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SCENES OF FEELING:  
MUSIC AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE LIBERAL SUBJECT

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## ABSTRACT

“Scenes of Feeling: Music and the Imagination of the Liberal Subject” traces the aesthetic and political implications of the idea, prevalent in Western liberal cultures since the Enlightenment, that self-definition and social transformation occur as felt and visceral experiences. Since operas such as *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), but also as recently as films like *The King’s Speech* (2010), the endpoint of a narrative is imagined to be the moment when individual redemption and social repair converge in a scene saturated with music and feeling. I argue that the scene is a crucial aesthetic form for the liberal imagination, since it allows abstract values like self-determination and empathy to be represented in a fantasized zone of contact whose scale is visceral, bodily and intimate. Within this form, the genres can vary: different chapters explore scenic thinking in relation to romantic love, political transformation, and the aspiration to the presence of “living in the moment.”

Chapter 1 considers how feeling and expression acquired the normative burden of representing the truth of the self; it does so by tracing developments in operatic form and culminates in a reading of *The Marriage of Figaro*’s closing scene. Then, each of the subsequent chapters extends the analysis toward the present while also revisiting different facets of the *Figaro* case: Chapter 2 considers the relation between political knowledge and epiphany in two operas by Richard Wagner; Chapter 3 explores the epistemology of the soundtrack in Hollywood romantic comedy; and Chapter 4 addresses, in three films in different genres that star Colin Firth, the generality of the liberal scene in which a lyrical voice establishes the sound of a repaired social collectivity.

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## Introduction

### Music, Feeling, and the Political

#### Self-Evidence

This dissertation is about how feeling became centrally important for narratives of self-becoming in Western cultures. “Narratives of self-becoming” are narratives that end with the satisfying clarity of self-definition, but this definition can involve other people: for instance, in the idea that one becomes whole in the two-as-one fusion of romantic love, or the idea that political transformations will take place when people come together as one, their differences dissolved by heartfelt speech and mutual empathic recognitions of one another’s feeling.<sup>1</sup> While feeling has been a formal endpoint in stories of human life since at least Aristotle, who called happiness the highest good and “that which all things aim at,”<sup>2</sup> this dissertation focuses on the concept of feeling that emerged with the idea of the liberal subject: the inherently free and self-determined individual that replaced, in the social and ideological reformulations of the Enlightenment, the individual whose existence was determined by birth into a monarchal order.

Within contemporary individualist, capitalist, and neoliberal contexts, feeling is often taken to impart crucial and self-evident knowledge, as in tautological phrases like “you just know it when you feel it,” or “do what you love, love what you do.” That is, feeling validates an event or a circumstance to the extent that it reflects something inner and felt. At the same time, discovering the self-evident *rightness* of romantic feeling or passionate work marks a narrative

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<sup>1</sup> On love’s “two-as-one” fusion as a classically liberal ideal, see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 188. For a critique of empathy’s effectiveness as a political weapon, see Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics,” in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, eds. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999): 49–84.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. William Kaufman (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 1.

endpoint in a process of self-becoming and social legibility: think of the transitional language in phrases like “she’s still single” or “I’m between jobs,” which frame the person without work or without a partner as occupying a narrative mid-point, a formal state of irresolution. In the midst of often intense social pressure to find “your calling” or “the one,” feeling can be an oracle in the arenas of the unknown. Its invocation of a certainty that is felt seems to communicate identity powerfully precisely because it refers to no proof beyond itself; feeling’s self-evidence lends to selfhood the idea that it could be known that way, too.

In the works and the period discussed in this dissertation, then, feeling can be both *self-evident* and also *evidence of a self*. I begin with a repertory of clichés from ordinary language because they are conjoined with another conventional repertory in light and sound: moving speeches that end with swells of applause; couples who embrace as a song fills the air; or someone who just enjoys a feeling of renewed promise or possibility as music floods the scene. The pervasiveness of these music-dramatic tropes in cinema and television, but also in genres like the political rally, speaks to an aesthetic common sense that accompanies the common sense of feeling’s rote phrases. In these aesthetic representations, music often marks the conjunction between the arrival of a feeling and the satisfaction of recognition, of feeling one’s belonging to a unit or a social category that affirms *who you are*. In the closing scenes of mainstream romantic comedies, for instance, a music cue often marks both the formal ending of a narrative and the protagonists’ ascension into a socially valuable and legible norm, that of the heterosexual couple. A further effect of the conventionality of such endings is that they reinforce a certain idea of what counts as a narrative—namely, something that ends with music’s affirmation of the clarity of self-becoming. When music is so often found at the endings of such stories, it begins to

inform what a story's shape is, or how one knows when something is at an end—such that other kinds of stories simply feel like incomplete ones.

### **Feeling and the Sensorium of Liberal Politics**

Feeling, passion, love—these sound like individual, intimate matters, experiences from private life rather than the domains of institutions and work, of governments and structure. A word like “love,” after all, is often used to mean exactly that which opposes the structural—in the idea that love dissolves differences, for example. A brief explanation is therefore needed for how I take these terms to be components of a political system. The broad historical purview of this dissertation opens with the shift, in the broad moment of the Enlightenment, from hereditary aristocracy to the idea that men were equal and free at birth—a political perspective known as liberalism. This shift involved a restructuring of how power formed social worlds. In theory, power was no longer top-down, dispensed by a monarch whose authority was ordained by a deity, but rather inside-out, in the sense that democratic communities are shaped by the preferences of its citizens, expressed publicly. Preferences, expression: these terms introduce matters of feeling and desire, of voice and utterance, into the material of a political system. Suddenly, what one wants has a direct bearing on the shape of the society one lives in.

Democracy cannot function unless its participants regularly identify and voice their preferences in public; the moments when you *know* and *voice* (that is, make public) a preference, then, are the moments that constitute you, make you recognizable, as a person of the state.<sup>3</sup> Some writers of liberal theory have described the psychological effects of living within such a framework of personhood. For example, the freedom to have preferences can lead to the burden of crafting a

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<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Liberalism Turned into a Tradition,” in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 326-48.

life that appears “self-determined.”<sup>4</sup> Being constantly hailed to have and express preferences can also produce an experience of constant inner monitoring, of fretting over *which* wants are essential and which peripheral to your person, such that “the making—and the unmaking—of decisions is a kind of activity which assumes a prominence unknown in other cultures.”<sup>5</sup>

Under these pressures, it is conceivable that the clarity of what feeling “just knows” emerges as a profound relief within a cultural environment’s constant demand for decision-making and self-fashioning. The arrival of a feeling of that offers self-definition might, in such an environment, be even more gratifying than the actual achievement of a certain kind of life. Consider the 2012 film *This is 40*, directed by Judd Apatow. The deictic title proclaims the universality of the troubles that beset Debbie and Pete, a middle-aged, affluent, white suburban couple: waning sex life, career struggle, aging parents, aging in general.<sup>6</sup> In the film’s tonally uplifting ending, Debbie and Pete are at a Ryan Adams concert. Pete, who owns a record label, notes that Adams currently isn’t signed to anyone. Then the camera drifts away as Adams’s indie-Americana strumming takes over, leaving them in the crowd as the screen fades to credits. Note that Pete doesn’t actually sign Adams in the film’s ending; he just notes that he *could* be signed. But it is more powerful—and more pertinent to the depressions that the plot details—that the Adams song underscores the return of promise, the feeling of possibility, in lives where old promises of normative magic have all but eroded. *This is 40* is a remarriage comedy—yet its final meet-cute is not between a couple but instead, literally, with music, which offers the

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. A. Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175-93.

<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre, “Liberalism,” 341.

<sup>6</sup> *This Is 40*, directed by Judd Apatow (United States: Apatow Productions, 2012), DVD.

middle-aged couple a little dilated moment of optimism and good feeling that, at least in this telling of the story, soothes and counterbalances the litany of horrors that came before.<sup>7</sup>

If contemporary individualist, capitalist, and neoliberal cultures have a poetics, we might say that expansive and uplifting feeling is a common trope of its endings—the music dialed up and the camera zooming out, whether in a car commercial or a rom-com. This is not to say that experiences involving music are never moving or transformative. But “music” also often stands in aesthetically for the “liberty” promised in liberalism; it offers an experience not simply of feeling but of the feeling that resistances, whether in the self or of the world, are melting away. Here we might recall Isaiah Berlin’s definition that “[p]olitical liberty ... is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.”<sup>8</sup> This freedom from obstruction is often enacted in the plot structure of romantic comedy films, in which the initial flush of romantic feeling typically takes place in the first or second acts, and not as the story’s closing event. The story usually involves a set of obstacles to the couple’s formation, and ends only when those obstacles (which could include ones internal to the protagonists’ psyches) are removed sufficiently for that feeling to realize a couple and other tangible effects in the world. The lyrical, amplifying endings of romantic comedy are not just about feelings of attraction, then. They also, and perhaps more centrally, involve the fantasy of moving through the world without resistance, of the frictionless encounter between one’s desires and the arena of their realization.

The poetics of romantic fantasy are not so different from the poetics of liberal political fantasy. Consider the oft-cited scene from the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) in which a population of prisoners lifts their heads in the middle of a day to the sound of a Mozart duet

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuit of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 122.

piping through the loudspeakers. The film provides its own reading of the scene in a voice-over by Red, played by Morgan Freeman:

I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free.<sup>9</sup>

The music being piped is the so-called Letter Duettino, sung by Susanna and the Countess in Act 3 of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), although as Red goes on to say, "I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about." The textual details are irrelevant to Red's understanding of the aesthetics of feeling "free": buoyancy, uplift, relief from gray, dissolved walls, the *legato* of soaring, the incandescence of the "briefest" moment.<sup>10</sup> In *Italian Opera in the Age of the American Revolution*, Pierpaolo Polzonetti links these aesthetic tendencies to the emergent ideologies of the Enlightenment, writing that the duettino's repetitions and mirrorings between two women from two social classes "invites us to forget about the practical purpose of the letter" and instead "allows that soft breeze to blow on everybody and everything"; the music is "conceived to defeat gravity, erasing or subverting hierarchies and differences."<sup>11</sup> If every regulatory regime has its own terms for that which threatens to dissolve it, "music" is one name for the force of such erasure in liberal political worlds.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont (United States: Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994), DVD.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the rhetoric of liberal feeling, not to mention the musical rhetoric of commercial film music, draws deeply from discourses of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. On this scene's exemplification of the Romantic ideal of self-sublimation in the universal, see Daniel K. L. Chua, "Listening to the Self: *The Shawshank Redemption* and the Technology of Music," in *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 34, No. 3 (Spring 2011), 341-355. On the "moment" as a conceptual category of Romanticism, see Berthold Hoeckner, *Programming the Absolute: Nineteenth-Century German Music and the Hermeneutics of the Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Pierpaolo Polzonetti, *Italian Opera in the Age of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 314.

In its invocation of the operatic idiom, *The Shawshank Redemption* aligns itself with the genre of rescue opera, which became popular in the milieu of the French Revolution and whose plots frequently detailed the freeing of political prisoners as an affirmation of universalist and humanist values. It may be worth noting that when Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805)—the best-known work in the genre—depicts the dungeon in which the prisoner, Florestan, is imprisoned, the idiom shifts from singing to the spoken idiom of melodrama.<sup>12</sup> Yet though *Fidelio* ends with Florestan's release, the obvious fact should be noted that most of the prisoners in Shawshank remain prisoners after listening to Mozart. Redemption, maybe—but not freedom, in the sense of the word that entails mobility and resources. Instead, the freedom that Red speaks of is a feeling imparted by the sound of opera that depends on, and we might say reinforces, the situation of encagement, since the existence of the prison's walls gives music the opportunity to melt them away. Liberalism's promise of the equality and universality of its subjects, rather than a promise to eradicate inequalities, is in fact one that can summon its concept of the universal precisely because of the existence of inequality, as Karl Marx noted:

Far from abolishing these *factual* distinctions [of birth, rank, education, and occupation], the state presupposes them in order to exist, it only experiences itself as *political state* and asserts its *universality* in opposition to these elements.<sup>13</sup>

The duettino scene from *Shawshank*, in effect, transposes the *conditions* of imprisonment—which are imbricated in commerce and the state, and rely on uneven distributions of resources, land, wealth, and notions of criminality distributed according to the color and visibility of the

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<sup>12</sup> For an extended analysis of this scene, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3-17.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Marx on Religion*, ed. John C. Raines (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 51.

body—into the *feeling* of imprisonment, which can thereby be mollified into a feeling of freedom via the sound of Mozart.

The transposition of confinement from a systematic and material arrangement of populations to a feeling points to how the good feeling of sentimental aesthetics can diffuse effective political attention. In Heather Love's words, "[t]he problem with sentimental articulations of empathy is that they equate the transformation of private emotion with the transformation of larger social structures."<sup>14</sup> The idea that empathy for others is needed in order for something to change on a structural level might be the expression of a wish for structural conditions to be vulnerable to good intention, for the domain of how one feels to have some agential power over them. Meanwhile, as the ending of films and commercials in which a swell of music underscores the camera's tilt toward the horizon indicates, the uplifting and freeing power of music has become one of the most marketable commodities in our current version of capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

### **Making a Scene**

An aesthetic component of the examples in the previous section involves the notion of the scene, of the scenic. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Andy puts the Mozart record on the speaker system, the film then shows a montage of surprise: prisoners, engaged in various activities around the compound, whose ears are suddenly pricked as they lift their heads toward the speakers. Like the climactic radio transmission of *The King's Speech* (2010), which I discuss

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<sup>14</sup> Heather Love, "B-Movie Aspirations," review of *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* by Lauren Berlant, *The Women's Review of Books* 26, No. 3 (May/June 2009), 28.

<sup>15</sup> On the commercialization of romantic feeling, see Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

in Chapter 4, a voice that comes through the machine interrupts the various individual temporalities in the prison and replaces them with a shared sense of the present as the beginning of something new. The transmission opens a shared envelope of time within the ongoingness of the day that turns bodies and faces toward it, like the sun.<sup>16</sup> The Mozart number, in other words, *makes a scene*, as when a raised voice or sudden movement in a public place snaps the disparately nearby out of their differing attentions, and bodies turn in a spectatorial semi-circle around the freshly unfolding event that interpellates them as its audience. The scenes from opera and film that I explore in this dissertation are, then, not only scenes in the sense of the neutral dramaturgical containers that parse a narrative into successive segments, as in “Act 1, Scene 3.” They are also moments within a story in which a person, or group of persons, is turned into an audience by someone’s effort to express, perform, or incite some great feeling, when the



Figure 1. A collective moment (and movement) of listening in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Kiri Miller for pointing out the choreographic aspects of the scene in which a voice gathers an audience.

ordinary business of the day is suspended by a sudden and visceral attention to the spacing of bodies, a collective intake of breath, a sense that something is happening.

Because I am describing scenes in which characters become audiences, or listen to non-diegetic music that suddenly crackles through a machine, they are, in a sense, metafilmic and metaoperatic moments, intermittent ruptures in which the concerns of mediation show through the narrative. The method of constructing a study around a collection of scenes is shared with a book like Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, which focuses on moments in which music seems to break out of its usual role in operatic signification, and acquires an intentional presence of its own, or has "moments of diegesis."<sup>17</sup> The premise of her method—and mine as well—is that attending to such exceptional moments can illuminate something about the work and the genre that outweighs their relatively brief durations, thus inverting the hierarchy that takes the scene to be a subordinate unit of the overall work. But since my archive is largely popular and sentimental, the scenes I study do not explicitly invite a spectatorial response of disturbance or distanciation, unlike the ones discussed by Abbate. Instead, they seem almost to presume a response of absorption and affective similarity, inviting the audience to join the circle of communal rapture that they also model on the stage or the screen.

It was initially the formal rhymes between scenes such as the ending of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and the ending of Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* that indicated to me the scope of this study, and suggested the need for a kind of analysis that could encompass their historical horizon. Both endings begin when someone emerges from a disguise; in both, the question of whether or not a couple still has a future cannot be known, only felt for; and both end

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<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), xii.

with an expansion of singing and string sound as the camera pans to the sky, or the dialogue zooms out to summarize the moral of the tale. These scenes seemed in essence or in general outline similar, like the kiss of birds. They were both works that achieved their fantasy resolutions of gender and class conflict by imagining scenes in which people shed their disguises and come face to face in some public place, in a confrontation suffused in music. The scene is a site of imagination for how these transformations work: throughout this dissertation, we will see people attempt to orchestrate scenes, to bring about “feelingful” encounters in public places, to gather audiences for their utterances. As exempla of liberal aesthetics, the imagined transformative promise of music in the cases that I discuss are also, without exception, the imagined promise of scenes.

At the same time, “scene” is borrowed from affect theory, where it is a unit of analysis that responds to a problem of scale: namely, the problem of how to track the relation between abstract, diffuse, and pervasive social structures—such as those of gender, race, capitalism—and the way these shape the range of possibilities for gesture and interaction in lived experience. The solution that the scene offers is to analyze lived moments in which the particular takes form in relation to, and in resistance of, historical repetitions that bodies carry with them affectively in encountering the world. The scene is the lived point of contact between private detail and structural condition. In the sociologist Bin Xu’s definition, “[s]cene ... links local performance to macrolevel structures and events”; theoretically, it “provides an alternative to the antimony of strategic contingency versus cultural structure.”<sup>18</sup> Or as Kathleen Stewart says about her method in *Ordinary Affects*, it is an attempt to “provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact”:

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<sup>18</sup> Bin Xu, “Grandpa Wen: Scene and Political Performance,” in *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 2 (2012), 114, 118.

The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a *scene of immanent force*, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world.<sup>19</sup>

The scene, therefore, addresses problems in the writing of history, including the problem of seeing all life and art as a reflection of, or determined by, the cultural dominants of its time (or the opposite practice of seeing history as a product of individual human agents). The dialectic between the structural totality and the scenic moment is a way of scaling the impingements of culture at its broad and minute registers. It allows a historical approach that attends to how conditions that organize massive amounts of life play out in the smallest of gestures, but also how the smallest gestures contain a utopian potential for building new infrastructures of the social.<sup>20</sup>

In a sense, what this dissertation is interested in is the opposite of this. Its interest in feeling is not an interest in ordinary, uncathartic scenes in which a complex bundle of affects might offer a way of sensing possibilities and new ways forward. The feelings in the scenes I track are cathartic, wanted, and expected: they involve people who long for the hit of romance or the passion that would indicate the discovery of the right track, the becoming of the self they were always meant to be. And yet the longing for such feelings exemplifies their self-evidence, since they are often feelings that someone has never yet experienced, but are supposed nevertheless to be immediately recognizable once they are felt. The operas and films of Western culture that seem to draw from the ideologies and rhetorics of the Enlightenment continually

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<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> For the gesture as the meeting point between a history of repetitions and the possibility of new collective significations, see Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

stage the appearance of such confirming feelings within the irruptions of scenes—as in *Shawshank*, when the transmission of music through the loudspeakers organizes a scattered population into an attuned audience, and the meaning of this event is *read* by Red in a specific way. One way to think of this dissertation, then, is as an archive of musical drama that demonstrates the long tradition of *scenic thinking* within which the West has invested its fantasies of achieving collectivity, transcending structural determination, mutual intimate dissolution, and self-becoming.

