as a creative, imaginative young woman who, struggling to find her place in the world and traumatised by the early deaths of two sisters, retreats from reality into her poetic imagination. As she seeks refuge from the social expectations that frighten or oppress her, her increasingly anti-social behaviour becomes the object of medical inquiry and social censure. In keeping with her role as a melodramatic heroine, Janet is the victim of a conservative social order that regards her difference from norms of feminine behaviour as deviance and illness. The pressures of social conformity become so unbearable she attempts suicide. Janet then spends the next eight years undergoing psychiatric treatment, including hospitalisation and electric shock treatments. *An Angel at My Table*, like *Heavenly Creatures*, demonstrates the instability of classifications of psychiatric disorder, as Janet’s diagnosis of schizophrenia is later found to be false.

Like many of the protagonists in these Australian and New Zealand films, “Janet’s story is largely one of suffering: from her childhood onwards she experiences grief, poverty and social stigmatisation, deprivation, fear and isolation, physical pain, manipulation” (Gillett, 2004: 31). Campion’s film sensitively portrays Janet’s ordeals and, through carefully selected voice-overs taken directly from Frame’s autobiography and intimate camera framings, creates a relationship of empathy between character and audience. Campion also uses the camera and the retrospective commentary of Janet’s voice-overs as tools of critique, in order to foster our critical awareness of the social and institutional forces that are responsible for Janet’s suffering. Through the compassion and understanding that result from this empathic relationship and its concomitant portrayal of the stigmatising effects of social and medical discourses, *An Angel at My Table* harnesses the emotional complexity of pathos to critique and deconstruct stereotypes of mental illness.

This chapter, like Campion’s film, is divided into three parts. I begin my analysis of *An Angel at My Table* with a close textual reading, which examines the various ways in which Janet is socially constructed as ‘different’ during her childhood and adolescence. Janet’s deviance from the social conventions of femininity is increasingly pathologised and culminates in her admission to
psychiatric care. In the second section, my focus moves from the social discourses of class and gender that construct Janet as different, to the medical discourse that gives Janet’s difference a name: schizophrenia. Indeed, Janet’s difference undergoes a further shift, from being pathologised to being romanticised and viewed as symptomatic of her ‘mad genius’. The label of the ‘mad writer’ influences Janet’s self-identification, as well as the attitudes of those around her. In this section, I analyse Campion’s sensitive portrayal of Janet’s years in psychiatric institutions, paying particular attention to the use of close-ups in maintaining a close emotional bond between Janet and the spectator. This empathy, or ‘shared feeling’, proves crucial to undermining the difference that the stereotype of the mad genius insists upon. In the third and final section, I discuss the persistent cultural force of the mad genius stereotype. Here I consider the wider social context of post-war New Zealand – the period of Janet’s hospitalisation – and Campion’s own response to Frame’s attempt, in her autobiography, to debunk the myth of the mad genius that plagued her for decades. As my analysis demonstrates, despite the social and medical construction of Janet as different, Campion’s film insists upon her very normality in the face of tremendous adversity, and it invites the spectator to empathise with the common experiences of adolescence and the search for self in Janet’s journey.

“I’ve got schizophrenia”: Pathologising difference

ISABEL: (reads) Dementia Praecox, also known as skits-o-freenia: a gradual deterioration of the mind, with no cure. (Jones, 1990: 44)

Diagnosis has an awesome power. Someone says a person is schizophrenic and everything is then interpreted in that light.
~ Jane Campion (Wexman, 1999: 80)

This section examines the social construction of Janet as ‘different’. Halfway through the second episode of Campion’s An Angel at My Table, Janet returns to her family after her first stay in a psychiatric hospital, bearing a letter that names her condition. It is a label from a language the Frame family neither understands nor speaks, prompting Janet’s sister Isabel (Glynis Angell) to look up its definition in a psychology textbook. This discursive construction of Janet as ‘mentally ill’ is the result of her failure to conform to the social expectations of femininity, growing up in
New Zealand in the 1930s and 1940s. While she had a happy family life during childhood, sharing her world of stories and poems with three sisters, Janet’s early school years are characterised by a mixture of triumph and shame. Her early poems win her the devoted attention of her grade four school teacher and she is awarded Dux of the school, which provides her with a free subscription to the Athenaeum library. Janet’s burgeoning talent for writing is a source of pride for her family and obvious pleasure for Janet (Alexia Keogh). However, the impoverished circumstances of her family mark Janet as different from other students and from an early age, Janet learns the social power and stigmatising effect of labels. She is branded “filthy” by the nurse inspecting Janet’s arms and ears, after she is singled out from her classmates for medical examination along with three other children, whose appearance also suggests family poverty. In another scene, Janet is summoned to the front of the class by Miss Botting (Brenda Kendall), who forces Janet to admit that she stole money from her father to buy chewing gum for her classmates. As she slinks back to her desk, Janet’s lonely walk is accompanied by harsh whispers of “thief”. Janet’s attempt to win friends has tragically backfired, intensifying her isolation and ostracism from her peers. The labels of “thief” and “filthy” stigmatise Janet, drawing attention to her family’s poverty, and demonstrate the discursive construction of her social deviance.

Being ‘different’ defines Janet’s identity from her earliest years, as we learn from the montage of scenes depicting Janet’s experiences at school. Janet witnesses society’s intolerance of difference when she sees her brother, who suffers from epilepsy, being teased by a group of school boys: “Georgie-Porgie’s queer in the head!” (Jones, 1990: 9). In response to her brother’s stigmatisation, Janet shamefully turns away so as not to be seen with him: “A conscious, shameful choice. Her face burns” (Jones, 1990: 9). As Frame recalls in her autobiography, Isabel’s teacher once

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71 These twin affects of triumph and shame are captured in Eva Rueschmann’s observation that “Janet Frame grew up in a close-knit family that was all the more isolated for its poverty” (2000: 41).

72 Kerry Fox plays the adult Janet in Episodes Two and Three (‘An Angel at my Table’ and ‘The Envoy from Mirror City’) but in Episode One ‘To the Is-land’, which depicts Janet’s childhood and adolescence, Janet is played by Keogh (primary school years), then Karen Fergusson (high school years), with Fox introduced towards the end of the episode as Janet prepares for teacher’s college and university.

73 This is made explicit in Laura Jones’ screenplay: “The four children all step out of line … We then see – by comparison – that they are the four poorest children in the line” (1990: 10).
said “You Frame girls think you’re so different from everyone else”. Frame explains, “I came to accept the difference, although in our world of school, to be different was to be peculiar, a little ‘mad’.” (1994: 109). Even at this young age, difference is already pathologised as a form of madness.

Stereotypical discourse is dependent upon visible signifiers of difference, in order to construct its chain of logic that links knowing with seeing (Lang, 1989: 24; Hayward, 2000: 358). In his analysis of stereotypical discourse, Homi Bhabha demonstrates how the stereotype of the Negro is dependent upon the visible mark of difference, namely skin colour (1992: 324). In An Angel at my Table, Janet’s difference is visualised by her frizzy red hair, which is stubbornly resistant to grooming and styling, and is a source of fascination and consternation for her peers. Janet’s hair is emblematic of her failure to meet cultural standards of femininity set by the growing consumer culture of cosmetics and beauty products, evident in the advertisements and women’s magazines of the 1930s. In her autobiography, Frame comments “I was baffled by my fuzzy hair and the attention it drew, and the urgency with which people advised that I have it ‘straightened’, as if it posed a threat” (Frame, 1994: 203). Her childhood friend Poppy (Carla Hedgeman) asks if she can touch it, and during her teenage years, Janet’s school nickname is “Fuzzy”. The ‘problem’ of Janet’s hair becomes a topic upon which other women feel compelled to speak and to give advice: two schoolgirls, one who is shown brushing her long, straight hair (the culturally accepted standard), offer advice and suggestions of possible styles. Years later, in London in the late 1950s, Janet is persuaded to have her hair set before meeting her publisher. The disastrous hair style that results is testimony to Janet’s failure to attain the desired/desirable feminine appearance of the times. Dressed in borrowed high heels and a black cocktail dress:

her awkward and uncertain gait not only exposes her discomfort in assuming the constrictive accoutrements on femininity typical of the 1950s but also reveals her inability as a serious woman writer from the colonies to fit into the fashionable world of London book publishing. (Rueschmann, 2000: 42-3)

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74 In the third section of this chapter, I will return to Bhabha’s theorisation of stereotypes: how they operate and what function they serve in relation to identity.

75 For Janet, her older sister Myrtle (Melina Bernecker) embodies the exciting and glamorous image of 1930s femininity (Rueschmann, 2000: 44-5). For a history of the changing modes of femininity in 1930s New Zealand, see Sprecher (1999: 151-60).
Janet’s awkward masquerade of conventional femininity in London recalls her post-war experience in the psychiatric hospital, when the nurses prepare the female patients for a dance with the male patients by applying garish make-up and hair ribbons, “in a particularly grotesque reflection on social norms and rituals” (Rueschmann, 2000: 48) and a parody of femininity. The inability of the patients to apply their own make-up in the accepted style becomes a visible mark of their psychological ‘difference’ from other women. As Mary Ann Doane has shown in her analysis of the 1940s woman’s film, a woman’s deviation from the prescribed ideals of feminine appearance signifies her mental illness: “the lack or impairment of a narcissism purportedly specific to femininity is hence symptomatic in these films” (1987: 42). An Angel at My Table illustrates this symptomatic relationship between feminine appearance and psychological classification. In the same way that Janet’s hair is the subject of public scrutiny and comment throughout her life, her mental health will become the subject of inquiry by doctors, nurses and university lecturers.

Janet’s marginal status and lack of friends continue to haunt her high school years, but her loneliness becomes even more painful after the sudden death of her older sister Myrtle (Melina Bernecker). Janet (Karen Fergusson) retreats further into the world of her imagination in an attempt to console her grief. With the loss of her closest friend and female role model, Janet is cast adrift from the conventional activities and amusements of girls her age. At her school break-up party, she sits in the corner of the room, painfully aware of her isolation, as her schoolmates gather around the piano, singing and laughing. Once at university and teacher’s college, she is too shy to mix with fellow students over coffee in the union. Instead, she eats her lunch in the psychology lab and writes poetry in the cemetery. These ostensibly inhospitable spaces of laboratory and cemetery serve as Janet’s ‘refuges’ from the world that intimidates and frightens her. Janet is ill-equipped emotionally to deal with the social expectations of her chosen career as a teacher, such as mixing with fellow staff over morning tea, and when faced with the scrutiny of the school inspector, Janet silently crumbles under the pressure and walks out of the classroom, knowing she will never return.
Campion’s treatment of Janet’s ‘breakdown’ in the classroom is exemplary of her film’s cultivation of an empathic relationship between protagonist and audience. Sue Gillett argues that this scene “is not sensationalized but compassionately rendered” (2004: 32). The scene illustrates Thomas Elsaesser’s definition of pathos as “noncommunication or silence made eloquent” (1995: 377), as we see a nervous Janet turn towards the blackboard and become transfixed by the piece of chalk in her hand. There is no music, no dialogue, only the subtle whispers of the school children as they wait for their lesson to begin, and yet Janet’s psychological dislocation from this moment is communicated – “made eloquent” – by the confused and blank stare on Fox’s face and the intimacy of the camera’s close-up. “Patiently the camera stays with Janet as she stares at the inexplicable chalk in her hand. […] There is no dizzying angling, nothing frenetic in the montage or the score” (Gillett, 2004: 32). Campion sustains the emotional tension of this unflinching close-up, so that the spectator experiences a growing discomfort while Janet stands frozen at the blackboard for what seems like an interminable period of time; it is a profoundly affective moment. In contrast with the complex staging of the breakdown scenes in *Shine* and *Angel Baby, An Angel at My Table* presents Janet’s public collapse subtly and without hysterics, creating a moment of pathos where the audience is invited to share in the protagonist’s emotions while maintaining a critical awareness of the social pressures that have led the protagonist to this point. This is the complex emotional response – the negotiation between emotion and thought – that Linda Williams identifies as the affective power of pathos (1998: 49).

Following her flight from the classroom, Janet swallows a packet of aspirin, in a suicide attempt that is described briefly and without fanfare in Frame’s autobiography76 and, sensitively, not depicted on screen. The film’s audience only becomes aware of this event when Janet recounts her failed suicide in an autobiographical essay she submits for university. This public disclosure of her pain and desperation ushers in the medical establishment, who pathologise Janet’s shyness and social awkwardness as a psychiatric disorder. Creating a shared emotion between her protagonist and her audience, Campion powerfully conveys

76 “On Saturday evening I tidied my room, arranged my possessions, and swallowing a packet of Aspros, I lay down in bed to die, certain that I would die. My desperation was extreme” (Frame, 1994: 188).
the shock of becoming the subject of psychiatric discourse when a naive Janet, having agreed to a few days ‘rest’ in hospital, is astonished to read the sign on the hospital door: ‘psychiatric ward’. This sign literalises the label of psychiatric dysfunction that will affect Janet’s social standing and her own self-definition for years to come.

**Playing the part of the mad writer**

This section continues my close analysis of *An Angel at My Table* and examines the physical and psychological effects upon Janet of becoming the object of medical discourse. In his *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault has described how behaviour that is considered socially deviant becomes medicalised and constructed as psychiatric illness. Psychiatry “[gives] labels to the dysfunctional” (Watson, 1998: 223). Janet’s social dysfunction – her shyness and her loneliness – is labelled ‘schizophrenia’ by the medical establishment, and this label becomes not only a mark of Janet’s difference but a source of self-identification for Janet herself. Her conformity with the ‘mad writer’ stereotype is insisted upon by those around her, such as her university lecturer John Forrest (Colin McColl), whom Janet admires (in fact, she harbours a secret crush on Forrest). He informs her of the lineage of great artists who were also afflicted with schizophrenia: “when I think of you, I think of … Hugo Wolff [sic]… Van Gogh …” (Jones, 1990: 45). Forrest holds up this stereotypical association of madness and creative genius to Janet, a myth she embraces hungrily, as her smile reveals: “she savours the affirmation that her sickness and her art can live together” (Jones, 1990: 45). In her autobiography, Frame writes of how she extensively researched schizophrenia and began adopting behaviours and vocabulary that conformed to the disorder’s symptomatology, which she describes as “my schizophrenic fancy dress” (Frame, 1994: 203). In the poems she wrote for John Forrest, Frame played the role of the mad writer with aplomb (Frame, 1994: 201). Forrest’s attention to her “case” (Jones, 1990: 45) made her feel special, important and interesting. Schizophrenia became a language that Frame learned and employed, fulfilling the stereotype assigned to her and conforming with cultural expectations of madness after she had failed to conform to the social codes of femininity (her lack of friends, dates, fashionable clothes, and an acceptable hairstyle). Her embrace of the
role of the mad genius illustrates what Mark Nicholls has called, in another context, “a mutually beneficial trade in stereotypes” (2004: 5).77

While Frame may have found some comfort in adopting a social role that was compatible with her own desires as a writer, playing the part of the ‘mad writer’ is not without its costs. Apart from the social stigma, there is the physical pain and emotional trauma of invasive psychiatric treatment. In *An Angel at My Table*, one of the legacies of Janet’s impoverished childhood, and another sign of her failure to attain the cultural standard of femininity, is her decaying, rotten teeth. Janet is so ashamed of their appearance that she adopts a toothless grin for a smile, and insists upon covering her mouth with her hand when she talks. In despair and pain, Janet finally calls upon Mrs Chandler (Annabelle Lomas), seeking help for her teeth. Mrs Chandler informs Janet of a new treatment for schizophrenia, which offers the promise of a possible cure. This scene is immediately followed by Janet’s first experience of electric shock treatment. Janet’s visit to the dentist is elided; she is now, simply, toothless. By cutting from the conversation with Mrs Chandler about her teeth to Janet’s first shock treatment, Campion makes a disturbing connection between ECT and dentistry that points to their desire to produce a normative femininity.78 These scenes suggest the link between culturally accepted standards of femininity and the construction of madness as social deviance in the 1940s, when a women’s appearance – the extent to which she does not attain or indeed exceeds culturally prescribed norms of femininity – was regarded as symptomatic of her psychological dysfunction.79

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77 Nicholls is referring to the stereotype of the Italian-Australian as child/adolescent that he traces in Italian-Australian cinema, ranging from Michael Powell’s *They’re A Weird Mob* (1965) to Kate Woods’ *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000) and including films by Italian-Australian directors Monica Pellizzari and Giorgio Mangiamele.

78 Sue Gillett also notices the link between the female body, teeth and ECT in Campion’s close-up of the jars of false teeth that belong to the patients. She links this image of false teeth with notions of decay and deterioration, which evoke the hopeless prognosis for Janet’s schizophrenia: “a gradual deterioration of the mind, without cure” (2004: 28).

79 Again, I am drawing on Doane’s work on the 1940s woman’s film, specifically her chapter ‘Clinical Eyes: The Medical Discourse’ (1987: 38-69), which establishes the symptomatic association between a woman’s appearance and her psychological dysfunction. Of course, Doane is analysing Hollywood studio films from the 1940s, whereas I am discussing a film produced in New Zealand in 1989-1990, but I would argue that Campion’s film makes visible the same social pressures that afflicted women in the 1940s as those demonstrated in the films Doane has selected for close analysis.
Second Feature: Stereotypes

Although the sequence depicting Janet’s years of institutionalisation occupies relatively little screen time (only ten minutes out of the film’s total running time of 155 minutes), it contains some of the most haunting images in the film. As with *Shine*, where Jan Sardi and Scott Hicks did not wish to dwell upon David’s ‘lost years’ in psychiatric care, Campion presents a series of short scenes in a montage sequence, compressing years of Janet’s life in psychiatric hospitals and conveying her isolation and despair through brief but powerful images. Several of these were adapted from Frame’s novel *Faces in the Water* (1961), a fictionalisation of her experiences in psychiatric hospitals in New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s. Scenes adapted from *Faces* include Janet’s humiliation at having to use doorless lavatories under the stern supervision of a nurse (Frame, 1961: 154); the pathetic sight of the male and female patients ‘dressed up’ for a ballroom dance (Frame, 1961: 188); the shuffling parade of recently lobotomised patients, scarves tied in bows to cover their shorn heads (Frame, 1961: 217), and a desperate Janet scribbling poetry on the wall of a cell as if her life depended on it (Frame, 1961: 206). The hospital day room is populated by shuffling, swaying, dishevelled women, shown in two brief shots that recall the graphic imagery of asylums in films such as *The Snake Pit* (Anatole Litvak, 1948). The soundtrack is equally disturbing, with persistent shouting, crying and blood-curdling screams (usually off-screen) accompanying these images. For the audience, it is distressing to see the effects of this environment taking their toll upon Janet.

Throughout this montage sequence of her years in institutions, we empathise with Janet’s pain and despair. Through her sympathetic framing and Kerry Fox’s subtle performance, Campion insists that Janet does not fit, she does not belong here. Finding herself to be ‘different’ once again, Janet stands out from the other patients for her very stillness and silence, while she is surrounded by cries and restless bodies. The one exception to this stillness is the harrowing depiction of her first ECT treatment, when the dramatic impact of Janet’s scream is heightened by a sudden absence of sound, both diegetic and nondiegetic, on the soundtrack as the camera

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80 Discussed in Chapter Two.
81 In her autobiography, Frame invites the reader to look at *Faces in the Water* for a more detailed (and graphic) account of her experiences between 1945 and 1954 (Frame, 1994: 194). “Scenes were taken from events she [Frame] discussed in *Faces in the Water* […] and I felt pretty confident that those scenes were particular, and weren’t made up to show madness but to describe her situation in a particular way” (Campion, in Wexman, 1999: 80).
pans slowly along her convulsing body. We see glimpses of rebellion in Janet’s refusal to use the doorless lavatory while other patients are watching, but this is as much an assertion of her humanity as it is ‘bad’ behaviour. Despite her protests, she is forced by an unsympathetic nurse to conform. The audience is never alienated from Janet’s view during these hospital scenes; we are encouraged to empathise with her, to share in her fear and loneliness. We continue our emotional identification with her, which has been established by the film’s use of Janet’s voice-over, starting from its very first frame. In the hospital scenes, the camera studies Janet’s watchful presence in close-up, inviting the audience to identify with her journey into the world (but not the mind) of the mad. Gillett analyses Campion’s use of close-ups in evoking our empathy for Janet and making “the visualization of this painful narrative bearable”: “The camera stays close to Janet, lingers, defines a protective space around her. It contains her, providing a sympathetic boundary within which her painful experience can be held and understood” (2004: 32). Campion’s creation of this intimate relationship between Janet and the audience demonstrates the role of empathy in bridging the gap between the character constructed as mentally ill and the spectator.

Janet’s experience in psychiatric hospitals is portrayed as a time of imprisonment, rather than treatment. The film’s critical view of psychiatry is conveyed in the one scene where Janet is invited to speak with a doctor, only to be told that her mother has signed the papers authorising a leucotomy: “it’ll do you the world of good” (Jones, 1990: 52). Not only is Janet denied the power to make decisions about her own treatment, as a result of being labelled ‘insane’, but the optimism with which the doctor describes the purported effects of the leucotomy is undercut by the framing of this scene. The doctor’s office window, covered with bars, looks out onto the hospital day room; the medium close-ups on the doctor and Janet are framed so that the mayhem of the patients in the day room is persistently in the background (indeed, the day room is lit more brightly than the doctor’s dark office, further drawing our attention to it). A patient smiles idiotically at the doctor and presses her face between the bars on the window, an image that is testimony to the gulf in the mid-twentieth century between psychiatry and the human beings it

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82 ‘Leucotomy’ is an alternative term for lobotomy.
purported to treat. Through her careful framing of this scene, Campion harnesses the power of the visual register to critique the paternalistic notions and dehumanising effects of psychiatry, and she invites the spectator to share this critical view.\footnote{\textit{An Angel at my Table}'s critical view of 1940s psychiatry comes from the vantage point of the late 1980s, after the profound shift in psychiatry’s social standing from its unchallenged authority and prestige in the 1940s and 1950s to the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s, led by R. D. Laing in Britain and Thomas Szasz in America (Porter, 2002: 209-211). Campion’s visual language here is the equivalent of Frame’s own scepticism about psychiatry, a view she held from the time she began to write \textit{Faces in the Water}: “I know that Dr Cawley found me a difficult patient for I was ‘against psychiatry’ and I disapproved of all psychiatric gods, with perhaps more tolerance of Jung” (1991: 383). Suzette Henke argues that “all Frame’s literary production, be it fictional or autobiographical, contributes to a complex but angry indictment of the treatment of mental illness in New Zealand hospitals at mid-century” (2000: 653).}

Despite her reprieve from the leucotomy and her discharge from hospital following the award-winning publication of her short stories, medical discourse has constructed Janet as a patient and during those eight years of institutionalisation, she learned to speak the language expected of her. When she feels the familiar pull of despair and loneliness years later in London, she presents herself at Maudsley Hospital, deploying the language of mental illness in her search for answers about her psychiatric history: “I knew that talk of suicide must always be taken seriously. Such talk came readily to me as a shortcut to ensure action” (Janet’s voice-over, Jones, 1990: 86). Having successfully inhabited the stereotype of the ‘mad writer’ for over a decade, it is with equal shock and fear that, following her examination at Maudsley, Janet learns she never suffered from schizophrenia (nor is she offered an alternative diagnosis for her ‘condition’). Campion employs a subtle but telling visual metaphor here of Janet descending the hospital staircase, initially photographed out of focus through a glass window that warps the image, then she emerges into natural light and a clear, unfiltered medium close-up. Janet literally emerges from the shadows and distortions of psychiatric misdiagnosis; once again, as in the earlier scene when Janet is informed she will have a leucotomy, Campion employs the camera as a tool in the film’s critical engagement with psychiatric discourse and stereotypes of mental illness. This shot accompanies Janet’s voice-over, which poignantly conveys Janet’s ambivalent relationship with this discursive regime: “At first the truth seemed more terrifying than the lie. How could I now ask for help when there was nothing wrong with me?” (voice-over, Jones, 1990: 87).
Help is forthcoming, however, in the form of Dr Cawley (Gerald Bryan), who gives Janet permission not to conform to social expectations: “if anyone tells you to ‘get out and mix’ when you don’t want to, don’t” (Jones, 1990: 87). This is a pivotal moment in Janet’s journey towards self-realisation and a key scene in the melodrama of affliction’s portrayal of the debilitating effects of social roles. After years of struggling to meet the standards of feminine appearance and behaviour, and retreating into herself for fear of failure, Janet’s relief is palpable: she is allowed to be different, to be herself. Ironically, this is yet another instance where the discourse of others serves to determine Janet’s identity. The benevolent Dr Cawley invites comparison with the doctor in All That Heaven Allows, who diagnoses Cary’s persistent headache as a somatisation of her heartache. These are kindly authority figures who liberate these victimised heroines from the physically and mentally unhealthy effects of social ostracism and stigma by giving them permission to follow their hearts’ desires. For once in Janet’s life, medical discourse is enabling, rather than disabling, and it opens the way for her to construct her own identity, as a writer.

Overcoming the affliction of stereotype

For that fine madness still he did retain,  
Which rightly should possess a poet’s brain. 

It has been your habit for long to do away with good writers,  
You either drive them mad, or else blink at their suicides,  
Or else you condone their drugs, and talk of insanity and genius,  
But I will not go mad to please you.  
~ Ezra Pound, accusing the public (Porter, 2002: 82).

