

**DRAMATIC TELEVISION SERIALITY,
THE MELODRAMATIC MODE,
AND EMOTIONS**

My paper considers seriality in contemporary American television dramas in terms of two recent movements that are having considerable impact on both cultural theory and film/television studies. The first influential movement is the turn to affect which, I have argued, ignores the productivity of emotionality (Pribram 2016; 2014). As defined by its theorists, affect exists as non-conscious, autonomic, bodily sensation while emotions refer to experiences that have passed through sociocultural processes. The second significant movement concerns arguments that contemporary television serials belong to melodrama as a larger narrative mode, including legal shows, police and detective programs, and medical series, instead of more traditionally assumed narrow genres, such as soap operas (Williams 2014; 2009).

Affect theory has developed, in part, as a rejection of the dominance of signification, discourse, and ideology over the past decades, including narrative processes (Massumi 2002). While affect theory has sidelined the study of emotions by largely reducing them to conscious, cognitive, articulated phenomena, emotions do not necessarily take shape as either conscious awareness or articulation. Further, affect theory has tended to conflate articulation – “sociolinguistic fixing” – with the entirety of meaning (Massumi 28). Yet, non-linguistic systems of communication are meaningful in that they produce associations, representations, and narratives, even when they remain inarticulable. For example, Gledhill has argued that the purpose and pleasures of the narrative, audio-visual, and performative techniques of melodrama is to express the “forces, desires, fears which...operate in human life,” and for which we have “no other language” (1987, 31, 37).

The recent success of fully serial dramas has been regarded as a valuable development in television history.¹ While a number of scholars have acknowledged televisual seriality’s origins in soap operas, pulps, and other ‘low’ genres, they’ve also tended to minimize contemporary seriality’s links to the melodramatic narrative mode (Sconce, Mittell). Rather, their analyses focus on the structural, self-reflexive, and poetic qualities of ‘narrative complexity,’ rather than televisual seriality’s embeddedness in melodrama’s emotional content. Yet the specific traditions of melodrama, and its apparent emotional ‘excesses,’ enable us to retain a sense of characters and audience members as human subjects planted firmly in the difficulties and dilemmas of specific sociocultural contexts.

Buckley analyzes melodrama’s core aesthetic structure as based on movement from emotion to emotion, quite intentionally swinging among opposing or contrasting affects, resulting in continuous emotional events both portrayed on stage and evoked for audience members. Following Buckley’s argument that emotionality exists as melodrama’s most central and enduring feature, I consider

emotions as a key aesthetic device in dramatic television serials. Conceptualizing television seriality as part of melodrama's narrative mode provides an alternative to the dominance of characters drawn as psychologically-determined, autonomous individuals. Melodrama's characters manage to turn our attention, instead, to the social worlds in which those characters exist.

One of the motivations for the development of affect theory has been to counter the too-pat conceptualizations provided by discursive, psychoanalytical, and ideological theories in recent decades. The question is whether turning to emotions could address similar concerns without reduction to a largely neurobiological, autonomic, individuated version of human activity. The advantage of emotions, as both social and narrative phenomena, rests in their capacity to capture some of the most meaningful, most moving aspects of life, while retaining focus on culturally embedded beings.

¹ Notable recent American dramatic serials include *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *Lost*, *The Following*, *The Bridge*, *House of Cards*, *Dexter*, *Under the Dome*, *The Walking Dead*, *True Blood*, *Game of Thrones*, *Ray Donovan*, *The Affair*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Blind Spot*, and *Fargo*.

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