## Methodology

A precondition of this dissertation was to arrive at a methodology that could speak to the family resemblance between works from different centuries and generic traditions which were still joined by a shared historical horizon—that is, changes in culture and subjectivity inaugurated by the theories of the Enlightenment. As a result, it is a dissertation whose approach I would describe as formal, even while its central subject is feeling. The co-presence of these terms was dismissed as an impossibility, until relatively recently, in certain quarters of the humanities. For instance, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie declare quite succinctly that “[a]ffect is not form”;<sup>21</sup> they were summarizing a widespread view that the turn to affect in the nineties, and the wealth of scholarship on feeling it inspired, was largely a response to the impression that post-structuralism and deconstruction left little room for the unruliness and knowledge of bodies and sensations.<sup>22</sup> Yet recent books, including Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* and Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the*

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<sup>21</sup> Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, “An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 145.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011), 434-72.

*Affects*, have made explicit disciplinary calls for a renewed attention to form in the study of culture and affect.<sup>23</sup> While I am entirely in sympathy with their call for formal thinking, it seems to me that formal approaches to analyses of affect or of political conditions of existence have never been missing. For instance, literary theorists influenced by psychoanalysis and Marxist critical theory have long attended to the formal and political dimensions of affect: in Fredric Jameson's reading of the sheer catalogues of sensory stimulation in the city scenes of nineteenth-century novels, which model a new mode of historical perception, a coasting amid distraction;<sup>24</sup> or Peter Brooks's identification, in the way that Balzac's narration pressures the reticent surfaces of the world for meaning, of an emergent melodramatic mode.<sup>25</sup> These novels record the experience of a social world that, as Lauren Berlant says, "historians can later call epochal, but that at the time was evidenced as a shared nervous system that it was the novelist's project to put out there for readers."<sup>26</sup> Attention to the formal properties of a writer's language, in other words, is not just attention to an individual style, but can also suggest what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling," which refers to whatever is common among a group's divergent experiences of a shared world—not the feelings themselves, which differ from person to person, but the possibilities or avenues of feeling made possible via socialization in a particular place and time.<sup>27</sup>

A precedent for this kind of formal and historical attention in musicology might be Gary Tomlinson's *Metaphysical Song*, in which different epochs of philosophical thinking on

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 45-77.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20, No. 4 (Winter 2008), 847.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 128-135.

subjectivity—for instance, late Renaissance, early modern, modern—are modeled in the operatic compositions of their times.<sup>28</sup> Thus a weave of recitative, or a convention of vocal patterning, can be traced to certain metaphysical presumptions about the self and its relation to the transcendental that define the thought of a particular epoch. My dissertation, by contrast, focuses on just one epoch: the epoch underwritten by the idea of the free, equal, liberal subject, which continues with variations into the present. Instead of associating an entire musical syntax with a particular metaphysical perspective, however, my interest is in tracking a single, perhaps metaphysical, obsession: the desire to experience self-presence and the presence of others as a saturation of feeling. The operas and films I discuss can be understood as narratives about the desires, and the difficulties, that attend the achievement of that goal.

## Chapter summaries

Chapter 1, “*Figaro* and the Form of Shock,” is about the overpromise of feeling to clarify domains of existence that are otherwise unknowable. I track a history of interpretations in musicology of the closing scene from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* that demonstrates, simultaneously, a desire for the sentimental ending to make visible hidden truths about the noble couple’s future, and the failure of the scene to offer the kind of certainty demanded of it. The chapter does not advocate for either belief in or skepticism of the happy ending, but rather argues that disagreements over what the ending means suggest that it has been overburdened with an expectation of significance, and asks how and why feeling came to bear this burden in the first place. I investigate formal changes in the structure of opera, developed in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, in which the alternation of recitative and musical numbers gave way to

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<sup>28</sup> Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

finales in which musical numbers were strung together to express a sequence of actions. I argue that the new possibility of representing action within a sequence of expression changed the nature of certain generic actions, such as requesting and granting forgiveness: the quality of utterance, the feeling of expression, become newly significant for forgiveness as a speech act.

Chapter 2, “Opera as a Form of Life: *The Ban on Love* and *Tannhäuser*,” unfolds two cases. The first tackles the question of how operatic “excess” can be indexical of political realities within the dramatic world of an opera. It focuses on a scene from Wagner’s early opera *Das Liebesverbot*, or *The Ban on Love* (1834/36), in which Isabella is prevented from announcing the patriarch’s hypocrisy to his subjects in public. The scene of non-expression becomes the second act Finale’s *quadro di stupore*; the opera renders the politically incomprehensible and unutterable as an expressive plenitude, and figures the unspoken as an expansion of noise. I suggest that opera is melodramatic not because it involves too much expression, too much feeling; instead, its melodrama is located in the aesthetic procedure by which everything that can be felt and said, even if repressed at the level of the plot, is realized as a plenitude in the register of musical sound. The second case, on *Tannhäuser* (1845), addresses the idea of failed epiphany. Various opera scholars have noted that Wagner opposes the sound world of Wagnerian opera to another world against which it is placed in relief, one constructed as “natural,” uncomposed. I examine the Act 2 finale, in which Tannhäuser hears the song of the pilgrims and experiences a religious epiphany that directs him to seek penance in Rome; yet the pilgrimage turns out to be a failure. The section explores the way in which a world of sound—here, the sound of Wagnerian opera—can represent what Wittgenstein called a form of life, a horizon of what it is possible to think and know at a given time, while also indicating the beyond of what cannot yet be thought. In doing so, the case of *Tannhäuser* points to forms of knowledge

and self-transformation that are slower to come by than sudden epiphanies permit, and hence of the limitations of imagining political transformation or the shift in another's consciousness as a saturated scene of discovery.

Chapter 3, "The Structure of Romantic Affect: Soundtracks and the Intimate Event," continues the previous chapter's focus on what is disclosed, or learned, in scenes of feeling. It also picks up on the first chapter's concern with romantic narratives, but relocates to the genre of Hollywood romantic comedy. The chapter tracks shifts in the representation of romantic ideology across the American twentieth century from the notion of the suitable mate—indexed by external markers of class, wealth, and attractiveness—toward the conspicuous disavowal of those features and an emphasis on the innerness of "soul." I examine the way in which this shift in emphasis from "outer" to "inner" reframed the role of the soundtrack as an unseen force of explication. Tracking the series of cinematic adaptations of Miklós László's 1937 play *Parfumerie*, which culminate in Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998), I argue that these adaptations bear witness to a process in which the film image grapples with the loss of its ability to provide proofs of love, while the soundtrack becomes freighted with a newfound pressure to express the lyricism of the self. While the early films could justify the possibility of romance simply by showing the body, *You've Got Mail* exists in a late millennial world in which the recognition of sentimental clichés has become a shopworn obstacle to experiencing them. It poses the questions: can the old conventions of tired genres still be felt as a discovery? How can the force of a cliché be recovered? The movie's form, then, grapples with the question of how to disclose genre as an impact in the age of the genre's anachronism.

Chapter 4, "The Voice of Feeling (Three Speeches by Colin Firth)," focuses on three speeches delivered by characters played by Colin Firth in three different films, each from a

different genre: the romantic comedy *Love Actually* (2003), the historical drama *The King's Speech* (2010), and the Douglas Sirk-inspired melodrama *A Single Man* (2009). Each speech affirms a way in which liberal subjects can achieve a sense of identity: via the romantic couple, via citizenship and nationalism, and finally, via the notion of being “pulled back to the present.” Yet the formal similarity of these three endings suggests that there is a certain shape to resolution itself that is common to the various fantasies that each of these genres enacts: a certain complex of feeling, expression, trauma, and voice that provides the outline of liberal subjectivity. I call this underlying structure *infrageneric*: it is a support lattice that is common to and can support a variety of genres and specific fantasies, but indicates the common cultural forms and historical inheritances that animate them.

Thus, though the chapters progress chronologically, they are also organizing as a kind of branching tree. The ending of *The Marriage of Figaro*, discussed in Chapter 1, introduces a cluster of themes that are taken up successively by the next three chapters: Chapter 2 picks up on the operatic dilation of a scene of shock, and what characters learn or discover from it; Chapter 3 continues the focus on romantic comedy; and Chapter 4 addresses, in its three Colin Firth cases, the form of the scene in which a lyrical voice becomes the sound of a repaired social collectivity.

### **Music, Film, and Film Music Scholarship**

The scenes in each chapter in which characters achieve a state of self-presence or presence with others are often not easy to achieve. That is, to arrive at a scene of saturated self-encounter is often posed as a problem within the narrative; the form of each work then becomes a response to the problem of how to make the moment of presence appear. Thus, in *You've Got Mail*, Joe (Tom Hanks) cannot simply reveal to Kathleen (Meg Ryan) that he is her online lover.

Isabella in *The Ban on Love* wants to magnetize a public audience for her act of political testimony, but can't. In *The King's Speech*, George VI cannot produce the lyricism of voice necessary to provide the sound of a nation's collective will. Each of these works' narratives are the fantasized or imagined responses to problems that are at once intimate, political, and aesthetic. The conundrums they stage speak to Jameson's notion that works in mass culture offers "imaginary resolutions" to the impossible contradictions plaguing their historical moment.<sup>29</sup>

In focusing on the musical saturation of a scene as the central event around which the remainder of the work is constructed, there is a certain methodological reversal of the hierarchy that takes music to be subordinate or peripheral to dramatic representation. While opera history has classically been recounted as a history of such reversals, in which each epoch newly asserts the primacy of either music or text, the peripheral status of music as something that illustrates or proceeds alongside the "narrative" has been much more stable in film music studies. This is also true of the way in which film scholarship addresses feeling, which is frequently associated with the work of the soundtrack. While scholars of film sound have focused extensively on the link between music and feeling in film, they typically address either the feelings that are produced in the audience, how feeling is represented, coded, or indexed in the film, or how the relay of feeling between the film and the audience takes place.<sup>30</sup> These perspectives are unable to track feeling as a cultural concept that might change, or be particular to, the larger epoch of history to which cinema belongs; their analyses take place in an undifferentiated present, and take the historical present of film music for granted. A key exception is Caryl Flinn's *Strains of Utopia*:

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<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 141.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Richard Dyer's *Nino Rota: Music, Film, and Feeling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2010), or the oculo-centric *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

*Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, which considers narrative film music as a continuation of Romanticist aesthetics, and analyzes not only specific soundtracks but also music's function within narrative film via formalist perspectives from feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. In her discussion of film music's "excessive" effects, she follows a formal tendency in the theories she cites to measure these effects in relation to "the ways perception and aesthetic consumption conventionally operate."<sup>31</sup> Thus, film music's excessiveness offers apertures of escape from signification; music remains analytically ineffable, and its utopian promise—to use Siegfried Kracauer's word for the structure of Adorno's formulation of the utopian—"unstatable."<sup>32</sup>

For the most part, musicologists who study film music tend either to explore a film score's rich intertextual and historical contexts or to analyze music in its interactions with other domains of a film. In her seminal book *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Claudia Gorbman identifies seven basic principles and functions that pertain to music in classical film practice: invisibility, inaudibility, signifier of emotion, narrative cueing, continuity, unity, and the possibility that any of these functions can disrupt the implementation of another.<sup>33</sup> As James Buhler points out, the first two terms refer to music's obligation to efface itself in service of the audience's absorption in the drama; the next two concern the "semiotic capabilities of music and its ability to clarify the narrative; finally, continuity and unity refer to music's role in providing "connective tissue" that "reinforces narrative structure."<sup>34</sup> Music is understood to be mimetic of, or contrast, or operate independently of, the image and other sounds; music exists in relation to

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<sup>31</sup> Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 70.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Pub., 1987), 73.

<sup>34</sup> James Buhler, "Psychoanalysis, Apparatus Theory, and Subjectivity," *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. David Neumeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 394.

or in independence of a coherence that includes everything else—the “narrative.” Because film music scholars attend instead to “the music,” the more generic or predictable a musical accompaniment is, the more difficult it is to extract analytic value from it, so that scholarly interest and density accrete around richer musical scores or ones with compelling historical itineraries. Yet a way in which this state of affairs limits film music scholarship is that it does not, initially, deal with the entire object of a film. There is a sense that musicologists, especially, cannot draw the same kinds of formal or interpretive conclusions about films in the way that film scholars can, since they are experts only on the musical parts and bring in consideration of other aspects of the film only insofar as the music invites it. Musicologists typically begin with the music of the film and move outward from there, instead of beginning with consideration of the whole film and *then* discovering what music might do.

### **Fantasy Resolution**

By contrast, the approach that this dissertation takes is not to see the generic swell of music as only another musical cue among many along the narrative, or as the predictable accompaniment to a critically impoverished moment. Instead, I begin with the swell and ask: how does the structure of the film stage the possibility of this moment? What kind of story must the film or the opera—and, by extension, the conjoined history of opera and film—tell in order to earn its saturated subjectivity? What is culturally, aesthetically, and politically particular about the structure of the moment that melts into generality in order to give birth to a fantasy of the liberal subject?

Finally, in its concern with excesses of feeling and sound, and with moments of affectively saturated recognition, this dissertation engages with sentimentality and melodrama,

topics that have been sites of extensive study in recent decades. Sentimentality has been described as an affective structure that involves “the presumption of emotional clarity and affective recognition in the scene of the mediated encounter,” to use a formulation from Lauren Berlant,<sup>35</sup> meanwhile, as an aesthetic form, James Chandler has traced this mediated encounter from eighteenth-century novels to twentieth-century film as a “network of relay or regard,” a triangulation of the gaze that scaffolds the flow of feeling.<sup>36</sup> Yet the presumption of emotional clarity or its aesthetic mediation do not necessarily mean that sentimentality is simply ideology, where that word refers to the lies peddled by the mass culture industry. Instead, adapting Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology, “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,”<sup>37</sup> we might say that sentimentality and melodrama are not only modes or sensibilities but also ways of imagining the relationship of feeling to real conditions of existence. That is, they are theories of causality, each one a way of connecting the unknown gaps in reality with its particular concept of feeling’s operation. Thus sentimentality and melodrama are not exaggerations or falsehoods that obscure what is real, but are rather theories of the real; or, to use Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s formulation, they are engaged in “rearranging the real.”<sup>38</sup> Any theory of reality is bound to illuminate in some aspects and prove to be dissatisfying in others; the chapters ahead touch in places on these dissatisfactions. Chapter 1, for instance, attends to the anxiety that results from overburdening exchanges of feeling as a site of signification. In Chapter 4, I consider what might be foreclosed in a theory of sentimentality modeled on the gaze, and

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<sup>35</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 271.

<sup>36</sup> James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 109.

<sup>38</sup> Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (University of California Press, 1993), 26.

explore instead the work of the voice in climactic cinematic speeches. Drawing on ordinary language philosophy, I argue that scenes in which the voice inaugurates a lyrical rhythm that becomes the sound of community—from *The Marriage of Figaro* to *Love Actually*—presuppose “life” as a narrative that culminates in a scene of self-expression, thereby foreclosing, formally, the temporality of the other’s response.

In the concern with scenes of recognition and their evasions, these case studies also engage the thematics of melodrama. In classic formulations, such as those of the cinema theorist Linda Williams and the literary theorist Peter Brooks, melodrama is a lens through which the world appears in a polarization of good and evil, and in which the repression of the virtuous tends toward an ending in which “the characters are able to confront one another with *full expressivity*.”<sup>39</sup> In his recent book *Melodrama: The Aesthetics of the Impossible*, Jonathan Goldberg agrees with Brooks that what is often at stake in these endings is a character’s attempt to be “witnessed and recognized.”<sup>40</sup> Yet Goldberg’s focus is on recognition’s impossibility, since the multiplicities and contradictions opened up by “music and image provide a way beyond words,” generating queer potentialities instead in their friction.<sup>41</sup> Goldberg himself notes that his book mostly treats issues of music—*melos*—and issues of drama separately. By contrast, the case studies in this dissertation might be described as attempts to see musical forms as forms of drama, by which I mean both the dramas of particular narratives and also, more generally, what we might call the drama of the liberal subject—the constitution of this subject as a kind of drama. So, for example, Chapter 2 discusses opera’s melodramatic dilations as aesthetic

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 4. See also Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), ix.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

compensations for the fear that certain feelings or experiences will fail to be expressed, to circulate and be recognized in public. And, in Chapter 4, I return to the question of witnessing in the context of contemporary film, arguing that the climactic speech's cinematic mediations suggest not that its central anxiety is whether a public will witness its act of expression, but more specifically the fear that there is no longer a public to address—that the voice's purpose is to generate its own audience.

The study of melodrama requires engagement with the historical range that this dissertation also encompasses, since its subject matter extends from the invention of melodrama as a musical genre in the eighteenth century to its iterations in film. In so doing, it suggests a thread of continuity from opera of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to present day cinema, one that offers a more comprehensive aesthetic view of this continuity than, say, studies that focus on filmed adaptations of opera, or scenes of opera in film.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as a transdisciplinary object that compels expertise in music alongside knowledge of literary, theatrical, and cinematic form, and in its production of rich traditions of feminist, Marxist, and queer critique, melodrama is one of several academic scenes whose gravity is forcing divergent lines of training and conversation, tracing the terrain of what Peter Brooks dreamily envisioned as a postdisciplinary future.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nearly all work undertaken thus far by musicologists on the connection between opera and film focus on “encounters”—that is, adaptations and quotations—of opera in film, even though most of them also gesture toward, without systematizing, their sense of more suggestive aesthetic connections. These include Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology, and Film* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa, eds., *Between Opera and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 48.

## Chapter 1

### *Figaro* and the Form of Shock

*I saw a woman, disguised in her maid's clothes,  
hear her husband speak the first tender words he  
has offered her in years—simply because he  
thinks she is someone else. I heard the music of  
true forgiveness filling the theatre, conferring on  
all who sat there a perfect absolution.*

These words, delivered by the character Antonio Salieri in Milos Forman's 1984 film *Amadeus*, recount the closing events of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.<sup>1</sup> Salieri, confessing to a priest at the end of his life, is attempting to convey what he finds powerful about the opera's ending, in which a philandering Count tenderly requests and receives the Countess's forgiveness. As Salieri begins to recall the fourth act, the sound of the Count singing "Contessa, perdono" quietly enters in the background of the sound mix. Then, the film cuts: we are now looking at the face of a much younger Salieri, alone in an opera box on the night of *Figaro*'s premiere. As the older Salieri's voice enters (now in voice-over) with the words above, the film cuts again to reveal the stage and the orchestra. But Salieri is not only describing, from the distance of an opera box or of memory, an experience of opera. His hushed, rhapsodic voice-over forms a duet with the Count's singing as expressive voices native to each medium—film and opera—are layered over each other; meanwhile, the film's form acknowledges their parallel potency by having each voice's entrance inaugurate a visual cut. The scene of opera brings two modes of

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<sup>1</sup> *Amadeus*, directed by Miloš Forman (Berkeley: The Saul Zaentz Company, 1984), DVD.

expressive utterance, belonging to aesthetic regimes from different centuries, into a relationship of mutual implication.

Specifically, cinematic mediation is laboring in this scene to evoke the power of operatic mediation and masquerade its effect as an effect of opera. The movie takes pains to show every aspect of operatic production that undergirds the singing, from shots of audiences fanning themselves at the edges of the frame to the abundance of candles that light up the orchestra, always in frame below the singers; from the extravagant period make-up and stilted choreography to the presence of Mozart himself at the podium, mouthing the words for the singers' benefit and shaping with his conductor's hands the sounds that Salieri describes so rhapsodically. The scene invites the film viewer to marvel at both the opera's beauty and its artificiality—at the notion that something so moving could emerge out of conditions so ordinary (one of the film's *idées fixes*). Yet the foregrounding of operatic mediation also elides the work of filmic technique in generating many of its emphases: the cut that travels back in time to the memory of *Figaro's* premiere, the shot/reverse shot alternation that establishes a formal symmetry between the stage and Salieri's look of rapture, the closely miked rasp of the voice's grain delivered in the intimate authority of voice-over, and the slow pan forward to the stage that nearly imperceptibly magnifies the characters as they sing.<sup>2</sup> If a cinematic audience falls in love with opera here, it will depend to some extent on the ability of filmic mediation to pass off its emphases as products of operatic force. Though the object of reference is eighteenth-century opera, aesthetic conventions of the twentieth century—narrative cinema's ways of phrasing time

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<sup>2</sup> For the use of the music cue in dissolving the difference between emotional transport and temporal/geographic transportation, see Berthold Hoeckner, "Transport and Transportation in Audiovisual Memory," in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, eds. Daniel Ira Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 163-183. On the "vococentricity" of narrative film aesthetics more generally, see Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), esp. 5-6.

and space, the immediacy and dislocation of voice-over, the irony of mediation—are embedded in the act of citation itself.