The stereotype of the mad genius, which defined Janet Frame’s persona for decades, continues to fascinate the public, as the recent success of Shine and A Beautiful Mind has demonstrated. This public fascination with telling and re-telling stories of the mad genius illustrates Bhabha’s notion of the ambivalence of stereotypical discourse: it combines fear and fascination in a compulsive retelling of “the same old stories” (1992: 323). Both Shine and A Beautiful Mind were not only
commercially popular and critically praised; they also inspired a number of articles in newspapers and journals, which explored the association of madness with artistic and intellectual feats of genius.\textsuperscript{84} The influence of this stereotype of mental illness upon medical discourse can be seen in the ongoing research by psychologists, geneticists and neurologists, as they search for the link between creativity and mental illness.\textsuperscript{85}

Psychiatrist Kay Jamison has focused on the similarities between the artistic temperament and manic-depressive mood disorders in a book-length study \textit{Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament} (1993). Her revisionist medical history of writers, artists and composers such as Vincent Van Gogh and Robert Schumann – both role models for Frame in her self-construction as a ‘mad writer’ – makes a persuasive argument, based on family genealogy and historical evidence, for reconceptualising the mental disorders of these troubled artists as manic-depressive illness rather than schizophrenia, which is the more common diagnosis. Jamison demonstrates how this illness, with its cyclical variations between depression and mania, allows for degrees of lucidity and control in artistic production, as well as ‘visionary’ moments of fervent creativity typically associated with such artists. She also reveals the costs of this illness, particularly when it is untreated or misdiagnosed, and thereby debunks its romantic association with creativity: “No one is creative when paralytically depressed, psychotic, institutionalized, in restraints, or dead because of suicide” (1993: 249). Manic-depressive illness is as equally disabling for creativity as it is the potential wellspring from which artistic inspiration may be drawn: “As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about”, wrote Virginia Woolf, to which Jamison adds the cautionary note, “yet the illness that drove the lava also killed her” (1993: 226). Jamison produces a study of madness and creativity that responds to our fascination with the figure of the mad genius by deconstructing its mythology through scientific and historical evidence.

\textsuperscript{84} See, by way of example, Calvo (2002); Mishra (2002); Stone (2002); Trafford (2002); Tunbridge (2002)

\textsuperscript{85} Recent studies on the link between creativity and mental illness have been conducted by the Stanford University Medical Center (2002), the University of Toronto (2003) and Vanderbilt University, Tennessee (2005).
Jamison’s project, like Campion’s film, represents a critical engagement with the mad genius stereotype. She is careful to avoid succumbing to the lure of the myth herself:

It is important to emphasize, however, that many writers and artists have no family history of these illnesses, nor do they themselves suffer from depression or manic-depressive illness. This point is critical. The basic argument of this book is not that all writers and artists are depressed, suicidal, or manic. It is, rather, that a greatly disproportionate number of them are ... (Jamison, 1993: 237).

From this disproportionate number emerges the stereotype of the mad genius, shaping public attitudes towards artists as much as the artist’s own sense of self.

Frame’s sense of self was indeed defined by the mad genius stereotype, whether she was complicit with it or rebelling against it. Frame was so desperate to be a writer that, for many years, she endeavoured to live up to others’ expectations of her as a ‘mad writer’, believing the myth that creativity and madness are allies in giving birth to poetic imaginings. She was seduced by “the romantic popular idea of the insane as a person whose speech immediately appeals as poetic” (Frame, 1961: 112). In An Angel at My Table, John Forrest’s pantheon of afflicted artists (“Van Gogh ... Hugh Wolf”) effectively imprisons Janet in an image of idealised and romanticised madness, one not of her own making. Frame repeats Forrest’s comment at several points in her autobiography, for this was “the remark which was to direct my behaviour and reason for many years” (1994: 201). One of Frame’s reasons for writing her autobiography was to debunk her own mythology as ‘New Zealand’s mad writer’, and Campion’s film stays true to this project by affirming Janet’s very normality: “when her autobiographies came out, I was incredibly eager to find out what the story really was, and I was shocked to find out how normal she was” (Campion, in Wexman, 1999: 59-60). Encouraging the spectator to view Janet as ‘normal’ rather than ‘different’ is of central importance to the film’s cultivation of an empathic relationship between spectator and afflicted protagonist.

An Angel at My Table explores the stereotypical discourse surrounding mental illness: in addition to its critique of the romantic idea of the mad genius, it portrays the stigma of being labelled a ‘loony’. Early in the first episode, during Janet’s childhood, the family are travelling on a train that stops at Seacliff station, near the
hospital that served as an asylum for decades.\textsuperscript{86} Immediately, Seacliff is defined by its association with madness, as Janet looks out the window to see a man standing with his legs askew, rubbing his back against the wall, with his eyes closed and mouth open, “his face lost to the rhythm” as he moves from side to side (Jones, 1990: 6). “That’s where the loonies go”, says Janet’s brother, and her mother tries to block Janet’s view of this distressing sight, but in fact her hands unwittingly frame this spectacle of madness, which we see from Janet’s point of view. It is a brief image but one that serves as a premonition of Janet’s own experiences at Seacliff hospital and introduces the derogatory language used to name the mentally ill.

The spectre of madness, embodied by Seacliff, fascinates the local populace, as Frame’s autobiography recalls: “as the train approached Seacliff […] there was movement in the carriage as the passengers became aware of Seacliff, the station, and Seacliff the hospital, the asylum, glimpsed as a castle of dark stone between the hills” (1994: 150, her emphasis). Frame’s apt choice of gothic imagery (“a castle of dark stone”) reflects the passengers’ ambivalence, the combination of fear and fascination that is central to Bhabha’s theory of stereotyping (1992: 312). This scene at Seacliff station, where the ‘loony’ is identified and named, echoes Bhabha’s retelling of Frantz Fanon’s memory of being labelled “a Negro”, when a white girl with her mother exclaims, “\textit{Look}, a Negro … Mamma, see the Negro!” (Bhabha, 1992: 321, his emphasis). These two moments for Janet and Fanon – of seeing and naming the other, of being seen and named as the other of stereotypical discourse – share the silent, watchful presence of a maternal figure, trying to protect the child from the threat of the other. ‘Loony’ adopts the same discursive function as ‘Negro’ in stereotypical discourse: it robs the subject of the ability to name themselves and it serves as a defensive strategy for the speaker by ‘othering’ the subject so named,

\textsuperscript{86} Seacliff, a small rural settlement north of Dunedin, was chosen as the site for a lunatic asylum by the Provincial Council in 1875. Several buildings were constructed between 1884 and 1918 to house female patients, shell-shocked servicemen and nurses. Some buildings were later demolished or destroyed by fire, and the site was abandoned as a hospital in 1973. Today, the area is known as Truby King Recreation Reserve. Sir Frederick Truby King was medical superintendent at Seacliff from 1889 to 1921. During this time, he established the Society for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children, more commonly known as the Plunket Society. For a brief history of the site, see Dunedin City Council (1998: 9-10). For a social and cultural history of Seacliff hospital, see Barbara Brookes (1992) and the essays by Cheryl Caldwell, Caroline Hubbard, Susan Fennell and Judith Holloway, amongst others, in Brookes and Thompson (2001).
thereby controlling the threat posed by the subject/other to the speaker’s sense of self, whether that self is defined by race or sanity. To recognise the humanity of the loony is to risk being confronted with the undifferentiated threat of madness, the possibility that the self is not immune to mental illness. This is the anxiety that stereotypical discourse seeks to assuage, a fear of the ‘other’ that is challenged by the melodramas of affliction’s invitation to empathise with the character discursively constructed as mentally ill, to bridge the gap between self and ‘other’.

In his documentary on New Zealand cinema, *Cinema of Unease*, Sam Neill recalls growing up in New Zealand in the 1950s – less than a decade following Frame’s diagnosis of schizophrenia – which he describes as a “paranoid time”:

> People were afraid of communism, trade unions, yellow peril, rock and roll. As a result, it was rigorously conformist, politically conservative and socially dull. But my memory tells me that the greatest fear of all was madness, paradoxically for many the only way out.

Neill’s journey through his past, and that of his nation’s cinema, takes him to various landmarks of his childhood, including the Sunnyside psychiatric hospital, which – like Seacliff station and hospital – stands as a permanent, physical reminder of the threat of madness: “everyone seemed to know someone who ended up here,” Neill remembers, “we grew up here [in New Zealand] in the God-given certainty that nothing dramatic would ever happen to us, except perhaps you might go mad.” Neill’s construction of madness as an escape from what he recalls as the “suffocatingly dull life” of 1950s New Zealand reflects the stereotypical view of

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88 Neill’s 1995 documentary, which he wrote and directed with Judy Rymer, was commissioned as part of the British Film Institute’s series celebrating the centenary of cinema. Other filmmakers who produced documentaries of their national cinemas included directors Martin Scorsese (American cinema), George Miller (Australian cinema) and Stephen Frears (British cinema) (Martin and Edwards, 1997: 184).
89 Alison Laurie also recalls growing up in the New Zealand in the 1950s, describing “the conservative and judgmental atmosphere of the times towards anybody who defined the status quo” and her own “dissatisfaction with what seemed a dreary and dull conformity” (Glamuzina and Laurie, 1991: 48).
90 In fact, it is to Sunnyside hospital that Mrs Chandler sends Janet for her ECT treatment.
mental illness as the driving force of creativity.\textsuperscript{92} There is no room for the visionary artist in the conservative Anglophile country of Neill’s memory. Madness is recast by Neill as a form of rebellion, a liberation rather than a prison sentence, illustrating the ongoing fascination of the mad genius stereotype.\textsuperscript{93}

Like Neill’s childhood memory of Sunnyside hospital, Campion recalls her own youthful response to the mythology of Janet Frame, which eventually moved beyond stereotypical notions of madness:

When I heard that Janet Frame had spent a lot of time in mental hospital, she became somebody I’d think about when we’d drive past the mental hospitals in New Zealand, wondering if Janet was really there. She grew to have a mythic proportion to me, her life seemed to sum up the tragic/sad artist. When her autobiographies came out, […] it was like the unravelling of a myth. (Campion, in Wexman, 1999)

Despite the lure of mystique that surrounds the mad genius, this too – like the ‘loony’ – is a social trap and a humanity-denying stereotype for the person so labelled. Frame’s autobiography is her attempt to step out of the social trap, the humanity-denying stereotype, of the mad genius, and in Frame’s recollections of growing up in New Zealand, Campion perceived a shyness and a vulnerability common to many, rather than the province of a gifted few.\textsuperscript{94} The traumas of Frame’s childhood and adolescence – her family’s poverty, her brother’s epilepsy, the deaths of two sisters – would be sufficient to cause permanent psychological damage in anyone, let alone the deleterious effects of the years spent in psychiatric institutions. What emerges from Frame’s autobiography and Campion’s film is not Janet’s illness but her strength in the face of loss and adversity.

\textsuperscript{92} Vincente Minnelli’s melodramas are testimony to the fascination of the relationship between artistic talent and mental illness: see, for example, the tortured artists of Vincent Van Gogh (Kirk Douglas) in \textit{Lust for Life} (1956); Stevie (John Kerr) in \textit{The Cobweb} (1955) and Jack Andrus (Kirk Douglas) in \textit{Two Weeks in Another Town} (1962).

\textsuperscript{93} As the subtitle “a personal journey” indicates, Neill’s documentary offers a personal perspective on New Zealand cinema. His thesis that madness is a recurring motif in these films was (unsurprisingly) not warmly received in New Zealand, and the documentary has been criticised for overlooking the contributions of women and Maori filmmakers, but it remains “the most influential attempt to define the distinctive character of films made in New Zealand” (Horrocks, 1999: 129).

\textsuperscript{94} Describing her response to \textit{To the Is-land}, the first volume of Frame’s autobiography, Campion recalls “how much my childhood felt like hers” (in Wexman, 1999: 60): “It awakened my own memories of my childhood; her book really seemed to me to be an essay on childhood in New Zealand” (Campion, in Wexman, 1999: 63).
Janet’s journey, as narrated in Frame’s autobiography and retold by Campion’s film, is about coming to terms with her identity as a writer without the badge of honour that schizophrenia would seem to confer. Sue Gillett observes that “the obstacle in Janet’s path […] involves freeing herself from the debilitating force of socially imposed identities” (2004: 30). These identities include the “social masks” (Gillett, 2004: 3) of the loony and the mad genius. Melodrama is concerned with the effects on the individual of the social masks they are forced to wear. Stereotypes in melodrama are not only “limited characters”, to recall Laura Mulvey (1989: 41), they are also limiting characters; in other words, the socially imposed identity of the stereotype limits the protagonist’s capacity for self-realisation and happiness. These are the “divided” characters that pervade fifties melodramas, “based on an unresolved tension between an outer social mask and an inner reality of frustration” (T. R. Atkins, quoted in Gledhill, 1991: 225). In this melodrama of affliction, Janet’s affliction is not schizophrenia itself but the social masks and limiting effects of social and medical discourses of mental illness. Her affliction is stereotype, not madness per se, and the film charts her journey in coming to terms with, then overcoming, this affliction. Janet’s time in London, where she first learns of her misdiagnosis, is characterised as a period of loss followed by rebirth. At first, Frame admits, “I was still inclined to cherish the distorted ‘privilege’ of having schizophrenia because it allied me with the great artists more readily than my attempts to produce works of art might have done” (1994: 367). But following her weekly conversations with Dr Cawley and her discovery of the city’s artistic community, Frame reflects, “here in London writing had been affirmed as a way of life without psychiatric qualifications” (1994: 415-6). For Frame, the presumed dependency of creative inspiration upon psychological instability, which the mad genius stereotype insists upon, had finally been severed.

Despite shaking off the burden of the mad genius from her own self-conception, Frame discovered that New Zealand society continued to regard her through this stereotypical view of creativity: “there was constant reference to me as ‘unbalanced, insane’ with a tendency to ally this to my writing and even make it a reason and explanation for my writing” (1994: 414). After years of identifying herself as “a textbook schizophrenic” (1994: 202), only to be confronted with the falsity of
that construction, Frame’s next battle was with the public’s perception of her. One recalls the Ezra Pound quote at the opening of this section: “I will not go mad for you” (Porter, 2002: 82). This is, in effect, the message behind Frame’s autobiography and, indeed, Campion’s film, in their portrayal of Janet’s liberation from the medical discourse and the social expectations of the mad genius stereotype.

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I would like to conclude this discussion of An Angel at My Table with a further comment by Kay Jamison, one which speaks to the film’s project of deconstructing the mythology of Janet Frame as New Zealand’s ‘mad writer’:

Clearly the pain experienced by writers and artists is not always the result of a pathological state of madness or melancholy. Often it is the ordinary, as well as the universal, in life’s experiences that combines with an unusually sensitive temperament […] to produce a heightened sense of vulnerability, awareness, pain, and futility (1993: 124).

Campion says she identified with and responded to Frame’s tales of growing up in New Zealand (Wexman, 1999: 60 & 63); her film encourages the spectator to respond in the same, empathic way. Campion’s film of Frame’s autobiography is testimony not to the writer’s ‘mad genius’, but to the ordinary and universal experiences of childhood and adolescence, and the search for identity through the minefield of social expectations. An Angel at My Table explores the deleterious effects of society and medicine’s stereotypical discourses and critically engages with the stereotype of the mad genius that defined ‘Janet Frame’ for so many years.
Chapter 5
Victims and Villains:
The moral legibility of the melodrama of affliction

In the melodramatic mode, the protagonist is portrayed as an innocent victim of an affliction, or social forces, beyond his or her control. In this chapter, I argue that the protagonist’s moral identity as victim-hero plays a key role in the melodrama of affliction’s cultivation of an empathic relationship between character and spectator. In a narrative of struggle and victimisation, the protagonist is portrayed as morally ‘good’ and virtuous. I identify this as the melodrama of affliction’s drive towards moral legibility, towards a recognition of the protagonist’s innocence and virtue. Through its portrayal of the victim-hero’s suffering, which the audience bears witness to, the melodrama of affliction calls upon us to empathise with the mentally ill protagonist.

Melodrama’s imperative to reveal with force and clarity the conflict between good and evil is established by the groundbreaking work of Peter Brooks. Brooks’ study of the influence of stage melodrama upon the novels of Henry James and Balzac, first published in 1976, provided the foundations for an historicised theoretical framework of melodrama developed in subsequent decades by film scholars such as Linda Williams. In this chapter, I draw upon the combined writings of Brooks and Williams to lay the critical foundations of the melodrama of affliction’s moral legibility. I argue that the melodrama of affliction narrates the protagonist’s desire to retrieve a lost innocence and it portrays this quest as a journey through pain and suffering, both physical and psychological. In melodrama, the idealised space of innocence is often visualised as a garden or rural idyll, symbolic of the maternal place of origin. The suffering endured by the victim-protagonist throughout their journey establishes their innocence, despite any guilt or wrongdoing assigned to them by other characters, and the audience bears witness to this suffering. Through this act of bearing witness, the audience not only exculpates the protagonist but we are encouraged to empathise with their pain and loss.
The moral occult and melodrama’s theatrical heritage

Peter Brooks locates the origins of melodrama as a narrative form within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath (1995: 14). He describes this as “the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch)” (1995: 15). As a modern theatrical form, melodrama came into being in “the postrevolutionary, post-Enlightenment, postsacred world where traditional imperatives of truth and morality had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need to forge some semblance of truth and morality” (Williams, 1998: 51). Stage melodrama’s dramatic nominations of good and evil answered a need for unequivocal moral expression during a time of social upheaval, when established notions of morality had come under attack and the ethical values of society had become increasingly difficult to read.

In its theatrical form, melodrama’s sensational effects drew upon the polarisation of good and evil for the staging of dramatic conflict, sudden revelations and last-minute rescues. Brooks detects “an underlying manichaeism” in the form, whereby “the conflict of good and evil is played out under the surface of things” (1995: 4). This is “the moral occult”, which Brooks defines as “the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality” (1995: 5). Central to Brooks’ concept of the moral occult is the notion that forces of good and evil, of innocence and guilt, are not immediately apparent, they are hidden: “the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives … is not clearly visible within reality” but it is believed to be operative beneath the surface of things, hence this domain “demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated” (Brooks, 1995: 20-21). This is the origin of melodrama’s desire to reveal those things that are concealed, to express what cannot be articulated, to uncover “what lies beneath the surface”; a legacy that is still evident in its cinematic form today.95

Brooks’ thesis is that the purpose of the melodramatic mode is “to locate and to articulate the moral occult” (1995: 5):

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95 Melodrama’s desire to ‘reveal all’ is made explicit in Todd Haynes’ recent homage to Sirk, Far From Heaven (2002), which features the tagline “what lies beneath the surface?”. I have borrowed this phrase for the discussion above as it encapsulates the compulsion to reveal that characterises the moral occult.
The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. ... The spectacular enactments of melodrama seek constantly to express these forces and imperatives, to bring them to striking revelation ... (Brooks, 1995: 13).

Thus melodrama has a revelatory function: a compulsion to reveal the moral occult, a drive towards the unequivocal identification of moral forces, which propels the narrative. According to Linda Williams, “[t]his quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama” (1998: 52): “It is the constant goal of melodrama to reveal the moral occult through acts and gestures that are felt by audiences as the emotional truths of personality” (Williams, 1998: 77). This notion of revelation is central to understanding how the moral occult operates in melodrama. During the course of melodrama’s narrative, moral values and the identities of good and evil may be concealed, questioned, challenged or perverted, but by the point of resolution and narrative closure, these values and identities will have been uncovered, unequivocally established and articulated in an intensely emotional and theatrical way. Murray Smith refers to this as “comeuppance”, “one of the basic satisfactions offered by melodramas”:

Just deserts are meted out to the various characters according to their real moral natures – virtues rewarded and villainy punished – and part of our satisfaction is derived from responding emotionally in what we regard as a morally sound fashion (1999: 224).

Smith’s description of melodramatic “comeuppance” and Williams’ reference to “emotional truths” highlight the importance of the audience’s emotional engagement to melodrama’s moral legibility; Williams describes this as “a visceral sort of ethics. They are felt as good” (1998: 74, emphasis in original). This interrelationship between ethics and emotion forms the basis of the “moral sentiment” theories of philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume, which point to our capacity for empathy as the source of morality (Neill, 1996: 178): “moral evaluations and judgments frequently underlie our emotional reactions,” explains Smith, “many of the cognitive judgments integral to emotions have an ethical character” (1999: 218). Melodrama links our emotional responses towards characters with our ethical judgments of them, through this “merger ... of morality and feeling”
(Williams, 1998: 55). We are invited to weep for the suffering of the innocent hero or heroine and to condemn those responsible for this suffering as ‘evil’. We are called upon to empathise with the innocent victim’s pain and loss.

**Bearing witness to suffering and victimisation**

Williams argues that “the suffering of the victim-hero is important for the establishment of moral legitimacy” (1998: 60) and in the melodrama of affliction, empathy for the hero is generated by the victimisation he or she endures, which the audience bears witness to: “if we are confronted with visual evidence of an individual’s suffering, we have a strong tendency to empathize and sympathize with her” (Gaut, 1999: 210). Both Elsaesser (1995: 353) and Nowell-Smith draw attention to melodrama’s central theme of persecuted innocence personified in “a hero whose role is to suffer” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 1977). Expanding upon Elsaesser’s argument that “a characteristic feature of melodrama is its concentration on ‘the point of view of the victim’”, Williams asserts that “the victim-hero of melodrama gains an empathy that is equated with moral virtue through … suffering” (1998: 66): “[t]o suffer innocently, to be the victim of an abusive power, is to gain moral authority, to become a kind of hero, no matter how pathetic” (Williams, 1998: 83 n15). Williams’ argument demonstrates the importance of the portrayal of suffering to establishing a character’s moral innocence and to securing the melodrama of affliction’s empathic relationship between character and spectator.

In the melodrama of affliction, the hero(ine) is usually a victim who suffers the affliction of mental illness and its distressing symptoms. But these protagonists can also be victims of social prejudice, medical misdiagnosis and maltreatment, and other forms of abuse, whether physical, psychological or sexual. The victim-hero of melodrama typically undergoes a series of trials and physical ordeals before their virtue is finally recognised. According to Williams, “the audience’s ability to adjudicate between guilt and innocence” often rests upon the “bodily exhibition of suffering [as] a paradoxical means of exculpation” (1998: 81). Regardless of what ‘crimes’ the victim-hero is accused of within the diegesis, the audience comes to

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96 Although the protagonist of the melodrama of affliction can be a man or a woman, for the sake of elegance I refer to the protagonist as the victim-hero, in keeping with Williams’ terminology (1998: 60).
recognise the victim-hero’s fundamental innocence and to empathise with their pain as they bear witness to the protagonist’s suffering. Williams notes that it is the recognition of virtue, rather than its reward, that is of primary importance in melodrama (1998: 66). Regardless of whether the narrative ends happily, in the success of the victim-hero, or unhappily, with the victim-hero’s failure to overcome their affliction(s), “the key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode” (Williams, 1998: 66) and to elicit an emotional response from the spectator.

Williams claims that melodrama “invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims” (1998: 42); I argue that the melodrama of affliction goes even further, and invites us to feel empathy for the victim-hero. Williams observes that melodrama “move[s] us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims” (1998: 42). The spectator’s emotion of pathos is central to Williams’ analysis of melodrama’s cultivation of moral feeling. In the Introduction, I discussed Williams’ assertion that pathos arises from a complex dialectic of emotion and thought, whereby we identify with the character’s feelings yet have a greater awareness than they of the forces that have conspired in their victimisation (Williams, 1998: 47). I argued that this experience of pathos is predicated upon our identification and emotional engagement with the victim-hero; indeed, Williams contends that melodrama encourages us to identify with the victimised character (1998: 46-47). This is empathy; we are invited to identify with the virtuous sufferer who “pathetically suffers in ways that elicit audience empathy” (Williams, 1998: 59). Crucial then to melodrama’s call to empathy is the depiction of the victim-hero’s suffering. As Williams has persuasively argued, it is in their apparently passive suffering that melodrama’s victim-heroes ‘act’; as a result of their suffering, the terms of melodrama’s moral economy are made apparent and our moral judgment is engaged via the emotive appeal of scenes of abandonment, estrangement, trial, and punishment.

Williams’ extensive, detailed analysis of D. W. Griffith’s Way Down East is central to her arguments concerning melodrama’s moral legibility and the emotional
response of pathos (1998: 62-80). As we bear witness to Anna’s lonely, pathetic suffering during childbirth and the subsequent death of her baby in *Way Down East*, we identify with her emotions of disbelief and despair while also condemning the social injustice of her situation. We have greater knowledge of her pain and suffering than any other character; consequently, our identification with her is heightened when she is treated cruelly by others who regard her as ‘guilty’ of the sin of unwed motherhood. In our eyes, according to the logic of melodrama’s moral economy, her sufferings are ‘proof’ of her innocence. Williams describes this as “the proof of innocence in the survival of a ritual ordeal” (1998: 81). What is intriguing about melodrama’s presentation of the protagonist’s suffering is that this proof is furnished not so much for the benefit of other characters in the diegesis, but for the benefit of the audience, to secure our empathic relationship with the victim-hero and to remove any doubt as to their moral innocence. In bearing witness to the victim-hero’s suffering, Williams contends that “audiences of melodrama are positioned like juries of common law trials” (1998: 81). Yet we not only judge the victim-hero, we identify and empathise with them. In its simultaneously sadistic and masochistic demand that we bear witness to and identify with the victim-hero’s suffering, the moral occult contributes to the melodrama of affliction’s call to empathy.

**Retrieving a lost innocence**

As part of its desire to reveal the hidden values of good and evil, to articulate the moral occult, the melodrama of affliction seeks to retrieve a lost innocence: “[m]elodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence” (Williams, 1998: 65). Gardens and rural homes are the kinds of spaces where melodrama introduces the innocent protagonist in happier times, before the villain “intrudes upon the idyll” (Williams, 1998: 65). However, the actual physical characteristics of the space of innocence are incidental to its symbolic significance; fundamentally, “the ideal space of innocence is … the maternal place of origin” (Williams, 1998: 65). Part of

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97 I also discussed *Way Down East* in Chapter One, in relation to psychological gesture and externalising the internal through the actor’s body.
98 Hence the climactic scenes of courtroom revelations in family melodramas such as *Written on the Wind* and *Peyton Place* (Mark Robson, 1957), and the popular contemporary cycle of courtroom dramas such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), a key text in Williams’ analysis of the persistence of the melodramatic mode in contemporary American cinema (1998: 53-54, 58).
melodrama’s affective power is its ability to generate pathos from the audience’s awareness of this lost space of innocence (Williams, 1998: 65) and their emotional identification with the protagonist’s quest to retrieve it: “[t]he narrative ends happily if the protagonists can, in some way, return to this space of innocence, unhappily if they do not” (Williams, 1998: 65).

*Way Down East* fits Williams’ definition of a happy-ending melodrama that regains the space of innocence with which it began (1998: 65). Interestingly, Anna does not literally return to her lost maternal place of origin – for her mother has died – but she re-establishes this lost maternal bond with Mrs Bartlett, the wife of the patriarch who judged her harshly and the mother of the man who rescues and thereby redeems her. This suggests that innocence can be reclaimed, indeed re-created, after it has been destroyed. Williams draws attention to Griffith’s presentation of Anna’s life with her mother as a “place of maternal goodness” (1998: 65), which she has to abandon for the decadent, dangerous environment of the city when she goes to seek financial support from her rich relations. This vulnerable figure of innocence is forced to fend for herself in the outside world, and she falls prey to the manipulations and uncaring attitudes of the city folk. The Bartletts represent those willing to help and befriend the victim heroine – indeed, the victim-hero(ine) of melodrama often encounters helpers along their journey – but Anna can only fully regain her place of lost innocence once she has endured the physical and psychological trials of childbirth out of wedlock, the death of her baby, the social stigma of her ‘crime’ against patriarchy, and the ordeal of being cast out into a blizzard and nearly dying on an icy river. In the sadism of melodrama’s moral economy, Anna must suffer before she can be allowed to ‘return home’. Anna’s suffering, which the audience bears witness to even when no other character is present, is essential to establishing her virtuous innocence and for eliciting our emotional engagement – our empathy – with a character maligned and misunderstood. As Carl Plantinga observes, “films often attempt to elicit an empathetic response only after a protagonist has undergone some kind of trial or sacrifice” (1999: 253). Our empathy with Anna’s desire to retrieve her lost innocence is elicited by the trials and tribulations she endures during her quest.
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

The victim-hero’s “quest, not for the new but for the old space of innocence” (Williams, 1998: 65), reveals that, fundamentally:

melodrama is nostalgic: it looks back at what is dreamt of as an ideal time … It dreams of the unobtainable – emotions, including hope, rise only to be dashed, and for this reason the melodrama is ultimately masochistic (Hayward, 2000: 218).

There is a naivety in the protagonist’s character that underlies this nostalgia for a lost innocence that cannot be regained, a recurrent feature in melodrama “of desire focusing on the unobtainable object” (Elsaesser, 1995: 372). The happy-ending melodrama may be achieved through finding a surrogate for the unobtainable object, thereby resolving the protagonist’s quest, while the sad-ending melodrama represents the failure to find a surrogate or to let go of the delusions of the past. Williams observes that “this longing for a home that was probably never quite so wonderful as remembered is a typical feature of all melodrama” (1998: 86 n53). She cites the lament of Rock Hudson’s character in Written on the Wind – “how far we have come from the river” – as exemplary of this nostalgia that seeks solutions to the present in the past. This is symptomatic of melodrama’s reliance on individual solutions to social problems, “its compulsion to ‘reconcile the irreconcilable’ – that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return” (Williams, 1998: 75). The weakness in melodrama’s social critique is its inability to conceive of a resolution to the social problems it lays bare, other than a return to the comforts and certainties of the past. Melodrama’s moral occult, identified by Brooks, is symptomatic of this desire to return to the spiritual values of the past, which have since been lost. The moral occult answers a felt need to reveal and unequivocally articulate moral identities in the modern, postsacred world.

Through the revelations of the moral occult, the melodramatic mode taps into our desire for the (largely illusory) comforts and certainties of the past. This is a felt need that arises when we are confronted with the social issues of the present. In an era of deinstitutionalisation and media campaigns to raise awareness of mental health issues, the social problem of mental illness in the community remains a source of fear and anxiety for many, whether one is afraid of the mentally ill as ‘the other’,
or fears going mad oneself. At first, it might seem that the melodrama of affliction offers a simplistic, reassuring solution through the triumph of the individual over the affliction of mental illness. Films such as *Shine* and *An Angel at My Table* would seem to fit the pattern of the happy-ending melodrama. On the other hand, films such as *Angel Baby* and *Heavenly Creatures* cannot offer the same reassurance, conforming instead to the sad-ending melodrama, where we can only weep at the tragic outcome of these doomed love stories. As Steve Neale argues, however, regardless of whether a melodrama ends happily or unhappily, its ability to elicit tears from the spectator points to our empathy with the protagonists (1986: 12 & 22). Despite the ideological conservatism inherent in melodrama’s nostalgic desire for the past, the cultivation of an empathic relationship, an emotional bond, between the audience and the mentally ill character on screen is in fact a progressive act, one that fosters understanding about this particular social issue. This suggests that the apparent conservatism of melodrama’s moral occult can have radical effects. Through our empathy with the victim-hero, the melodrama of affliction “deploys identification to get audiences to reconsider their emotional responses and to learn from a fictional situation” (Gaut, 1999: 214). The melodrama of affliction’s call to empathy demonstrates Berys Gaut’s contention that:

> the Brechtian idea that identification must always function so as to render the audience uncritically receptive to conventional values is false. Identification may work in an appropriate context to drive home some hard lessons (1999: 216).

In the context of the social problem of mental illness, the conventional, Manichaeistic values implicated in the moral occult serve the didactic function of bridging the gap between the mad and the sane, by securing our emotional identification with the mentally ill victim-hero.

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In this chapter, I introduced and provided the theoretical framework for the melodrama of affliction’s drive towards moral legibility. The following chapter applies this framework to a close analysis of *Bad Boy Bubby*, but this moral legibility
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

is also present, to varying degrees, in the other melodramas of affliction. The protagonist of the melodrama of affliction becomes morally legible as innocent as a result of the suffering they endure during the course of the narrative. The audience is encouraged to empathise with this figure of the victim-hero(ine) as they bear witness to his or her suffering. The revelations of melodrama’s moral occult rely upon this suffering to establish the victim-hero’s innocence, despite the crimes they may be accused of, and to nominate those who are truly guilty. The protagonist strives to retrieve their lost innocence, to return to the maternal place of origin, which is often represented via the motif of the garden or the rural idyll. Throughout the victim-hero(ine)’s journey, which is suffused with loss and suffering, the audience is encouraged to empathise with his or her emotions and pain. The moral legibility of the melodrama of affliction demonstrates the power of melodrama’s appeal to our emotions.
Chapter 6
Empathising with Murder:
Revealing the moral occult in Bad Boy Bubby

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which the melodrama of affliction achieves moral legibility and encourages the audience to empathise with the protagonist, who is presented as virtuous and innocent as a result of the suffering and victimisation he or she endures. To illustrate this, I will analyse Rolf de Heer’s challenging and confronting film, Bad Boy Bubby (1993). In its portrayal of the title character, this film draws upon two morally opposed stereotypes of mental illness: the psycho killer, embodying evil and villainy, and the idiot savant, representing innocence and virtue. Once I have established Bubby’s conformity with the features of these two stereotypes, I will argue that de Heer’s film needs to resolve the ambiguity and the tension between these polarised character types if it is to achieve an unequivocal articulation of moral identities and cultivate an empathic relationship between protagonist and spectator. Bad Boy Bubby demonstrates Peter Brooks’ concept of the moral occult – melodrama’s desire to reveal the true forces of evil and malevolence in the world – via its critique of institutionalised authority, particularly religion. The film also illustrates melodrama’s goal, identified by Linda Williams in her analysis of Way Down East, of recovering the lost space of innocence. Despite its graphic violence and explicit sex scenes, I argue that Bad Boy Bubby is a melodrama of victimised innocence in a morally corrupt world taken to its logical extreme. Through its engagement with the conventions of melodrama’s moral legibility identified by Brooks and Williams, Bad Boy Bubby achieves the melodrama of affliction’s aim of encouraging the audience to empathise with a character portrayed as mentally ill.

“Kid’s completely crackers”: Bubby as mentally ill

Bad Boy Bubby is an unrelenting portrayal of the abuse – psychological, physical, sexual – which people are capable of inflicting on one another. It is also a celebration of the fundamental goodness and generosity of people, and the ability to

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Third Feature: Moral Legibility

break out of cycles of abuse through love and support. Director Rolf de Heer explains what he sees as the film’s message:

there are these cycles of abuse which generate more abuse … abused children, for example, often become abusive parents. I wanted to say that with enough love and attention the cycles can be broken (de Heer, quoted in Urban, 1994: 73).

Bad Boy Bubby portrays the picaresque adventures of a child-man, Bubby (Nicholas Hope), who has spent the first thirty-five years of his life living in a concrete bunker with his impoverished mother, Mom (Claire Benito), without ever encountering the world outside his home. Bubby is forbidden from going outside by Mom, who tells him the air is poisonous. The first thirty minutes of Bad Boy Bubby depict the dysfunctional, infantilising relationship between mother and son, as we see Mom bathe and shave Bubby, feed him warm milk and sugar, slap him and threaten to “beat [him] brainless” (de Heer, 1996: 18), then have sex with him. During these short scenes, Bubby hardly speaks, except for repeating Mom’s words or imitating the hissing of a feral cat he plays with. Melissa Iocco suggests the mother-child relationship in Bad Boy Bubby is:

constructed, or fantasised, as being in a stage of infantile containment. Bubby’s mother meets all his physical needs and keeps him confined in a small space, almost as if he were in a perverse nursery or a dark womb (2003: 2).

This is Bubby’s “maternal place of origin”, to borrow Williams’ phrase (1998: 65), that he will be forced to abandon and which, throughout his journey, he seeks to retrieve. Despite the film’s confronting subject matter of incest, violence and psychological abuse, Bubby’s journey shares several features with the trials and tribulations of Anna in Way Down East. These features, identified by Williams, are a crucial part of the melodrama of affliction’s drive towards moral legibility.

Bubby’s childlike emotional and physical dependence on his mother is threatened by the arrival of Pop (Ralph Cotterill), a drunken priest who fathered then abandoned him. Conforming to the narrative structure of classic stage melodrama, identified by Brooks, which was carried over into cinema by Griffith (Williams, 1998: 65), Pop represents the prototypical villain who intrudes upon the ‘idyll’ Bubby
shares with his mother. Although his existence with his mother hardly seems ‘idyllic’ to the audience, this is the only world Bubby has ever known and the film constantly reminds us of Bubby’s own nostalgic longings for this infantile, maternal bond – no matter how abusive it may be – as he later struggles to cope in the world outside.

Pop takes Bubby’s place in Mom’s bed and Bubby is subjected to even more verbal abuse and physical assaults, now from both parents. This Oedipal narrative is taken to its logical extreme when Bubby, distressed by his parents’ abuse and the loss of physical intimacy with Mom, kills his parents by suffocating them with cling wrap. Slowly realising he has to fend for himself (just like the abandoned Anna in *Way Down East* after her mother’s death), Bubby steps over the threshold into the outside world and encounters every aspect of human behaviour, from help to hostility, from friendship to fear. “Using Bubby’s non-judgmental view of the world, the film begins to explore parts of that world”, de Heer explains. “And so the world is funny and tragic. It is ugly and beautiful. It is spiteful and forgiving, loving and hateful, honest and hypocritical” (de Heer, quoted in Malone, 2001: 62). Thus the film casts the world of contemporary Australian urban-industrial society in Manichaeistic terms of good versus evil, reflecting melodrama’s drive towards clearly identifying the moral forces operative in the world. This demonstrates Brooks’ notion that melodrama works towards presenting the modern, or postsacred world, in morally legible terms (1976: 5). Melodrama seeks to reveal “moral good in a world where virtue has become hard to read” (Williams, 1998: 54).

During the course of his “odyssey” (Keane, 1995: 55 & 57), Bubby meets and instantly falls in love with Angel (Carmel Johnson), who physically resembles Mom – Bubby’s first sexual object – with her large figure and breasts. For Bubby, Angel represents the possibility of reclaiming, or recreating, his lost maternal bond. When he witnesses Angel’s parents abusing their daughter, both physically and psychologically, Bubby responds by killing them, again with cling wrap (although this time, the crime is depicted off-screen and referred to only briefly in dialogue). Bubby unwittingly finds himself the lead singer of a rock band, when he stumbles on stage and begins repeating the epithets of abuse he learnt from Pop. Bubby develops his talent for mimicry, both on and off stage, and takes to repeating the phrases of the various people he meets, in a rudimentary acquisition of language: “Enactment,
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

repetition, reflection are his mode, like a baby, only that he is 35 years old” (Keane, 1995: 56). When he encounters a group of cerebral palsy patients cared for by Angel, he reveals a special talent for understanding and ‘speaking’ their non-verbal language. After enduring homelessness, incarceration, insults, physical assaults and rape – a melodramatic trial by ordeal (Williams, 1998: 81) – Bubby finally achieves public recognition as a cult rock star and happiness in fathering children with Angel. He is portrayed as the suffering victim-hero of melodrama who, like David Helfgott in *Shine*, finds redemption in love and public recognition of his talent as a performer. Indeed, Liz Ferrier explicitly links *Shine* and *Bad Boy Bubby* in her identification of the “disabled artist” cycle in contemporary Australian film (2001). This cycle, in which Ferrier includes *An Angel at My Table* and *Sweetie*, is characterised by a common narrative pattern: “an embattled artistic individual, suffering from a disability or difference which isolates him or her socially, manages to find solace and ultimately social recognition, through creative performance and self-expression” (Ferrier, 2001: 58). As Ferrier observes, Bubby and David are “the disturbed products of extreme psychological and physical abuse (very bad parents), who both become exceptional artistic performers” (2001: 58). Like many of the protagonists in the melodramas of affliction I examine in this thesis, through the social acceptance that flows from his success as a performer, “our unlikely hero … suffers and learns and survives … Innocence triumphs” (Dalgleish). Through the “empathetic response [elicited after the] protagonist has undergone some king of trial or sacrifice” (Plantinga, 1999: 253), we share that triumph.

Unlike the other melodramas of affliction, *Bad Boy Bubby* is one of the few films where the protagonist is not formally diagnosed as mentally ill, nor do we see him receiving psychiatric treatment, such as medication, counselling, or institutionalisation. Despite the absence of a medical discourse, Bubby is constructed as mentally ill, or at least psychologically disturbed, both within the diegesis and in

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100 *Sweetie* is the exception to this narrative resolution, as the title character’s creativity does not result in social recognition. This film is nevertheless included in Ferrier’s cycle because of the link she draws between the disabled artist’s compulsive need to be creative and the common feature of “bad parenting” (2001: 58). I will return to this concept of “bad parenting” in the final chapter, where I analyse *Sweetie*. Once again, an exception to Ferrier’s cycle springs to mind with *An Angel at My Table*, in that Janet experiences the embattled artist’s social isolation but the figure of the bad parent is absent in this film.
extra-textual commentary on the film. The pejorative name-calling of other characters in the film, together with various critical interpretations, encourage a reading of *Bad Boy Bubby* as yet another portrayal of mental illness in contemporary Australian cinema. In the course of his adventures in the outside world, Bubby is called all manner of derogatory names, but several of these invoke mental illness, such as “you mad bastard” (de Heer, 1996: 53) and “you fucking nutter” (de Heer, 1996: 60). Before he has even encountered the world outside his cell-like home, Bubby has already been labelled “crackers” (de Heer, 1996: 32) by his insensitive and intolerant father Pop, who asks “Have you got a mental condition or something?” (de Heer, 1996: 26). This phrase is repeated by Bubby in his first performance with the band (de Heer, 1996: 71). Bubby’s psychological state is the subject of speculation between Angel and her co-workers at a care centre for people with cerebral palsy. Angel’s colleague asks, “Do you think he might be schizo?” to which Angel replies, “I don’t think he’s anything … he’s just a … kid. … If we take him anywhere, they’re going to lock him up, and I feel he shouldn’t be locked up” (de Heer, 1996: 76). Angel’s own ‘diagnosis’ of Bubby’s condition echoes the pronouncement of Cherie (Natalie Carr), the Salvation Army singer, who tells Bubby “that’s what you are, a weird kid, nothing but a big, weird kid” (de Heer, 1996: 41). Thus, throughout the film, Bubby is alternately viewed as mad or childlike. Regarding Bubby as “just a kid” neutralises the presumed threat of violence associated with mental illness, making him (potentially) easier – and certainly less confronting – for the audience to empathise with. But this infantilisation does not remove the assumption of psychological dysfunction or retarded development. This assumption carries over from the diegesis to critical discourse regarding the film.

The critical reception of Bubby as mentally ill is evident in the various terms used to describe his character. John Conomos regards Bubby as “deranged”, “psychotic” and “pathological” (1994: 377). Ferrier describes him as “disturbed” and she draws parallels between Bubby and David Helfgott in terms of the psychological damage that results from their abusive upbringings (2001: 58). Jonathan Rayner also views *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Shine* as “related” (2000: 142). Like *Shine, Bad Boy Bubby* rescues its psychologically damaged protagonist from the depths of subjugation and victimisation, and redeems him through the love of a compassionate woman. The
link between *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Shine* has been noted by *Shine’s* director Scott Hicks, who was asked by Peter Malone to speculate on the coincidence of several Australian films in the 1990s depicting mental illness:101

Well, you can go back to *Bad Boy Bubby* ... it’s a curious thing, isn’t it? I don’t know what it’s to do with, but you could point to things like the collective unconscious, the Jungian notion that somehow these ideas are present and somehow they get discharged through different forms of expression (Hicks, quoted in Malone, 2001: 81).

Although *Bad Boy Bubby* may use a “different form of expression” and eschew the medical discourse of other melodramas of affliction, the film has been critically linked with other portrayals of mental illness from the point of view of the afflicted protagonist.

Like *An Angel at My Table*, *Bad Boy Bubby* offers a window onto social perceptions of and attitudes towards mental illness, even though in this film the protagonist’s psychological state is not formally diagnosed. *Bad Boy Bubby* explicitly references the social discourse of mental illness by critically engaging with two of the most common stereotypes of mental illness – the psycho killer and the idiot savant. The tension between these two, seemingly opposed, stereotypes represents the Manichaeistic struggle between good and evil at the heart of melodramatic storytelling (Brooks, 1995: 4). In many ways, the film can be viewed as a struggle for Bubby’s soul, as we see him resort to murder, theft and assault in order to survive. Can he retain his childlike innocence and earn our empathy despite his abhorrent actions? This is the central dilemma that runs throughout the film and is explicitly addressed in the didactic speeches of the organ-playing Scientist (Norman Kaye) and band member Steve (Peter Monaghan). “Take responsibility for who you are” (de Heer, 1996: 62), exhorts the Scientist, while Steve provides Bubby with a lecture on the history of religious genocide and a lesson in morals: “No matter how mad you get at someone, don’t kill them ... ever” (de Heer, 1996: 86). These scenes contribute to the moral legibility of *Bad Boy Bubby* by defining the terms of good and evil operative in the world and revealing the hidden moral forces at work beneath the surface of reality. This exemplifies Brooks’ concept of “the moral occult” in

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101 As I discussed in the Introduction, this coincidence has also been noted in Harry Oldmeadow, in McFarlane, Mayer & Bertrand (1999: 264).

Melodramatic character types such as the victim-hero and the villain communicate in clear and unequivocal terms who is innocent and who is guilty in melodrama’s moral economy. Bubby may be the victim of unrelenting physical abuse, with a special talent for mimicry and compassionate communication with society’s outcasts, but he is also a multiple murderer. What happens when these two character types, the stereotypes of the idiot savant (victim-hero) and the psycho killer (villain), are combined in one character? How do these competing stereotypes affect our ability to empathise with the protagonist? To illustrate how the moral legibility of *Bad Boy Bubby* emerges from the resolution of the tension between these two morally opposed stereotypes of mental illness, I will examine each stereotype and its moral identity in detail, then demonstrate the presence of Brooks’ moral occult in the Manichaean worldview of *Bad Boy Bubby*.

“Psycho killer, qu’est que c’est?”: Bubby as villain

Bubby commits matricide, patricide and two homicides (Angel’s parents). Given his mental deficiencies and his murderous impulses, Bubby seems to fit the profile of the psycho killer stereotype, a character type who is usually portrayed as the villain within a film’s moral economy. Inviting the spectator to empathise with the psycho killer is an example of what Murray Smith calls “a perverse allegiance”, whereby the film attempts to marshal our sympathies for a character who embodies socially or morally undesirable traits (1999: 222). *Bad Boy Bubby* is an interesting case study for Smith’s question: “under what circumstances and for what reasons might we experience sympathetic emotions toward morally perverse or undesirable characters?” (1999: 237) Demonstrating Homi Bhabha’s notion of the ambivalence

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102 From the song ‘Psycho Killer’, written by David Byrne (1977) and recorded by Talking Heads for their album *Talking Heads 77*.

103 In this context, empathy is construed as a sympathetic emotion, meaning an emotion that is congruent, or in accordance with, the character’s own feelings. One of the reasons for the frequent confusion of empathy with sympathy is that these related but distinct emotional responses are often “mutually self-reinforcing. To empathize with a character involves feeling what fictionally she is feeling; since most characters have a concern for their own welfare, by empathizing with them one will also be sympathetic to them, that is, one will be concerned for them. Conversely, if one is sympathetic to a character, one will tend to align one’s emotions with his, feel what he feels, and so empathize with him” (Gaut, 1999: 211).
of stereotypes (1992: 312), which I discussed in Chapter Three, *Bad Boy Bubby*

Third Feature: Moral Legibility

critically engages with the psycho killer stereotype by challenging our assumptions
about good and evil: the killer’s victims are portrayed as beyond redemption, while
the killer himself is presented as a victim. In Smith’s terms, Bubby typifies the “good-
bad man”, whose wrongdoing may be mitigated by “a host of redeeming factors”
(1999: 223-224). Rayner draws our attention to this tension between Bubby as villain
and Bubby as victim: “From his first double murder onwards, Bubby is both the
innocent victim and heedless perpetrator of mundane yet horrific crimes” (2000: 140).
The moral legibility of Bubby’s actions is, initially, unclear: is he good or evil? The
“quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama” (Williams, 1998: 52),
hence the melodrama of affliction strives towards a revelation of true moral identity
and moves the audience from fear – our usual response to the psycho killer
stereotype – towards empathy. Before discussing the ways in which this film
challenges the conventional moral identity of the psycho killer in order to encourage
our empathy with Bubby, I will define some of the features of this character type and
examine how these are played out in *Bad Boy Bubby*.

As I explained in Chapter Three, the stereotype of the psycho killer is one of
the most common representations of mental illness in popular culture. The psycho
killer provides a form of narrative economy: the killer’s motives can be explained
simply by the fact of his madness (Wahl, 1995: 112). These characters are often more
‘entertaining’ than an anonymous, unseen murderer because their madness is
conveyed to the audience through their bizarre appearance, speech and behaviour.
The characters played by Peter Lorre are prime examples of the psycho killer
stereotype (Wahl, 1995: 37). Lorre’s on-screen persona demonstrates Otto Wahl’s
point that characters with mental illness are always presented as recognisably
different from the rest of humanity. “A breed apart”, characters with mental illness
are presumed to “look and act different”, despite the fact that it is difficult in real life

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104 In keeping with the mechanics of stereotyping, which rely upon pattern and repetition
(discussed in Chapter Three), Lorre’s personification of the psycho killer was established
across a number of films, with roles such as the child murderer Hans Beckert in *M* (Fritz Lang,
1931), the insane, love-struck Dr Gogol in *Mad Love* (Karl Freund, 1935), the killer in *Stranger
on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940), Sydney Greenstreet’s effeminate side-kick in *The
Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and the weak, alcoholic doctor who is partner in crime to
the murderous Jonathan Brewster (Raymond Massey) in *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra,
1944).
to identify a person with mental illness just by looking at them (Wahl, 1995: 36). With his short, stocky physique, large eyes, unusual voice and accent, Lorre became the embodiment of the psycho killer: “Squat, stocky, round-faced, at once pitiable and terrifying, he seemed a textbook illustration of schizophrenia” (Philip Kemp, quoted in Wahl, 1995: 37). Kemp’s observation encapsulates the cultural appeal of the psycho killer stereotype, demonstrating Bhabha’s notion of the ambivalence of stereotypes (1992: 312) – the dialectic of fear and fascination – in his phrase “at once pitiable and terrifying”. While Lorre’s characters may earn our pity through his portrayal of them as “tortured souls … driven by internal demons” (Rubin, 1999: 43), their moral identity is clearly evil. The psycho killer is the personification of villainy, illustrating Brooks’ idea that melodramatic good and evil are “highly personalized”: “Good and evil can be named as persons are named” (1995: 16). While the psycho killer’s crimes may be explained by mental illness, by “internal demons” (Rubin, 1999: 43), this does not exculpate them. Indeed, mental illness is one of the core features of the psycho killer stereotype: the “deviance” of these characters ultimately “makes sense” through the causative factor of madness (Rubin, 1999: 43).

Another defining model for the psycho killer stereotype which influences the portrayal of Bubby is Norman Bates from Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Like Lorre’s child murderer Beckert in M, Norman is a split self, tormented by the internal demon of his ‘mother’. These two men share several character traits that establish the template from which Bubby’s personification of the psycho killer is formed. Both Beckert and Norman are compulsive killers, compelled to act upon their murderous impulses whenever they see a child (Beckert) or an attractive woman (Norman). Both have a ritualised modus operandi in their killing: Beckert’s desire to kill is signalled by his whistling of a Grieg tune, while Norman must don a dress and wig to become ‘mother’ before he carries out his murders. Lotte Eisner observes that Beckert’s whistling is also a psychological quirk; its off-key, tuneless quality conveying his mental instability (1976: 123 & 124). Similarly, Norman’s dressing as mother in order to murder externalises his internal psychological conflict and signifies his split personality. Critics have viewed Beckert as immature (Kracauer, 2004: 222) and developmentally retarded (Eisner, 1976: 113). This is also a fitting description of Norman, whose bedroom is still cluttered with the toys of childhood and an unmade,
single bed, suggesting his incomplete passage into adulthood. By each film’s conclusion, both men have been identified as multiple murderers and, significantly, mentally ill. The psychiatrist’s diagnosis in *Psycho* is anticipated by the arguments of Beckert’s drunken defence lawyer in *M’s* kangaroo court: “This man is sick. And a sick man should be handed over, not to the executioner, but to the doctor”.