This scene from *Amadeus* offers a productive framework for reading commentaries on *Figaro*'s ending in contemporary musicology. Like the scene above, these commentaries are “about” *Figaro*, or comic opera in the eighteenth-century, but their language embeds aesthetic concerns and anxieties from the writers’ present. Of particular note are moments in which a commentary or analysis ventures afield from the ordinary domains of music history or music theory, and into much more vexing domains of intimacy and knowledge—specifically, the question of how much to trust an avowal of contrition and change:

But the Count and Countess are conscious; they feel their feelings through, and there is a ground of sympathy between them which Figaro and Susanna cannot ever comprehend. ... Probably no one has left a performance of *Figaro* without reflecting that the Count will soon be philandering again. But just as surely there will be another reconciliation, another renewal as genuine on both sides, as contrite and as beautiful. Clever Figaro and Susanna are not actually so secure.

(Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 1952)

There is little reason given to hope that Almoviva’s public apology will affect his actions in private. The mad day has brought the servant couple [Susanna and Figaro] through a crisis to establish a firmer foundation for their marriage, but the noble couple is repeating, not for the first or last time, a ritual act of apology and forgiveness.

(Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*, 1983)

When the Countess pardons the Count in act 4 of *The Marriage of Figaro*, it is not that Mozart’s music simultaneously gives voice to some more profound statement of or about forgiveness. Rather, it is the fact that there is a Countess, a Count, a specific dramatic situation, and ordinary words like “Contessa, perdono” sung out loud that has in quite precise ways predetermined the meaning to attach to Mozart’s musical moment. These mundane, visible things feed a conviction that transfigured forgiveness—that specifically—is being conveyed by some very beautiful noise.

(Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?”, 2004)

The happy ending is inevitable: the Count, humbled, begs forgiveness. Everyone lives happily ever after; or so we hope but somehow doubt, given the complexity of their feelings for each other.

(Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera*, 2012)

On the one hand, much of the opera seems to reiterate a skeptical, even cynical message about human beings and their feelings—a message largely inherited from its French source [the play by Beaumarchais on which the libretto is based] and often associated in both works with the explicit parody of sentimental topoi. On the other, the opera contains passages in a more direct sentimental mode, and even presents deep, serious emotions such as those of the last scene. The tension between these opposing drives can be disquieting: we are offered two irreconcilable views of things human, yet it is impossible to settle on either side, morally or emotionally, without feeling questioned by the other.

(Stefano Castelvecchi, *Sentimental Opera*, 2013)<sup>3</sup>

These excerpts demonstrate the aesthetic problems of extracting future knowledge—of what “will be”—from scenes of saturating feeling in the present. They argue about how to weigh the sharp impress of someone’s moving utterance against personal history and other evidence to the contrary; they consider that how one responds to a sincerely uttered promise depends on an individual disposition toward optimism or cynicism, which is liable to feel like a choice between two undesirable ways of being seen (either too gullible or too cold); they wonder whether a shared, beautiful moment is a sign that ordinary life has been transformed, or just repeated; on the whole, they wonder about how to parlay the experience of intensely felt and expressed feeling in the present into knowledge of how things will turn out, especially in relation to the promise of generic, or normative, ends.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 90; Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze Di Figaro & Don Giovanni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 193; Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (March 1, 2004), 522; Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012), 128; Stefano Castelvecchi, *Sentimental Opera: Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 208-9.

It matters little that different writers disagree about *what* the scene of feeling is evidence of. Kerman, for instance, hears in the reconciliation between the Count and Countess that they are “conscious,” that they “feel their feelings through,” and that “there is a ground of sympathy between them which Figaro and Susanna can never comprehend. ... Clever Figaro and Susanna are not actually so secure.” But Allanbrook asserts that at the end of the opera the servant couple establishes “a firmer foundation for their marriage,” in contrast to the nobles. Both readings presume that there can be musical and textual evidence for the ground of a marriage’s stability—even though *Figaro*’s Aristotelian drama presents only the events of a single day. What these accounts share is the sense that the scene of feeling could provide evidence for something like whether or not a relationship is “secure,” that its heartfelt exchanges contain traces of the truth in domains of knowledge that are mysterious.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter does not venture its own interpretation of what *Figaro*’s ending might mean. Instead, it begins with the observation that many writers feel that it *should* have some meaning, that there should be an epistemic link between a scene of feeling in the present and the circumstances of future life. Yet this burden of clarification is something that the scene cannot completely satisfy, as the variety of its critical responses demonstrates; the ending, though “inevitable,” leads not to interpretive closure but to interpretive proliferation. Attempts to make sense of *Figaro*’s sentimental resolution inevitably refract its listeners’ aesthetic presuppositions about intimacy, genre, sincerity, and knowledge, revealing ways of reading feeling that have become implicit as common sense in the present.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a reading of critical commentaries like these in the context of Austrian ideas of theatricality and authenticity in the time of *Figaro*’s premiere, see Edmund J. Goehring, “Ironic Modes, Happy Endings: ‘Figaro’ Criticism and the Enlightened Stage,” *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 18, no. 1/2 (2011): 27–72.

<sup>5</sup> For the notion that genre can be read politically by uncovering what its terms expose about structures of belief in its historical moment, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). I am also indebted here to Lauren Berlant’s writing on genre as something that not only repeats meaning but also serves as a site of pedagogy and ambivalence for those who shape their lives

How did affective utterances, expressive exchanges, come to bear this burden of signification? I will suggest that an answer must take into account transformations in operatic form that took place in the decades preceding *Figaro*'s composition, specifically involving the development of the *quadro di stupore*, or shock tutti, and the introduction of multi-section finales.<sup>6</sup> The implications of these formal developments were many, but among the most significant was "the introduction of dramatic action into a musical number," as John Platoff has noted.<sup>7</sup> The multi-section finale disturbed the strict alternation of recitative and musical number that constituted what Platoff calls the action-expression cycle, thus destabilizing what counted as an "action" and an "expression." The chapter then turns to consider how *Figaro* manifests a new understanding of "expression" by comparing it with the status of expressivity in *seria* and *buffa* works that precede it. I suggest that the particular tangle of hopes and disappointments that *Figaro*'s ending inspires—hopes that it will convey certainties about shared life, disappointments that it never fully can—can only be understood in tandem with contemporary transformations in the concept of the individual. *Figaro*'s ending, I will argue, models the new burdens that feeling must carry within the conceptions of subjectivity and expressivity that were emerging in its time.

### **Shock's Musical Form**

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, certain developments in operatic form had the effect of reformulating how opera captured and represented feeling. One such development was the *quadro di stupore*, or tableau of stupefaction: a scene in which a sudden revelation or

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within it. See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Paolo Russo, "LARGO AL CONCERTATO! Alle origini del «quadro di stupore»," *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 15, no. 1 (2008), 33-66.

<sup>7</sup> John Platoff, "Music and Drama in the 'Opera Buffa' Finale: Mozart and His Contemporaries in Vienna, 1781-1790" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 2.

turn of events in the story brought dramatic action to a halt and opened a spacious musical texture in which the characters, frozen in place, reiterate their confused and shocked responses to what had just happened. Before the *quadro*, a shocking event in the story might have elicited a musical jolt, a sudden *fortissimo* spasm, in the orchestra. But the *quadro* represented the *experience* of shock in its musical form, conveying the feeling of hovering in a suspended moment, of the loud hammering of inner thought as the sound of the outside world dims. As this section will argue, the *quadro* is an early indication of what Fredric Jameson described as opera's shift from emotion to affect: from the stable, identifiable feeling-states typical of the aria to the constantly shifting and roiling sensations that he associated with Wagnerian chromaticism.<sup>8</sup> It is important to understand how opera's representation of feeling changed in the *quadro* because it marks a moment that is formally entwined with the happy ending: the event of shock, after all, represents a point of social disintegration, of the intense separation of characters' interiorities, of the flouting of plans and conceptions of the world, while the happy ending is the event of social reconstitution and narrative closure. The *quadro* features characters who can barely get their words out, let alone produce an utterance that will bring about the finale's evaporation of conflicts. If feeling is problematic in *Figaro*'s ending—if there is disagreement about what it can promise or clarify or remedy—we should look first to how the *quadro* transformed the representation of shock at the moment of narrative dissolution.

*Figaro*'s closing events, in fact, begin with an event of shock: when the Countess, dressed as her maidservant Susanna to entrap her husband in his infidelity, steps out into the clearing of the action and identifies herself before him and the denizens of his court. Shock is the

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<sup>8</sup> For a genealogical history of the term “passion” in relation to musical practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Martha Feldman, “Music and the Order of the Passions,” in *Representing the Passions: Bodies, Visions, Texts*, ed. Richard Meyer (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 37-67.

embodied form of dramatic lag, of the time it takes for someone to catch up to what has happened. In the space of shock opened by the Countess's revelation, the other characters reiterate generic phrases of confusion:

BASILIO, CURZIO, COUNT, ANTONIO, BARTOLO  
Heaven! What do I see?  
I'm raving! Going crazy!  
I don't know what to believe.

If we take these words to mean what they say, an effect of the Countess's unmasking is the loss, among her witnesses, of the typically unconscious way in which sight sustains the belief that one is sane. Minutes before the end of a four-hour opera, the characters suddenly discover that what they thought was the plot was merely the cover for something else, and this loss causes the further loss of a sense of world that they can believe in. These phrases are sung in an increasingly agitated texture that comes crashing to a close on a fermata. Then Mozart writes another fermata over a grand pause—a hush over the stage and the pit. What will the Count do? In many stage and film productions, he takes a knee: then, buttressed by warm strings that have suddenly shifted from G minor to major, he begins to ask the Countess for forgiveness, the words coming out in two-bar phrases that each rise and fall, separated by quarter-rests for breath, so that operatic singing here is not passed off as something extravagant that the breath can do, but is as simple and regular as breathing. These two-bar phrases are then picked up by the Countess, and then by the entire ensemble, so that the melody begun by the Count turns into the euphony of an entire social order singing in harmony. The scene seems to indicate that it would not be enough for the Count to communicate his contrition in private (as Susanna and Figaro do); he must make a show of it. And the show consists not only of the way breathing becomes singing, as if opera is recalling its origins, but is also found in the quiet of the onlookers as they watch his

performance, absorbed in the scene (which mirrors the opera audience's absorption, all of us now spectators) as they wait for the end of the phrase to enter.

This operatic ending from 1786 would not have been possible without certain developments in the structure of comic opera libretti and musical form that quickly became conventional after the middle of the century. Revelations of identity, shock, the sudden turn of contrition, the plea for forgiveness, the Countess's granting of it: that all of these events take place within a passage of music (rather than recitative) would not have been likely before 1750, when the rule, as John Platoff writes, was "the musical segregation of dramatic action from emotional expression"—the strict demarcation of passages of recitative, in which events happened, from musical numbers, in which characters reflected on their emotional reactions to these events.<sup>9</sup> It was in the decades immediately preceding *Figaro*'s premiere that two different yet related developments prepared the way for specific elements of its ending: the development of the *quadro di stupore* (which Platoff calls the shock tutti) and the multi-section finale, which allowed composers to write multiple musical numbers in succession at the ends of acts (rather than alternating them with passages of recitative).<sup>10</sup>

A sudden unmasking or revelation was just one kind of dramatic event that could be realized musically with the development of multi-section finales, but it was also an exemplary one, as more than one musicologist has attested. Daniel Hertz, for instance, locates the origin of the comic opera finale in the scene of surprise: it was when composers began responding to these moments in the libretto with significant musical changes, shifts in meter and timbre, that the

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<sup>9</sup> Platoff, "Music and Drama in the 'Opera Buffa' Finale," 1. Platoff attributes the origin of this idea to Marianne Fuchs, "Die Entwicklung des Finales in der italienischen *Opera Buffa* vor Mozart" (Ph.D., University of Vienna, 1932).

<sup>10</sup> For a consideration of Mozart's finales in relation to those of his contemporaries, see John Platoff, "Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Opera Buffa Finale," *The Journal of Musicology* 7, no. 2 (1989): 191–230.

multi-sectional finale began to emerge in nascent form.<sup>11</sup> This way of retroactively plotting a form's historical emergence can lead to strange anachronistic disappointments, such as when Hertz, reviewing earlier comic operas, laments the composer's incapacity to see what could be made musically from the story's scenes of surprise. When Carlo Goldoni's libretto for *Bertoldo Bertoldino e Cacasenno* was set into a *dramma giocoso* by Vincenzo Ciampi in 1749, for instance, Hertz writes that Goldoni

provided the composer with quite an opportunity for dramatic surprise. After a stretch of dialogue between the two pairs of couples there is an unmasking, with consequent astonishment and rage expressed by the duped pair. What an occasion here for musical surprise! A change of metre and rhythm perhaps? Or at the least, some surprising harmonic turn. Yet Ciampi sets the whole scene as a unified movement in the same metre, with nothing more surprising than a secondary dominant to delineate the moment of revelation: 'Oh chi vedo!' Whatever his merits as a composer ... Ciampi was not the musician to take advantage of all the dramatic fire and imagination that Goldoni had to offer.<sup>12</sup>

Hertz is not alone when he imagines a libretto charged with unfulfilled potential, awaiting only a composer sensitive enough to recognize its promise and give it the realization it calls for. Paolo Russo similarly engages in historical backshadowing when he describes two collaborations in the late 1760s between the composer Giovanni Paisiello and the librettist Francesco Cerlone, one a *commedia per musica* called *L'osteria di Marechiaro* and the other a farce on the same plot called *La Claudia vendicata*, which feature a magical plot element in the form of a bottled spirit who can be invoked to immobilize enemies.<sup>13</sup> When the spirit transforms several characters into statues, Russo writes that "Paisiello does not grasp the golden opportunity offered to him" by a

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Hertz, "The Creation of the Buffo Finale in Italian Opera," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 104 (1977): 67–78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of these operas within a study of magical elements in Enlightenment-period opera, see David J. Buch, *Magic Flutes and Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Music Theater* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 216–18.

**Andante**

I.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.  
Si b

Fg.

Cr.  
Mi b

Trb.  
Do

ROS.

CONTE

Fredda ed im.  
(con gesto autorevole trattiene i soldati e presenta un foglio all'ufficiale, che alla lettura si sorprende e subito ordina ai soldati di ritirarsi.)-Quadro di stupore-

- la -

**Andante**

Vni

Vle

Ve.

Cb.

Pizz.

Arco

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.  
Si b

Fg.

ROS.

CONTE

I.

Freddo ed im.

mobi - le come u - na statu - a, fia - ton non re - sta - mi dare spi - rar, fia - to non

1.1 Beginning of the quadro di stupore "Fredda ed immobile," from Rossini's The Barber of Seville.

text in which the characters comment on their hardness (“indurito”) or their resemblance to rocks (“qual macigno diventata sono già”) or iron (“sembra un ferro”).<sup>14</sup> Instead of writing something like a *concertato* in which the characters could all express these thoughts together in a static, spaced-out texture that mimics their bodily frozenness, the magical event has no effect on the mode of operatic expression: Paisiello has the characters deliver these thoughts successively, in dialogue. Similarly, in his *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1782), Paisiello responds to the scene in which the Count exposes his identity by having each character relate in an aside what their thoughts are and what action they plan to take. Russo contrasts this scene with the more famous version by Rossini and the librettist Cesare Sterbini (1816), in which the Count’s revelation leads to “Fredda ed immobile,” an ensemble number that drops the tempo suddenly as one character after another performs their stunned affect by comparing themselves to statues in halting, spaced-out syllables.<sup>15</sup> The diegetic, magical event of frozenness in the Paisiello plot becomes a metonym for the musical realization of shock after mid-century—a new form that persists throughout the nineteenth-century and in filmic permutations since.

For Russo, the problem is not exactly that earlier composers did not react sufficiently to situations of revelation and shock in the libretto—that it was a matter of intensity or degree. Rather, the historical transition that Hertz and Russo seek concerns the *form* of shock’s realization, as an experience or feeling, in the musical register of opera. When Ciampi sets an event of surprise in the libretto by writing in a slightly pungent harmony—a secondary dominant—to mark the impact of a shock, he is imagining shock as a feeling or a temperature, a sudden spike in affect, a tone or quality associated with a word or action. This way of conceiving shock in music imagines it as sensation that adjoins speech and event, but does not

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<sup>14</sup> Russo, “LARGO AL CONCERTATO!,” 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

fundamentally undermine their claim to establish the pace of representation. Feeling does not disturb or interrupt the musical form, or throw the current representational framework (recitative, dialogue) into disarray. In Russo's account of the fully developed *quadro di stupore*, however, he describes the way that a shocking event derails a sense of shared reality, the pacing of time, the working of language, and even the phenomenological orientations of internal and external reality.<sup>16</sup> In a *quadro di stupore*, some "stupefying external event" bungles the characters' desires and throws their certainty of what has happened into disarray. Their physical immobility is the result of a sudden premonition of the incompatibility of their desires with the direction of the plot, which leads to stunted action. Meanwhile, the music enacts the dilation of what he calls an "ecstatic" moment, an expanding bubble of time in which each character's feeling-state is amplified at the same time as their bodies are paralyzed, concentrating attention on their inner thoughts and feelings even as this introspective register is externalized as the material texture of the scene's polyphony. Shock, in other words, enters operatic form as a spacing or hovering in which time is suspended and characters are thrown back into their thoughts, which hammer loudly and repetitively while the sounds of the outside world seem suddenly muffled. The focus shifts the third-person perspective of recitative into first-person (Russo compares the intense subjective interiority of the stunned ensemble to that of the aria<sup>17</sup>), only literary and cinematic analogues of perspective are unable to capture the way in which a *simultaneous multiplicity* of first-person foci generate interiority as a *communal sound*. At the same time, singing itself has suddenly become difficult as the characters stutter their words out in fits and starts ("a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

singhiozzo”); within this musical and dramatic framework, it can be hard not to repeat the same phrases over and over as the impacted and diffuse moment stretches on.<sup>18</sup>

The *quadro* offers a different way of conceptualizing the changes to operatic genre in the middle decade of the eighteenth century, which are usually said to focus on the pamphlet war instigated by performances of Pergolesi’s comic intermezzo *La serva padrona* on the stages of French *tragédie lyrique*. The ensuing debacle known as the *querelle des bouffons* concentrated on the difference between the mimeticism of French opera, which aimed to produce effects via its representation of situations and affects described in the text, and the free expressivity of Italian singing, which produced pleasure without recourse to representation.<sup>19</sup> Recently, Roger Grant has more assertively described this moment as a shift from mimeticism to affect, citing contemporaneous theorists whose analytical frameworks shifted away from music’s mimetic capacities to capture the ways that music in comic opera induced affective states directly in its audience.<sup>20</sup> Yet the development of the *quadro* affords a different way of thinking about what changed in opera in the middle of the century. Whereas in earlier works shock might show up locally or momentarily as a pungent harmony, a tone or intensity that does not fundamentally unsettle the representational framework of dialogue or musical number, in later works the arrival of shock brings the musical section to a halt and opens a new one at a different temporal resolution, one whose sense of suspended animation and expression replicates shock’s effects on subjective and interpersonal experience. Where shock used to be rendered affectively, as

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>19</sup> The literature on the *querelle* (or *guerre*) *des bouffons* is vast, but see A.M. Whittall, “*La Querelle des Bouffons*” (Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 1963) and Enrico Fubini, *Music and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe: A Source Book*, ed. Bonnie J. Blackburn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For a perspective that considers the *querelle* within the ongoing battle with vococentrism in modernity, see Marcelle Coulter Pierson, “The Voice under Erasure: Singing, Melody and Expression in Late Modernist Music” (Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Roger Mathew Grant, “Peculiar Attunements: Comic Opera and Enlightenment Mimesis,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (December 12, 2016): 550–69.

harmony or tone, the *quadro* now conceived of shock as a coherent and expansive musical structure.