The psycho killer, as illustrated by *M* and *Psycho*, is compulsive, ritualistic, childlike or socially immature, and torn by internal psychological conflict, which manifests as a split self. In many ways, Bubby fits the psycho killer stereotype. He is compelled to kill when overcome by anger and distress. Each of Bubby’s killings is motivated by anger towards his victim and a desire to contain their abusive and hurtful discourse, whether he is acting as Angel’s defender after he witnesses the slaps and insults dished out by her parents, or responding in rage to the drunken taunts and physical abuse of Mom and Pop. Anger and hurt compel Bubby to murder, illustrating the compulsive, uncontrolled nature of the psycho killer’s emotions. In keeping with the psycho killer stereotype, Bubby’s murders share a distinctive trademark: suffocating his victims in cling wrap. This signature method earns him the moniker “the Clingwrap killer” (de Heer, 1996: 52) on the front page of the local tabloid, demonstrating the newsworthy appeal of the psycho killer.105

Bubby’s sheltered and incestuous upbringing has produced a socially dysfunctional man, lacking conventional language skills and an awareness of social norms. His mental deficiency is visualised by his unusual appearance, particularly once he is in the outside world and no longer has Mom to bathe and shave him. With his long, wild hair, goofy grin and dishevelled clothing, Bubby looks mad – “You’re a queer looking rooster aren’t you?” (de Heer, 1996: 41-42) – demonstrating another feature of the psycho killer.106

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105 Several scholars writing on serial killers comment upon the mass media’s fascination with multiple murderers, such as Anton Kaes in ‘Serial Murder, Serial Culture’, part of his monograph on *M* (2000: 26-38).

106 It should be noted that each individual instance of the psycho killer in fiction and in film does not (and need not) embody every feature of the stereotype. For example, John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995) differs from the stereotype in his bland, insignificant appearance: he is a middle-aged, white man who bears no distinctive physical features that might suggest his homicidal disposition. Richard Dyer observes that “he is unremarkable to look at” (1999: 41), in contrast with the handsome or grotesque killers in *M*, *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), *Maniac* (William Lustig, 1980) and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986). Similarly, while Bubby shares a number of traits with Norman Bates and other psycho killers such as Mark in *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960)
transition from child to man, from the inside to the outside world – is dramatised by his adopting the persona of his father Pop. In an exaggeration of the Oedipal trajectory, Pop serves as Bubby’s model for male adulthood. ‘Becoming’ Pop is Bubby’s defence against the cruelties and intolerance of the outside world, after he observes that “Bubby no fit no more out there” (de Heer, 1996: 64). He becomes, like his predecessors in M and Psycho, a split self, divided between Pop and Bubby, his public and private personas. By conforming to these features of the psycho killer stereotype, there is the risk that Bubby may be cast as the villain in this melodrama of affliction.

Bubby’s abusive upbringing also fits the profile of the psycho killer:

I wanted to make a film about childhood, about the importance of being loved as a child. Previous research for an aborted project about serial killers had taught me that almost without exception serial killers had had some form of deprived childhood (de Heer, 1993b).

Portrayals of serial killers in popular culture insist that the killer was invariably abused as a child, whether sexually, physically or psychologically. This is “the common sense of stereotypes”, according to Yvonne Tasker (2002: 75): “In serial killer mythology, … an abused childhood often provides an explanation for the killer’s origins” (2002: 79). Jake Wilson attends to Bad Boy Bubby’s use of this feature of the psycho killer stereotype: “The ‘cycles of abuse’ conjured up here might remind us at a more general level that the child abuser and his (or her) victim are among the defining archetypes of contemporary film and TV” (2003). The detective work in these films and television shows involves not only solving the crime of ‘whodunnit’ but explaining why they did it, which typically requires an investigation of the killer’s past. The past is assumed to contain some traumatic event, most commonly

and Michael in Halloween, his compulsion to kill – unlike his predecessors – is not based upon using violence as a substitute for heterosexual sex.  
107 Early in the film, the image of Bubby dressed as Mom, complete with wig, dress and large breasts and wielding a wooden spoon as he abuses the cat, evokes the spectre of Norman Bates in the cellar, wielding a knife while wearing a wig and his mother’s dress. Both men mimic the speech and vocal inflections of their mothers, but while Bubby adapts this skill to imitating other people, Norman remains unable to break out of his Oedipal “private trap”: “I think that we’re all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. … I was born in mine. I don’t mind it anymore.” Fundamentally, de Heer’s vision is more optimistic, even naive, than Hitchcock’s, for Bad Boy Bubby dares to assert that these traps can be escaped.
an abused childhood. Usually this revelation serves to explain the killer’s motives, but it does not to excuse the crime nor exculpate the killer, largely because the audience does not bear witness to the killer’s past sufferings; their past history of abuse is simply narrated by another character, like the psychiatrist in *Psycho*’s concluding scene. This illustrates the crucial role in melodrama’s moral economy of bearing witness to suffering: “Audiences of melodrama are positioned like juries of common law trials” (Williams, 1998: 81). Bubby’s victims, because we bear witness to their abuse, seem to justify his actions. Their sadism is presented in graphic contrast to the muted expression of Bubby’s own perverse acts. He murders Mom and Pop in their sleep, speaking in hushed, seemingly benevolent, tones – “Now, you be still Pop. … Mom, you be still too” (de Heer, 1996: 35) – and we never actually see him murder Angel’s parents. Conforming to Smith’s archetype of the “good-bad man”, “the film keeps his immoral traits and actions in the background and stresses his positive attributes … in the case of the ‘good-bad’ character structure, the internal moral system of the text makes a character attractive *relative* to other characters” (1999: 227, emphasis in original). We are confronted once again with the ambivalent emotional appeal of stereotypes, as we are drawn into what Wilson sees as *Bad Boy* Bubby’s “amoral delight in tit-for-tat revenge”:

De Heer’s films draw much of their Gothic power from our ambivalent feelings about such revenge – playing in horror-movie fashion on our awareness that while despised outsiders may be victims or visionaries, they’re also, potentially, monsters (2003).

While acknowledging Bubby’s personification of “tortured innocence”, which is a standard motif of melodrama since its earliest days (Elsaesser, 1995: 353; Hayward, 1996: 205), Wilson argues that “the line [is] often blurred between torturer and victim” (2003). How then may we arrive at a clear moral legibility, whereby the identities of torturer and victim can be unequivocally and separately named? Bubby’s status as a victim of abuse may encourage us to read him as morally innocent, but this may not be enough to secure our empathy towards him, for as I have argued, the causal logic of the abuse narrative is also a feature of the psycho killer stereotype, who is usually a figure of fear, rather than empathy. The conventional melodramatic morality of the psycho killer as evil is challenged in *Bad*
Boy Bubby by the co-presence of a morally opposed and empathetic stereotype: the idiot savant, who represents innocence and virtue in a morally ambiguous, postsacred world.

“He is the complete innocent”: Bubby as idiot savant

108 The idiot savant, or the wise fool, is a familiar figure in theatre and literature (Malone, 1996: 9). As depicted by writers such as Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky, the idiot savant compensates for what he lacks in intelligence or mental capacity through the insight and wisdom that his mental disadvantage grants him. His gift or special ability (‘savant’) is a form of compensation for his disability (‘idiot’). This gift also serves to redeem the character in the eyes of the audience and to identify him as fundamentally ‘good’. The journey of the idiot savant is typically characterised by a gradual shift from social exclusion and ostracism to recognition of his gift and the acceptance that flows from this recognition. The idiot savant’s journey echoes that of melodrama’s victim-hero, whose fundamental innocence is finally acknowledged in the narrative’s climax by a public or private recognition of virtue (Williams, 1998: 52).

The stereotype of the idiot savant, like the psycho killer, is characterised by a number of features.109 For example, the idiot savant is typically unaware of social customs and taboos, as we see when Bubby persists in touching other women’s breasts in his search for a surrogate Mom. The idiot savant is childlike and naïve, and in the early stages of the narrative, he may find himself thrust into a corrupt and morally confused world. This childlike naivety of the idiot savant aligns him with innocence in melodrama’s moral stereotyping of character.110 The idiot savant is also an outsider, a social outcast, but usually this does not trouble the idiot savant. As

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109 As I discussed in Chapter Three, stereotypes are defined by their persistent appeal and repetition across a number of texts. The enduring appeal of the idiot savant stereotype is demonstrated by his appearance in a variety of films from different decades and production contexts, ranging from Jimmy Stewart in the title role of Harvey (Henry Koster, 1950) and Peter Sellers as Chance the Gardener in Being There (Hal Ashby, 1979) to Dustin Hoffman as the autistic Raymond Babbitt in Rain Man (Barry Levinson, 1988) and Sasa Gedeon’s modern retelling of Dostoevsky’s novel in Return of the Idiot. Several critics have noted similarities between Bubby, Chance the Gardener, and Kaspar Hauser, from Werner Herzog’s The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974), which demonstrates the persistence of this particular character type (Keane, 1995: 57; Kemp, 1994: 40; Malone, 1996: 9-10; Stratton, 1993).
110 Lillian Gish’s performance in Broken Blossoms (Griffith, 1919) represents the archetypal association of childlike naivety with innocence in melodrama’s moral economy.
Amruta Slee observes of *Bad Boy Bubby* and de Heer’s other films, “unlike many outsiders, de Heer’s mavericks seem content for the most part with their status – it’s not these characters who are out of sync, it’s the society they find themselves in” (2004: 49). The idiot savant’s position on the margins of society enables him to be an observer, to see clearly what others cannot. The idiot savant’s special gift is not always a superior intellectual talent; it is often this ability to see the world differently. In this way, the idiot savant stereotype can be used as a tool of authorial critique or commentary upon the actions of other characters and the moral failings of the modern world. Through the idiot savant’s ability to see the world differently, filmmakers can communicate their social critique in a manner that can be tragic or comic, combining political commentary with emotional affect. These features of the idiot savant combine to create a character type who embodies a social and moral naivety, with a different worldview and a compensatory gift – a special ability that makes up for their mental illness.\(^{111}\)

The idiot savant is a favoured stereotype of filmmakers seeking to represent mental illness positively. Although officially classified as ‘insane’, the idiot savant is often portrayed as kinder and nicer than those regarded as ‘normal’. This stereotype poses the existential question of whether madness is a curse or a gift, and invites the audience to consider the relativity of the labels ‘insane’ and ‘crazy’. While the idiot savant stereotype may appear less harmful and stigmatising than the psycho killer stereotype in its positive ‘spin’ on mental illness, there is often the implication that psychiatric treatment will destroy the idiot savant’s special gift.\(^{112}\) In keeping with this stereotype’s benevolent view of mental illness, the idiot savant is usually aligned with the values of good and virtue in melodrama’s moral economy, as opposed to the villainy associated with the psycho killer stereotype. The idiot savant represents “an extreme and highly individualized form of moral idealism”, which is characteristic of melodrama’s “heroes” (Elsaesser, 1995: 352). There is something

\(^{111}\) Steven Hyler (2003) incorporates the features of the idiot savant under the category of “Specially Gifted Mental Patient” in his taxonomy of Hollywood’s stereotypes of mental illness, citing Raymond (*Rain Man*), Prot (*K-PAX* [Iain Softley, 2001]), John Nash (*A Beautiful Mind*) and David Helfgott (*Shine*) as recent examples.

\(^{112}\) See, for example, the scenes in *A Beautiful Mind* that show the side effects of medication upon John Nash’s ability to concentrate on his mathematic calculations, and in *Shine*, the prohibition on playing the piano enforced by David’s doctors. In these films, psychiatric treatment is portrayed as preventing these geniuses from realising their talents.
beguiling in the idiot savant’s lack of psychological complexity,\textsuperscript{113} evident in de Heer’s own body of work:

[De Heer] allows that he does favour a certain naivety in his lead characters – perhaps because he enjoys the way kids look at the world; he insists he’d rather spend time with children than with most adults (Slee, 1994: 50).

This simplistic, childlike view of the world accounts for much of the enduring appeal of the idiot savant stereotype.

In keeping with the features of the idiot savant, Bubby has a special gift: his ability to mimic other people.\textsuperscript{114} Initially, Bubby mimics his mother and the cat in his cell-like home. This skill is further developed when he ventures into the outside world and mimics the body language and speech of the people he meets. He ‘shares’ his gift with others, when he joins the band on stage and creates crowd-pulling performances through his mimicry of his parents’ insults, and when he mimics the language of the cerebral palsy patients, thereby communicating with them. Bubby’s talent for mimicry fits Ferrier’s definition of creative expression in the disabled artist cycle as “an obsessive-compulsive activity. Great emphasis is placed on the irrational … with any social recognition and success presented as largely incidental rewards” (2001: 68-69). In addition to representing the idiot savant’s special gift, Bubby’s compulsive, irrational mimicry serves as both a symptom of his mental illness and a key device in the film’s social commentary:

Bubby’s capacity to repeat his parents’ (and others’) dialogue is indicative of his being located in a twilight zone of cybernetic and pathological dysfunction. He verbalises and acts out the social and psychological maladies that characterise our families and society. (Conomos, 1994: 377)

The film’s use of Bubby’s mimicry as a tool of social critique is a key aspect of its moral legibility: “in his innocent imitation he mirrors people’s virtues and vices back to them” (Keane, 1995: 56).

\textsuperscript{113} This also reflects the “nonpsychological conception” of melodrama’s character types (Elsaesser, 1995: 351), discussed in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{114} This is another feature of the idiot savant that Bubby has in common with Chance in\textit{ Being There}, who mimics the speech and behaviour of his benefactor and the people he sees on television. Bubby and Chance’s talents for mimicry are the product of their status as observers, a further feature of the idiot savant.
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

As part of *Bad Boy Bubby*’s social critique, de Heer also deploys the idiot savant’s ability to see the world differently:

[Bubby] has a very narrow value system, but one that is uncorrupted by TV, radio, books, pictures. He is uncorrupted by the pressure to conform, by aspiration. He has no real basis for comparison, therefore no real basis for making judgements about people. In that sense he is a complete innocent. (de Heer, 1993b)

In this statement, de Heer highlights two key features of the idiot savant that contribute to his moral identity as ‘good’: Bubby is an innocent – “uncorrupted” – and he sees the world differently: “he has … no real basis for making judgements about people”. It is clear that Bubby’s value system differs from that of most of the people he encounters. He sees beauty in people who are usually rejected or marginalised by society. He regards Angel’s large breasts as “perfection” (de Heer, 1996: 77), in contrast with Shannon’s “perfect thirty-sixes” (de Heer, 1996: 80), which fail to impress him. He sees the humanity in, and can communicate with, people with cerebral palsy, whose disfigured bodies normally inhibit identification and empathy with other able-bodied humans. Bubby’s alternative worldview enables him to ‘do good’, to care for and love those whom society has rejected: “I wanted to show that because he has no references to the world; his view of what is beautiful is different, so he can find someone beautiful whom we would not normally call beautiful” (de Heer, quoted in Urban, 1994: 73). De Heer’s statement encapsulates the ability of the idiot savant to see the world differently and through his alternative worldview, this stereotype conveys the film’s social critique.

*Bad Boy Bubby*’s social critique specifically targets institutional authority, namely the Law and the Church, as part of the film’s desire to make the postmodern, postsacred world morally legible. The agents of institutional authority are portrayed as ‘evil’ in the polarised terms of melodrama’s moral economy: “The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world” (Brooks, 1995: 13). Bubby suffers physical abuse at the hands of police officers, leading to the traumatic loss of his naivety and innocence. After being punched in the stomach by a traffic cop, a prison guard forcibly drags Bubby into a cell occupied by a naked prisoner referred to as ‘the Animal’, who proceeds to rape...
Bubby. The film also depicts the racist attitudes of the police towards two Aboriginal women who want to report a stolen purse but receive no assistance and are verbally harassed instead. Significantly, when Bubby is annoyed by the prison guard, he imitates these women – whose harassment he witnessed – and tells the guard to “get fucked!” (de Heer, 1996: 59). Bubby’s ignorance of society’s legal and religious tenets is such that he kills his parents, then Angel’s parents, with no sense that his actions are illegal and immoral. Indeed, Keane argues that the film portrays these murders as acts of benevolence (1995: 56), as Angel’s dialogue suggests: “My parents were just waiting to die anyway Bubby … whoever did it put them out of their misery” (de Heer, 1996: 85). Despite her threats about God and Jesus casting judgement upon him, Bubby’s mother has denied him a ‘proper’ education in morals and ethics. It becomes the role of Steve, the band member, to educate Bubby about the immorality of killing. Steve’s ‘lecture’ provides another opportunity for social critique in the film, this time scrutinising religion and its role in motivating mass murder and genocide. We also see Angel’s parents, whose house is adorned with religious icons, using God as an excuse for tormenting their daughter: “God doesn’t like fat people. Fat people are an abomination in His eyes” (de Heer, 1996: 84). As Iocco observes:

> the ideological structures [such as organised religion and the law] that are commonly imagined to provide support, strength and centrality are presented in the film as backward, hypocritical and unreliable (2003: 6).

In de Heer’s view, *Bad Boy Bubby* “became a film about belief systems: spiritual, religious, scientific, interpersonal and how, by clinging to them in order to try to make sense of the world, we are actually prevented from making sense of it” (de Heer, quoted in Malone, 2001: 64). Bubby discovers he can only make sense of the world and find his place in it by rejecting religious dogma. He manages to overthrow his oppressive upbringing – “Jesus can see everything I do and he’s going to beat me brainless” (de Heer, 1996: 61) – and embrace a fearless independence: “Fuck you God, strike me down if you dare” (de Heer, 1996: 62). Bubby’s journey towards achieving this independence provides the film with an opportunity for social critique, by illustrating the hypocrisy of the Law and the Church and dramatising the
rejection of institutionalised belief systems, in favour of an alternative belief system: the moral occult of melodrama.

Despite *Bad Boy Bubby*’s explicit rejection of institutionalised religion, Bubby embodies the “holy innocent character” that is central to many of de Heer’s films (Shane McNeill, quoted in Slee, 2004: 48). Malone casts the film in religious terms when he describes it as “a *De Profundis* film”, referring to Psalm 130 ‘Out of the depths, I cry to you …’: “a *De Profundis* film … take[s] its audience, quite unrelentingly, into the depths of brutal and ugly human experience and then tries to reach out for some meaning, for some hope” (1996: 12). Malone’s description of *Bad Boy Bubby* identifies the moral polarities of the film’s worldview, in its depiction of the extremes of brutality and generosity experienced by Bubby. This polarised worldview demonstrates Brooks’ notion of the moral occult (1995: 20-21), as the film strives towards a melodramatic revelation of the moral values operative in a postsacred world “where moral and religious certainties have been erased” (Williams, 1998: 59). Rayner also sees Bubby’s narrative function in religious terms: “Bubby enjoys a prophetic or messianic status … [he is a] Christ-like figure … naïve, unworldly but transcendent” (2000: 140). In keeping with the idiot savant’s special gift, Bubby “offers unwitting hope and salvation to the fallen” (Rayner, 2000: 140). The film has been described by several writers as “a parable” (Dalgleish; Finlan, 1998; Keane, 1995: 56), underscoring the narrative’s quasi-religious dimensions and the moral order linked to the sacred that the film wishes to retrieve. The idiot savant does ‘good’ things, and his presence reveals the world in morally stark terms of ‘good people’ and ‘bad people’. His childish psychology, lacking the complexity of adult emotions, is regarded not as a disability but as a gift: “Simplicity is presented as the greatest virtue, along with innocence” (Keane, 1995: 57).

The simplicity of the idiot savant’s worldview is reflected in *Bad Boy Bubby*’s Manichaeism, the polarisation of good and evil that is characteristic of melodrama’s moral occult (Brooks, 1995: 13). Like other social outcasts, Bubby finds himself taken in by the Salvos and thrown in jail by the police. Many people react in a hostile manner towards him, because of his dishevelled appearance and his unusual behaviour. But along his journey, there are several ‘helpers’ to assist in his social integration. Like the Bartletts who take in Anna in *Way Down East*, Bubby is
befriended and supported by the band members and their friend Dan (Bruce Gilbert) who shelters and clothes Bubby; the waitress (Lucia Mastrantone) who lets ‘Pop’ eat pizza without charge; the organ-playing Scientist who advises Bubby to “think God out of existence” (de Heer, 1996: 62). These are the ‘good’ people in Bad Boy Bubby’s moral universe of polarised character types:

The city is filled with characters who are generous and loving, who are mean-minded and mean-spirited, desperate and tormented. Many persecute the fool. Many empower him to a new life (Malone, 1996: 10).

The Manichaeism that runs throughout de Heer’s films is pointed out by his colleague, Shane McNeil:

The characters want to be innocent and believe in the purity of the world, and the darkness that’s there comes from the conflict between them and reality … That’s a bit there in Rolf, he does have a childlike and naïve quality (quoted in Slee, 2004: 50).

While Bad Boy Bubby critiques the hypocrisy of institutionalised religion, the film evinces a nostalgic longing for the moral certainties that religious tenets provide, a desire to identify and recognise good and evil in a world where institutional authorities such as the Church and the Law are no longer capable of doing good, let alone recognising innocence and virtue. Bad Boy Bubby represents de Heer’s own naïve conflict between his belief in innocence and virtue and his brutal vision of the harsh realities of modern society. Keane argues that the film “impos[es] a simplistic, dualistic view of the world” (1995: 57). This dichotomised worldview reflects the underlying Manichaeism of melodrama (Brooks, 1995: 4). Through his casting of Bubby as an idiot savant, de Heer draws on the emotive force of melodrama’s polarised character types and dares to assert that innocence will prevail and eventually be recognised in a postsacred world.

**Bubby as victim-hero**

Having established Bubby’s conformity with both the psycho killer and the idiot savant stereotypes, I now address the questions: how does Bad Boy Bubby reconcile these two morally opposed character types? How does the film resolve the
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

ambiguity of Bubby’s moral identity and encourage our empathic relationship with him? The protagonist of the melodrama of affliction is traditionally portrayed as the victim-hero, “a hero whose role is to suffer” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 192). The audience is encouraged to identify with the protagonist’s journey, to empathise with their emotions, and we “bear witness” (Williams, 1998: 54) to the trials and tribulations the victim-hero endures before their innocence and virtue are recognised. De Heer intends for the audience to view Bubby as ‘innocent’, as his screenplay (1996: 13) and extra-textual commentary suggest (de Heer, 1993b; Malone, 2001: 62). It is crucial, therefore, that Bubby’s murders are portrayed as the act of an ignorant, if angry, child, who shows no awareness of the immorality of his actions. Bubby makes a promise to Steve at the conclusion of his lecture on genocide – “no more clingwrapping” (de Heer, 1996: 86) – and indeed Bubby keeps that promise, suggesting his moral education is now complete and that he has successfully completed the passage to adulthood, learning to control his libidinal urges to lash out at those who make him angry or upset. As I argued earlier, Bubby’s victims are portrayed as deserving of punishment and his actions are presented as the logical, if excessive, outcome of his deprived upbringing. This demonstrates the “good-bad” character structure identified by Smith, which invites our empathy for a character whose actions are morally undesirable (1999: 224). The audience is thereby encouraged to displace their moral condemnation of the killings onto Bubby’s and Angel’s abusive parents, who are portrayed as the true villains. This is one way in which the film maintains Bubby’s status as ‘innocent’ despite the illegality and immorality of his actions and solicits our empathy for this “good-bad” man.

In addition to the moral and ethical judgments of Bubby’s actions we are invited to make, the audience is frequently aligned with Bubby’s emotions and experiences in the world, illustrating the link between the spectator’s emotional response and the film’s moral legibility (Smith, 1999: 210; Williams, 1998: 77). De Heer’s use of point of view shots and point of audition sounds demonstrates the role of melodramatic style – externalising the internal – in the melodrama of affliction’s cultivation of empathy: “The spectator’s and the protagonist’s journey are thus aurally, and at times visually, in synch” (Hickey-Moody and Iocco, 2004: 79). De Heer foregrounds Bubby’s position as observer (one of the features of the idiot
savant) through these point of view shots and point of audition sounds, the latter specially recorded for the film by binaural microphones placed above Nicholas Hope’s ears and hidden under his wig. These devices enable the spectator to see and hear the world as Bubby experiences it. As I argued in Chapter One, the melodrama of affliction endeavours to align the audience with the protagonist and to elicit empathy by presenting events through the eyes and ears of the victim-hero. Particularly in its use of binaural microphones, *Bad Boy Bubby* demonstrates the externalisation of the protagonist’s internal psychological state through the cinematic staging of his sensory experiences.

Hickey-Moody and Iocco argue that “sound and music play particularly crucial roles in the construction and re-construction of Bubby’s subjectivity” (2004: 79), a subjectivity that is directly communicated to the audience: the binaural microphones create “an intense, claustrophobic soundscape where the listener is (literally) aurally positioned between Bubby’s ears” (Hickey-Moody and Iocco, 2004: 79). For example, when the band members realise Bubby is “the Clingwrap killer”, Steve places earphones on Bubby so the band can talk privately, and the soundtrack conveys Bubby’s subjective experience – his point of audition – as the dulcet tones of the Largo from Handel’s *Xerxes* drown out the band’s arguments. We see the band members talking animatedly, shot from Bubby’s point of view, but their voices are overwhelmed by the sustained notes of the organ. In the following close-up shot, Bubby’s facial expression shows his awe and pleasure in response to the music: he is “spellbound” (de Heer, 1996: 54). This relay between Bubby’s point of view and his reaction, which is emotionally sustained by Bubby’s unbroken point of audition, is exemplary of Carl Plantinga’s “scene of empathy”: “a kind of scene in which the pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favoured character becomes the locus of attention” (1999: 239). Plantinga explains that “filmmakers employ particular strategies to maximize the probability that the represented face will elicit an empathic emotional response” (1999: 249). These strategies include focusing the spectator’s attention on the character’s face through close-ups or point-of-view structures (Plantinga, 1999: 249) and heightening the

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115 The sound design of *Bad Boy Bubby* has been a particular focus of recent scholarship on the film in articles by Anna Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocco (2004), Cat Hope (2004) and Iocco (2003).
affective meaning of a scene through fitting music (Plantinga, 1999: 254). Scenes such as this one where Bubby’s hears Handel’s Largo for the first time strengthen the film’s encouragement of a shared emotional journey between protagonist and audience, consolidating Bubby’s status as the innocent and empathetic victim-hero in this melodrama of affliction.

Perhaps the most significant factor resolving Bubby’s equivocal moral identity and eliciting our empathy is its unrelenting portrayal of his physical and emotional suffering, which we bear witness to. Bubby demonstrates the fundamental vulnerability of melodrama’s victim-heroes: “our sympathies are mobilized … by their vulnerability”, the kind of character trait “that can promote empathy and sympathy” (Gaut, 1999: 211). Ferrier draws our attention to the childlike connotations of the film’s title, which reminds us of the protagonist’s immaturity and vulnerability (2001: 71-72). Williams asserts that “the suffering of the victim-hero is important for the establishment of moral legitimacy” (1998: 60). Bubby’s moral legitimacy is established, and the conflict between the psycho killer and idiot savant stereotypes is resolved, by his victimisation: “the audience’s ability to adjudicate between guilt and innocence” rests upon the “bodily exhibition of suffering [as] a paradoxical means of exculpation” (Williams, 1998: 81). The victim’s suffering must be exhibited, put on display as “visual evidence” (Gaut, 1999: 210), to secure his or her innocence and elicit our empathy with their pain and loss. The audience is both witness and jury, passing judgment according to the suffering and persecution endured by the victim-hero. Williams wryly comments on the perverse moral power of suffering in American melodramas (1998: 82 & 83 n15), and indeed there is a similar perversity in the physical and psychological extremes to which Bubby is subjected and to which we bear witness, suggesting melodrama’s simultaneously sadistic and masochistic nature.

Bubby endures all manner of melodramatic trials and tribulations. The suffering that Bubby inflicts upon his and Angel’s parents seems minor alongside Bubby’s own relentless sufferings, “a host of redeeming factors mitigating [his] wrongdoing” (Smith, 1999: 224): sensory deprivation; malnutrition; lack of education; incest; psychological abuse; homelessness; multiple assaults; incarceration; and rape. Indeed, the film puts us in an uncomfortably empathic position in many of these
scenes of suffering. For example, through the empathic device of point of audition sound, our discomfort at witnessing Bubby being anally raped by a fellow prisoner is intensified by the harsh, piercing sounds of the police bagpipes he hears outside the prison cell. When Bubby is repeatedly kicked on the ground by a group of women he has offended (he touches the breasts of a large woman who resembles Mom and Angel), we are once again placed inside his headspace: as the film speed changes to slow motion, Bubby recalls the soothing tones of the organ in Handel’s Largo, in an attempt to mentally escape the physical pain and humiliation of his degradation. As the mournful melody is taken over by strings, the music continues while Bubby retreats from the outside world and returns to his cell-like home. Bruised and broken, he collapses on the floor where the chalk outline of a female corpse is the last remaining trace of Mom. As he dissolves into tears, we cannot fail to be moved by this moment of pathos: we emotionally identify with Bubby’s sense of loss while, at the same time, maintaining a wider awareness of society’s misunderstandings and intolerance of this vulnerable outsider. Bubby’s sufferings are extreme, for they must exceed the villainy of his crimes if he is to be exculpated and empathised with. Bubby’s moral identity as villain is ultimately superseded by his status as the melodrama of affliction’s victim-hero and our empathy is persistently elicited as we witness his physical and psychological suffering.

**Breaking the cycle of abuse: recovering Bubby’s lost innocence**

According to Williams, the victim-hero of melodrama is typically presented as a figure of innocence at the outset of the narrative (1998: 65). Villainy then intrudes upon this innocence, causing physical and/or emotional harm, and thereafter the victim-hero’s journey becomes a quest to retrieve this lost innocence. If the victim-hero returns to the place of innocence, the melodrama ends happily; unhappily, if they do not. The ‘happy ending’ of *Bad Boy Bubby* has caused some consternation amongst critics, who consider it too “light” or “sentimental” (Malone, 1996: 12). De Heer concludes his film with a montage of scenes showing Bubby’s successful transition from outsider to insider, characteristic of the idiot savant’s journey. For the third time, we see Bubby perform with the band. Each performance has charted the increasing sophistication of the band’s integration with Bubby’s mimicry, and their
Third Feature: Moral Legibility

growing popularity. This final performance shows a crowded pub with fans wearing clerical collars and speaking broken English in imitation of ‘Pop’, their rock idol. The band now has a name “Pop and the Clingwrap Killers” (de Heer, 1996: 86) and matching costumes: masks made of cling wrap. Bubby’s cult following marks the culmination of the disabled artist’s journey from isolated creative expression (in his cell-like home) and a hostile audience (Mom and Pop, shop assistants, the police) to public performances (with the band) before a wider, appreciative (and paying) audience (Ferrier, 2001: 73-75). Bubby’s creative success also represents the social acceptance and public recognition of virtue of melodrama’s victim-hero (Williams, 1998: 66-67).

Bubby’s crowd-pleasing performance on stage with a large-breasted blow-up doll ‘morphs’ into an intimate sex scene with Angel: after the camera shows Bubby in close-up singing to the doll, the camera pulls back to reveal Angel’s profile where the doll should be. At this point, the band’s music is overtaken by the Largo from Handel’s Xerxes, which has already featured in two earlier scenes (discussed above). This music connects the next two scenes and plays out over the end credits. After showing us Angel and Bubby’s gentle lovemaking, de Heer uses the camera again as a transition device between two separate moments in time: a tracking shot from Angel’s face to her stomach takes us from an expression of sexual climax to her giving birth to twins. As the second baby is presented to Angel, Bubby is holding the first and we see over his shoulder a crowd of fans and media recording the event. Finally, we see Bubby, the two children and Angel playing in a garden. Through the two camera transitions and the emotional continuity provided by Handel’s Largo on the soundtrack, de Heer links Bubby’s public triumph as performer with his evolution from child-man to adult, capable of intimate, non-abusive sexual relations and playful fatherhood. The “cycle of abuse” has indeed been broken (de Heer, quoted in Urban, 1994: 73).

57), which reveals her pejorative view of melodrama. She expresses concern at the film’s implication that “sentimentality can provide some kind of instant solution to exploitation and abuse”: “We can change, can undo conditioning, with the assistance of pure hearts, simple minds, sentimentality and simple virtues, and a bit of mysticism along the way” (1995: 57). In her insistence upon Bad Boy Bubby’s failings as a realist text (1995: 57), Keane implicitly critiques the film’s “use of the rhetoric of melodrama to provide absolute clarity and to deny the always morally messy realities of life” (Grimsted, 1994: 202).

De Heer indirectly acknowledges these criticisms and defends the incongruity of the ending:

I was more naïve, more positive when I made Bubby … The ending has been criticized a fair bit for being positive … with Bubby I did feel that with enough love and care and attention and patience, and so on, that you can make a difference to what is otherwise an inevitable cycle of violence (Hopgood, 2003: 35).

In Bad Boy Bubby, the social problem of child abuse is resolved in individualised, melodramatic terms. De Heer has described the film as “a plea for childhood”: “Perhaps the single most important thing we can do is love our children without abuse” (quoted in Malone, 2001: 58). Despite this professed attempt at consciousness-raising, ultimately de Heer opts for a melodramatic solution to the social problem presented by the film. The social is personalised through focusing on the evil individuals who are the agents of abuse – Mom and Pop – thereby disavowing the wider and more complex social dimensions of the issue, such as poverty and lack of education. By focusing on Bubby’s individual journey towards overcoming his abusive past and portraying the social problem of child abuse in polarised terms of good and evil, the audience’s discomfort in witnessing such acts of abuse and the social responsibility this spectatorship implies are ultimately displaced by our emotional involvement in the narrative resolution, which promises to restore moral

116 Without using the actual term ‘melodrama’, Keane’s disdain for Bad Boy Bubby’s engagement with melodrama is evident in her repeated use of the words “sensational”, “sensationalism”, “sentimental”, “sentimentality” and “manipulative”, always framed in a negative sense (1995: 57). These are code words used by critics to describe melodrama’s powerful emotional affects in pejorative terms. Both Gledhill (1987: 5) and Williams (1998: 43) discuss melodrama’s negative reputation amongst critics and film scholars.
The film demonstrates Smith’s contention that “fictions designed to elicit perverse allegiance”, such as empathising with murder, “often reveal underlying structures that are more complex but also more conventionally moral” (1999: 222). Despite its portrayal of perverse and immoral acts, *Bad Boy Bubby* adopts and endorses the conventional morality of melodrama’s moral occult, to producing a “Manichean opposition” that results in “a comforting empathy with the good man” (Smith, 1996: 142).

The apparently naïve and incongruous resolution of *Bad Boy Bubby* is in fact essential to its project of casting the world in morally legible terms and encouraging the spectator to empathise with the victim-hero. It answers melodrama’s demands for a satisfactory revelation of the moral occult and a public recognition of innocence and virtue. The popularity of Bubby’s performance and his status as a media celebrity represent public recognition of his true moral identity in a postmodern, postsacred world: the good idiot savant, with his special gift of mimicry, effectively trumps the evil psycho killer. Malone defends the ending as part of the film’s underlying Manichaeism, its interplay of darkness and light, and once again casts the narrative in religious terms:

> Perhaps the ending is too ‘nice’. ... images of light are seen as sentimental. Perhaps the final family images are too light here. But de Heer has taken us on an emotional journey from darkness to light, hell to heaven, despair to hope, emptiness to fullness of life – agony and passion to resurrection. (1996: 12)

In his journey from despair to resurrection, Bubby has followed the prototypical path of melodrama’s victim-hero: the quest to reclaim his lost innocence. As Williams demonstrates in her analysis of *Way Down East*, in melodrama innocence is associated with childhood, symbolised by rural homes and gardens (1998: 65). The symbolism of Bubby’s family playing in the garden, which maintains this association, is not subtle, but melodramatic signs and symbols rarely are, for subtlety may

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117 Justin Shaw has investigated the tension between the different spectatorship positions and the competing contracts offered by contemporary social problem films. By the conclusion of their narratives, these films must resolve the tension between the social contract – which makes the spectator conscious of their own moral responsibility in the act of looking – and the melodramatic contract – which casts the world in clear moral terms and offers an individualised solution to the social problem portrayed, without implicating the spectator. This is melodrama’s tendency to ‘personalise’ the social (Shaw, 2002: 144-145).
impede clarity and moral legibility. Like the tableau of stage melodrama, the final image of *Bad Boy Bubby* “gives the spectator the opportunity to see meanings represented, emotions and moral states rendered in clear visible signs” (Brooks, 1995: 62). Despite being the site of his abuse, Bubby wants to return to the maternal home, to the warmth and familiarity of Mom’s bosom: “the ideal space of innocence is … the maternal place of origin” (Williams, 1998: 65). Frequently in melodrama, the protagonist’s desire is “focus[sed] on the unobtainable object” (Elsaesser, 1995: 372), such as a son’s incestuous desire for his mother. While Mom represents Bubby’s unobtainable object in his quest to reclaim his lost innocence, he has found a surrogate object in Angel, much like the lost maternal bond Anna recreates with Mrs Bartlett in *Way Down East*. De Heer’s optimism asserts that while Bubby can not return home to the space of innocence, he can remake it.

The ending of *Bad Boy Bubby* may not be as unequivocally ‘happy’ as some critics have assumed. In the film’s final shot, the camera gradually pulls back from this image of domestic harmony to reveal that the green, lush garden where the family is playing is next to Angel’s parents’ house (which we last saw buried amongst junk metal). As the camera continues its slow reveal of the surrounding urban environment, we see that this tiny oasis is dwarfed by the machinery of heavy industry. As Rayner observes, “that they [Bubby and Angel] and their children live in the shadow of factories still pouring forth poisons reflects the fragile and illusory nature of any individual’s bliss in the contemporary world” (2000: 141). In her discussion of *Bad Boy Bubby*’s parodic portrayal of the formation of the masculine Oedipal subject, Rose Lucas shares Rayner’s sense of the darker undercurrents beneath this sunny scene:

> The final image of Home is both reassuring and chilling; Bubby may have broken the suffocating control of Mom; he may have taken on the power of Pop and have beaten him, enabling him to move on to relationships of caring and reciprocity – but he has

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118 In theatrical melodrama, the revelation of true moral identities was often staged via a frozen tableau, where the actors adopted poses that not only symbolised their moral identity but also conveyed their recognition of a wronged innocence (for example, the gesture of bowing down before a character who has endured suffering and hardship). Brooks analyses the tableau in Guilbert de Pixérécourt’s stage melodrama *La Fille de l’exilé* (1818) as an example of this melodramatic recognition of virtue (1995: 24-25).
Lucas’ reading of the final scene suggests that the film’s insistence upon Bubby’s innocence as a virtuous victim-hero cannot completely erase Bubby’s moral identity as a murderous villain: “the scripts of the past constitute a heavy weight around the shoulders of this child-man” (1998: 145). The happy ending of Bad Boy Bubby may be naïve and unrealistic but, as Rayner and Lucas suggest, it is not absolute. In fact, the precarious nature of the film’s resolution heightens the melodramatic contrast between the fragile beauty of Bubby’s reclaimed space of innocence and the soulless machinery bearing down upon it.

The utopian moment of the film’s final scene is only maintained – “musically prolonged” (Williams, 1998: 67) – by the soaring strains of Handel’s Largo, which continue while the camera retreats from Bubby’s garden oasis. The presence of Handel’s Largo is significant not only for the emotional symbolism the melody has accrued via its repetition throughout Bubby’s quest to retrieve his lost innocence, but for the composition’s original incarnation as an aria sung in praise of a tree’s shade. One of Handel’s best-known pieces, the aria’s lyrics – sung by the title character in Handel’s 1738 opera Xerxes – celebrate the “dear”, “friendly”, “sweet” shade of the tree under which Xerxes sits. Thus Handel’s ‘Largo from Xerxes’ (as it is commonly known) heightens the symbolism of Bubby’s garden oasis, demonstrating the spiritual force that music carries throughout the film. This final, musically sustained image suggests the persistence of the melodramatic tableau: a highly stylised, non-realist climax of the narrative that conveys emotional intensity through a “picture [that] speaks more powerfully than words” (Williams, 1998: 52). Bad Boy Bubby dares to assert that in a postsacred, industrial society “where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question” (Brooks, 1995: 15), moral values of innocence and virtue persist and “cry out” to be recognised. The melodrama of affliction ensures and articulates this recognition.

119 “Ombra mai fu di vegetabile, cara ed amabile, soave più” (translation: “Never was the shade of vegetation more dear and friendly, more sweet”).
120 From the De Profundis psalm 130, as suggested by Malone (1996: 12).
The Manichaeism of *Bad Boy Bubby* demonstrates melodrama’s determination to make the world morally legible in clear and unambiguous terms. This is the melodrama of affliction’s drive towards moral legibility. De Heer’s portrayal of Bubby’s cell-like home and the outside world is characterised by moral polarities of good and evil, kindness and brutality, light and darkness. While the world surrounding Bubby is cast in morally stark terms, Bubby’s own moral identity is conflicted, torn between two opposed stereotypes of villainy and virtue, the psycho killer and the idiot savant. That the innocent idiot savant ‘wins out’ over the evil psycho killer is proof not only of de Heer’s own optimism that cycles of violence and abuse can be broken; it is testimony to the demands of melodrama, which dictate that the suffering victim-hero must be exculpated of his alleged crimes and his innocence and virtue finally recognised. Bubby endures all manner of physical and psychological brutalities, which we bear witness to. In melodrama’s moral economy, his suffering and victimisation secure his status as innocent and the film’s portrayal of Bubby’s ordeal, frequently from his visual and aural perspective, encourages an empathic response from the spectator. He becomes a rock star, a lover, a father … and literally gets away with murder.
Chapter 7
Rage Against the Patriarchy: The family home as site of conflict and trauma

In the previous two chapters, I argued that the protagonist's moral identity is linked to his or her victimisation, which the audience bears witness to. Through this act of bearing witness, the audience comes to empathise with the protagonist's pain and suffering. I turn now to the place of suffering, which in the melodrama of affliction – as with the family melodrama before it – is typically the family home. Rather than a place of security and refuge from the world outside, the family home in the melodrama of affliction is a battleground of tensions and conflicts between parent and child, or it is the site of trauma and loss. As we saw in *Shine* and *Baby Boy Bubby*, the protagonist may endure physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse at the hands of a parent, who represents evil and villainy within melodrama's moral economy. Even in those melodramas of affliction where there is no parental abuse, the protagonist experiences some trauma in childhood and adolescence (for example, the deaths of Janet's two sisters in *An Angel at My Table*, Kate's unexplained phobia of being cut in *Angel Baby*, or Pauline and Juliet's extended periods of hospitalisation and separation from their families in *Heavenly Creatures*). This trauma or abuse occasions the loss of the protagonist's innocence, and is presented as the primary causative factor behind their affliction of mental illness.

In this chapter, I examine the family home as the site of conflict and trauma. To establish the theoretical framework for this examination, I draw upon critical analyses of the 1950s family melodrama, particularly the writings of Laura Mulvey and Robert Lang. I examine the various ways in which melodrama reveals the conflicts and ideological contradictions that result from the limitations of patriarchal gender roles, and the price the protagonist pays for his or her failure to conform to these expectations. In this and the following chapter, I focus particularly on the struggle of the female protagonist in her search for identity within patriarchal society. I introduce the figure of the unruly woman, usually discussed in relation to comedy, as a useful model for analysing the melodramatic heroine's resistance to and subversion of patriarchal authority, which is represented by the father. In its
presentation of the heroine’s plight, the melodrama of affliction reveals “the social circumstances that limit a woman’s options to deviant behaviours” (Turim, 1989: 160). These are the ideological contradictions of patriarchy exposed by melodrama’s portrayals of family conflict. This suggests the capacity of melodrama to critique the limitations of gendered identity offered by patriarchy, even if it is unable to envisage an alternative for the victimised protagonist. I argue that the unruly woman is a recurring figure in melodrama’s family conflicts and her rebellious actions offer the spectator “a dizzy satisfaction”, to use Laura Mulvey’s phrase (1989: 39), in witnessing patriarchy under attack. This “dizzy satisfaction” describes the spectator’s empathic response. Mulvey’s phrase captures the sense that empathy is an emotional, rather than a rational, response to the material presented on screen.

This theme of the family contributes to the melodrama of affliction’s project of eliciting empathy from the spectator; ‘the family’ represents a universal condition that points to a common humanity, regardless of whether our individual family histories are happy or traumatic. It is this recognition of a common humanity, which is felt as a shared emotion, that characterises empathy with another person “whose outlooks and experiences may be very different from our own” (Neill, 1996: 178). It is not necessary for the spectator to have experienced an abusive or traumatic childhood, in order to empathise with the protagonist’s emotions and feelings. But the experience of subject formation under patriarchy is, according to feminist film theorists such as Mulvey and Lang, a universal one. Melodrama’s portrayal of family conflict offers “a simple fact of recognition” (Mulvey, 1989: 39) that constitutes the foundation of our empathic response. We recognise the protagonist’s dilemmas as they struggle with the limited terms of identity under patriarchy, and while we may prefer to distance ourselves from the extremities of the protagonist’s actions (particularly when they are mentally ill), the melodrama of affliction insists that we empathise with their emotions: their frustrations, their rage, their desires, and their pain.
The pleasure of recognition: revealing the ideological contradictions of patriarchy

The melodrama of affliction’s portrayal of family conflict reveals the ideological contradictions that lie beneath the surface of lived relations under patriarchy: “melodrama makes visible, in the form of familial tensions, the exploitation and oppression differently [sic] experienced by members of the family” (Hayward, 2000: 216). Melodrama’s tendency to reveal and make visible family conflict leads Mulvey to argue that, rather than providing the critical subtext to banal plots of romance and domesticity, “ideological contradiction is actually the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama” (1989: 30). Melodrama relies upon the ideological contradictions expressed by family conflict to provide the subject matter of its drama: “its excitement comes from conflict, not between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love” (Mulvey, 1989: 39). Mulvey contends that melodrama may be regarded as “having an ideological function in working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form” (1989: 43, emphasis in original). In similar terms, Robert Lang asserts “the melodrama is an aesthetic that makes ideological contradiction its subject matter” (1989: 7).

This ideological function of revealing and making visible tensions and contradictions beneath the surface of patriarchal society recalls the functioning of the moral occult (Brooks, 1995: 5), which similarly sets out to reveal, to articulate and to demonstrate what lies beneath the surface of reality. Lang brings together these two features of the melodrama of affliction – moral legibility and family conflict – in his study of the melodramas of D. W. Griffith, King Vidor, and Vincente Minnelli:

the melodramatic imagination that structures the films [of Griffith, Vidor, and Minnelli] understands experience in Manichaean terms of familial struggle and conflict. … In later melodramas, those of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s …, the moral universe loses its overtly Christian inflection and the struggles tend to focus on the extent to which social conditions determine characters’ destinies, before it becomes understood that the essential struggle is one for individual identity within a familial context (1989: 3).

For Lang, melodrama is ultimately about familial relations under patriarchy, even in those family melodramas where “the locus of action is not always literally or
Fourth Feature: The Family

exclusively in a family” (1989: 5). He adapts Brooks’ concept of the moral occult, which was developed in relation to stage melodrama, to the narrative concerns of the family melodrama:

the melodrama seeks to reveal a moral universe in operation, even where it is unable to show good triumphing. The Law might be paternal, familial, social, divine – but the melodrama investigates it, challenges it, in some fashion articulates how it functions … (Lang, 1989: 18).

As part of its articulation of a moral universe of paternal and familial Law, the family melodrama draws upon melodrama’s moral stereotypes: “[i]n the family melodrama the villain changes over time, but in one way or another the villain is some aspect of the patriarchy” (Lang, 1989: 8). In the melodrama of affliction, that villain is often the father, the embodiment of patriarchal law and power. In keeping with his or her role as the victim-hero(ine) in melodrama’s moral economy, the protagonist – as Elsaesser (1995: 353) and Nowell-Smith (1985: 192) have observed – is constructed as a victim of patriarchal society (Gledhill, 1985: 77). In melodrama, the victim appeals to our sympathies (Williams, 1998: 42) and, as I argued in Chapters Five and Six, the melodrama of affliction calls upon us to empathise with the victim-hero, whose suffering we bear witness to. Williams rightly argues that the protagonist’s victimisation is crucial to the moral legibility of the melodramatic mode (1998: 60), but it is in the emotive experience of bearing witness to the physical and psychological suffering of victimisation – the moment of pathos – that we are invited to empathise with the protagonist’s feelings. The melodrama of affliction’s portrayals of family conflict illustrate the often uncomfortable nature of pathos, with its complex dialectic of emotion and thought that combines “viewer identification with pathetic suffering” and a greater critical awareness of the victim’s dilemma (Williams, 1998: 46-47). While we may find satisfaction and pleasure in the exposure of patriarchy’s ideological contradictions, which elicits a response of social critique, we also share the protagonist’s emotions of pain and rage in response to their victimisation; in other words, we respond with empathy, whereby “our emotional reactions mirror those of [the victimised] character” (Gaut, 1999: 213). Given the dramatic intensity of melodrama’s family conflicts, these scenes can be highly charged emotional experiences for the empathetic spectator.
The prototype of father-son conflict in the melodrama of affliction is the male melodrama of the 1950s. In these films, the son “either suffers from the inadequacies of his father (Rebel Without a Cause [Nicholas Ray, 1955]), or is in danger of extinction from his murderous or castrating father (as in Home from the Hill [Vincente Minnelli, 1960])” (Hayward, 2000: 219). The two films Hayward cites above as examples of the 1950s “male weepie” represent polar extremes in their portrayal of the father as the agent of his son’s oppression and psychological malaise. The patriarch himself is revealed as dysfunctional, “either transgressive as in madness (Home from the Hill) or completely ineffectual and unable to uphold authority (Rebel without a Cause)” (Hayward, 2000: 219). The family melodramas of the 1950s reveal “a whole generation of Oedipally beset protagonists” (Williams, 1998: 80), such as the tortured characters played by James Dean – unwilling “to fulfil society’s expectations of male adulthood” (Hayward, 2000: 218) – or Robert Stack in Written on the Wind, who literally embodies his character’s anxieties about inheritance and infertility. Families like the Hadleys (Written on the Wind) and the Starks (Rebel Without a Cause) expose the ideological contradictions of patriarchy in the alcoholism, delinquency and death-drives of their maladjusted sons. Despite revealing this crisis in masculinity which the pressures of patriarchy have brought about, the family melodrama is unable to “propose a comprehensively better substitute for the patriarchy; the most that a subject (female or male) can hope to achieve is some sort of adjustment to the dominant culture” (Lang, 1989: 8-9, emphasis in original).

The female protagonist of the melodrama of affliction is equally, if not more so, a victim of patriarchy. Her transgressive behaviour will be socially regarded and medically constructed as evidence of a psychological disorder, rather than symptomatic of the pressures of patriarchal society. Even if the female protagonist accepts patriarchy’s limited terms of female identity, she can never have the same access to patriarchal law and power as her male counterpart. The “repressive, subjectivity-denying terms of patriarchal femininity” (Lang, 1989: 8) are demonstrated by the narrative resolutions of the Hollywood women’s films of the 1930s and ‘40s, directed by men for a female audience. These melodramas “function

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121 I discussed Stack’s performance in Chapter One, in relation to the melodrama of affliction’s externalisation of the internal state.
ideologically as repression of female desire and reassertion of the woman’s role as
reproducer and nurturer. Or, if she is incapable of resuming or assuming that role,
then she must stand aside, disappear, not be” (Hayward, 2000: 222). Mulvey notes
how the male melodrama works to resolve the ideological contradictions it has
revealed and articulated during the course of the narrative, but in the case of
melodramas that privilege a female point of view, these can only be stories of
contradiction, not reconciliation (1989: 43). She describes the pleasures of recognition
for the female spectator as melodramas such as those directed by Douglas Sirk
“prob[e] the pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well-known to women”
(Mulvey, 1989: 39):

This simple fact of recognition has aesthetic and political
importance. There is a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way
that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and
erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping-
ground, the family (Mulvey, 1989: 39).