The result is a modification of opera's conventional action-expression cycle: the unit of operatic form that follows passages of action in recitative with sung numbers that process and release the feelings of the preceding section.<sup>21</sup> This is a way of constructing a sequence of actions in which feelings are generally clear and knowable in relation to the events that provoke them, in which feeling doesn't disturb the unfolding of narrative and instead offers a zone of reflection and release protected from interruption. In the action-expression cycle, the expressive meaning and felt significance of an event is formally predictable and all but guaranteed, to the point that a spectator familiar with the genre could hear the expression of feeling as the sign of an event's closure.<sup>22</sup> Lyricism and expressivity occur with formal regularity to clarify the feelings associated with the most recent sequence of events; they are at work in making sense of past action, not in forwarding or opening *new* action that might still be unfolding. The aria's clarifying function is supported by the fact that its rhetoric is often more abstract and symbolic than the rhetoric of recitative, delivering little in the way of references to specific characters or situations in the story and instead providing allegorical or moralistic commentary on what has just happened. We might think of the action-expression cycle as a kind of mechanism that linearizes or temporalizes an opera's literal (plot) and allegorical registers, rendering them as an oscillation that becomes the rhythm of musical drama:

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<sup>21</sup> Platoff, 48-56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

## Symbolic registers

Allegorical (moral, metaphor)

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Literal (plot, action, character)

## Realization in time

Action | Allegory | Action | Allegory  
(Recit. | Number | Recit. | Number)

*Action-expression cycle*

A major consequence of the multi-part finale, however, is the realization of action in fully orchestrated and rhythmically regular sections, and not only in recitative. Once numbers are strung together, differences in meter, key, and expressive mode between these sections can be used to mark dramatic shifts in tempo and mood. The neat order that follows every sequence of action with a reflective passage is no longer so absolute. Instead, a sudden revelation forces characters into an expressive mode before they have all the necessary facts. They feel something intense but cannot yet say what kind of event they are responding to; their feeling is still *forming* as they try to assess, from scraps of information, what this sudden turn will mean for their chances of bringing about various generic endings. At this point, though, it is impossible to know, which is why they think they are mad or babbling; they are not singing after action but in the midst of action's unfolding, within shock's dilation of an ecstatic moment in which they are still coming to grips with how relationships have changed in the present and the viability of their plans in the long term.<sup>23</sup>

A key example from Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, the comic intermezzo that set off the war between mimeticism and expressivity on the French stage, will help to indicate how feeling and action begin to mutually transform as concepts once their formal confinements to recitative

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<sup>23</sup> See Russo for the argument that the shock of the *quadro di stupore* centrally involves transformations of the relations between characters. For the more general argument that the shift from *seria* to *buffa* as opera's generic dominant in the eighteenth century involved a shift from vertical (monarchal/theological) to horizontal (social) relations, see Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 34-67, esp. 63. For a more contemporary discussion of the experience of the present as a dilated, affective impasse, see Lauren Berlant, "Starved," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (June 20, 2007), 433-44.

and sung numbers begins to destabilize. The intermezzo's two acts unfold a story involving just three characters: Uberto, his servant Serpina, and a mute manservant named Vespone. Serpina wants to become the mistress of the house and sets out on a plan to manipulate Uberto into marrying her. The scene in question takes place in the intermezzo's second half, and begins when Serpina attempts to stimulate Uberto's feeling for her by vividly evoking a hypothetical future in which she is married and gone from his life. This aria, sung in the subjunctive, is followed by her departure from the house to bring in her "fiancé": a man named Captain Tempesta who is really Uberto's mute manservant in disguise. Faced with the prospect of his servant marrying another man, Uberto begins to brood over whether he should marry her himself:

## UBERTO

### Recitative

*Ah! poveretta lei! Per altro io penserei...  
 ma... ella è serva...  
 ma... il primo non saresti...  
 dunque, la sposeresti? Basta...  
 Eh no, no, non sia!  
 Su, pensieri ribaldi andate via.  
 Piano, io me l'ho allevata:  
 so poi com'ella è nata... Eh! che sei matto!  
 Piano di grazia... Eh... non pensarci affatto...  
 ma... Io ci ho passione,  
 e pur... quella meschina. Eh torna... oh dio!  
 eh, siam da capo... Oh! che confusione.*

Ah, poor girl! Yet, I would not be averse ...  
 ... but ... she is a servant ...  
 but, I would not be the first ...  
 so, should I marry her? ...  
 Enough, it cannot be!  
 Leave me in peace, twisted thoughts.  
 Consider, I have raised her almost from birth  
 ... Ah, you are insane!  
 Be patient and drive away such thoughts ...  
 But ... I feel passions ... and they are for the  
 wretched girl. What a conflict ... Oh God!  
 It begins once more ... what a confusion!

### Aria

*Son imbrogliato io già;  
 ho un certo che nel core  
 che dir per me non so  
 s'è amore, o s'è pietà.  
 Sento un che, poi mi dice:  
 Uberto, pensa a te.  
 Io sto fra il sì e il no*

I am very perplexed  
 I feel something in my heart  
 I cannot describe.  
 Is it love? Is it pity?  
 A voice tells me:  
 Uberto, think of yourself!  
 I am torn between yes and no,

*fra il voglio e fra il non voglio,  
e sempre più m'imbroglia.  
Ah! misero, infelice,  
che mai sarà di me!*

between wanting and not wanting,  
and am ever more perplexed.  
Ah! Miserable, unhappy one,  
What will become of me?<sup>24</sup>

Uberto's recitative suggests that he is speaking as his thoughts are still being formed. His sentences trail off, he interrupts himself often, and his attempts at clarity are peppered with hesitant prepositions. He is both the confused subject of feeling and the authoritarian voice who commands himself to be decisive and composed. The only thing he seems to be clear about is that he feels *something* ("But ... I feel passions," "I feel something in my heart").

Yet the shift from recitative to aria brings about no further clarity. Feeling, here, is far from providing the expressive signature on a completed passage of action; it does not summarize the action's emotional genre nor formally indicate the closure of a dramatic unit. Rather, feeling is the only thread Uberto can hang onto within an extreme subjective and dramatic instability. The *mystery* of what he feels, "torn between yes and no, between wanting and not wanting," is associated with a narrative opacity: "What will become of me?" While it is the clarity of named emotion that allows an aria to serve a summative function, capping an action off with the release or performance of the feeling associated with it, Uberto's incapacity to identify his feeling—"Is it love? Is it pity?"—serves to obscure the genre he is in, which bars him from knowing how things will end. The fact that it could be either love *or* pity suggests that he feels something intense and directed that has nevertheless yet to settle into a specific emotion, one of a finite number of feeling-states associated with particular cultural scripts and significances. Instead, he is still in the part of feeling where the needle is skipping around, withholding the clarity of

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<sup>24</sup> The texts and translations of the Pergolesi works in this chapter are transcribed from Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *Tutto Pergolesi: The Complete Opera Edition* (Halle: Arthaus Musik, 2013), DVD.

meaning. Feeling in this aria might be imagined within the model of affect represented in the following graph:

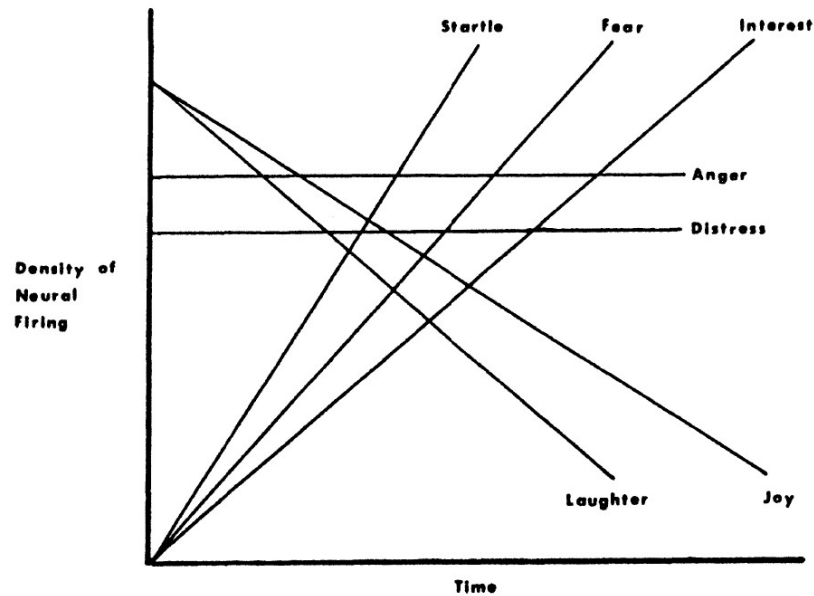


Figure 2. Silvan Tomkins's graph of affects.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank adapted this graph, by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins, to show how states that are radically different in significance for the subject (for instance, fear and interest) might be related in the form of bodily activation that produces them.<sup>25</sup> Each emotion on the graph is the result of a temporality and intensity of neural firing: thus a slower activation of the impulse that is read as fear might appear to consciousness simply as interest. It is in this space of indetermination, between the sensing of affects and the determination of their socially (and generically) circumscribed significance, that Uberto finds himself in the aria.

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<sup>25</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995), 506.

Fredric Jameson identifies a historical shift in Western symbolic production from (named) emotion to affect in the 1850s, pinpointing its occurrence in music to the dissolution of the aria's clearly defined feeling-states and the emergence of Richard Wagner's continuous chromaticism, which mimics affect in its "sliding scale" of harmonically non-functional tones and constantly shifting intensities.<sup>26</sup> Yet we might also detect traces of a musical formal transition from named emotion to affect here, in the use of an aria to perform the inhabitation of feeling that is unnamable, and in which the significance of feeling is not its self-evident clarity but its registration of the uncertain and unknowable. The affective confusion of the aria is introduced by Uberto's remark about his perception of a shift in social norms: "She is a servant ... but ... I would not be the first ..." Here, Uberto attempts to dismiss the idea of marriage, but it is rekindled by his awareness of a precedent of masters marrying servants that allows him to continue in imagining it as a possibility for himself. The musical formal shift from emotion to



Figure 3. Uberto and his manservant hearing a disembodied voice in Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*.

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<sup>26</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 39-42.

di - ce: U - ber - - - to, pen - - - sa a

te, pen - - - sa a te.

1.2. "Uberto, pensa te" from *La serva padrona*.

D. GIOVANNI. Nò! Nò! Nò!

IL COMMENDATORE. Sì! Sì! Ah, tem - po più non

L'EPORELLO. Sì, Sì!

1.3 The Commendatore's vocal line in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

affect is associated with a historical circumstance in which the dissolution of calcified structures of power results in the proliferation of new possibilities, ones that reduce the role of social identity in marriage and place new emphasis on the decisiveness of feeling. This is not to say that servants or masters in the old world never experienced conflict in decisions of marriage; but in this aria, Uberto experiences the loosening of class scripts as an expansion of options that leads to intense indecisiveness and self-scrutiny (“Uberto, know yourself!”). He can no longer disqualify the unwelcome thought on the basis of class structure alone.

Gary Tomlinson argues that comic opera began to initiate a shift away from the metaphysics of voice in *opera seria*, in which the voice acts as a material counterpart to transcendent, supersensible realms.<sup>27</sup> Yet because comic opera primarily parodies or avoids the mysticism of *seria* aesthetics, it does not yet inaugurate a “new relation to metaphysical realms.” It is in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* that Tomlinson finally finds the arrival of an “absolute self-possession” that “moves far from early modern operatic subjectivity,” and a voice, in Don Giovanni’s aria “Finch’han dal vino,” that is “steadfast, unself-conscious, unknowing,” enacting a dog-headed dismissal of the spiritual that “comes close to refuting metaphysics itself.”<sup>28</sup> It is notable in this context that at least one production of *La serva padrona*, directed in 2008 by Mando Bernardinello and conducted by Diego Fasolis, does not have Uberto alone sing the aria’s third-person injunction, “Uberto, pensa a te!”<sup>29</sup> Instead, on the last iteration of the verse, Uberto stops singing and an unseen voice, deep and reverberant, delivers the command acousmatically

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<sup>27</sup> Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, 34-67.

<sup>28</sup> Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, 64-5. There is a difference between *buffa*’s representation of “an intersubjective matrix of social relations” that “reflects the world of exteriorized, interactive emotion” and the kind of self that Don Giovanni represents, which has been imagined by generations of critics in relation to an image of society as constraint; in this view, full personhood exists to the extent that its will/desire is intransigent to the social.

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *La serva padrona*, dir. Mando Bernardinello (Switzerland: HD Suisse, 2008). Available on YouTube, “(HD) Pergolesi: La Serva Padrona, intermezzo in two parts | Diego Fasolis & Barocchisti,” 45:51, accessed August 11, 2017.

as he and his mute servant listen in fear. In its visual reference to Don Giovanni and Leporello, listening to the voice of the Commendatore in the graveyard—and thereby underlining the disembodied voice’s aural similarity to the Commendatore’s deathly voice—the production gestures toward a different meaning of the phrase “know yourself.” It no longer refers casually to Uberto knowing what he feels or wants in this situation—or, to be more precise, in its delivery as an existential demand, knowing these things is no longer a casual matter. The reference to *Don Giovanni* invites the spectator to read the emergence of a newly modern subjectivity in Uberto’s aria of anxious affect, the feeling in his chest maddeningly imprecise and yet essential for a decision that was once made easier by the circumstances of birth.

### ***Seria-buffa***

I propose that an understanding of feeling’s place and function in the closing exchanges of *Figaro* should take into account the transformations discussed above in opera’s representation of feeling: the desegregation of feeling from the expressive end of the action-expression cycle, and the shift in the representation of shock from tone to musical structure. The resulting *quadro di stupore* is fundamentally opposed to the sociality of recitative, which posits an environment in which talking is the most natural thing—where talking together is the activity of being together. Instead, the expansion of shock’s affect represents a point of social disintegration, of the intense separation of characters’ interiorities, of a loss of confidence in their grasp of what is real. The ending’s generic closure requires a restitution of this crisis of intersubjectivity, in which the idea of a shared world is at its most tenuous and characters feel themselves to be insane, mad. The moment thus invites the question of what it will take to restore their sanity. What must happen

before the sense of a shared world can be reconstituted, and generic endings, or even ending at all, become imaginable again?

It turns out that the reconstitution of shared life happens very differently before and after the formal changes tracked in this chapter. If, as Stefano Castelvechi has argued, *Figaro* represents a third mode, the sentimental, that is neither properly *buffa* nor *seria* but which arises in the midst of the eighteenth century's culture of sensibility, how does its denouement contrast resolutions in earlier serious and comic works that also turn on matters of revelation, recognition, and forgiveness?<sup>30</sup> In this section, the two comic intermezzi written by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, along with the two *seria* operas with which they premiered, will offer examples of operatic resolution before the formal developments of the *quadro* and the multi-part finale. Specifically, I argue that what unites the *buffa* and *seria* modes in these works is the shared sense that heartfelt utterances are performative and not necessarily reliable. What constitutes the *seria-buffa* conjunction is thus the idea of feeling's performativity, which can be questioned, interrogated, doubted—responses that disappear in *Figaro*'s sentimental representation of collective redemption.

Consider the reconciliation at the end of Pergolesi's other comic intermezzo *Livietta e Tracollo*. In the story, Tracollo is a man who has robbed Livietta's brother. Livietta exacts revenge by dressing up as a rich Frenchman and pretending to doze while her neck is bedizened with valuable necklaces. Tracollo then enters the stage dressed as a poor peasant woman, and attempts to steal the necklaces. Over the span of two acts, the two continue to spar through various disguises (for example, Livietta sends Tracollo to jail for stealing, but Tracollo escapes by disguising himself as an astrologer). At some point in the exchange Tracollo extends an offer

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<sup>30</sup> Castelvechi, *Sentimental Opera*, 188-209.

of marriage, which Livietta scornfully rejects. The proposal is the gun in the comedy's first act, and the pair's subsequent play-acting is shadowed with the question of how they will come to be married. Near the end of the second act, after a bout of particularly raucous playing in which they mime rowing across the river Styx, Livietta pretends to be fatally afflicted and declares that she is about to die. There follows a death aria, serious in affect, in which Livietta asks Tracollo for his forgiveness in plangent gasps:

LIVIETTA

*Caro, perdonami, placa lo sdegno  
La destra stringimi di pace in segno  
Ti lascio addio; Tracollo mio,  
di Livietta non ti scordar.*

Forgive me, my love, don't be angry  
Take my hand as a sign of peace  
I leave you, farewell; my Tracollo  
don't forget Livietta.

After an extended performance of dying (the aria is in ABA form, and the later sections increase the intensity and figuration of the orchestral accompaniment), Livietta collapses at the end of the number. When the music strikes up again in the mode of accompanied recitative, Tracollo's first question concerns the credibility of expressive utterance:

Can I believe her or not? Shall I approach or not? Shall I soften or stand firm? I'm afraid of getting entangled. She's too clever by half. On the one hand, that's true, but on the other, I feel sorry for her. Her fear, my mistreatment, could have made her faint. I'm so tempted!

Tracollo reiterates a number of the themes present in musicologists' responses to the expressive appeal at the end *Figaro*: he wants to know how seriously to take Livietta's show of suffering and contrition; he considers rationally whether or not to allow himself to be moved; he worries about being a dupe to sentimentality, but also worries about being too cynical in the face of pleading. He attempts to assess the genuineness of an affective scene by weighing it against its

causes, and recognizes the appeal of giving in to the sentimental offer of believing in what is said with feeling.

His solution to the sentimentalist's dilemma, considered from the perspective of *Figaro's* ending, is astonishing:

There's nothing else for it; I've thought it through. I'll creep up close and, if I see her make a tiny movement, I'll go back to playing mad and not believe her.

In other words, he will confirm the veracity of her expressive utterance via bodily evidence. In this world, sincerity leaves traces on the body, which can be found out if only one looked closely and carefully enough (recall that Tracollo began the act in costume as an astrologer, peering at the moon and stars through his telescope). Sincerity in this world is the antipode to comic play and masquerade; at the end of the day, disguises can always be taken off. *Figaro*, it should be noted, contains a series of unmaskings that result in comedy: Cherubino under the sofa, Susanna in the closet. But in the end, the sincerity of the Count's plea for forgiveness is not something that can be settled by searching for clues on his body. What it would mean to take him or what he says seriously cannot be settled in the same way by evidence.