I argue that what Mulvey is describing here is a response of empathy, where
the spectator recognises the dilemmas and shares the emotions of the protagonist. In
his critique of the Brechtian position that the spectator’s emotional identification
clouds their capacity for critical judgement, Carl Plantinga argues that “congruent
emotions [such as empathy] may also encourage self-examination and critical
judgement about social and political factors” (1997: 375). This includes a “recognition
of the unjust social systems in which the characters find themselves” (Plantinga,
1997: 375). Indeed, Plantinga asserts that the viewer’s emotional response to the
protagonist’s dilemma “depends on recognizing their plight and the reasons for it”
(1997: 375, emphasis in original). While the narrative resolutions of these family
melodramas work hard to contain the ideological contradictions of patriarchy that
have been allowed expression, the female spectator is offered “the satisfaction of
recognising those contradictions, usually suppressed” (Gledhill, 1985: 77). The
ideological contradictions of patriarchy are familiar (in both senses of the word) to
the female spectator, and these are emotively felt truths of a shared experience –
“well known to women” (Mulvey, 1989: 39) – of victimisation. This act of recognition
elicits an empathic response from the female spectator towards the protagonist.
Empathy, as I established in the Introduction, involves “feeling what a character
feels” (Gaut, 1999: 212), putting yourself ‘in her shoes’. In her account of the emotional appeal and ideological effects of the family melodrama, Mulvey draws our attention to the female spectator’s capacity to feel like the protagonist does, to put herself in the same position and to share the same emotions. She links this empathic viewing position to the pleasure of recognition as familiar ideological contradictions are exposed. This is what produces the “dizzy satisfaction” (Mulvey, 1989: 39) of witnessing patriarchy under attack. While the conflicts portrayed on screen are hardly ‘pleasurable’ to watch if we empathise with the victim’s emotional pain and distress, satisfaction comes nevertheless from having the dilemmas of patriarchy exposed. This satisfaction, or pleasure in recognition, is similar to Neale’s notion of the pleasure of giving way to tears in response to melodrama’s scenes of pathos (1986: 20). While the narrative resolution may seek to contain the explosive ideological conflicts it has revealed, “in any story, pleasure comes primarily from the process of its telling, rather than from the nature of its ending” (Neale, 1986: 20).

Does this mean the male spectator is incapable of empathising with the victim of family conflict? And how might the female spectator respond when she witnesses the victimisation of the male protagonist? While Mulvey’s arguments are particular to the female spectator’s empathic response towards the female victim of family conflict, the 1950s family melodrama reveals the extent to which both men and women are victims of patriarchy’s ideological contradictions: “The melodrama recognizes that we are all – men and women – subject to the Law” (Lang, 1989: 9). Thus, the pleasure in recognition that Mulvey identifies for the female spectator is arguably also available to the male spectator. While Lang recognises the differences between the woman’s film and the family melodrama, he asserts that these two melodramatic sub-genres share “a mode of address – an address to culture’s ‘others’” (1989: 30) and that the woman’s film is equally capable of appealing to men (1989: 31): “In the melodrama we are concerned, ostensibly, with the point of view of the ‘other’ in our (patriarchal) culture” (Lang, 1989: 35). While patriarchy tends to align this notion of otherness with the feminine, the victimisation and sufferings endured by those male protagonists who fail to live up to patriarchy’s expectations, such as Kyle Hadley and Jim Stark in the 1950s family melodrama, or those who dare to challenge the Law of the Father, such as David Helfgott and Bubby in the 1990s
melodrama of affliction, reveal that patriarchy’s ‘others’ are not exclusively female. The ‘other’ is anyone who questions, challenges or fails to conform with patriarchal Law. In this way, the melodrama of affliction offers both the male and female spectator the pleasure of recognition, as ideological contradictions are revealed, and the empathic viewing position of identifying with the protagonist’s emotions, as they struggle to define their own identity within the limitations of patriarchy’s gender roles.

The satisfaction of witnessing the dramatic eruptions of family conflict in melodrama is due in large part to the stylistic devices used to heighten the conflict and visualise the internal drama of the characters. This demonstrates the link between melodrama’s thematic content and its style, between family conflict and the externalisation of the internal state. The vertical axis of the staircase is a key device in the melodramatic staging of family conflict between parents and children, as the visual orchestration of arguments and physical confrontations “can produce strong emotional effects” (Elsaesser, 1995: 371) for the viewer. Amy Lawrence identifies the staircase as a significant element in the family melodrama’s mise-en-scène of the home: “Because the characters are trapped, [these films] are more concerned with the particulars of the interior space. … the staircase is often the site of crisis [and] frustration” (1999: 157). Some of the most well-known and spectacular examples of staircase conflicts in family melodramas include Rebel Without a Cause, Bigger Than Life (Ray, 1956) and Written on the Wind. In Rebel Without a Cause, for example, the conflict between Jim (James Dean) and his parents is melodramatically staged as he towers over the father who disappoints him, while he turns his back on his domineering mother, who stands on the steps above. In the women’s melodrama Now, Voyager (Irving Rapper, 1942), the shifting power relations between a domineering mother and her daughter, Charlotte (Bette Davis) are made literal when the mother tumbles down the stairs following an argument. After years of repression under her mother’s stern control, Charlotte finally articulates her desire for independence and a life of her own choosing, but this is resisted by her mother, who glares disapprovingly at Charlotte (off-screen) before loosing her footing at the top of the stairs and injuring her ankle as she falls. The staircase here symbolises the power struggle between mother and daughter, as Elizabeth Cowie observes:
“Charlotte’s ‘rise’ is matched by her mother’s ‘decline’ into physical illness and invalidism” (1984: 89). In the family melodrama, the staircase offers a stage for the melodramatic enactment of conflict, which is symbolically expressed as a physical assault by the child upon the parent, who is often injured in the process. The staircase thereby visualises in spectacular fashion the power struggle between parent and child, a struggle that is “fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence” (Mulvey, 1989: 39).

The combination of stylistic devices such as the staircase with the narrative content of family conflict can produce powerful emotional affects. Plantinga observes that “audiences tend to relate various stylistic features … with affects” (1999: 254): “These must all work in congruence with the events depicted and other stylistic features to elicit the intended emotional response” (Plantinga, 1999: 255). The symbolism of the staircase is one such stylistic feature: through the dramatic orchestration of character movement, the staircase visualises the rise and fall of the characters’ emotions as conflict is played out along its axis. The frequent deployment of staircases in melodramatic scenes of conflict demonstrates Plantinga’s contention that empathy is elicited through a combination of film style and technique, along with narrative context and character engagement (1999: 253). This illustrates “the degree to which textual structure … from large-scale narrative structure to the minutiae of stylistic usage … determines the nature of our imagining” (Smith, 1997: 415). In the melodrama of affliction, style and content are combined with the intention of eliciting our empathy for the victims of family conflict.

The unruly woman: both cause and effect of ideological conflict

Charlotte’s desire for independence and her resistance to parental control point towards another recurring trope in melodrama’s spectacular and emotional enactments of family conflict: the figure of the unruly woman, who presents a potent challenge to patriarchy’s limited gender roles. The unruly woman has generally been theorised in relation to comedy, rather than melodrama, so I will discuss these theories briefly before applying their model of the unruly woman to those women in melodrama who resist and problematise patriarchal control. In her study of female unruliness in comedy The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter, Kathleen
Rowe draws on Mary Russo’s feminist reappraisal of Bakhtin’s analysis of the female grotesque body, in order to define the unruly woman. The grotesque body is associated with the corporeal activities of eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, copulating, ageing and decaying (Bakhtin, 1984, 317 & 323). The unruly woman is the literal embodiment of these activities that society regards as taboo or as bodily functions from which women should refrain. She thereby represents a challenge to patriarchal constructions of femininity, “an alternative conception of womanliness, one based on the pursuit of rather than the denial of pleasure” (Jenkins, 1992: 275). This figure of disorder and rebellion has also been identified by historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who calls her “the woman on top” (1975: 124). The unruly woman is frequently found in comedy, as comedy employs the spectacle of anarchistic performance to make us laugh (Jenkins, 1992: 264). As implied by her role in comedy and made explicit by Russo (1986: 213 & 217), the unruly woman often makes a spectacle of herself. She dares to call attention to herself, through her dress or her actions, as Henry Jenkins explains: “If Mulvey’s notion of spectacle asserts a socially learned desire to be looked at, Russo’s notion of spectacle dares men to look while gleefully anticipating male displeasure with what they see” (1992: 265). This suggests the unruly woman’s refusal to conform to patriarchal standards of appearance and behaviour. She dares to claim the right to determine her own identity and to express herself unhindered by social norms or cultural expectations of how women should behave. Given this profound liberatory potential, the unruly woman is a figure of great interest for feminist theorists.

Unruliness is a risky strategy for feminists, however, as it can lead to a misogynist response that confirms the notion that women are in need of patriarchal control. This places the unruly woman at the centre of conflict within the

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122 Rowe refers to Russo’s 1986 essay ‘Female Grotesques’.
123 Patriarchy’s disavowal of the body, in favour of the mind, combines with its need to control women’s behaviour, as Elaine Showalter explains: “Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists … have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind” (1987: 3-4).
124 The dangers of the unruly woman being read in misogynistic terms have been noted by those critics who have examined the unruly woman/the woman on top in history and in cultural texts (Rowe, 1995b: 31; Russo, 1986: 216-7 & 219; Jenkins, 1992: 246, 247 & 249). Within comedy, Jenkins notes that the unruly woman is “both a target of chastising male laughter and a vehicle for liberating female laughter” (1992: 247).
patriarchal family. This misogynist response is also an inherent danger in comedy, where laughter can easily turn to ridicule and derision. Provoking a pejorative response is the risk that any filmmaker takes when addressing a taboo subject, such as mental illness, through comedy:

jokes allow the comic expression of ideas that in other contexts might be regarded as threatening, although they win their public acknowledgment at the expense of their no longer being taken seriously by the listener (Jenkins, 1992: 251).

Indeed, laughter risks inhibiting empathy, if the spectator is laughing at, rather than along with, the unruly woman. Despite this risk, comedy allows a space for the unruly woman to define herself, to ‘act out’ “the dilemmas of femininity” (Russo, 1986: 225), “to make visible and laughable the tropes of femininity” (Rowe, 1995b: 209). This space may eventually be closed off by the pressures of narrative resolution, but this does not diminish the power of depicting, and the pleasure of witnessing, female unruliness on screen (Jenkins, 1992: 275). Through her comic acts of rebellion, the unruly woman offers the possibility of spectatorial pleasure and satisfaction as ideological contradictions are revealed and ridiculed.

Melodrama shares comedy’s capacity for allowing the expression of female resistance to patriarchal norms. Susan Hayward’s description of the melodramatic heroine suggests the parallels between the unruly woman of comedy and the female protagonist of the family melodrama and the woman’s film: “She puts on display the conflicts at the heart of feminine identity between female desire and socially sanctioned femininity” (2000: 219). In melodrama, as in comedy, the ideological contradictions of patriarchy are laid bare, only to be hastily covered over in the interests of narrative resolution: “as Sirk has pointed out, the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, the cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled, in the last five minutes, into a happy end” (Mulvey, 1989: 40).

Using the features of the unruly woman identified by Rowe, Russo and Jenkins outlined above, we can trace the presence of the unruly woman in several melodramatic heroines, even though these women may not exhibit the features of the grotesque body associated with unruliness. The unruly woman constitutes a
challenge to patriarchy, whether that challenge is expressed through sexual aggression, excessive or violent behaviour, defiance of dress codes and physical appearances, or less overtly but still subversively through independent thoughts and ideas, through daring to determine one’s own identity. Whereas comedy revels in the unruly woman’s behaviour as a source of humour, melodrama is concerned with the unruly woman’s containment and confinement, either within the home or the institution. Despite the trials and tribulations endured by the melodramatic heroine, there is scope, albeit limited, for the expression of female desires and the exercise of female agency within melodrama’s narratives. There are aspects of unruliness in the heroines of Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937) Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and All That Heaven Allows, for example. In Stella Dallas, Barbara Stanwyck plays the title character, whose inappropriate sense of dress, characterised by excess, presents a grotesque parody of femininity. Together with Joan Crawford in Mildred Pierce, both these women are unruly in their upwardly mobile class ambitions and their close relationships with their daughters, which threaten patriarchal authority through their economic independence and exclusion of men. The widowed Cary in Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows is another example of the unruly woman of melodrama, as her desire for sexual independence in her relationship with Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) poses a ‘threat’ to her class and her family; her “fantasy …

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125 As these characteristics suggest, the unruly woman can also be found in film noir; the femme fatale, with her sexual predacity and her incitement of violence, represents the extreme expression of unruliness. Rowe makes a distinction, however, between the unruly woman of comedy and the femme fatale of film noir: “The unruly woman represents a special kind of excess differing from that of the femme fatale … her sexuality is neither evil and uncontrollable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/madonna” (1995b: 10-11). Thus Rowe positions the unruly woman outside the virgin/whore dichotomy of patriarchy and locates her “special kind of excess” in laughter. Despite the established connection she has with comedy, I view the unruly woman as closely aligned with the femme fatale as, like her noir counterpart, she deploys sex ‘on her own terms’, she engages with self-display or spectacle-making through costume, and she is associated with gender inversion, which echoes constructions of the femme fatale as the phallic woman and demonstrates her upheaval of patriarchal authority.

126 For example, Christopher Orr (1991) analyses the containment of Marylee Hadley’s libidinous energy in Sirk’s melodrama Written on the Wind, as she assumes the responsibility of sole surviving heir to the Hadley fortune and is forced to give up her unrequited love to another woman. In film noir, the threat of the femme fatale is ultimately contained by imprisonment or death.

127 Rowe briefly acknowledges the presence of the unruly woman in melodrama in her discussion of Stella Dallas (1995a: 51-52). The unruliness of Mildred’s ambitions is reflected in the ‘unruly’ nature of the film’s generic identity, which combines melodrama with film noir, as Pam Cook (1980) observes. Consequently, the film noir icon of the femme fatale heightens the presentation of Mildred as an unruly woman, rebelling against patriarchal norms.
is, in patriarchal terms, transgressive – and so cannot be fulfilled” (Hayward, 2000: 217). Cary’s unruly sexual desire is ultimately contained by social and familial pressures and the union of Cary and Ron is deferred until his sexual potency is neutralised by a serious accident. For Mulvey, *All That Heaven Allows* is exemplary of the ideological contradictions of patriarchy that are incapable of reconciliation (1989: 43), as this compromised ‘happy ending’ demonstrates.

Rather than responding with laughter, as comedy invites us to, melodrama encourages us to empathise with those who are the victims of patriarchy. Laughter is a response to the unruly woman’s actions, whereas empathy is a response to the unruly woman’s *emotions*. For example, as *Bad Boy Bubby* illustrates, it is the emotional state – not the actions – of the victimised protagonist that the melodrama of affliction encourages us to identify with: we share Bubby’s pain and rage at the abuse he endures, but this does not mean we agree with or condone his murderous actions. We empathise with a character when we feel like they do, when we mirror their emotional state (Neill, 1996: 177; Gaut, 1999: 213). While the unruly woman of melodrama may act in unconventional and socially inappropriate ways, our emotional identification with her rage and frustration is testimony to the powerful appeal of empathy and the familiar, shared experience of living in patriarchy. The unruly woman offers a particularly potent challenge to patriarchal control, in her defiance of the restrictive codes of feminine appearance and the limiting conventions of acceptable behaviour. Even though her unruliness may eventually be contained by the pressures of narrative resolution, this does not diminish the pleasure of recognition and the empathic response from the spectator as the ideological contradictions of patriarchy are exposed.

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The family conflicts revealed by the unruly woman’s rage against the patriarchy suggest the attraction for melodrama of ideological contradiction as the source of its drama:

If the family is the melodrama’s favourite milieu, it is because there one finds the most vivid and troublesome contradictions of
melodrama’s ideological context. ... To the degree that the melodramatic text is hysterical, neurotic, or paranoid, so is the family. The family is the natural breeding-ground for neurosis, for it is the space in which the first conflicts that form the subject occur (Lang, 1989: 49-50).

The recurring themes of hysteria, neurosis and paranoia in the family melodrama of the 1950s point to this sub-genre’s influence on the representations of mental illness in the melodrama of affliction. The melodrama of affliction draws upon the narrative strategies and stylistic devices of the family melodrama (such as the spectacular staging of arguments on the staircase) in order to portray family conflict and its effects upon the formation of the protagonist’s identity in an emotionally charged manner designed to elicit empathy from the spectator. According to Lang, “what is at the stake in the melodrama [is] a question of identity” (1989: 8). Family conflict in melodrama arises when the protagonist fails to meet or to accept the limited terms of their gendered identity which patriarchy has set down. In similar terms, Nowell-Smith argues:

[wh]at is at stake ... is the survival of the family unit and the possibility for individuals of acquiring an identity which is also a place within the system, a place in which they can both be ‘themselves’ and ‘at home’ ... It is a condition of the drama that attainment of such a place is not easy and does not happen without sacrifice (1985: 193).

Both Nowell-Smith and Lang describe the search for identity in the family melodrama in terms of “what is at stake”, suggesting the overdetermination of gender identity within patriarchal ideology. The stakes are indeed high, as Nowell-Smith suggests when he observes that the attainment of individual identity within the family requires sacrifice. Lang also sees melodrama’s “drama of identity” (1989: 8) as “the essential struggle ... for individual identity within a familial context” (1989: 3). In its portrayal of the trials and tribulations of the afflicted protagonist as she or he negotiates their difference from ‘normality’, the melodrama of affliction is similarly concerned with the search for identity within the family, as the primary space of subject formation. We empathise with the struggle, the suffering and the desires of patriarchy’s rebellious sons and daughters as they seek an identity of their own choosing and endure family conflict and trauma in their quest, because this
search for identity is familiar to us all. We are able to relate to their plight, to imaginatively see ourselves in their position (Neill, 1996: 191; Gaut, 1999: 212), largely because we are all subject to patriarchal law and we recognise the ideological contradictions on screen. This recognition of the protagonist’s plight is the foundation of our empathic response (Plantinga, 1997: 375). What is at stake in the melodrama of affliction, however, is often not only the protagonist’s gendered identity, but their sanity as well.
Chapter 8
Empathising with Protest:
The unruly woman of melodrama in *Sweetie*

*Sweetie* is exemplary of the dramatic staging of family conflict and repressed trauma in the melodrama of affliction. Jane Campion’s film offers a portrait of family dysfunction, with scenes of conflict, temper tantrums and physical violence between family members underpinned by suggestions of incest and mental illness. *Sweetie* (Genevieve Lemon) is an unruly, ‘mad’ daughter, rebelling against her pathetic, timid father, who may have sexually abused her. While the critical consensus is that *Sweetie* is suffering from a psychological disorder,\(^{128}\) it is important to note that the nature of her illness is not revealed explicitly, but only hinted at in oblique lines of dialogue. Consequently, *Sweetie*’s unruly behaviour becomes constitutive of the mental illness she is presumed to have. I am particularly interested in the ways in which unruliness stands in for madness in this film, and what implications this has for acts of female rebellion against patriarchal control. Despite the extremities of her behaviour, I argue that the unruly woman is a figure of empathy in the melodrama of affliction.

In this chapter, I examine the figure of the unruly woman as both a catalyst for and a response to family conflict and trauma. I begin by establishing *Sweetie* as an exemplary figure of unruliness. I then examine the film’s implication that *Sweetie* was abused as a child. The abuse narrative, as demonstrated by *Shine* and *Bad Boy Bubby*, is a common theme in the melodrama of affliction, but *Sweetie*’s presentation of this issue is equivocal. After considering the ambiguity of the abuse narrative in *Sweetie*, I then expand upon the theories of the unruly woman outlined in Chapter Seven, where I argued that this rebellious figure can be traced in the family conflicts of melodrama as well as comedy, where she is traditionally located. In this chapter, I compare *Sweetie*’s unruliness, in particular her conflict with her father, with the unruly figure of Marylee Hadley in the canonical melodrama *Written on the Wind*. This comparison (in itself ‘unruly’) across decades and production contexts

\(^{128}\) The following critics and film scholars are examples of this consensus that *Sweetie* is mentally ill: Yves Alion in Wexman (1999: 84); Mary Cantwell in Wexman (1999: 53); Cheshire (2000: 32 & 35); Ebert (1990); McHugh (2001: 201); Polan (2001: 97).
demonstrates the persistence of the unruly woman in cinema and her ongoing appeal. Comparing *Sweetie* with *Written on the Wind* also challenges the dominant view of Campion’s film as a grotesque comedy and offers a reinterpretation of it using theories of melodrama, for which Sirk’s film is a major touchstone. Through close scene analyses of Sirk’s and Campion’s family melodramas, I establish a connection between these unruly daughters that demonstrates the value of melodrama as a reading strategy for Campion’s portrayal of family dysfunction and mental illness. The unruly woman is a confronting figure, a challenge to our sympathies and our empathic relationship with the melodramatic protagonist. I conclude by arguing that, for all her moments of excess and unruliness, the conventions of melodrama create an ambivalence in our response towards Sweetie. We may feel hostile towards her or be alienated by the extremities of her behaviour, but there are moments of pathos when Campion reveals Sweetie’s own vulnerability. In the melodrama of affliction, empathy is elicited by the protagonist’s vulnerability (Gaut, 1999: 211). In its portrayal of Sweetie’s victimisation at the hands of patriarchy, Campion’s film calls upon us to empathise with this most confronting of melodramatic heroines.

**Sweetie as a model of unruliness**

“An inescapable, overbearing force who sows pandemonium wherever she turns.”

Sweetie embodies many of the physical and psychological features of the unruly woman. The ‘signs’ of the unruly woman include being overweight, with a corresponding indulgence in food; a heightened sexual appetite; loudness and uncouth language; physical and verbal aggression. These are just some aspects of the grotesque body that point to a lack of self-control and a refusal to heed the social norms of feminine appearance and behaviour set down by patriarchy. Sweetie presents us with a textbook example of the unruly woman: her appearance, her

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130 These ‘signs’ are compiled as a summary of the detailed analyses of Jenkins, 1992; Rowe, 1995b; and Russo, 1986, which I discussed in the previous chapter.
behaviour, and her challenge to patriarchal authority.\textsuperscript{131} Sweetie’s fleshy, overweight body is accentuated by her short skirts and skimpy tops; she yells, screams and swears; she damages property, particularly her sister’s (the front door, a dress and a collection of miniature china horses) and she physically attacks members of her family. Sweetie presents a grotesque parody of femininity with her heavy eye make-up, dyed hair, black nail polish and accessories such as large earrings, studded wrist collar and princess cuff lace gloves.\textsuperscript{132} These bold items draw attention to the constructed nature of femininity.\textsuperscript{133}

In keeping with the unruly woman’s rebellious nature, Sweetie refuses to conform to codes of feminine behaviour and decorum. She is unable (or unwilling) to keep Kay’s house clean and tidy, and she urinates in the driveway. She growls like a dog, literally attempting to bite the hand that feeds her (her father’s), and she whimpers and whines like a child when things do not go her way. Sweetie’s animalistic and childlike vocality connotes a pre-linguistic rejection of the Law of the Father, especially when these sounds are often produced in direct response to her father’s actions. This is supported by Mary Russo’s analysis of the grotesque body, which points to the association of the pre-linguistic Imaginary with the maternal and the abject (1986: 220). Sweetie’s nonconformity with patriarchy’s construction of femininity is not limited to her repertoire of barks, growls, whimpers and squeals. She is also prone to violent outbursts and temper tantrums, with her most aggressive physical assaults reserved for conflicts with her sister (hair-pulling and wrestling) and her father (trying to knock him off a ladder). Sweetie’s displays of physical violence verge on slapstick, suggesting the attraction for comedy of the unruly woman archetype as a source of comic spectacle (Jenkins, 1992: 264). Sweetie is both

\textsuperscript{131} I am not alone in reading Sweetie as an unruly woman. Both Terrie Waddell (2003) and Rose Capp (2003) draw on Kathleen Rowe’s book \textit{The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter} in their analyses of \textit{Sweetie}. Indeed, Capp contends that “Campion’s entire oeuvre is defined by the presence of unruly women, from her earlier works such as \textit{Peel} (Jane Campion, 1982) to her most recent feature \textit{Holy Smoke} (Jane Campion, 1999)” (2003: 250).

\textsuperscript{132} Cf. Henry Jenkins’ analysis of the “grotesque parody of femininity” presented in early film comedy by Winnie Lightner, one of his examples of the unruly woman of comedy (1992: 260-261).

\textsuperscript{133} Sweetie’s grotesque parody of femininity not only aligns her with female unruliness, but invites a reading, informed by Judith Butler’s work, of gender as performative and femininity as masquerade (a reading I do not pursue here).
cause and effect of this dysfunctional family, making her a difficult figure for the audience to empathise with, particularly when we are laughing at her.

Sweetie’s sister Kay (Karen Colston) is her silent, repressed double (Smelik, 1998: 145 & 146). Kay represents the contained, classical body, the very opposite of Sweetie’s grotesque body in appearance and behaviour (Russo, 1986: 219). Kay is slim and dresses demurely, often wearing a uniform; she is quiet and introverted; she is financially independent of family – renting a house and working at a bank; and for much of the film she is repulsed by the sexual advances of her boyfriend, Louis (Tom Lycos). In contrast, Sweetie is hypersexual, as demonstrated by the frequent and vocal sex she has with her boyfriend Bob (Michael Lake) – Kay observes: “They’ve been at it a fair bit” (Lee and Campion, 1991: 17) – and her seduction of Louis on the beach. In the latter instance, Sweetie demonstrates her unruliness by putting bodily pleasure before notions of sibling loyalty and monogamy. With both men, she is literally “the woman on top” (Davis, 1975: 124): she lies on top of Louis to kiss him and fondle his crotch, and during a tender night-time moment between Sweetie and Bob, he lies on his back while she sits up, stroking him. Sweetie represents the sexual assertiveness that Kay demonstrates in the film’s opening scenes, when she lures Louis away from his fiancée and seduces him in the car park. But Kay suddenly loses interest in sex when Louis plants a tree in the backyard as a symbol of their love. As Kay’s opening voice-over informs us, she has a phobia of trees that is linked to childhood memories of her sister. Sweetie is Kay’s “dark double” (Showalter, 1987: 68), representing her sexual desires and unexpressed anger. Campion’s film is as much about Kay’s journey towards reconciliation with her sister – her darker self – as it is about Sweetie’s unruliness. Sweetie is the “monster” to Kay’s “dutiful daughter” (Showalter, 1987: 63).

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134 This reading of Sweetie and Kay as doubles of anger and repression respectively is inspired by Elaine Showalter’s analysis of Florence Nightingale’s memoirs of her repressive family life (1987: 62-63) and Showalter’s reading of the relationship between Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason (1987: 68-69). Campion and her co-writer Gerard Lee both regard Sweetie as representing Kay’s “darker side” (Lee and Campion, 1991: viii). Campion observes: “For Kay, Sweetie is what she might become if she lost control … Kay is very afraid that things will get out of control” (Lee and Campion, 1991: ix-x). Smelik also reads Sweetie and Kay as doubles (1998: 145 & 146). Regrettably, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into more detailed discussion of Kay’s own psychological dysfunction: her superstitions, her tree phobia and her frigidity are symptomatic of her own repressed family trauma.
 Perhaps the greatest feature that casts Sweetie as an unruly woman is her challenge to patriarchal control. Indeed, Rowe perceives feminist potential in comedy’s antiauthoritarianism, in its attack on the Law of the Father (1995b: 101-102). Sweetie physically, visually and verbally assaults her father, Gordon (Jon Darling), during several scenes of conflict that foreground the powerlessness of this patriarch, who cannot contain the rebellious excess of his unruly daughter. Sweetie’s resistance is limited, however, by her need for fatherly love and approval. This is undoubtedly a product of the unnatural relationship between Sweetie and her father, with its connotations of incest. Sweetie’s family struggles to contain her excess within the family home. Institutionalisation is not an option here, as the patriarch is reluctant to allow the intervention of professionals in this domestic conflict. But it is precisely this failure to contain Sweetie that results in her death, ironically the ultimate confinement.

Sweetie’s scenes of family conflict, characterised by comic slapstick and anarchistic behaviour, are ambivalent comic spectacles for the audience: Sweetie’s behaviour is so extreme and bizarre that it provokes both laughter and concern at the lengths to which she will go to get her way. We are witness to the manipulations and emotional blackmail that Gordon inflicts upon Sweetie, which – at least to some viewers – may seem like justification for her outrageous actions. To others, it is Sweetie who is guilty of emotional blackmail. This illustrates the ambivalence of the film’s reception: the initial hostility that greeted the film upon its debut at the 1989 Cannes film festival, and its subsequent critical rehabilitation as one of Campion’s most original and striking films (Ashby, 2002: 92-93; Cheshire, 2000: 31; Polan, 2001: 99). In the ambivalent response we experience towards Sweetie’s tantrums and acts of protest, Campion is constantly challenging and problematising our ability to empathise with this unruly woman.

The unruly woman’s nonconformity with patriarchal norms can be read in two ways: as an inability to conform, thereby labelling her as ‘mad’ or ‘ill’, or as a refusal to conform, which implies a greater degree of self-determination and

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135 Campion suggests a darker side to Sweetie and Gordon’s relationship in a brief scene when Sweetie washes Gordon in the bathtub. I will discuss this scene further later in this chapter.
rebellion. The fact that the same action can be read in these two different ways illuminates the treatment throughout history of independent, free-thinking women as ‘mad’ and mentally imbalanced, when in fact their mental faculties were intact.

In comedy, characters who are the target of the unruly woman’s jokes or comic performance will often dismiss the woman as mad: “she’s crazy!” Explosions of comic aggression or uninhibited expression directed at representatives of the status quo are often dismissed as the actions of a deranged mind. Terrie Waddell describes this as the “back-lashing aspect” of female unruliness, where “the inherent message is that to debunk the rules of official reason is to be mad” (2003: 193).

Treating the actions of the unruly woman as signs of madness thereby minimises their social critique.

It is not surprising then, that the unruly woman is one of the most powerful and frequently used stereotypes for dramatising mental illness, in both comedy and melodrama. The association of unruliness with madness is a centuries-old tradition that cinema draws upon when seeking ways to communicate mental illness through behaviour rather than formal diagnosis.

136 The nonconformity of Campion’s heroines continually places them at risk of being regarded as ‘mad’. Consider, for example, the conversion of Ruth (Kate Winslet) to Indian spirituality in Holy Smoke. Ruth’s family and friends “cannot tolerate or understand Ruth’s defection” (Gillett, 2004: 73) and Sue Gillett comments on the disjunction between Ruth’s spiritual experiences in India and the stifling suburbia of her family’s home: “It is impossible to imagine Ruth’s liquid experience of blissful truth at the touch of the Guru occurring in such a solidly defined, yet excessively inauthentic place. Indeed, such an experience, were it to happen, could only be labeled madness” (2004: 73-74, my emphasis).

137 Showalter provides an overview of this history in her ‘Introduction’ (1987: 1-20), especially pages 4-5.

138 For example, in the early comedy directed by Lloyd Bacon, So Long Letty (1929), the antics of Letty Robbins (Charlotte Greenwood) include joke telling and raucous singing. In response to her unruly behaviour, grandfather Mr Davis (Claude Gillingwater) refers to Letty as “that maniac” and the hotel in which this comic performance takes place as “a madhouse” (Jenkins, 1992: 245).

139 Waddell identifies a particularly Australian incarnation of the unruly woman that she calls “the scrubber”, a figure of sexual excess, abjection, liminality and irrational dependency on men (2003: 184-185). Her article traces the presence of the scrubber in four recent Australian films: Sweetie, Fran (Glenda Hambly, 1985), Radiance (Rachel Perkins, 1997) and Praise (John Curran, 1998).

140 Sweetie echoes the nineteenth century’s conception of ‘the madwoman in the attic’, exemplified by Jane Eyre’s Bertha Mason. The effect of Sweetie’s unruliness (or madness) on the family home finds its equivalent in John Conolly’s nineteenth-century writings on the treatment of ‘the insane’, as quoted by Showalter: “Lady patients at home, Conolly writes, are ‘quite estranged’ from all their relatives; ‘all their conduct has been fierce and unnatural’ and the house itself is rendered awful by the presence of a deranged creature under the same roof: her voice; her sudden and violent efforts to destroy things or persons; her vehement rushings to fire and window; her very tread and stamp in her dark and disordered and remote
that are employed in the portrayal of Sweetie thereby double as signs of her mental illness. At no stage in the film is Sweetie’s ‘illness’ defined or given a name, nor do we see her being institutionalised or receiving medical treatment. We have only a handful of lines of dialogue on which to base our conclusion that she is mentally ill. When we first meet Sweetie, Kay informs Louis that Sweetie is “a bit mental” (Lee and Campion, 1991: 14). Kay then interrogates Sweetie: “you’ve stopped taking your medication, haven’t you?” (Lee and Campion, 1991: 15). Sweetie answers only obliquely – “Bob and I are going to walk through some doors, Kay” (Lee and Campion, 1991: 15) – and never directly speaks about her condition, except to announce to Gordon: “I’m doing real well Dad […] I’m not going back there”. Wherever “there” might be is a matter of speculation: Sweetie could be referring to the family home or perhaps some kind of institution. In the absence of clear narrative information, we rely upon stereotypical indicators of madness suggested by the character’s speech, dress, temperament, and actions, as well as the reactions of other characters. The ambiguity with which Sweetie’s mental illness is portrayed is characteristic of the film as a whole: “Refusing to be a psychological drama the film never explains or interprets. It is up to the spectator to discover in this universe of madness the normal within the anomaly” (Smelik, 1998: 151). The ambiguity of Campion’s film challenges the spectator’s ability to empathise with Sweetie. This ambiguity also influences the portrayal of Sweetie’s relationship with her father.

**Problematising moral legibility: the ambiguity of the abuse narrative in Sweetie**

Jane Campion’s cinema, as I have written elsewhere, is characterised by ambiguity (Hopgood, 2002). It is typical of Campion’s style that Sweetie’s mental illness is presented in oblique ways, without the narrative certainty and containment provided by psychiatric discourse, medication and institutionalisation. Sue Gillett observes that Campion’s films are frequently concerned with what is unseen or

chamber, have seemed to penetrate the whole house; and, assailed by her wild energy, the very walls and roof have appeared unsafe, and capable of partial demolition” (1987: 68). This description evokes the ‘threat’ posed by Sweetie to home and family.

141 Note that “there” is adlibbed by actress Genevieve Lemon. The exact lines in Lee and Campion’s published screenplay are: “I’m getting on really well Dad” and “I’m not going back” (Lee and Campion, 1991: 26).
unsaid (2004: 24). These are the moments of ambiguity in Campion’s films, when the audience is left to interpret the information they are given – or the lack of it. Campion is not interested in telling her audience what to think or how to respond. There is much about Sweetie’s past that is unseen or unsaid in this film. And what we do see and hear in the present is open to interpretation.

A key example of Campion’s trademark ambiguity is the bathroom scene in *Sweetie*, when Kay pauses outside the bathroom door, left ajar, and sees Sweetie washing her father in the bath. We see the bathroom from Kay’s point of view. When the soap falls from Sweetie’s grasp, she playfully fishes around in the water near her father’s groin, humming occasionally as she does so. Gordon sits immobile, his back to the camera. Campion then cuts to a shot of Kay in bed, pulling up the sheets and blanket close to her chin, staring tensely at the ceiling, as the camera pans away from her face towards the broken ceramic horse pieces on her bookshelf (the remnants of Sweetie’s attempt to eat them during a sisterly fight). There is a subtle but ominous undertone on the soundtrack. The entire scene is less than thirty seconds, but its presentation is so unsettling that it casts a shadow over the remainder of the narrative, especially in the subsequent scenes between Sweetie and her father. While this is the only scene of intimate physical contact between Sweetie and Gordon, the implication of an incestuous relationship is supported by Gordon’s indulgence of Sweetie’s unrealistic career ambitions and his fear of upsetting her. This brief, wordless scene carries intimations of a family secret, of a repressed trauma: “If this is a film about incest, it circles around that event, seeking its own interpretation, seeking out its affect, its experiential dimension, its symptomatic consequences. The event does not crystallize …” (Gillett, 2004: 22-23)

Campion’s ambiguous presentation of this bathroom scene challenges the melodrama of affliction’s drive towards moral legibility: who is the victim here? Who are we invited to empathise with? Kay, because the bathroom is seen from her point of view? As several film theorists have argued, pointing to the use of the point of view shot to show the killer’s perspective in horror films, “there is no necessary tendency to empathize with the character whose visual perspective we imaginarily

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142 Recall Smelik’s observation, quoted above: “the film never explains or interprets. It is up to the spectator” (1998: 151).
occupy” (Gaut, 1999: 209). While it is possible to read Gordon as abusive,\textsuperscript{143} there is equal scope for arguing that it is Sweetie, not Gordon, who is being manipulative in this scene.\textsuperscript{144} The question of who is the victim and who is the villain is complicated by the fact that we do not see Gordon’s face, only his impassive back as Sweetie scrubs him. The expression on Kay’s face is also unclear and difficult to read, making it hard to empathise with her when we’re not exactly sure what emotions she’s experiencing. In my earlier analysis of \textit{Angel Baby}, I discussed Carl Plantinga’s concept of the scene of empathy (1999), which draws our attention to the importance of reaction shots – where we see the character’s emotional response to what they have just seen – to securing our empathic response with the character whose point of view we share. Indeed, “the reaction shot can be a more effective vehicle for affective and empathic identification with a character than the point-of-view shot” (Gaut, 1999: 210). Our ability to empathise with Kay at this point is limited by the ambiguity of her emotional response. Has she stumbled upon a shocking revelation or has she known of her sister and her father’s incestuous relationship all along? Is she disturbed by what she has seen, or is she jealous of the special ‘bond’ between Sweetie and her father?\textsuperscript{145} While it is clear that Sweetie’s delusions of grandeur are largely the result of “bad parenting” (Ferrier, 2001: 58),\textsuperscript{146} the suggestion of incest here invites us to read Sweetie’s mental illness as the result of an abused childhood.

The idea that Gordon is, or has been, involved in a sexual relationship with his daughter is supported by his estrangement from his wife. When Flo (Dorothy Barry) leaves Gordon for a trial separation, he sits mournfully in Sweetie’s bedroom, not his own.\textsuperscript{147} When husband and wife are later reconciled, Flo clearly positions the

\textsuperscript{143} Patricia Mellencamp reads \textit{Sweetie} as “a case study of domestic abuse denial” (1995: 173), asserting that Flo and Kay are in denial about Gordon’s sexual abuse of Sweetie.

\textsuperscript{144} While not denying the sexual subtext of this scene, several of my colleagues in the School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology regard Sweetie’s actions as further evidence of her manipulative nature and her power over her father. I showed this scene during a seminar presentation (Cinema Studies reading group, 25 August 2003) and a heated debate ensued about whether Sweetie was the victim or the perpetrator of sexual abuse.

\textsuperscript{145} See Smelik regarding Kay’s ambivalence: “Kay’s pained expression may signify either disgust or envy, or most probably, both” (1998: 149).

\textsuperscript{146} I discussed Liz Ferrier’s notion of “bad parenting” in Chapter Six, where I analysed the abuse narrative in \textit{Bad Boy Bubby}. Like de Heer’s film, \textit{Sweetie} fits Ferrier’s model of the disabled artist cycle in contemporary Australian film: Sweetie is a social outcast and compulsive performer with bad parents (2001: 58-59).

\textsuperscript{147} And again, when Sweetie has barricaded herself in the tree house, Clayton discovers Gordon lying on the bed in Sweetie’s bedroom.
problem of Sweetie as the major impediment to their marriage. As she explains her plan to find Sweetie somewhere to live independently, Flo states firmly “I’m not giving him up, not without a struggle”. It seems that Flo’s status as Gordon’s wife is threatened by her own daughter, who is regarded by Flo as the dominant one in the relationship: “she’s got him under her thumb!”. The film’s equivocal approach to this sensitive issue is acknowledged by Patricia Mellencamp: “Campion is not interested in causes, or in explanations” (1995: 173). Nevertheless, Mellencamp asserts that the true nature of Gordon’s relationship with Sweetie – sexual abuse – is “embedded in quick and subtle glimpses” such as the scene in the bathroom: “Beneath the surface of everyday life are real and deadly secrets” (1995: 153). While not discounting the possibility of an incestuous relationship between Sweetie and Gordon, Kathleen McHugh observes that “although the film associates the family’s past with its present, it stops short of articulating an abuse narrative that establishes a causal or logical or moral relation between the two” (2001: 201). McHugh sees a consistency of approach across all of Campion’s features, from Sweetie to Holy Smoke: “While the films clearly document their protagonists’ experiences and struggles with trauma, they also avoid the manichean [sic] judgments and sentimental pathos of melodrama” (2001: 198). In contrast with the stark moralising of the abuse narratives in Shine and Bad Boy Bubby, the abuse narrative in Sweetie is elusive, ambiguous and equivocal in its moral legibility and in its portrayal of Sweetie. This makes it difficult to respond to melodrama’s call to empathise with victimised innocence, when the film refuses the desire of the moral occult to reveal all (Brooks, 1995: 20-21).

Rebel within the home: the unruly daughters of melodrama

“The whole family’s coming apart like a wet paper bag” ~

Gordon in Sweetie (Lee and Campion, 1991: 28)

For all her moments of spectacle-making and anarchistic performance, the narrative of Campion’s film poses the dilemma with which Kay’s family grapples: what to do about Sweetie? How to resolve the family conflicts which her unruliness causes? Once she is removed from Kay’s house and returned to her childhood home, the stage is set for a final confrontation between this unruly daughter and her parents, particularly her father, Gordon. It is this final father-daughter conflict – in
contrast with the comic spectacles of Sweetie’s conflicts with Kay – that firmly locates the film within a melodramatic tradition, notwithstanding its established generic identity as grotesque comedy.\footnote{The following are examples of scholars who read Sweetie as a grotesque comedy: Collins, 2002; Haslem, 1999; Murray, 1999; Saccoccia, 1999.} Campion’s subsequent films, especially The Piano, have been identified by scholars as women’s films or Gothic romances, harking back to the melodramatic subgenres of Hollywood filmmaking in the 1940s.\footnote{The following critics theorists Campion’s films as melodramas, women’s films or Gothic romances, see Bell, 1995; Gillett, 2004; Polan, 2001; Smelik, 1998.} Indeed, Sue Gillett asserts that “women’s melodrama [is] the genre which perhaps comes closest to generally describing Campion’s films” (2004: 11). Gillett’s observation that Sweetie presents us with “the spectacle of female suffering” (2004: 12) invites a consideration of Campion’s first feature film from the perspective of melodrama, whose codes and conventions have long been employed in the cinematic depiction of a woman’s pain and suffering (Williams, 1998: 45-48). In its portrayal of family conflict and trauma, the melodrama of affliction calls upon us to empathise with the victims of patriarchy.\footnote{See my discussion in the previous chapter of melodrama’s interest in the victims of patriarchy, as argued by Laura Mulvey (1989) and Robert Lang (1989).} I will argue that, despite the confronting aspects of her rebellious behaviour, Sweetie can be viewed as an empathetic victim.

To support this argument, I will compare Sweetie with the headstrong character of Marylee Hadley in Written on the Wind as an example of the unruly woman in melodrama, a character who is both rebel against and victim of patriarchy. This film has served as an exemplary text in melodrama scholarship since the 1970s, grounding the critical discourse and establishing the codes and conventions of the melodramatic mode in cinema.\footnote{The following essays are just a sample of the scholarship on Written on the Wind, from three decades, that attests to its canonical status: Elsaesser, 1995 (originally published 1972); Mulvey, 1989 (originally published 1977); Gledhill, 1985; Orr, 1991; Klinger, 1994; Mulvey, 1998.} Written on the Wind portrays family dysfunction and conflict – a recurring theme in the melodrama of affliction – as the central focus of dramatic incident. Melodrama exposes and makes visible the contradictions in patriarchal ideology. As I discussed in the previous chapter, “ideological conflict is actually the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama” (Mulvey, 1989, 39) and this conflict is usually enacted within the family. To establish Sweetie’s engagement with the codes and conventions of melodrama, I will compare the scene
of Sweetie’s final conflict with Gordon with the conflict between Marylee and her father, Jasper (Robert Keith), in *Written on the Wind*. These scenes demonstrate the melodramatic conflict that is a consequence of the unruly woman’s behaviour.\(^{152}\)

In comparing a late-twentieth century Australian art-house film with a Hollywood studio melodrama from the 1950s, I acknowledge the limitations of my methodology. It is important to be aware of the vastly different sociohistorical and industrial contexts that produced these two films. It is equally valid, however, to be attentive to the generic expectations and conventions that inform the portrayal of family conflict and the figure of the unruly woman in the cinema. The Hollywood studio-produced melodramas of the 1950s codified the cinematic representation of family dysfunction and ideological conflict, and I have selected *Written on the Wind* on the basis of its critical reputation as an iconic example of that codification. *Written on the Wind* and *Sweetie* are also fitting counterparts in their portrayal of women who refuse to conform to patriarchal ideology’s narrow gender expectations and whose struggle for independence must be fought in the domestic sphere, the home of melodrama. It is this melodramatic tradition that underscores the treatment of Sweetie’s unruliness and, by extension, her mental illness, making Campion’s film exemplary of the melodrama of affliction’s portrayal of the family home as the site of conflict and trauma.

*Written on the Wind* depicts the dramatic conflict between a defiant daughter and her widowed father, who vainly tries to exercise his authority over this independent, sexually promiscuous figure. Similarly, in *Sweetie*, Gordon tries to coax, persuade and physically force Sweetie to pay heed to his authority, when he demands that she let young Clayton (Andre Pataczek) down from the tree house. In both films, the conflict is caused by the daughter’s rejection of patriarchal authority and control. The sites of these daughter-father conflicts are charged with symbolic significance: in *Written on the Wind*, the climax of this conflict is staged on a grand staircase. In the previous chapter, I examined the staircase as a common site of family conflict and traumatic event in melodrama, serving as visual orchestration for

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\(^{152}\) My methodology of employing close textual analysis to elucidate *Sweetie’s* engagement with melodrama is supported by Dana Polan’s recent study of Jane Campion’s films. Polan argues strongly for, and his work demonstrates, the value of “close analysis as it enables us to be precise about those traits that [are] activated by its users” in establishing genre classifications (2001: 26).
emotional effect and dramatic climax (Elsaesser, 1995: 370-371). In *Sweetie*, this staging of family conflict on a vertical axis is maintained through the substitution of a ladder for a staircase. Both scenes are characterised by the unruly behaviour of the daughter – manifesting as sexual assertiveness and a naked tantrum, respectively – and an impotent, ineffectual response from the father. Each patriarch endeavours to contain the conflict (and the daughter) within the domestic sphere, but the public display of the daughter’s unruliness is a constant threat. Despite the patriarchs’ efforts at containment, each conflict escalates and results, ultimately, in death.

In *Written on the Wind*, diegetic music from a record player is used to heighten the melodrama of the conflict between Marylee and her father, Jasper. In this scene, no words are exchanged between the two antagonists. Indeed, they are not even in the same room. But Sirk’s use of music and cross-cutting in this scene, extensively analysed by several theorists,\(^{153}\) establishes an emotional connection across two physically separate spaces. Jasper has just been confessing to Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) that he is a failure (“I failed them all … my wife, my brother Joe, both my children”) when a police car pulls up in the driveway, carrying Marylee and a petrol station attendant. As Marylee saunters inside and climbs the stairs to her bedroom, indulgently trailing her fur coat behind her, Jasper questions the attendant, who informs him that Marylee picked him up and took him to a motel: “your daughter’s a tramp, mister”. At this point, Jasper reaches for his gun, kept in the desk drawer, but Mitch restrains him. A close up on the gun shows Jasper’s hand go limp, before he collapses into his chair. While Jasper slumps, defeated, beneath his own imposing portrait, Mitch takes charge and has the attendant released, on the condition he keep quiet about his encounter with Marylee. The public sphere has already been implicated in this domestic conflict, with the police bringing Marylee home and the attendant telling Jasper that the way Marylee “operates” is common knowledge. As the head of a very rich and powerful family, Jasper struggles to contain the excessive behaviour of his alcoholic son and promiscuous daughter, both given to public displays of their afflictions. After Mitch dismisses the attendant and the police, Jasper summons his strength to confront Marylee.

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Meanwhile, Marylee watches the departure of the police and the attendant from her upstairs bedroom window, then lights a cigarette, picks up a framed photo of Mitch, her unrequited love, and puts on a jazz record at high volume. As the bongo drums and trumpet start up, Marylee dances with Mitch’s photo in her arms. She then places the photo of Mitch on a shelf while she begins to undress in front of ‘him’. At this point, Sirk begins crosscutting between Jasper gradually climbing the large, spiral staircase and Marylee stripping down to her black underwear, then donning a flame-coloured negligee. While initially the volume of the jazz music is altered to reflect its diegetic location, so that when Jasper and Mitch are in the study downstairs the music is faint, once the crosscutting begins between Marylee’s bedroom and the staircase, the music remains at the same volume, further connecting the two spaces. The contrast could not be greater between Jasper’s heavy-hearted footsteps making their steady ascent and Marylee’s feverish dancing, with her swirling negligee and kicking legs. A close up of Jasper’s hand shows him losing his grip on the banister and he tumbles backwards down the stairs, to the lurid accompaniment of blaring trumpets. While Mitch rushes to the bottom of the stairs to Jasper’s aid and Jasper’s daughter-in-law Lucy (Lauren Bacall) looks down with horror from above, Marylee flops onto a chair, kicking up her heels with an expression of pure ecstasy on her face.

The combination of crosscutting and continuous soundtrack conveys conflict between father and daughter even when these two characters occupy physically separate spaces. The implication that Marylee’s unruliness – her sexual display and self-indulgence – caused her father’s death is made explicit by her brother Kyle in the following scene: “me and my darling sister, we pushed Dad down the stairs”.

In Frank Skinner’s score for the film, Marylee is associated with various styles of jazz music, such as the Afro-Cuban influence (particularly the percussion) in this recording, which would have carried exotic connotations for a 1950s North American audience. In her first scene, the image of Marylee seated at the wheel of her red convertible is accompanied by a bluesy saxophone and piano bass line. This becomes her signature tune, a musical motif with sultry connotations that is not associated with any other character. The film’s use of these jazz styles draws upon their association with nightclubs and, by implication, sexual activity. Jazz thereby heightens the presentation of Marylee as a sexually active character and its presence in the film score supports Klinger’s reading of *Written on the Wind* as appealing to ‘adult’ entertainment values.

Indeed, in Criterion Collection’s DVD release of *Written on the Wind* (2001, NTSC), this scene is referred to by the chapter title “Dance of Death”!

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154 Klinger identifies this record as “a jazz rendition of ‘Temptation’” (1994: 46). Throughout Frank Skinner’s score for the film, Marylee is associated with various styles of jazz music, such as the Afro-Cuban influence (particularly the percussion) in this recording, which would have carried exotic connotations for a 1950s North American audience. In her first scene, the image of Marylee seated at the wheel of her red convertible is accompanied by a bluesy saxophone and piano bass line. This becomes her signature tune, a musical motif with sultry connotations that is not associated with any other character. The film’s use of these jazz styles draws upon their association with nightclubs and, by implication, sexual activity. Jazz thereby heightens the presentation of Marylee as a sexually active character and its presence in the film score supports Klinger’s reading of *Written on the Wind* as appealing to ‘adult’ entertainment values.

155 Indeed, in Criterion Collection’s DVD release of *Written on the Wind* (2001, NTSC), this scene is referred to by the chapter title “Dance of Death”!
Written on the Wind, the daughter’s unruliness constitutes a physical assault upon the parent. The intimation that injury and death are direct consequences of the daughter’s unruliness is forcefully played out in Sweetie. In contrast with the scene in Written on the Wind, the final conflict between Sweetie and Gordon makes no use of music. While the scene takes place outside, it remains within the domain of the family home: the backyard, a potent site of family conflict in several Australian films. As with the Hadleys, the public sphere threatens to intrude on this domestic conflict and the patriarch is determined to keep things in the family. Sweetie has moved into her tree house – her “palace” – and refuses to come down, demanding that Gordon bring her meals, which he obediently does, and that Clayton, Kay’s ten-year-old neighbour, be brought over to see her palace. When Kay arrives with Clayton, Sweetie has stripped off her clothes and painted herself black. She is yelling obscenities, particularly at Gordon (calling him “an arsehole” and “a bastard”), which attracts the attention of the neighbours. Sweetie is making a very public spectacle of herself, like Marylee who publicly flaunts her sexual power. While Kay and Flo try to convince Gordon to call the police or the fire brigade to get Sweetie down, Clayton manages to sneak up the ladder to Sweetie’s tree house. When Kay, Flo and Gordon rush outside to call him down, Clayton and Sweetie push away the ladder and assault the family with food scraps. As Gordon replaces the ladder and starts to climb up, Sweetie farts in his face.