In Livietta and Tracollo's comic world, it is the musical language and rhetoric of *seria* that serves as the discourse and register of dissembling. For instance, near the end of the first act, Livietta threatens to report Tracollo to the magistrate, who punishes thieves by execution. In response, Tracollo produces the following recitative, culminating in an aria:

TRACOLLO

Recitative

*Misero! A chi mi volgerò? Sì, a voi, a voi, numi d'Averno. Proserpine,*

Poor me! Who can I turn to? Yes, to you, gods of the underworld. Proserpinas, Plutos,

*Plutoni, idre, cerberi, sfingi,  
tempestose tempeste, folgori, lampi e  
tuoni, e voi che un palmo avete di coda,  
funestissime comete. Stelle fisse ed  
errant, lune mancanti e piene, fermate,  
fermate il vostro corso a rimirar le mie  
tragiche scene.*

Aria

*Ecco il povero Tracollo  
Già vicino a tracollar  
Già mi vedo il laccio al collo,  
Già mi sento soffogar  
Questo è l'ultimo singhiozzo,  
Giunta è l'alma al gargarozzo,  
Già si parte, già sen va.*

Hydras, Cerberuses, Sphinxes, tempestuous  
tempests, thunderbolts, lightning and thunder,  
and you, ill-omened palm-tailed comets.  
Fixed and wandering stars,  
new moon and full moon, halt,  
halt on your course to look at my  
tragic predicament.

Behold poor Tracollo  
Facing doom  
I can just see the noose around my neck,  
I can feel myself choking.  
This is my last gasp,  
My soul is in my gullet.  
It's going now, it's on its way.

When faced with the threat of death, Tracollo's response is to switch to the discourse of *seria*. His recitative rehearses a laundry list of the genre's mythological and tragic symbology: gods, raging weather, celestial bodies. The references do not belong to comedy's vernacular and intimate world, but rather invoke *seria*'s penchant for the grand and the distant, occasionally to the point of farce: thus Tracollo's vocabulary is sometimes not adequate to the task of expressing his despair ("tempestuous tempests"), and he is so anxious to put on a show of pity that he can hardly decide which gods or spirits to invoke, finally just naming all the ones he can think of. Musically, the accompanied recitative and the orchestral accompaniment to the aria fully embody *seria*'s tropes of plaintive affect: gasping figures, stern double-dotted rhythms, sinewy dissonant lines that rise and fall, and strong melodic emphases on 1-5 to mark the beginnings and ends of declaratives. Excised from context, "Ecco il povero Tracollo" is not all that different rhetorically and sonically from some of the numbers that the audience would have heard in the *seria* acts of the evening's entertainment.

What distinguishes this aria from those in *seria*, though, is the response of other characters. Livietta hears the tone and register of Tracollo’s utterance not as the naturalized sound of sincerity but as a persuasive tactic. She recognizes it as an expressive choice whose purpose is to render her more sympathetic and generous, but it has the opposite effect, as she relates in recitative immediately after the aria ends: “You’re fooling yourself to think you can make me change my mind. The more you beg, the more you harden my heart.” The expressivity native to *seria* is denaturalized as the language of acting and play in the *buffa* intermezzo. In fact, the characters routinely employ its musical and symbolic conventions when they are in disguise (for instance, in Tracollo’s initial appearance onstage as a poor peasant woman), and routinely appraise each other’s virtuosity in putting on *seria* as a style (Livietta responds to one of Tracollo’s performances of tragic pity with the quip, “He’s good at pretending!”).

In the intermezzo’s original performance context, in which the comic tale, broken into two parts, was staged in the intermissions of *opera seria*’s standard three-act structure, this relationship of styles would have been presented within a nested narrative structure:

<i>Seria</i> I	<i>Buffa</i> I	<i>Seria</i> II	<i>Buffa</i> II	<i>Seria</i> III
Beginning of <i>seria</i> plot	Beginning of <i>buffa</i> plot / Midpoint of dramatic tension	Midpoint of dramatic tension	Resolution of <i>buffa</i> plot	Resolution of <i>seria</i> plot

Though variations in any audience’s member’s ability or desire to follow the plot is an issue for every era of opera spectatorship, there is evidence that contemporaneous critics wondered at the overall effect this hybrid form would have on the dramatic coherence of each part. “Just imagine seeing a representation of the death of Caesar and Pourceaugnac [a comedy by Molière], in

which an act of each is performed in alternation,” despaired the French critic Josse de Villeneuve.<sup>31</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau similarly worried about how audiences would parse two stories folded into each other, writing in his *Dictionary of Music* that “if they suffered the principal [story] to be forgotten, the spectator, at the end of each *fête*, would be as little moved as at the beginning; and to animate him afresh, and inspire him with a new movement, we should be obliged to begin again for ever.”<sup>32</sup>

Within the course of an evening, *seria*'s and *buffa*'s narratives repeatedly interrupt but also double one another, often passing over the same thematic terrain twice—first in serious and then in comic style, and then the other way around. For instance, the *seria* opera *Il prigionier superbo*, which details a romantic and military rivalry between Metalce, King of the Goths, and Viridate, Prince of Denmark, is tonally and thematically distinct from *La serva padrona*'s story of a servant who tries to trick her master into marrying her. But *prigionier* and *padrona* also contain many continuities. In both, a man in power wishes to replace the woman he is partnered with by marrying someone else. Act II of *Il prigionier superbo* opens with the woman threatened with the man's departure confiding to a tertiary character her plan to trick the man and win back his affection; Act II of *La serva padrona* then opens with Serpina confiding to a tertiary character her plan to entrap her master in marriage. Both stories contain plots of concealment that prepare for later resolutions in which the unconcealment of the secret triggers closing gestures of forgiveness, marriage, and reconciliation.

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<sup>31</sup> Josse de Villeneuve, *Lettre sur le mechanism de l'opéra italien* (Paris, 1756), quoted in Charles E. Troy, *The Comic Intermezzo: A Study in the History of Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979), 131.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Dictionary of Music*, trans. William Waring, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (London, 1775), 300.

The way in which these narrative elements fold over and double one another scaffolds a stylistic relationship in which each form of opera is embedded within the other as its discourse of play. Just as comic intermezzi were introduced in the intermissions of *seria* to provide tonal and dramatic relief, so too does *seria* re-emerge within the environment of comedy as the discourse of play-acting. Yet *buffa*'s tonal contrast was not only confined to the intermezzi, as Martha Feldman has argued. *Buffa*'s light, parodistic treatment of *seria* tropes also emerged as a metadiscourse between particular *seria* actors and their audiences. Feldman gives the example of a castrato named Caffarello who "got into trouble more than once for making obscene gestures and remarks, joking with the audience, making fun of other singers on the stage, mimicking and anticipating their phrases," and notes that "in the very theater where *seria*'s meanings were proposed (even conceded) with all the overt symbolic trappings of unquestionable absolutism, singer and audience seem to have behaved with decided freedom."<sup>33</sup> The relation between *seria* and *buffa* is not only one of different or opposed genres, or of styles of opera in cultural competition with one another; nor is *buffa* simply the intimate and vernacular alternative to *seria*'s kings and gods. *Buffa* and *seria* are invaginated as each other's play forms, each one serving as the mode that signifies improvisation, mugging, and theatrical address within the other's aesthetic context. Where one is naturalized the other emerges as the sound of play.

In other words, the symbiosis of *seria* and *buffa* is based in each one's destabilization of the other's natural mode of expression. Each one emerges as a tonal and affective *alternative* to the default sound of the other's world, which means that each style is marked from the beginning as a rhetorical form, a mode of play or commentary or performance, rather than as unconscious and undifferentiated language. Their mutual destabilization via gestures of masquerade and play

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<sup>33</sup> Martha Feldman, "Magic Mirrors and the *Seria* Stage: Thoughts toward a Ritual View," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995), 430.

is significant for how characters in both worlds assess and establish certainty when it comes to others' utterances, and indicates a point of difference with *Figaro's* sentimental ending. Put simply, it is not taken for granted in Pergolesi's *seria* or *buffa* narratives that someone's profession of change or commitment will be immediately accepted by the other person. In *Adriano in Siria*, the second act begins—not unlike the second act of *The Marriage of Figaro*—with the woman whose husband has scorned her wondering whether he will ever return to loving her again. When Sabina confronts her husband Adriano, however, he admits to his infatuation with the prisoner Emirena, and tells her, “Sabina, you have won. I happily return to you.” But Sabina tells him that she doesn't believe what he says, which leads Adriano to further determinations: “I shall not see her again.” Sabina then asks how he can trust himself. “I am determined,” Adriano says, “and one can do anything when one wishes.” The tone of the exchange is different, literally, from the Count's reconciliation with the Countess: this exchange is set in recitative. It is also different in the sense that the couple is aware of the difficulties of promises, from Sabina's shrewd question about self-trust to Adriano's slightly defensive protestation that “one can do anything when one wishes,” as if attempting to talk himself into it. As in *Livietta e Tracollo*, the scene of expressive appeal is followed by a scene in which characters discuss and question how seriously to take a confession or protestation, dissect its likeliness, and seek evidence beyond the sound and spirit of the utterance itself. It is as if the absence of this second scene from the ending of *Figaro* displaces its anxieties and questions onto the opera's reception, such that the absence of questions about sincerity, masquerade and authenticity in the operatic scene itself externalizes them into problems that emerge in the critical response to genre as such.

Whether an expressive utterance (of confession, of promise) is contested, probed, questioned or not appears to be bound up in the difference between “speaking” and singing, between recitative and musical number. Another key point of difference between the endings of the Pergolesi operas—both *seria* and *buffa*—and the ending of *Figaro* is that all the Pergolesi endings situate their scenes of forgiveness and reconciliation in recitative, which are then followed by affirmative closing choruses sung by the entire ensemble. These works maintain the separation of active and expressive passages, and specifically locate revelation, personal epiphany, demands for forgiveness, and reconciliation as events pertaining to action, not expression. One way to approach the significance of *Figaro*’s ending, then, is to consider the significance of transplanting the request for and granting of forgiveness from a period of action to a period of expression. Such a move amounts to a reformulation of what *kinds* of activity asking for and granting forgiveness are taken to be; something changes about the nature of the acts and their status as expressions.

### **End of an (Utterance’s) Era**

In her study of recognitions in Mozart’s operas, Jessica Waldoff suggests that recognition scenes are problematic because they “raise questions and pose difficulties in the very scenes that attempt to provide solutions and a sense of a satisfactory conclusion.”<sup>34</sup> They are galling not only because they are dramatically incredible, in other words, but even more so because they occur in a dramatic context whose purpose is to perform the evaporation of disbelief and the coming together of all in shared conviction. Recognition scenes are therefore particularly liable to produce a sense of critical detachment between the spectator and the story. As Waldoff writes,

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<sup>34</sup> Jessica Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart’s Operas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 79.

they are “moments at which fictions are fully revealed to be fictions,” when the represented action “ceases to be plausible and crosses over into the realm of artificiality and contrivance.”<sup>35</sup> It is no accident that aesthetic questions tend to appear in the vicinity of recognitions, since they are moments in which the apparatus and the conventionality of genre show through with particular force.

Recognitions, then, may be sites where the waning of old forms and the emergence of new ones can be tracked, and where we might get a sense of what is new or newly vexing in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Aristotle used the word *anagnorisis* for recognition and *peripeteia* for a reversal of fortunes or events in a plot; Waldoff notes that recognitions are also often scenes of *peripeteia*, in which a sudden dawning or draining of the way a character sees the world leads to an irreversible shift in the circumstances of the world they share with others. The formal shifts of the mid-eighteenth century that led to the development of comic opera’s multi-section finale, and in particular the *quadro di stupore*, allowed opera to imagine this moment as an opening of a new texture and rhythm of sociality, in which the intensity of characters’ inner thoughts is suspended in a zone of porous contact with other, unreachable minds. The scene of sudden revelation is thus not simply another event in the tale but a “shift *into* the implausible: the secret unfolded lies beyond the realm of the common experience; the truth discovered is ‘marvelous.’”<sup>36</sup> According to Russo, the standardization of the operatic scene of shock meant that its arrival could announce clearly to the audience that they had moved into a new aesthetic framework (“ci troviamo ora in un 'quadro di stupore'”) in which the declarative function of words had been abandoned (“la funzione dichiarativa delle parole”).<sup>37</sup> The final ensemble of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>37</sup> Russo, “LARGO AL CONCERTATO!,” 65.

*Figaro* is not exactly a *quadro di stupore*—its characters sing in *legato* rather than in gasps, and address one another instead of singing privately—but it immediately follows a revelation of identity that stuns the ensemble and orchestra into total silence, their collective breath held on a fermata over a grand pause as they await the Count’s response. If, as Russo argues, the *quadro* explodes opera out of a communicative framework in which utterance functions declaratively, what new framework takes its place?

It is useful to recall in this context that many of the critical responses to *Figaro* cited at the beginning of this chapter turned on the poverty or failure of words—their failure to mean, to guarantee, to be dependable, to amount to more than only signs. In his dismissal of *Figaro*’s closing words, Kerman cites the vacuity of the text as a corroboration of the music’s dramatic power:

With Beaumarchais [the author of the play on which *The Marriage of Figaro* is based], the reconciliation is nothing—worse than nothing, it suggests fatally that the intricate plot had beaten the author, and that clemency was the only way he saw to unravel it. As for Da Ponte, here is his contribution:

COUNT: Forgive me, Countess!

COUNTESS: I am more gentle  
And answer you “yes.”

ALL: We all are delighted  
To have it end thus.

With this miserable material before him, Mozart built a revelation, and saw how it could be supported by other elements in Beaumarchais’s scaffolding. In opera, the dramatist is the composer.<sup>38</sup>

But the meaning of this “material” must surely account for historical context, and in particular the shifts in the organization and ideology of social structure that were in motion in the time of

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<sup>38</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 91.

*Figaro*'s composition. *Figaro*, and the Da Ponte-Mozart collaborations more generally, are frequently cited as documents of the coming French Revolution and the redefinitions of the Enlightenment, although Pierpaolo Polzonetti has also argued that their political reference point should be traced backward and across the ocean: Beaumarchais, he argues, was "translating ideas of the American Enlightenment for his fellow French citizens," and the Da Ponte-Mozart operas "were conceived in the wake of the American Revolution and to a certain extent inspired by this epoch-changing event."<sup>39</sup> The operatic shift from monarchs and deities to the increasing popularity of stories involving common people engaged in the intimate dramas of a household took place against this background of political reformulation.

One aspect of this shift was the waning of operatic reconciliations that featured a monarch who dispensed clemency and forgiveness across his realm, or members of a family who recognized their relation of blood. Thus, in Mozart's Da Ponte operas, "the recognitions of family ties and birthright appear to be far less important than recognitions of self, knowledge, purpose, or feeling."<sup>40</sup> Instead of endings that affirmed class identity, "non-conformist recognition scenes began to manifest pride in one's achievement."<sup>41</sup> Reconciliation scenes written under the aegis of Enlightenment values were ones that recognized "the potential of the human spirit in the direction of knowledge, affection, and progress, and, more often than not, with unfailing optimism." They no longer confirmed the identifying power of birth and blood, but now denounced them as irrelevant "through couplings justified by affinity of heart regardless of nationality and class."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pierpaolo Polzonetti, *Italian Opera in the Age of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 317.

<sup>40</sup> Waldoff, *Recognition*, 311.

<sup>41</sup> Polzonetti, *Italian Opera*, 148.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

These broad structural shifts altered the context of the simple words spoken in opera's endings of restitution and reconciliation. For instance, Marvin Carlson writes of Goldoni's libretto for *Il re alla caccia*, a *dramma giocoso*, that "the resolution is very much imposed and manipulated by the benevolent king, who has the means and inclination to resolve gender conflict by fiat and class conflict by ennobling everyone who asks."<sup>43</sup> Yet what is different in the monarchical resolution and the one in *Figaro*'s court involves the king's "means and inclination," his ability to resolve conflict "by fiat." There is still an abundance of power structuring the relationships in the Count's court: it is his court, after all, and many of the madcap day's events revolve around his freedom of movement and the relegation of others to performative or literal hiddenness. The opera opens on the question of the Count's freedom to move between and into the servants' quarters, and anyone who is not the Count tries to salvage relief or leverage by occupying its smallest and most furtive spaces, a closet or the underside of a couch, where his dominion might be less absolute. Yet there is something different about the quality of the ending, which begins when the Count discovers that his subjects have been involved in a plot and beg him for forgiveness, and ends when the Countess's unconcealment transfers the court's forgiveness onto the question of whether she will forgive him. Unlike kingly clemency, forgiveness in *Figaro* is not delivered as an edict; we might say that the Count lacks the means, in this context, to simply dispense clemency across his little realm. The act of reconciliation cannot be delivered as an edict; it is no longer *automatic* in the same sense.

In the loosening of inherited forms of power, there is a change in the quality of the utterance that delivers operatic forgiveness and clemency, and thereby to the mechanism that

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<sup>43</sup> Marvin Carlson, "Il re alla caccia and Le Roi et le fermier: Italian and French treatments of class and gender," in *Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna*, eds. Mary Hunter and James Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96.

installs social harmony in generically happy endings. A king's absolution is endorsed within a political and theological structure, and remains in effect until the dissolution of that structure or the issue of a contravening order. The ending of *Figaro*, however, is shot through with the sense that words have lost the power to make such guarantees; no one can say for certain how long forgiveness will last, or if it will change, or when. Its intention cannot simply go into effect, like a law, but must be continually tested for, including by those involved. Though "perdono" is the same word spoken by a king, it is a different kind of speech act. Thus, even if the sentimental ending is inevitable as a feature of its genre, the feeling that saturates the reconciliation's exchanges is rather an indication that things are less secure than before, that words alone cannot be counted on to deliver the same certainties they once did. When the Count begins to sing, he does not yet know whether his little court can be healed and the comedy brought to an end, even though he is still the Count. Everything hangs on his utterance and her response to it, speech acts that are laden with a different significance than the kingly edict that merely transmits royal will.

We can think of the variety of responses and interpretations to *Figaro*'s ending that opened this chapter as an effect of a certain loss, once kingly clemency is gone. Once those words lose their guaranteed power, their force can only be trusted, disbelieved, interpreted; the fact that there is disagreement about the significance of the Count and Countess's exchange is a sign that words cannot erase those uncertainties. Instead, confirmation must be found somewhere else, and one place it is searched for is in the quality or tone of an exchange, the way in which words are said; *expression* now carries the burden of asserting a stability whose duration can no longer be guaranteed. Expressivity floods into the gap left by the disappearance of monarchical power, even while the Count's and Countess's sentiments are still transacted within sharp differences of power and freedom. Expressive utterance is not a sign that everyone is now equal,

addressing one another from the same place of human spirit; it is rather a sign that certain components of law have now gone underground, become implicit.

The question of whether the Countess's forgiveness or the Count's contrition are genuine or not, and whether their effects on the court's social world will last or not, cannot be known. The absence of this certainty generates the need for a terminology of certainty, such as the notion of a relationship's "security" or the firmness of a marriage's "foundation," which are taken to leave clues in the aesthetic register of everyday exchange. It is this register that is then mined interpretively for conclusions about the genre that the couple ultimately occupies: tragedy, comedy, or something else. The modern quandary exemplified in the responses to *Figaro's* reconciliations, of not knowing whether to believe or to be skeptical of sentimental expressions of feeling, cannot exist without a broader cultural desire to treat feeling and expressivity as privileged loci of knowledge about a life's generic and large-scale contours. It exists within a logic that privileges expressive utterance as a site of truth and humanity, at the exclusion of other logics.

The responses to *Figaro* also document their writers' historicity. They are part of an ongoing epoch of expressivity in which one is liable to experience moral weight in the choice between the acceptance of, or skepticism toward, expressions of sentiment. Yet the choice between sincerity and skepticism is part of a broader logic that first presumes the heartfelt exposure of feeling to be a place *to look for* evidence of humanity—a theme that will occupy the remainder of this dissertation. This basic assumption undergirds various kinds of liberal common sense in public and private forms of intimacy: the political empathy that is stirred up by spectacles of the underprivileged; the sense that feeling tenderly for someone and witnessing the tender return of this feeling is a sign that they are being properly cared for; or the sense that

hearing someone's passionate utterance, their virtuosic display of suffering, means witnessing something fundamental and even pornographically exposed *about* them rather than witnessing the performance of a discourse, learned by you and them, in which the intense disclosure of feeling equates subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> *Figaro*'s sentimental ending brackets expression's former association with play and masquerade and reinvents it as a discourse of truth.

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<sup>44</sup> For consideration of how liberal spectacles meant to stimulate empathy draw on the aesthetic "allure" of degradation, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (University of California Press, 1993), 25. For an example of a liberal cinematic spectacle, see Adam Nayman, "Atrocity Exhibition: *12 Years a Slave*," *Reverse Shot*, accessed August 12, 2017, [http://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/1095/12\\_years\\_slave](http://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/1095/12_years_slave).

## Chapter 2

### Opera as a Form of Life:

#### *The Ban on Love and Tannhäuser*

In the last chapter, we discussed the way in which the *quadro di stupore* records the sharp impact of an unexpected event as a spaciousness of texture, a hovering in dramatic time that seems to stretch out *ad infinitum* as the characters collect themselves privately. I described the number's musical repetitiveness and dramatic sluggishness as reflecting the experience of being in shock, of a numbing of outside sound as the noise of inner thought, circling for comprehension, reaches its pitch. Yet since the nineteenth century, the *quadro*'s musical form has also been cited as an example of operatic excess. "Some great event," wrote Carlo Ritorni about the convention in 1841, "suspending the course of the action, will amaze the participants and cause them to reflect, giving rise to the *largo* or the *adagio*, where many master composers explore at length (perhaps too much) the variety of their slow harmonies."<sup>1</sup> The sentence models Ritorni's drift of attention: when amazement and reflection force the tempo into a *largo* or an *adagio*, his focus is drawn out of the story by the composer's technique, which he feels to be ostentatious. It is also at this point that he feels the need to issue a sanction, recording an impression of sheer surplus in the scene by writing a surplus—the parenthetical aside "perhaps too much"—into the sentence.

Contemporary responses to opera still often associate the general impression of opera's *too-muchness* with the *quadro di stupore*. As Mary Ann Smart has argued, it is the "dramatic

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Ritorni, "Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica" (Milan, 1841), 46-7, quoted in Scott L. Balthazar, "Mayr, Rossini, and the Development of the Early 'Concertato' Finale," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116, no. 2 (1991): 266.

stasis and literal repetition” of the *quadro* that especially troubles modern opera directors, because “the copious musical repetition and the ‘frozen’ ensembles militate against the spectator’s immersion in the drama, rendering a naturalistic or identificatory experience almost impossible.”<sup>2</sup> Here, “immersion,” “naturalism” and “identification” are the desired modes of operatic experience that are under threat by “copious” musical repetition and “frozen” drama; as a result, one of the “most urgent tasks of the revisionist *regisseur*” is “that of opening up a space of critical detachment between the audience and the emotive content of the spectacle.”<sup>3</sup> The directors further imply not only that whoever gets too close to this “emotive content” risks unconsciousness, but also that the operas might be unconscious themselves without the intervention of modernist staging, as the imprecision of pronoun referents in the following comment suggests: “You have to wake them up, poke holes into the operas so that inner life will flow out and force them to confront the issues, instead of being lulled into comfortable euphoria.”<sup>4</sup>

These are common, perennial responses to opera’s excesses. The danger almost always returns to an aspect of feeling, whether it is the “emotive content” that must be critically distanced or the “comfortable euphoria” that must be disturbed. For the sanctioning critic of opera, there is not much difference between musical and bodily excess, between the “literal repetition” of motifs and the euphoria that it supposedly produces; in fact, a certain conflation of these different kinds of excess is needed for musical surplus in the scene to be read as emotive surplus, as an indication that the audience is bathing in euphoria. In this chapter, sensuous excess will refer to this conflation of too much music with too much feeling.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Smart, “Resisting Rossini, or Marlon Brando Plays Figaro,” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2011): 154.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Of course, operas represent and aim to produce many kinds of feeling, including ones valorized by modern *regisseurs*. In Smart's survey, it is only when feeling becomes an "emotive content," when lingering in the sensuous persists too long in the absence of new dramatic action, that it calls attention to itself and invites sanction. I call these occurrences of *durative affect*: when feeling, or musical sound, outpaces the time of event, and this sheer persistence causes it to emerge from the background of its integration in the drama and become perceptible as a problem or a matter of interest. *Durative* refers to the idea that there is a conventional temporal relation between an opera's sensuous surface and the pace of its events, and that this relation is disturbed by the literal repetitions and the frozenness of the *quadro*; *dur* also indicates the hardening of opera's sensuous matter into "emotive content," the solidification of the sensuous into an object of attention. This "emotive content" in turn becomes an object to which fantasies about a general population's viewing experience can be attached: mass audiences who are undisciplined in their pleasure and irresponsible in their politics. These are conventional ways in which sensuous proliferation in opera tends to be read, and they imply a normative pedagogy at work in the interpretation of excess itself as a sign.

This chapter considers alternate ways of thinking about the too-muchness of opera and what it means to be absorbed in it. Whereas the modern directors quoted above consider opera's emotive content and comfortable euphorias to be historical blind spots, affective zones in which the individual can never get beyond pleasure to recognize a collective concept of itself, my question concerns how opera's dilations and excesses of sensuousness might be historical—that is, might tell us something specific about the culture that produced them, beyond the ongoing argument between pleasure and the control of pleasure. The proliferations of sound and feeling that take place in scenes of discovery and surprise are especially significant, because they are

diegetic moments in which characters' preconceptions about what has been happening are shattered, and they are forced to reformulate their intentions and self-conceptions to accommodate what they have just learned. The *quadro di stupore* represents the sudden loss and sudden flood of new information, and models the way in which operatic characters adapt and modify their conceptions of one another in scenes of intense affective circulation.

Thus, the first case study, on Richard Wagner's early comic opera *The Ban on Love*, attempts to provide a cultural explanation for what Carl Dahlhaus called the "obvious fact" of number opera: "the difference between recitatives, which are closer to the speed of real speech and sometimes exceed it, and closed numbers, in which time expands or even stands still in order to give sufficient space to an expression of feeling removed from time."<sup>5</sup> If opera is a pattern of sound and language in which giving "sufficient space to an expression of feeling" takes priority over the temporality of "real speech," what desire or anxiety might operatic *form*—in distinction from any particular opera's content—exist to soothe? I consider a scene in which a woman attempts to call out the hypocrisy of a ruler, but is told that his reputation and his station would render her speech act meaningless, without effect. It is the unutterability of a political complaint that generates the first-act finale's *quadro di stupore*, as Isabella "falls into mute despair" and the crowd she has called to her wonders what to make of her silence. Here, the *quadro*'s expansion of an intense moment, its musical proliferations and excesses, are an aesthetic surplus that is tied, in the story, to what cannot be communicated, to the gaps in a world of language between what needs to be said and what cannot yet be understood, publicly or politically. In literary and cinematic scholarship, the logic by which a repressed feeling or utterance produces explosions of language, noise and color is known as melodrama. The *quadro* from *The Ban on Love* similarly

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, "The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera," in *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth*, eds. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 107.

offers a way of thinking of opera's melodrama not as a manifestation of too much expression, but as surface plenitudes that are indexical of linguistic impossibilities.<sup>6</sup>

The second case study turns to a different first-act finale: that of Wagner's middle-period opera *Tannhäuser*. In the scene, Tannhäuser, who is wrapped up in sinful desire, suddenly hears the song of pilgrims on their way to spiritual salvation in Rome, which produces in him a sudden epiphanic transformation. Yet his quest for salvation ends in failure. Reading musical details along with Carolyn Abbate, I argue that what feels like transformation and discovery for Tannhäuser may be the repetition of an old addiction, here to the idea of questing itself, which is reflected in the difference in music that Wagner writes for the unnamed pilgrims in the opera's background and the protagonists in the front. The case revisits the old question of musical meaning, but in a slightly altered form. Instead of asking what a given passage of music means, or whether music can mean at all, its focus is on the way that a scene's sonorous envelope can represent a limit to what it is possible to know. In this it recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein's use of the phrase "form of life" to describe language not as a function of signs and their referents, but as modes of behavior and response that have meaning within a specific discourse world.<sup>7</sup> The operating binary, then, is not between utterances that are true or false, but between utterances that are possible and those that are meaningless or simply unavailable within someone's current way of absorbing and interpreting the world. Just as the concept of the form of life trains attention on how "language reflects the epistemic situations of its users," the cases in this chapter

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 (1972), 68-91.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

ask not whether excess affect is dramatic or superfluous, but instead what characters are shown to learn—and what is foreclosed to them—in scenes of affective saturation.<sup>8</sup>

In offering different ways of reading the sensuous excesses of opera, this chapter invokes a broad and transdisciplinary history of scholarship that focuses on the reinterpretation and reevaluation of feeling. Since at least early feminist philosophy's claim that feeling is not opposed to rational knowledge but can rather be the source of more accurate pictures of the world, there have been explorations in various disciplinary languages of the ways in which feeling can be an index of the social and political, rather than the exclusively individual.<sup>9</sup> The critical dismissal of emotive excesses without formal or political substance has been redressed in various ways: in film melodrama, the neo-Marxist critical turn in the 1960s allowed for readings of stylistic excess as markers of disjuncture between "a mainstream film's aesthetic and ideological programmes."<sup>10</sup> Stylistic excess became an aperture within which to read a film against the grain for a political critique of its own overt claims. Similarly, former musicological dismissals of sentimental European parlor music in the nineteenth century have been redressed by later work via new kinds of affective interpretation: the metonymic "tears" of sentimental aesthetics are no longer simply (and uncritically) mimetic of musical bathos, but instead have been located within social strategies of gendered adaptation and performance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wendy Lee-Lampshire, "The Sound of Little Hummingbird Wings: A Wittgensteinian Investigation of Forms of Life as Forms of Power," *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 409.

<sup>9</sup> See Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 129-156; and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 263-274.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Pub., 1987), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Rabinowitz, "'With Our Own Dominant Passions': Gottschalk, Gender, and the Power of Listening," *19th-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1993): 242-252.

In opera studies, excess has been a traditionally denigrated term, since it directly contradicts the notion of dramatic integrity and coherence postulated in Joseph Kerman's early and influential polemic *Opera as Drama*. Kerman derived his ideal for opera from the values of dramatic European literature, and contrasted operatic music that he described as "shabby," "superficial," or "only" in service of mood with properly "dramatic" music that captured intricate nuances of character and story.<sup>12</sup> This view, like the position of the modern opera directors quoted earlier, models a modernist response to the aesthetics of Romanticism and eighteenth-century *Empfindsamkeit*, which sought an equivalence between the whole form of a work and a deeply individuating and intimate sense of the author's inner self, with feeling as its focus. His rejection of music that only provides a "mood" is like modernist directors' rejections of emotive content: both worry that any music not deeply embedded in an opera's dramatic structure risks creating passive, indulgent audiences.

Yet other writers have taken opera's excessiveness to be central for articulating new political possibilities. For example, the particular excesses of sound, feeling and body that are nearly definitive of opera as an aesthetic have been narrated in memoirs such as Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, in which the irruption of opera's extravagant sensory structures into the ordinary sensory fabric of a young queer man's life constitutes traces of a future patterning that might offer some new scaffoldings for gender and sexuality.<sup>13</sup> The memoir traces an aesthetic itinerary in which initially strange affects, disconnected from the background of the ordinary, are read as apertures to some as-yet unrealized life. Other critical works on opera have concentrated on its surpluses as

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<sup>12</sup> Kerman, Joseph. *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 14.

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

a source of opera's political subversiveness.<sup>14</sup> In Catherine Clément's *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, the oppression of women enacted in the pervasive and ritual sacrificing of opera's heroines for the audience's pleasure is redeemed, or at least mourned, through the potential of the soprano's voice to ring out beyond her character's fate, to echo even past the enclosed world of the drama.<sup>15</sup> Clément's book is an attempt to write herself back to her love of opera, which has betrayed her; and she does this by separating the singing voice from the cruelty inflicted on opera's women, which also means to abandon those characters to their operas, to say their salvation exists only outside their worlds, once the curtains have fallen on their bodies. This is to say that formally, Clément cannot make political sense of opera's excessive affect within the narrative economy of the fiction's world; its utopian promise can only be recovered outside of it, once that world ends. The promise of political repair in this project shares the broad notion, expressed in the directors' comments cited above, that opera's sensuous excesses are not indexical within their worlds; there, their meaning is located in the distance of their distortions of a music-dramatic norm.

These politically engaged texts on opera demonstrate that the aesthetic question of how to read and interpret sensuous excess—of how to respond to and make sense of feeling that seems undermotivated by its context—has bearing, not only for musical works, but also within ordinary life. Consider moments in which someone thinks that someone else is being “sentimental.” The word may imply the observer's opinion that the other person is lingering too long in attachment to something, that there is an implicit friction between the temporality of the observer—which is

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<sup>14</sup> For an interpretation of operatic voice grounded in psychoanalysis, see Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). In musicology, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera; or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

more flexible, able to move on—and the more sluggish temporality of the sentimental person. Coming upon a sentimental person may prompt many of the same defensive maneuvers taken by the modern director: the establishment of a “critical detachment,” and the impulse (which may be acted on or not) to “throw cold water” on the person in order to awaken a more properly realist—we might say more dramatically motivated—response to their surroundings.

The “emotive content” that threatens for the director any possibility of a naturalist, dramatic, or narrative coherence in an operatic scene is thus similar to what Sara Ahmed calls the alien affect: an affect whose underexplanation via normative social scripts causes the affective as such to emerge from the unconscious of a scene and into the foreground, where it becomes an object that can catalyze interpretive doubt, and therefore interpretive productivity:

If we are disappointed by something that we expected would make us happy, then we generate explanations of why that thing is disappointing. Such explanations can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why am I not made happy by this, what is wrong with me?) ... We become strangers, or affect aliens, in such moments.<sup>16</sup>

The alien affect appears as an interpretive riddle, throwing the mind into what Stanley Cavell might have called a mood of skepticism—moments in which the search for complete certainty generates a mania of interpretation and doubt.<sup>17</sup> Yet Ahmed ultimately locates the significance of this interpretive activity not in the subject’s self-transparency but in political pedagogy. Writing about feminist emotions, she describes the failure of spectators to grasp their political import as a problem of reading:

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<sup>16</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 42.

<sup>17</sup> See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 420-496.

In the thick sociality of everyday spaces, feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling, as the ones who ruin the atmosphere, which is how the atmosphere might be imagined (retrospectively) as shared.<sup>18</sup>

The encounter with “bad feeling” doesn’t provoke the observer to wonder *what* in the world might cause it; the emotion is attributed not to the badness of the world but to the subject of emotion as the source of badness, which spoils everyone’s party. The cause of this bad reading, Ahmed suggests, is not primarily that these observers refuse to acknowledge the badness of the world, but rather that what the emotion threatens is the loss of shared worlds, the risk of being thrown apart. The intrusion of an emotive content that seems unmotivated by the situation (the bad feeling is attributed to the feminists themselves, rather than the conditions of the “everyday space”) is a threat to the mood but more painfully to the observer’s freedom from skepticism—from having the experience of others and of the reality you think you share thrown into doubt. Ahmed demonstrates here that *how* a feeling is interpreted—that is, a pedagogy of reading—is at work in how a system of oppression continues to propagate itself. For the emotion to signify differently, then, there would need to be different collective habits of reading and interpreting excessive, unattributed, alien feeling.

### **Submerged Expression and the Language of the Law: *The Ban on Love***

In Richard Wagner’s early opera *The Ban on Love*—his only comedy aside from *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*—the curtain rises on a scene of civic tumult. The stage is outfitted as a suburb filled with entertainment venues of all kinds, but particularly those dedicated to pleasure (“Belustigungsörter”), whose customers are in the process of being rooted out forcibly by law enforcement into the street. The opera opens *in media res* with the raid, and the orchestra

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<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 65.

opens with a commotion of syncopations and accented rhythms that fails to produce a melody until, a little later, the citizens' voices also start to become discernible above the din. The scenic opulence of a public and political brawl, rendered on a cinemascopic rather than intimate scale, speaks to the influence of French grand opera in the 1830s on the young Wagner's execution of an *opera buffa* plot. Yet *The Ban on Love* does not open with an ordinary slice of life within a certain political order, as historical operas often do. As we soon learn, the king of Sicily has gone away and been replaced with a German governor, Friedrich, who as temporary head of state has instituted the titular ban that is now producing the violence of the opening scene. The opera thus opens in a state of exception, and realizes a fantasy of what may happen when default power goes on holiday. As with fairy tales in which the death of parents leaves an orphan in the hands of a new, quasi-official power (often symbolized in the step-parent) whose care the child must navigate and survive, the replacement of a presumably sturdy and invisible power with a suddenly and frighteningly embodied one suggests that the opera's central intrigue will be about the erotics of relating to power itself.

At the beginning, though, this power is displaced and disembodied: when the citizens demand an explanation for the raid, it is Brighella, a traditional commedia dell-arte character and the captain of the guard, who reads out the order passed down from Friedrich. These words, ventriloquized by a lower executor of power and detached from their author, are the only ones in the scene that are delivered in plain speech, rather than singing. The order commands the banishment of the annual Carnival and the closing of taverns and places of entertainment, and dictates that any "violator of drink or love will immediately be punished by death." The citizens greet this proclamation with laughter until the guards drag in Claudio, in chains. When asked if it was high treason that brought about his imprisonment, Claudio responds that he was "only in

love.” The punishment of love with the severity of an offense to the state is taken by the citizens as evidence of Friedrich’s inhumanity: that his “rigid soul is not enclosed in warm flesh and blood as other men’s.” They resolve to free him, but Claudio believes that there is only one hope: his friend Lucio must go to the convent where his sister Isabella resides and bring her to Friedrich, because “a sister’s pleading can surely soften the indomitable will of that heartless man.”

In other words, the opera’s opening establishes an opposition between the heartless, rigid ruler and the warmth of the people, between speech and singing, between anti-love and love, which Wagner uses to develop a polemical, self-deprecating cliché about the cultural difference between Germans and Italians. Yet by rendering Friedrich’s order in speech and everyone else’s words in singing, the opera’s opening ascribes to “opera,” the aesthetic medium, a political and narrative function. Specifically, when the men declare that only a woman’s expressive appeal can restore the temporary head of state’s humanity, they are thinking about an aria—not, however, as a basic music-dramatic unit in operas such as this one, but as a specific weapon that targets the political and intimate problem that the opera’s plot unfolds. When Lucio later tells Isabella that she must “beseech [Friedrich] with a sister’s tears,” he introduces both the gendered and the political significance that the aria is to have as a vehicle of affective expression and persuasion. The gendered geography of the first act indicates how feminine tears are supposed to accomplish this feat. While Scene 1 takes place in a public street in which we witness the exercise of law, Scene 2 opens in a convent, a feminine space described by Isabella and her friend Marianne as a place they have retreated to precisely because it is external to the world of law the harms it inflicts. It is in Scene 3 that Isabella exits the convent and returns to the world, specifically to a courtroom, where the confrontation between feminine tears and male law will

play out. The transformative conjunction of femininity and “tears” is thus bequeathed by a certain zoning of the world in which the feminine is first excluded from the public world of law in order to retain the capacity to return to it and change it. Singing, understood as affective expression, is able to dissolve the strictures of heartless power only by virtue of an initial exclusion from its domain, which grants it the putative power to reintroduce “heart” to that domain as an achievement of political transformation.