Sweetie’s naked, screaming, flatulent body represents the grotesque, abject expression of unruliness, which is only subterranean in Marylee’s aggressive sexuality. But like Marylee, Sweetie challenges patriarchal authority and control.

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156 See, for example, the symbolic significance of the scorched earth and Hills Hoist in the Heslop backyard, after Muriel’s mother torched the lawn before committing suicide because her son refused to mow it, in Muriel’s Wedding (P. J. Hogan, 1994). The backyard is often the site where the patriarch attempts to assert control over female family members who dare to challenge his authority. In addition to Gordon’s failed attempt in Sweetie, consider the scenes of conflict in Shine between Peter Helfgott and his daughter Margaret (Rebecca Gooden), and in The Boys (Rowan Woods, 1998) between Brett (David Wenham) and his girlfriend Michelle (Toni Collette), where he has violent sex with her in the backyard laundry. I am grateful to Patrick Porter for pointing out the symbolic significance of the backyard in Australian family melodramas and his suggestion that this may serve as a marker of national difference from the staircases and interiors of American family melodramas.

157 In the opening scene of Sweetie, Kay’s voice-over tells us: “Dad built a palace in the branches, she was the princess, it was her tree”. Kay’s voice-over does not appear in Lee and Campion’s published screenplay (1991).

158 Anneke Smelik also reads Sweetie as abject (1998: 147).
When Gordon approaches the tree house brandishing the swimming pool leaf skimmer, Sweetie simply turns this ineffective weapon back onto its bearer, as she grabs hold of it, forcing Gordon to lose his footing on the ladder and dangle precariously while she ties the skimmer to the tree house. Sweetie and Clayton then start jumping up and down on the rickety floor of the tree house, oblivious to the danger as the wooden boards start to give way. Unlike the staircase tumble of Jasper Hadley, the collapse of Sweetie’s tree house takes place off-screen. We hear the groan of collapsing timber and the hysterical screams but the camera shows Kay fumbling with a twisted garden hose. The camera then reveals the devastation Sweetie has caused: Flo and Gordon are on the ground, both bloodied and injured, while Clayton has miraculously managed to hang on to the tree. Sweetie’s carnivalesque body is buried amongst broken planks of wood, her face marked by a bleeding wound on her forehead. She can only utter “Dad ... Dad...” before she convulses and blood oozes from her mouth. Despite Kay’s best efforts at resuscitation and her pleas to call someone, Flo and Gordon look on, unmoved, while their daughter dies before them.

Once again, unruliness has resulted in injury and death, but this time the unruly woman has brought about her own destruction. In contrast with Marylee, Sweetie’s unruliness is so extreme that self-destruction seems the inevitable result of her rebellion. Her psychopathology is such that the only alternative would appear to be medical treatment and institutionalisation, given the failure of the domestic sphere to contain her. While Sweetie’s death serves as the ultimate confinement of her unruliness, it also implicates the patriarchal authority that drove her to such extremes. What is apparent in these two scenes of family conflict is that the patriarchal figure is ineffective in dealing with the daughter’s unruliness. The failure of patriarchal control is symbolised by both daughters being at the top of the staircase/ladder, with the parent below them, in a metaphorical alignment of height with power and authority (Carroll, 1991: 191). The impotent patriarch of Jasper Hadley, disarmed by his surrogate son Mitch and unable to control his own daughter despite his vast economical power, finds his contemporary incarnation in Gordon, who cannot even admit his own failure and seek help from outside the family, which might have prevented the catastrophic outcome of this conflict. Gordon’s stubbornness in his refusal to call the police or the fire brigade finds its most
damning expression in his tragic immovability while Sweetie lies dying before him. The final shot of Sweetie’s parents standing by, passive and unmoved while Kay attempts to resuscitate her sister, evokes the moralising of the final tableau of stage melodrama, “whose picture speaks more powerfully than words” (Williams, 1998, 52). Sweetie’s last words (“Dad…Dad…”) are ambiguous – they may constitute a plea for help, an apology, or a laying of blame against the father who abused her – but combined with the impotent postures of Flo and Gordon, they suggest a degree of parental responsibility for Sweetie’s unruliness.

This eerie calmness of this concluding tableau, after the dramatic conflict that precedes it, reveals melodrama’s capacity for social critique, which it achieves via the spectator’s emotional engagement and identification with the dilemmas and conflicts played out on screen. Mulvey describes this spectatorial engagement as “a dizzy satisfaction”, which emerges from a recognition of the ideological contradiction that is melodrama’s manifest, not latent, content (1989: 39). The spectator’s empathy with the victim of patriarchy is a key part of this emotional and critical response, which Williams identifies as pathos’ dialectic of emotion and thought: “For unlike tragedy, melodrama does not reconcile its audience to an inevitable suffering, […] the female hero often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions “(Williams, 1998: 47). At the same time that we emotionally identify with Sweetie’s sense of abandonment by her parents, particularly her father, we are critical of the ideological pressures that lead families to hurt one another and the fatal conflicts that are the result of lives lived under patriarchy.

The unruly woman as a figure of empathy

The unruly woman, as I established in the previous chapter and illustrated above, is a figure of rebellion against an unjust order, and the melodrama of affliction critiques patriarchal authority through its empathetic portrayals of unruliness. While the portrayals of Marylee and Sweetie evoke an ambivalent response in the audience – a mixture of horror and delight at the spectacles of chaos these women cause – both films offer moments within their narratives that reveal these women are as much

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159 I briefly discussed the tableau of stage melodrama in Chapter Six in relation to moral legibility.
victims as they are vamps or villains. In her first scene in *Written on the Wind*, Marylee is portrayed as a lustful tramp, chatting up a lower-class working man in a bar; watching with evident delight as her brother and Mitch fight this man to defend her honour; then speaking boldly about her sexual desires for Mitch. Soon after, we see a very different Marylee: she has swapped her bright pink dress, with its daring décolletage, for wholesome jeans and a checked shirt. This scene offers us privileged access to Marylee’s private reverie, her recollection of childhood, as she sits by the lake, a site of lost innocence that she yearns to return to. In an aural flashback, we hear her memories of childish conversations with Mitch about love and marriage. Demonstrating the psychological insight accorded the flashback in classical narrative cinema, this scene provides an explanation for what motivates Marylee to behave the way she does: her (sexual) frustration at her unrequited love for Mitch Wayne. While in her first scene at the lower-class bar “Marylee’s sexuality is made to stand for the decadence of the affluent classes”, in this scene by the river “we identify with the legitimacy of her sexual needs” (Orr, 1991: 383). This is a crucial moment when the film invites us to empathise with Marylee.

Towards the end of *Written on the Wind*, we have another empathetic moment, which finds its parallel decades later in *Sweetie*. These scenes reveal the unruly woman’s vulnerability and they take place within the family home: when Sweetie is left behind while Gordon, Kay and Louis drive to the outback, having fallen for her father’s lie that Bob is on the phone, and when Marylee is left alone in the Hadley mansion after the death of her brother Kyle and the departure of the romantic couple, Mitch and Lucy. Both women, abandoned by their families, look mournfully out the window at the departing cars, and then collapse under the weight of their loneliness and isolation: Sweetie crying and whimpering like a child, Marylee tearfully cradling the model oil derrick against her forehead. These are profoundly affective moments for the audience that counter the negative feelings we may have had for the characters in earlier scenes. These moments remind us that, despite the suffering and the trouble she may cause, all too often it is the unruly woman who suffers most: “melodrama thus insists that women’s deviance from the

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160 Maureen Turim analyses the flashback as representing subjective thought and offering the past as explanation and justification for a character’s psychology (1989: 145).
norms of our culture can lead only to isolation and tears, their pleasures can come only in pain, and the stories of their rebellion can be the occasions only of grief” (Rowe, 1995b: 112-113).161

Despite Rowe’s bleak view of its narrative outcomes for women, melodrama produces a critique of patriarchy that emerges from our emotional engagement with its victims. This is the dialectic of emotion and thought, identified by Williams, at the heart of the spectatorial response of pathos (1998: 47-48). As I have argued throughout this thesis, melodrama’s social critique is predicated upon our empathy with its victimised protagonists. Of all the protagonists of the melodramas of affliction I have examined, Sweetie is the most difficult figure to empathise with. This is largely due to Campion’s trademark ambiguity, which eschews clear explanations and character motivations, and thereby destabilises the moral legibility of the melodrama of affliction. The final, poignant image of Sweetie only compounds the moral illegibility of the relationship between Gordon and Sweetie, with its unresolved implication of incest. As Gordon wanders through the backyard, he imagines Sweetie as a child, performing under the willow tree. Dressed in a pink fairy costume, she sings a love song straight to the camera, which stands in for Gordon’s point of view – “love me with all of your heart, as I love you”. Rather than a bullying patriarch like Peter Helfgott or an abusive parent like Bubby’s Mom, Gordon is presented as a tragic, pitiful man, trapped in his memories of Sweetie as a figure of innocence, not unruliness. At the same time, we cannot help but feel for the lost innocence of Sweetie herself, performing a love song for her father. Eva Rueschmann also singles out this “poignant image of a younger and more innocent Sweetie”, arguing that the “coda to Campion’s debut film conveys the director’s strong empathy for the grotesque, pathetic Sweetie and her quest for love” (2000: 39). Despite the film’s resistance to the moral legibility of the melodrama of affliction, this final image affirms melodrama’s desire to a return to the place of innocence (Williams, 1998: 65) – in Sweetie’s case, the performative space of the backyard. Our potential for an empathic response to Sweetie, and her unruly ‘sister’ Marylee, is tied

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161 Cf. Orr who proposes an alternative reading of Marylee’s final scene: “the power represented by the object in her hands [the model oil derrick] is certainly very real” (1991: 386).
to these lost sites of childhood innocence, the river (*Written on the Wind*) and the backyard (*Sweetie*).

Through her death, Sweetie unwittingly brings peace and order to her family. The resolution of this family conflict meets the demands of melodrama, which dictate that the survival of the family unit and the acquisition of individual identity are contingent upon struggle and sacrifice (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 193). After surviving the ordeal of Sweetie’s invasion of her home, Kay finds a place in which she can be “herself” and “at home” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 193), while Sweetie’s self-sacrifice secures Flo and Gordon’s marriage – “the survival of the family unit” (Nowell-Smith, 1985: 193) – and relieves the family of the ‘monster’ it helped create. *Sweetie* is testimony to the ideological demands of patriarchy’s limited gender roles, which are laid bare by melodrama. The narrative closure achieved by Sweetie’s death renders this ideological contradiction in poignant terms; if the female protagonist in melodrama is incapable of resuming or assuming the woman’s role as reproducer and nurturer, “then she must stand aside, disappear, not be” (Hayward, 2000: 222).

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*Sweetie* is regarded as one of Campion’s most original works, a definitive expression of her ‘off-centred’ aesthetic practice and her narrative interest in the strangeness of everyday life (Haslem, 1999; Murray, 1999; Polan, 2001: 57-59). While reading her first feature film as a grotesque comedy – as many theorists do – illuminates these characteristics, an analysis from the neglected perspective of melodrama deepens our understanding of *Sweetie’s* assault upon patriarchal authority and Campion’s confronting portrayal of family dysfunction. In this chapter, I demonstrated the presence of the unruly woman in the melodrama of affliction’s portrayal of family conflict and trauma, and argued that Campion’s portrait of family dysfunction shares resonances with the family melodrama of the 1950s, exemplified by *Written on the Wind*.162 By making a spectacle of herself, the unruly woman makes visible the familiar dilemmas of femininity, dilemmas we

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162 There is further scope to explore the idea that *Sweetie’s* generic hybridity, a common characteristic of contemporary Australian cinema (O’Regan, 1996: 237-238), makes Campion’s film generically ‘unruly’, but this exploration belongs in another thesis.
recognise. This act of recognition lays the foundations for our response of empathy (Plantinga, 1997: 375). Through her excessive behaviour and appearance, Sweetie reveals the cracks within the suburban home and the subterranean forces that threaten to uproot patriarchal authority in the melodrama of affliction.

As Campion’s film illustrates, the unruly woman is a powerful device in the dramatisation of family conflict. She is a figure of both excess and empathy. Sweetie reveals the precarious nature of the unruly woman in the patriarchal family, demonstrating both the power and the vulnerability of this confronting figure. She is presented as the melodramatic victim of a dysfunctional family, particularly her father, and the film implies she has experienced the trauma of sexual abuse. Sweetie is also portrayed as a destructive force, comically raging against suburbia and the nuclear family, but she is only able to liberate herself (and her sister) from family conflict through death. While her rage and rebellion may ultimately be contained by the conventions of narrative resolution and conservative gender ideologies, the unruly woman brings to the surface the repressed traumas and ideological conflicts of the patriarchal family. Therein lie the satisfactions of melodrama and its spectacular enactments of family conflict and trauma. As spectators, we empathise with the unruly woman’s protest against patriarchal authority and her search for identity within patriarchy’s narrowly-defined gender roles.
Conclusion
Concluding Diagnosis

In this thesis, I introduced the concept of the melodrama of affliction as a key intervention in debates concerning the representation of mental illness in cinema and as a new way of reading six recent films from Australia and New Zealand: *Shine, Angel Baby, Heavenly Creatures, An Angel at My Table, Bad Boy Bubby* and *Sweetie*. The melodrama of affliction is defined by four features of the melodramatic mode: the externalisation of the internal state; the critical engagement with stereotypes; moral legibility; and family conflict and trauma. I identified these features through a detailed review of melodrama scholarship since the 1970s, which surveyed the evolution of the melodramatic mode from the stage and early cinema, through the Hollywood studio era, to the films of the 1990s. I illustrated each feature of the melodrama of affliction through close scene analyses of the films under investigation. I argued that the melodrama of affliction employs the style and themes of the melodramatic mode to represent mental illness from the perspective of the afflicted protagonist. Combining the insights of cognitive film theorists with Linda Williams’ detailed analysis of melodrama’s emotional affect, I presented a melodrama-based theory of empathy. I concluded that, through its engagement with melodrama’s emotional appeal, the melodrama of affliction evokes the audience’s empathy for the mentally ill protagonist, who is presented as the virtuous victim-hero as a result of their suffering.

While these six films demonstrate popular culture’s ongoing fascination with depictions of madness, they also contribute something new to the legacy of mental illness on film: they invite the audience to feel with the mentally ill character, rather than laugh at or fear them. For the melodrama of affliction, there is no ‘us-and-them’ when it comes to mental illness; we are invited to put ourselves in the afflicted protagonist’s shoes, to share their emotions and empathise with their plight, to recognise our common humanity. The melodrama of affliction demonstrates cinema’s capacity to remove viewers from their own experience and to provide detailed access to the perspective of others, which is the foundation of empathic understanding (Flory, 2006: 68 & 75). As Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) tells his
daughter Scout (Mary Badham) in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962), “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, till you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it”. This is the insight that empathy offers us and it is a complex emotional response, one that is elicited by the particular stylistic devices and narrative themes of melodrama.

I acknowledge that not every one of the films examined here demonstrates each stylistic and thematic feature of the melodrama of affliction to the same extent. For example, *Angel Baby* avoids reading its characters in Manichaeian terms of good and evil; there are no abusive parents, cruel teachers or villainous doctors in this sensitive portrayal of schizophrenia as an affliction that also affects those closest to the patient (namely, Harry’s brother, his wife and son). Similarly, *Sweetie* problematises the moral legibility of its melodramatic narrative, while presenting one of the most extreme dramatisations of family conflict. By contrast, this feature of family conflict and trauma is only referenced obliquely in Kate’s back-story in *Angel Baby* and not actually depicted on screen. These examples suggest that certain features of the melodrama of affliction may be diminished or remain undeveloped in favour of heightening others – for example, *Angel Baby’s* extensive engagement with externalising the internal, in its depiction of Harry’s psychotic episode after he withdraws from his medication then loses his job, and Kate’s breakdown that leads to her hospitalisation. *Angel Baby* relies heavily upon this stylistic feature of the melodrama of affliction in order to reflect the characters’ experience of living with schizophrenia, a psychotic disorder characterised by hallucinations and delusions. As psychiatrists Sidney Bloch and Bruce S. Singh observe, “we do not consider psychotic people to be like ourselves” (1997: 159). Given the stigma and sinister connotations still attached to the term ‘schizophrenia’ (Bloch and Singh, 1997: 166 & 167), the makers of *Angel Baby* have to work hard to encourage the audience to emotionally identify with Harry and Kate, rather than distance themselves from their plight. By externalising Harry and Kate’s internal states through melodramatic style, *Angel Baby* provides valuable insight into the thinking, perception and emotional state of a person afflicted with schizophrenia. This example illustrates how each feature of the melodrama of affliction serves to enhance the film’s call to empathy. As I have reiterated throughout this thesis, the experience of empathy is not necessarily
pleasant and we may prefer not to identify with a character in a delusional state, particularly when they are scared or angry. Despite this reluctance on the part of the viewer, melodrama’s stylistic devices can be employed to position us inside the sensory headspace of the afflicted character – as Angel Baby powerfully illustrates – thereby making their psychological state accessible and, more importantly, understandable. Thus the melodrama of affliction elicits our empathy for a character whose outlooks and experiences – as Alex Neill has suggested (1996: 177-178) – may differ from ours and whose feelings may be foreign to us. This empathic response is crucial to melodrama’s ability to move us to pathos for victims of psychological and social forces beyond their control.

While I have not set out to engage with issues of national cinema and national identity in this thesis, it would seem appropriate to consider the implications of my argument for debates about Australian and New Zealand cinema and the industries’ relationship with Hollywood. In arguing that these six Australian and New Zealand films are melodramas of affliction, I am not presenting melodrama as a formula for how Australian and New Zealand films should be read, or indeed made. I offered examples of Hollywood melodramas throughout this thesis not as prescriptive models but as established melodramatic texts that help elucidate and demonstrate the melodramatic features I have identified in these Australian and New Zealand films. Reading Sweetie as melodrama goes against the grain of its critical reception as art cinema and grotesque comedy. Consequently, throughout this thesis I referred to canonical melodramas, such as Written on the Wind, to illustrate points of melodramatic style and theme, and to support my argument that these Australian and New Zealand films draw upon and engage with the melodramatic mode. This is not to suggest that Sweetie imitates or replicates Sirk’s film; rather, these comparisons reveal “the persistence of melodrama” (Elsaesser, 1995: 354) across decades, across nations, and across industrial contexts. The melodramatic mode persists because of its unique power to move us to pathos, to draw us into emotional identification with the victimised protagonist (Williams, 1998: 43). Only melodrama can move us to tears in response to a son’s grief over his lost paternal or maternal bond – as in Shine and Bad Boy Bubby respectively – despite our greater critical awareness that the lost parent is also the agent of the son’s abuse. This is the complex dialectic of emotion
Reviewing the Melodrama of Affliction

and thought – or empathy and critique – that defines melodramatic pathos (Williams, 1998: 46-47).

In this thesis, I examined the aesthetic appeal and affective power of melodrama for narrating stories of mental illness. While acknowledging the canonical status of several Hollywood melodramas, I demonstrated that melodrama is not the province of American cinema alone. If melodrama is “the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures”, as Linda Williams asserts (1998: 42), what are the implications when other national cinemas adopt this mode for their own storytelling? Williams argues strongly for melodrama as “a peculiarly democratic and American form” (1998: 42), “the typical form of American popular narrative in literature, stage, film, and television” (1998: 50). By contrast, Christine Gledhill suggests that the melodramatic mode is capable of addressing a diversity of audiences, thereby facilitating an international exchange of melodrama’s cultural products: “melodrama constructs a version of the ‘popular’ capable of producing recognition for a range of audiences from difference classes, localities, and national groupings” (1999: 230). In considering these two positions regarding melodrama’s ‘national identity’, I would argue that the presence of melodrama in Australian and New Zealand cinema is in fact characteristic of the melodramatic mode, which, as Gledhill argues, is “adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures” (1999: 229). This adaptability is evident in the application of Peter Brooks’ study of melodrama on the French stage and in the English novel to theories of melodrama in American cinema. In this thesis, I demonstrated the adaptability of the melodramatic mode across the diverse genres of these Australian and New Zealand films and its particular ability to portray mental illness with empathy. Given the ongoing marginalisation of the mentally ill in society, melodrama is a powerful ally in representing mental illness from the afflicted character’s physical and emotional point of view. The melodrama of affliction offers filmmakers a compelling and emotionally satisfying solution to the artistic challenge of portraying mental illness on screen.

I also presented a new perspective on the issue of cinema’s representations of mental illness, one that sought to investigate and understand these films as complex artistic texts worthy of close analysis, rather than simply as accurate or inaccurate.
presentations of psychiatric conditions and their symptoms. As Adam Phillips argues, “the mad have been essential to Western drama” (2006: 36): “‘Sanity’ … has always found it difficult to match the infernal dramas and melodramas of madness” (Phillips, 2006: 34). If psychiatrists and medical scholars are concerned about the ways in which mental illness is portrayed, they should endeavour to understand both the attractions and limitations of mental illness as dramatic subject matter for narrative cinema. Mental illness has long been “a shared preoccupation, and a site of conflict for artists and scientists” (Phillips, 2006: 36). Only a few medical scholars, such as Otto Wahl (1995) and Claire Wilson and colleagues (1999a & 1999b), have considered the narrative and stylistic demands that shape the portrayal of mental illness in fictional film and television. The majority of articles in scientific journals have concluded (rather simplistically) that films rely upon stereotypes to portray mental illness. I expanded upon this finding, by investigating why films use stereotypes of mental illness. Stereotypical discourse is an inescapable part of our ambivalence towards the idea that we, too, may be prone to madness. Rather than dismiss the discursive power of stereotypes, the melodrama of affliction engages with some of the most common stereotypes of mental illness in order to satisfy melodramatic imperatives and to draw the audience into an emotionally affective critique of society’s attitudes towards mental illness.

My concept of the melodrama of affliction offers new insights into the portrayal of mental illness in film and demonstrates the persistence of melodrama in contemporary cinema. More significantly, the melodrama of affliction draws our attention to melodrama’s ability to elicit empathy, which is fundamental to the mode’s emotional affect. By harnessing the emotional appeal of melodrama’s style and themes, the melodrama of affliction evokes an empathic response from the spectator towards the afflicted protagonist, thereby bridging the gap between the mentally ill and ‘the rest of us’.
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All That Heaven Allows  
*Douglas Sirk, 1955*

*Amadeus*  
*Milos Forman, 1984*

*American Psycho*  
*Mary Harron, 2000*

*Analyze This*  
*Harold Ramis, 1999*

*An Angel at My Table*  
*Jane Campion, 1990*

*Angel Baby*  
*Michael Rymer, 1995*

*Arsenic and Old Lace*  
*Frank Capra, 1944*

*As Good As It Gets*  
*James L. Brooks, 1997*

*Bad Boy Bubby*  
*Rolf de Heer, 1993*

*Bad Taste*  
*Peter Jackson, 1987*

*A Beautiful Mind*  
*Ron Howard, 2001*

*Being There*  
*Hal Ashby, 1979*

*Big*  
*Penny Marshall, 1988*

*Bigger Than Life*  
*Nicholas Ray, 1956*

*The Boys*  
*Rowan Woods, 1998*

*Braindead*  
*Peter Jackson, 1992*

*Calamity Jane*  
*David Butler, 1953*

*Camille Claudel*  
*Bruno Nuyttten, 1988*

*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*  
*Robert Wiene, 1921*

*Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey by Sam Neill*  
*Sam Neill & Judy Rymer, 1995*

*The Cobweb*  
*Vincente Minnelli, 1955*

*Cosi*  
*Mark Joffe, 1996*

*Crocodile Dundee*  
*Peter Faiman, 1986*

*Dead Calm*  
*Phillip Noyce, 1989*

*Donnie Darko*  
*Richard Kelly, 2001*

*The Double Life of Veronique*  
*Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991*

*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*  
*Werner Herzog, 1974*

*The Exorcist*  
*William Friedkin, 1973*
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<td>Frederick Keeve, 2002</td>
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<td>Giant</td>
<td>George Stevens, 1956</td>
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<td>A Girl’s Own Story</td>
<td>Jane Campion, 1984</td>
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<td>Halloween</td>
<td>John Carpenter, 1978</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Harvey</td>
<td>Henry Koster, 1950</td>
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<td>Heavenly Creatures</td>
<td>Peter Jackson, 1994</td>
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<td>Douglas Sirk, 1959</td>
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<td>Bernard Rose, 1994</td>
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<td>Jerzy Domaradzki, 1995</td>
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Marnie
Mildred Pierce
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Misery
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Návrat Idiota  (Return of the Idiot)
Now, Voyager
Nuts
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
Passionless Moments
Peel
Peeping Tom
Philadelphia
The Piano
Pollock
Portrait: Jane Campion & The Portrait of a Lady
The Portrait of a Lady
Possessed
Pretty Woman
Psycho
Raging Bull
Rain Man
Rambo: First Blood Part II
Random Harvest
Rebel without a Cause
Regeneration
Rope
Schindler’s List
Se7en

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Ian Barry, 1989
Rob Reiner, 1990
Patty Jenkins, 2003
P. J. Hogan, 1994
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Milos Forman, 1975
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Jane Campion, 1982
Michael Powell, 1960
Jonathan Demme, 1993
Jane Campion, 1993
Ed Harris, 2000
Peter Long & Kate Ellis, 1996
Jane Campion, 1996
Curtis Bernhardt, 1947
Garry Marshall, 1990
Alfred Hitchcock, 1960
Martin Scorsese, 1980
Barry Levinson, 1988
George P. Cosmatos, 1985
Mervyn LeRoy, 1942
Nicholas Ray, 1955
Raoul Walsh, 1916
Alfred Hitchcock, 1948
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<td>Anatole Litvak</td>
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<td>Stranger on the Third Floor</td>
<td>Boris Ingster</td>
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HOPGOOD, FINCINA ELIZABETH

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