This is how the eventual confrontation between Friedrich and Isabella is prepared. Yet as we later discover, and against Claudio and Lucio’s expectations, Isabella’s pleading does not persuade the man in charge. The remainder of this section will focus on her aria and the events that follow it, which diverge significantly from the source story on which *The Ban on Love* is based—Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. In both the opera and the play, Friedrich—or Angelo, as he is called in the play—begins to desire Isabella as she pleads for her brother’s life, and offers her his pardon in exchange for her virginity. When Isabella refuses and threatens to expose the hypocrisy of a ruler who has banned the activity that he also solicits, he counters that his pristine reputation will prevent anyone from believing her accusations. In the play, Angelo exits promptly after this announcement; Isabella then delivers a brief soliloquy in which she decides to go and consult her brother, and then exits herself. In the opera, however, Friedrich’s declaration that Isabella’s complaint will be essentially *incomprehensible* in the face of public opinion leads to the act’s *quadro di stupore*. In placing the generic scene of dramatic stasis and musical repetition here, at the moment in which a political truth fails to circulate, the opera invites consideration of the *quadro*’s sensuous surplus not as the sign of too much expression but rather of too little. The scene raises the idea that repetitions and expansions of musical sound, central to opera’s melodramatic reputation, could be expressions of the non-expressible, of the

gaps in a world of language that prevent an utterance from making sense. It thus invites a different consideration of opera's melodrama, insofar as that term typically links its sensuous excesses—of voice, of emotion—with excesses of self-expression.

Let us first trace the itinerary of the sequence that begins when Isabella arrives in the courtroom. From the outset, her interaction with Friedrich centers on the contexts of utterance as much as utterances themselves—on who is addressed and how, on what can or cannot be communicated. The first move in this exchange takes place when Isabella asks Friedrich to clear the courtroom, because, as she says, “I won't address your station, it's to your heart I wish to speak.”<sup>19</sup> This address to the heart is demarcated formally from the recitative that precedes it. When the court clears, the orchestra introduces an *adagio* motif in the woodwinds and then shades it out into a gentle, arpeggiated string backdrop over which Isabella's voice enters. Her first line, “Can you understand the grief of an orphan,” introduces a formally strict antecedent-consequent number that is nevertheless marked *colla parte*, a musical designation that instructs the orchestra to follow the expressive rhythm of the text, reversing the voice's usual fidelity to metrical rhythm. The musical marking prioritizes the voice's expressive freedom even as the aria's message uses the abstractive strategy of humanistic appeal, referring not to Isabella or Claudio but to the “orphan” and the “sister” who pleads for her brother's life, prevailing on Friedrich not to leave “her” alone and helpless. Thus, when she asks him to “relieve my suffering through mercy,” she is invoking not only her own pain in this specific situation but the generalized pain and generalized love of sisters and parentless children, the denial of which would make anyone a monster indeed.

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<sup>19</sup> “Zu eurem Herzen, zu eurem Amt nicht will ich sprechen.”

Her request to clear the court in the hope that Friedrich's embodiment of a structure of power could be separated from the man with a heart backfires, however. It turns out that women's intangible claim to feeling does not contest power, as Claudio and Lucio believed, but merely entices it. Sentimentality, as an empathic political strategy that assumes that aesthetic experience will have tangible effects on persons' beliefs and actions, presumes that the feeling of being moved will lead to some further recognition of other persons and their pain.<sup>20</sup> Yet as Isabella pours feeling into her attempt to rouse Friedrich's sympathy, Friedrich is unable to experience the sensuous as mediating anything. Instead, he is fixated on Isabella and her voice as the source of the sensuous, as when he says, "To hear such words come out of her mouth ... it's too much! My blood boils, I'm not conscious of what I'm doing." The failure of a sensuous experience to stimulate empathy for an abstract, non-present other resolves into a fixation on the sensuous itself as the experience's endpoint.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Friedrich is moved, but not in the way that Isabella had hoped: he agrees to release her brother, but only if she will teach him "how heavenly his crime was." The scene of aesthetic persuasion fails to direct him *through* itself and toward some changed understanding of abstract or specific persons. Instead of being stirred by the aria toward empathy for her brother, Friedrich is just stirred up—by the aria, and by the one who delivers it.

He wishes, in essence, to make two exemptions within his state of exemption. He will rescind Claudio's punishment for breaking his law, but only if he is allowed the pleasure whose denial to the rest of the citizenry is the most concrete manifestation of his power. For him to

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<sup>20</sup> Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, eds. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999): 49–84.

<sup>21</sup> Mladen Dolar suggests in fact that to focus on the aesthetics of the voice rather than its message may be a quasi-conscious strategy of political avoidance. See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006): 3–4.

appear unhypocritical, then, his transaction with Isabella must take place in secret—outside the purview of his “station.” Isabella’s response is to immediately disseminate the secret. In a sequence whose rage becomes nearly metaphorical, Isabella screams at the windows and doors,<sup>22</sup> imagining power’s hypocrisy as a sealed room whose eradication requires the letting in of air:

Come here! Come here!  
Come here, deceived people!...  
Come here! Come here!  
Break down the doors, listen to me!  
Come here! Come here! Come here!  
I’ll unmask the vilest hypocrite of all  
Before your very eyes!

Her call for the “deceived people” to break down the doors not only refers to the physical barriers to the seat of power, but also speaks to the fantasy of testimony: the idea that the maintenance of injustice results from a problem of communication, of news that has simply yet to be adequately delivered. As she calls the crowd back in to witness her magical act—unmasking the fraudulent ruler before their very eyes—they are not only specific citizens but an allegorical representation of the People that the person wronged by law has called to hear her complaint.

Following the failure of the aria, then, the stage is being set for another expressive act. Yet as Isabella assembles the audience to whom her testimony will be delivered, Friedrich pulls her aside and tells her that if she reveals what he said to her in private, he’ll proclaim his proposition to have been a trick—“A test to see whether your virtue was real.” Here, Friedrich invokes the inherently projective function of the law: the law claims to have no desire except to regulate the desire of the citizen. Though the writing of law coalesces desire into a structure that

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<sup>22</sup> “sie schreit nach den Fenstern und Türen”

dispenses force, law, once it is written, displaces its own tendency or intention into a focus on the individual's potential for aberrant intention, and frames itself as a *check* on desire rather than a manifestation of it. In doing so, law produces the sense in the citizens it governs that they are the possessors of too much embodiment and too much urge, when this sense in fact originates in the paternalistic desire of its own strictures. Lauren Berlant has argued in the context of the United States that "anyone coded as 'low,' embodied, or subculturally 'specific' continues to experience, with banal regularity, the corporeal sensation of nationality as a sensation over which she/he has no control."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the individual's visceral and personal experience of an errant sensation and of helplessness more generally is the result of the fit between the individual's coding and the processing of national systems. Writing about Iola Leroy, the title character of Frances Harper's 1892 novel about an enslaved African-American woman who at one point responds viscerally with resistance and anger to the touch of a white slaveowner, Berlant notes that these emotions aren't so much meaningless as *unreadable* by anyone brought up in the structures of power in the South, since someone without legal rights to their own body *ought not to feel* resistance to its being claimed as such. "Her sensations, therefore, make no sense to the slave system; therefore they are no longer credible. Her relation to them makes no difference. This is the most powerful index of powerlessness under the law of the nation."<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, an index of privilege is to be "above the sensational constraints of citizenship"—to be exempted from the unwanted encounter with one's own body, again and again, while living within the nation and the law. Thus, "the desire to become national seems to call for a release from sensuality—this is the cost, indeed the promise, of citizenship."<sup>25</sup> If power

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<sup>23</sup> Berlant, *Queen of America*, 239.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

is measured by the degree of one's exemption from sensuousness, and powerlessness by the degree to which one is forced into it, the counterrevolutionary strategy would be to make "abstract and corporeal citizenship come into contact not on the minoritized body but on the body of the nation."<sup>26</sup> Another way to say this is that rule will remain so long as the ruler remains above the law: that is, exempt from the sensuality that marks those who experience rule. The idea that the fantasy of power *is* a fantasy of being exempted from individuating desire is enacted in the very opening of Scene 3, in which Brighella, the captain of the guard, stands alone in a courtroom of law while waiting for Friedrich's arrival. Like Leporello at the beginning of *Don Giovanni*, Brighella fantasizes about what he would do if he occupied the seat of power:

Ah, might I not judge a little ... might I not?  
What wouldn't I give to try a case ... what wouldn't I;  
How gladly I'd carry out my duty ... very gladly—  
And never demand more salary...never!

When power is only fantasized but not yet possessed, the fantasist imagines that he will be the first to execute an office untampered by private desire. Yet this fantasy barely lasts through Brighella's first case. As he saunters up to the judge's seat, Dorella, who has been charged under the new ban for her employment at a tavern, enters the courtroom. Thinking that Brighella is the real judge, Dorella begins to state her case. But Brighella's playing at an official demeanor is repeatedly undermined by his attraction to her, until he finally proclaims, "You've conquered

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<sup>26</sup> Lauren Berlant, "The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Anita Hill," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997): 945.

me, / My judicial calling has vanished!” For Brighella and Friedrich, there is no such thing as embodied law.<sup>27</sup>

Isabella is told that her complaint will have no effect, first, because of the sensuous displacement enacted by power from itself to the bodies of those it subordinates; or, as Friedrich puts it, “If you’d talk of my inflexibility, my severity, yes, even of my cruelty, they’d easily believe you. But if you’d speak of my love they’d only laugh.” But Friedrich’s intuition about what the people will find credible and what laughable also implies, second, that Isabella’s testimony is averted not because of a failure of will or expressive desire on her part. Even if she could perfectly and eloquently communicate her grievances, Friedrich assumes, the people will be presented with a story—the rational, imperious head of state who succumbs to flesh—whose facts will be dissonant to what the people will be willing to believe about him and the station he occupies. The problem, here, lies not in the capacity for utterance, but in the fact that the public conditions for the reception of the utterance about a king and his abuse do not yet exist. Isabella can speak the word, but the word will have no effect. The context that would allow it to be understood does not yet exist.

It is into this situation of an utterance that can’t be spoken that the *quadro di stupore* is introduced.<sup>28</sup> As soon as Friedrich spits the words, reinforced by *forte* chords in the orchestra, that shut down Isabella’s drive to public testimony, a solo oboe line enters with a melody from Isabella’s orphan aria, rising up *piano* over soft plucks in the strings. Now, however, the original

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<sup>27</sup> For consideration of how both law and masculinity function as “disembodied norm,” see Frank Rudy Cooper and Ann C. McGinley, eds., *Masculinities and the Law: A Multidimensional Approach* (New York: NYU Press, 2012): xv.

<sup>28</sup> Because it is only the content of what Isabella means to say that is withheld from the scene of testimony (while the surface of her skin manifests her emotions fully), the situation is different from the one tracked theoretically in Lauren Berlant’s “Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*,” which is about underperformed emotion. Nevertheless, the article provides a useful bibliography of recent and not-so-recent work on reticent expression. See Lauren Berlant, “Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* 28, no. 3 (September 2015): 198-199.

sempre ritardando

*ppresc.*

(Isabella sinkt stumm zusammen, der Chor und die Übrigen nähern sich ihr teilnahmsvoll.)

I.  
F.  
zu deinem Un - glück sprächst du nur!

*pizz.*  
*pizz.*  
*pizz.*  
*pizz.*  
*pizz.*

2.1. The solo oboe melody that enters as Isabella sinks down in silence in Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*.

F major of Isabella's aria is recast in the oboe line in A-flat minor, a change in mode that underscores the deflation of the aria's initial transformative promise. Meanwhile, the stage directions indicate that "Isabella sinks down in silence; the chorus and others approach her sympathetically."<sup>29</sup> Friedrich's direction to "be silent"—since any utterance would indict her rather than the power she means to expose—leads directly to the entrance of the solo oboe, as if singing or lyricism here had gone underground, submerged beneath literal expression. At the

<sup>29</sup> (Isabella sinkt stumm zusammen, der Chor und die Übrigen nähern sich ihr teilnahmsvoll.)

same time, the stage directions choreograph a tableau in which a crumpled Isabella is the focal point for a crowd of onlookers, who represent the “public” that has been called here to hear the testimony that is not forthcoming.

The scene thus acts as the public complement of the aria Isabella has just “performed,” privately, for Friedrich. The oboe that has taken her melody into the orchestra introduces her next words, which begin with the aria’s generic invocation of a character’s emotional status: “I blush red with rage and shame.” Yet these words are not directed to the others in the room, but spoken in an aside. The condition of political unutterability in which Isabella finds herself splits her message from its surface affects, driving her speech underground while her face’s red is the only sign she releases publicly—what Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick called a blazon of shame.<sup>30</sup> It is significant for this scene that Sedgwick considered shame an affect of interpersonal failure, that “shame-humiliation throughout life can be thought of as an inability to effectively arouse the other person’s positive reactions to one’s communications.”<sup>31</sup> The blazon thus communicates through unruly color the incapacity of the communicative conduit, while manifesting at the same time a “desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge.”

Isabella’s blush is the red flag that signals an intersubjective emergency. When the crowd stumbles back into the room and finds her mute, sunk to the floor, and evincing emotion that is underexplained by their grasp of the situation, their failure to *place* or *explain* the emotion results in the following exchange:

Chorus:           What’s wrong, Isabella, tell us.  
                      You called for us and we’re here!

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<sup>30</sup> Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 36.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Franz Basch, “The Concept of Affect: A Re-Examination,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 24 (1976): 765-766, quoted in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 37.

*Isabella dismisses them with a silent gesture.*

Chorus:           You're silent! What are we to *make* of that?

Here, the overpresence of an affect in relation to its narrative or dramatic motivation (the crowd senses something is wrong, but doesn't know what) is conjoined with Isabella's expressive regression to the gestural theater of melodrama. This gesture, in turn, stimulates an interpretive productivity: the chorus wants to know what they should *make* of this feeling. This productivity comes in the form of the chorus's skeptical frenzy, lasting the next sixty bars, in which they repeat the following words in increasingly florid vocal and orchestral textures:

Silent suffering makes her speechless,  
what did he confide in her?  
My heart is filled with astonishment,  
shuddering at the explanation.

The crowd's inability to read Isabella's expressions generates a great deal of uncertainty that is rendered as a superfluity of singing. The underexplained affect throws the chorus into skepticism, into the drive to resolve or know definitively the contents of another mind that results in what Cavell calls a skeptical recital: an endless interpretive productivity that stems from an unquenchable doubt.<sup>32</sup> The "shuddering" of an explanation too horrible even to imagine is rendered, in operatic time, into several minutes of spaciouly voiced texture in which Isabella, Friedrich, and the chorus all sing together in harmonic lockstep. Yet though the musical texture knits together all the voices of the scene into an encompassing pattern, the form that results captures the imprint of an intersubjective rupture, as the chorus narrates their confusion and dread at being kept out of Isabella's mind.

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<sup>32</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 420-496. In the context of romantic love, see Lauren Berlant, "Love, A Queer Feeling," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 435.

The scene is representative of the way that the *quadro di stupore*, as a generic component of operatic finales, represents a sudden turn of events or a break in knowledge as a musical excess that operates in tandem with characters' physical frozenness. The rendering of astonishment as a literal immobility among a stupefied crowd is perhaps best known in "Fredda ed immobile," an ensemble number from the first-act finale of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* in which the Count, parading as a drunk soldier, finds himself about to be arrested by the Officer of the Watch. Yet the Count takes him aside before his capture by the law to show him documents that testify to his real identity. The officer then instructs the soldiers to withdraw, but fails to reveal to them or the gathered crowd the reason for his action. This sudden, unexplained event prompts the protracted and expansive number that follows, in which the characters communicate via musical and textual repetitions their physical immobility:

Cold and motionless  
Like a statue,  
I have hardly  
Breath to breathe!

Of course, the stakes of the scene involving the Count's parading as a soldier, which he uses to woo Rosina from her intended, Bartolo, do not refer to the nexus of gender, sex and power that the scene in *Liebesverbot* does. But the scene does demonstrate the aesthetic and relational parameters that join sensuous frozenness, on the one hand, and the circumstances of public disclosure, on the other. In both cases, an occurrence (the release of the soldier; Isabella's muteness after her call) is due to a secret that has not yet reached circulation in the public, the secret nature of which is indicated by a choreography in which a character whispers in an aside. The aside, meanwhile, is a sidebar to the public time of action, and represents a bubble of temporality in which information is exchanged outside the knowledge of the public. The result of

the disparity between private and public knowledge produces an event of skepticism, a throwing into confusion of the crowd's grasp of the situation that leaves a long aesthetic trail in the form of the frozen ensemble. Durative affect, here, we might say, is the rendering of a negative presence as a fullness, a rendering in the fullness of sound the sense of an insufficiency of explanation, a gap or missing link in the circumstances of communication.

Here is, then, a different way of telling the origin of the *quadro*'s rapturous excesses (and, therefore, the origin of its status as operatic). Along the sequence of the story's events, there comes a moment in which something becomes unreadable to those assembled nearby, an action or a feeling whose underexplanation disturbs their confidence and throws them into private and separate speculation of what has happened. Yet opera's representation of this turn, as characters are thrown into wordlessness and an incapacity to breathe, let alone speak, takes the form of an expansive and sensuous richness, as if operatic technology were itself responding, alongside the people called by Isabella into the hall, to the question of what it could make of the unutterable. The operatic number, its proliferation of musical repetitions and affective prolongation, comes about because the chorus's skepticism pressures the surface of Isabella's silence into all that color and noise. The effect of the chorus on Isabella's submerged expressiveness is thus like the effect of the camera in Douglas Sirk's melodramatic cinema. On the visual technique of *Written in the Wind*, Sirk writes that

[a]lmost throughout the picture I used deep-focus lenses, which have the effect of giving a harshness to the objects and a kind of enameled, hard surface to the colours. I wanted this to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters, which is all inside them and can't break through.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 (1972), 2.

The *quadro* captures the melodramatic logic by which the sensuous appears as an expression of the unexpressed. Sirk's characters are blocked, or frustrated, in their access to a full expressivity, but at the same time expressivity floods out vicariously through different aesthetic channels and is rendered for the spectator as an experience of fullness. In the place of unreleased energy and unuttered violence comes an intensification of the medium of cinema, the harshness of light and color standing on the screen for that which remains buried.

In *Das Liebesverbot*, the frustration of Isabella's expressive act similarly causes an intensification of operatic mediation, one effect of which is a drastic slowing of the time of representation. As soon as Isabella falls silent, the score is marked *sempre ritardando* and long fermatas space out the chorus's expressions of astonishment, which are rendered in a hushed *piano*. Yet this slowing down is not only expressive and incremental, as the *ritardando* marking implies, but is also a drop in scale. When Friedrich and Isabella join the chorus's voices in counterpoint, he sings a rapid, dotted ascending line in which he describes his lust for her, while she sings, also to herself and in sixteenth notes, about how she could possibly expose his hypocrisy. Yet the chorus, which has been repeating the same text continuously, here drops to a much slower rhythmic rate: the words "Was hat er ihr vertraut?", whose five syllables initially took roughly a single bar to sing, are now stretched out to a full four measures. This spacing allows the two protagonists to counterpoint one another with florid lines that weave across the silent gaps of the stretched-out sentence. This is especially clear when Friedrich shifts to sixteenth-note triplets, a text setting that seems to emphasize the roominess he has found within the interstices of another's speech, his vocality reflecting the excessiveness of his desire. A moment of musical expansion can be described as either a slowing down of the pace of

2.2. The temporality of the chorus's repeated text becomes four times as slow; Friedrich's melody remains in the "normal" time of eighth and sixteenth notes.

singing or as a slowing of time itself. The first takes the chorus's sudden tempo shift as an event within the representation: the crowd, perhaps increasingly astonished by Isabella's silence, now repeats their initial statement at a pace that registers their shock, letting out only a word at a time. But the fact that Isabella and Friedrich continue to sing in "normal" time against the stretching out of the chorus's utterance suggests here that the time of utterance remains the same for the chorus, and that their text is spaced out because narrative time is being stretched.

The pragmatic reason for setting texts this way is, of course, so that each character's words can be heard by the audience. But its effect, at least in *The Ban on Love*, is to imply that the characters' minds operate on different planes, or speeds, of consciousness. Smart describes a similar phenomenon in the dramaturgy of Italian comic opera in which a buffo character will

I. Doch soll'ich selbst das Opfer sein?!- O du be.trog'-ne  
 Do. Lö - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 L. Lö - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 C. Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 Ant. Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 P.P. Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 F. vor Wol - lust bebt mein Herz, da ich sie so ge - schaut!  
 Ang. Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 Da. Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 B. hat, was er ihr hat ver - traut, es war gewiß kein Spaß,  
 Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 Lö - - - - - sung graut, vor der Lö - sung graut,  
 VI. I. arco pizz. arco  
 VI. II. arco pizz. arco  
 Vla. arco pizz. arco  
 Vcl. arco pizz. arco  
 Basso. arco pizz. arco

2.3. Friedrich's sixteenth-note triplets against a dramatically slowed vocalization in the chorus.

often be “free” from the immobilizing effects experienced by the cast as a whole.<sup>34</sup> She recalls a postmodern production of *The Barber of Seville* in which Figaro, a jester figure external to the plot's romantic narratives, moves in the spaces between immobile bodies during “Fredda ed immobile” and waves his hand in front of their faces—as if to snap them out of a trance. Yet

<sup>34</sup> Smart, “Resisting Rossini,” 154.

none of the characters seem to be able to see or respond to him, which allows him to enjoy, privately, a freedom of movement that is quicker and more flexible than they can manage in their suspended state. The same seems to be true of Isabella's and Friedrich's voices in relation to those of the chorus. The triplet that Friedrich sings to each eighth note in the chorus seems particularly to evoke a sense that there are multiple speeds of consciousness at work; he sings loops around the chorus's ever-slowng syllables, as if the rate of his thinking were increasing, or that he were now burrowing down into tiny spaces within their speech and finding them cavernous.

The idea that aesthetic mediation could slow down time sufficiently for that which ordinarily escaped consciousness to become available to the senses was one of the earliest fantasies of film and photography, in Edward Muybridge's discovery that his apparatus could capture a degree of visual detail in the world, such as the position of a horse's legs in mid-gallop, that was too fast for the eye to register—what Walter Benjamin called the optical unconscious.<sup>35</sup> In popular film, photography's ability to render these lost images to ordinary sight has been, among other genres, one of the attractions of the superhero film, as when the time of representation slows in *The Matrix* to capture Neo weaving between bullets.<sup>36</sup> The cinematic capture of the optical unconscious speaks to the desire not to waste any part of a visual spectacle; the image's slow motion allows every detail of a kinetic scene normally too rapid to process to fully saturate an audience's sensorium, thereby delivering on the generic promise to produce as much effect as possible from each scene of action.

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 217-252.

<sup>36</sup> *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowskis (United States and Australia: Warner Bros., Roadshow Entertainment, 1999), DVD.



Figure 4. The camera swivels around Neo as the time of representation slows, showing the eddies of air carved out by bullets in *The Matrix*.

If, in the action film, the slowing down of the time of representation in its action climaxes speaks to an implicit desire on the part of the audience to witness something fully, to rescue the contents of the optical unconscious and deliver them in the tempo of consciousness, what does the slowing down of time in the *quadro di stupore*, opera's affective climax, speak to? The scene of dramatic standstill and musical repetition and proliferation comes in response to an event in which Isabella wishes to say something but finds that her utterance does not yet have meaning in the political and public forms of life she inhabits. It is the chorus's skepticism that applies melodramatic pressure to the surface of Isabella's silence, generating out of it an extended scene saturated with feeling. Yet what feeling stands for, here, is not only a phrase that hasn't been uttered but an absence in the chain of linguistic signification, a faulty relay that prevents a phrase from circulating in public as a bearer of sense. It is in operatic mediation that this injustice receives its retribution not in the realm of law but in the plane of sensation.

Just as film rescues the grain of visual spectacle from being lost to the optical unconscious, never to be seen, we might say that the *quadro di stupore* rescues the contents of history's affective unconscious, delivering the promise that every moment of stifled expressivity

will achieve, in the register of the aesthetic, the fullness of its due. If the structure of melodramatic narrative is one in which an affective plenitude in an imaginary register fills in for a real communicative gap—thereby generating fantasies of going back, saying it all, rescuing something almost lost in the nick of time<sup>37</sup>—we might say more generally that melodrama expresses the fantasy that the gaps of history will be filled, that all the disappointments and unresolved plots will be remedied by melodrama’s superb technologies of light and sound. It is the fantasy, for example, that death will wait in the wings until the end of a phrase. Opera’s melodrama promises, to use a phrase from Benjamin, that “nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history”—that is, nothing which has ever been felt or thought will die before it is vocalized. And this suggests that melodrama’s history as an aesthetic mode is a history shadowed by fear of the loss of fullness.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of political knowledge, *The Ban on Love* teaches us how to read aesthetic opulence in reverse. When an alien affect surprises a room and provokes speculation about how to read it as a sign, the opera’s dilations of Isabella’s political muteness might model the possibility of reading durative affect as the surface trace of a linguistic incommensurability, of a temporal—that is, historical—gap between what there is to say in the present and the arrival of a public language that could comprehend it. It is when nothing can be said, when a syntax hasn’t yet been formulated or taught, that semaphores may appear on the surface of skin, drawing attention to a space where utterance might one day reside. If noticed, the feeling whose origin is unspoken might stretch a tiny bubble of time within the ongoingness of an ordinary moment,

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<sup>37</sup> See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); see also Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (California: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 254.

gathering around it something like an audience that witnesses its spectacle and wonders what to make of it. To attend to the little arias of feeling in the everyday, there would need to exist common habits of interpretation that take affective disturbances in the rhythm of shared life not to be signs of individual disturbance but of forms of life—worlds of language—that have yet to be built.

### **Operatic Sound as a Form of Life: *Tannhäuser***

In the previous section, the case of *The Ban on Love* showed how sensuous fullness, rather than being read as self-evident expressivity, could be the sign of specific inexpressive gaps within a given world of language. The aim was to read sensuous excesses in opera not only as anti-drama and anti-narrative, but instead as the rescued surface traces of things that could not be said. Opera, as a medium of insistent embodiment, could then be understood as a medium of melodrama insofar as it transforms the hidden or uncirculated into visceral and audible plenitudes. In moments where operatic sensuality caused some critics to complain of a departure from drama or representation, I argued that this was only true insofar as the viscosity of such moments was linked structurally to stated impossibilities in the plot (such as the impossibility of the crowd's acceptance of Isabella's testimony). Operatic amplification, then, can bear reference within the story's political and social registers, but negatively: as the positive trace of what the law cannot yet read or write, and as the displaced sensuality that abstract power defers from itself. The case ultimately suggested the reading of the fullness of presence not as something ontological in itself, but rather as an arrow to an absence somewhere else whose burial breathes that presence into life.

This section will continue to focus on scenes in opera in which an epiphany is delivered or withheld as a crowd gathers around some event of great feeling. I am interested, as before, in what is and is not communicated in opera's communal scenes of intense affective circulation, and therefore in how opera imagines the way in which its characters arrive at certainty and learn from each other. In this case, a scene of feeling leads to transformative epiphany: I focus on the second-act finale of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, in which the eponymous knight, upon hearing the sound of pilgrims singing on their way to Rome, realizes the sinfulness of his pursuit of sexual pleasure and rhapsodically declares his intention to pursue religious salvation. Yet the reading will focus on this scene as an example of averted pedagogy—of the feeling of epiphany obscuring the absence of any real change—that culminates in the opera's tragic end.

When the opera begins, we encounter Tannhäuser as a knight who is growing sick of the incessant pleasure he left the world to discover in Venus's underground lair. We learn further that he is endlessly restless, shuttling back and forth between the world of society and the Venusberg whenever each begins to bore him.<sup>39</sup> In Act 2, Tannhäuser attempts to re-enter society by participating in a song contest with other minstrel-knights, but the obedient paens to chaste love delivered by the others are completely derailed by Tannhäuser's frenetic ode to Venus and her erotic pleasures. The minstrel-knights are all ready to condemn Tannhäuser, but Elisabeth, the woman Tannhäuser initially spurned in pursuit of Venus, suddenly throws herself before them, singing of the need to forgive and for Tannhäuser to join the pilgrims on their journey to Rome, where they will seek redemption. In this contest of the voice's affective power, it would seem that Elisabeth has the final word—but there is one more instance of singing, and listening, before the act's end. As the assembled voices, including Tannhäuser and Elisabeth, reach a

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<sup>39</sup> All musical examples and references to the score are to the Dover edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1984).

cacophonous pitch, seconds before the end of the act, it all cuts out: the orchestra, the characters, the chorus, everything. They have heard something “[i]n the background, deep, as if sounding out of the valley,”<sup>40</sup> a group of young pilgrims who continue to echo a chorale they have been singing, from the wings and the deep background of the stage, since the first act:

At the sublime festival of clemency and grace. / I will atone for my sin in humility.  
Blessed is he who truly believes! / He shall be saved through penitence and repentance.

The orchestra then takes up again immediately, *allegro* and *fortissimo*. Tannhäuser cries out, “Nach Rom!” (“To Rome!”), which is immediately echoed by everyone else, including Elisabeth. The act comes trumpeting to a close eleven bars later on a grand B major chord.

On the surface, this is a scene in which singing produces an affective transformation in its listeners: Tannhäuser, initially bent on returning to the Venusberg, is completely rerouted toward penitence and religious salvation upon hearing the young pilgrims’ song. It is a depiction in embodied time of what Lawrence Kramer calls the opera’s thematic argument between the “national patrimony” represented by the pilgrims and the modern, alienated world of sensuality for which Venus’s lair stands.<sup>41</sup> The scene thus links the act of listening to singing to an individual transformation with implications for its historical moment. Here, attending to the aesthetic produces both Tannhäuser’s intense sense of individual purpose and the affective coherence of the crowd, affirming the efficacy of expressive appeal as a means of changing hearts and minds and uniting warring perspectives in a single affective plane of consistency. And yet the fact that this transformation happens during the diegetic event of a song contest, in which the efficacy of singing is not given but rather under judgment, places the question of singing’s

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<sup>40</sup> “Im Hintergrund, tief, wie aus dem Tale herauf schallend”

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “Wagner’s Gold Standard: *Tannhäuser* and the General Equivalent,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 2 (July 2009): 146.

value in a zone of uncertainty. *Tannhäuser*, as Carl Dahlhaus noted, occupies a transitional period in Wagner's output that was "no longer" opera, in which singing is separated into discrete numbers, and "not yet" music drama, with its more continuous leitmotivic form.<sup>42</sup> The song contest may be seen as a dramatization of the very question occupying this transitional period, since it is occupied with what singing can do: whether it can absorb, freeze, convince, or silence an audience.

As we shall see, *Tannhäuser* does not only complicate the bind between singing and affective knowledge, but also destabilizes operatic sound itself as the aesthetic texture that promises consistency between the characters' vocalizations and the orchestral music that operates in the background of their world. Consider how the young pilgrims' song "enters" the song contest. The format of the song contest requires that each participant take turns singing, with each subsequent act of singing either following or interrupting the previous one. Thus, Wolfram begins the contest, followed by Tannhäuser, followed by Walter; this goes on until they are all interrupted by Elisabeth ("Stay your hands!"). But when the entire gathering's attention is next captured by the pilgrims' song, it is not exactly an interruption. The pilgrims' chorus floats in from the back of the stage right after a tremendous *fortissimo* climax in which the full orchestra and crowd at the front of the stage land on a G-major sonority, which is held for two bars and a quarter note. Yet the chorus actually begins halfway through the second of the two full bars, three beats before the massive orchestral and vocal sound cuts out (Appendix 2). The relation between them seems less to be one of contest or even of response, and more one in which the characters assembled at the front of the stage only now hear the music in the background once they stop making sound themselves.

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<sup>42</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971): esp. 31-34.

The pilgrims' song, after all, has been going on for a while, and the opera has already given the sense that their singing bears a different status than that of "operatic" singing. We first heard the pilgrims in Act I Scene 3, in which the voices approach from the distance through the valley, gradually approaching the front of the stage before exiting again into the wings, yet continuing to sound at farther and farther distances from offstage. When the opera transitions back from the open, natural world of sound to a more familiar operatic artifice, the sense is not so much that the pilgrims have *stopped* singing, but rather that they are too far away to be heard, and that the volume has anyway been turned back up in the realm of the plot. The sound of operatic artifice, in the form of orchestral music and the singing of named characters, does not so much replace the pilgrims' singing as cover it over, and thereby render it inaudible. The sudden interruption of the second act finale's drive to formal closure by the chorale would then seem less an interruption of one kind of music by another, but more the peeling back of operatic artifice to reveal sounds that had always been going on in the background.

How were these sounds first introduced in the opera? In the third scene of Act I, Tannhäuser leaves Venus's lair and returns to nature, to the surface of the world. This magical transport happens instantaneously and finds him deposited abruptly in the middle of a valley. The stage directions indicate a shepherd on the mountainside playing a shawm, and bells tolling in the distance. A path cutting through the mountain face leads in the distance to the Wartburg, the home of the minstrel-knights that Tannhäuser had abandoned for the Venusberg. As the shepherd plays, a new sound enters the landscape:

One hears the song of the old pilgrims, which come nearer along the mountain path from the direction of the Wartburg. [...] The shepherd, hearing the song, ceases playing the shawm and listens attentively.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Man hört den Gesang der älteren Pilger, welche, von der Richtung der Wartburg herkommend, auf dem Bergwege sich nähern. [...] Der Hirt, den Gesang vernehmend, hält auf der Schalmei ein und hört andächtig zu."

The stage directions record the first instance in which *listening to singing* appears as an action in the story, and not just implicitly as part of the activity of opera. But they also indicate that “man hört” (one hears), which presumably refers not only to Tannhäuser, standing near the front of the stage, but to the opera’s audience as well. The shepherd, in laying down his shawm and assuming a posture of intense listening, becomes a kind of surrogate for the audience within the scene. We might say that he represents the audience onstage while also modeling the kind of absorption that the scene asks of its audience.<sup>44</sup>

But the shepherd’s listening also indicates that this is a rare instance in which the audience hears the same sounds as the characters on the stage. The pilgrims’ song floats out from the back of the stage, pricking the shepherd’s ear as well as the audience’s (“man hört”), as if the physical space carrying the sound through the stage and into the hall were continuous. As Carolyn Abbate argues, this scene features an “operatic soundscape that was unprecedented in 1845 and would remain avant-garde well into the twentieth century.” For right at the beginning of the scene,

the pit orchestra drops out. Almost everything audible during the next ten minutes comes directly from the stage: the Shepherd’s song, his piping, the voices of the Pilgrims that approach and then fade away realistically, cowbells that imply unseen flocks, and finally tolling bells from the Wartburg tower and the Landgraf’s hunting horns. Aside from a tremolo wake-up call when Tannhäuser comes to, and some discreet background accompaniment to the reprise of the Pilgrim’s chorus, the orchestra remains silent.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Fried describes a pictorial trope in eighteenth-century French painting in which the painting’s absorbed subject (for instance, in reading a book) models the kind of attention that obtains between the observer and the painting. See Chapter 1 of his *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>45</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 124.

Nearly all of the sounds in this scene, in other words, come directly from the stage. Wagner painstakingly notes the source and displacement of every sound in this scene: far-away bells growing more distant, the sound of the pilgrims as they approach the front and then exit the left side of the stage (their voices continuing to recede long after they disappear from view), and offstage horns whose relative distances from each other are notated precisely in the stage directions.<sup>46</sup> These sounds unfold the dimensions of a physical space of which the stage space is only a part. Offstage space is not at all abstract, but rather seems to be a physical continuation of stage space from which singers and instruments continue to sound their locations.

The atypical porousness of the stage's boundaries seems related to another feature of the scene: what both Abbate and David J. Levin call the natural, unrehearsed quality of its sounds.<sup>47</sup> Abbate argues that this music gives the impression of being "unperformed: no one has learned it or repeats it, no *paradis artificiel*, no proclamation of ironic distance with every melodic turn. Wagner has thus labored very hard to produce something that short-circuits consciousness of his presence ... something someone had to have made."<sup>48</sup> She compares the sounds of the scene to the tone of a bell "whose weight and shape determines the unique note it sounds." Hence the claim of naturalness refers not only to what the sounds are of—shepherd's pipes, distant bells—but also the absence of a compositional consciousness that intervenes between the vessel and the sound it makes. Yet the erasure of the composer's signature from this music recalls Theodor W. Adorno's claim that the "occultation of production by means of the outward appearance ... is the

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<sup>46</sup> "Sämtliche Waldhörner hinter der Szene links ziemlich entfernt und verschieden verteilt; die Hörner in C der Bühne zunächst; die Hörner in F etwas zurück und tiefer, die Hörner in Es am entferntesten und tiefsten." ("All French horns behind the scene at left somewhat distant and split up; the horns in C initially on the stage; the horns in F somewhat back and deeper; the horns in E minor the deepest and furthest back.")

<sup>47</sup> David J. Levin, "Interstitial Redemption: Wagner's "Tannhäuser" and the Dramaturgical Vicissitudes of Music Drama" *Monatshefte* 98 No. 2 (Summer 2006), 180-197.

<sup>48</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 125.

formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner.”<sup>49</sup> The absence of Wagnerian style from the scene’s natural sounds is also the very emblem of Wagnerian aesthetics.

Yet, as Abbate noted, there *is* some orchestral music in this scene, which includes a “tremolo wake-up call when Tannhäuser comes to, and some discreet background accompaniment to the reprise of the Pilgrim’s chorus.” This “discreet” music appears in two forms: a continuous stream of *pizzicato* eighth notes in the cellos and violas, and a legato texture in the violins and violas:



2.4. *Pizzicato eighth notes in Wagner’s Tannhäuser.*



2.5. “Discreet background accompaniment” in the strings.

<sup>49</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991), 85.

In Abbate's reading, these instances do not furnish proof that there *is* orchestral sound, but instead function as exceptions in her reading of orchestral silence. They are brought up and dismissed to make room for the claim that "the pit orchestra drops out" and, later, "the orchestra remains silent." How do we make sense of the way these fragments of music are heard (or not heard)? These examples are, after all, not devoid of significance in the context of the scene. The pizzicato cello line mimics the Baroque musical idiom of the "walking bass," which resonates with the scene of walking pilgrims on stage. The other legato strings play, of course, a version of the central theme of the *Tannhäuser* overture (known as the "remorse" theme) that recurs throughout the opera, and is taken up here in Tannhäuser's vocal line.

How do we reconcile Abbate's claim that the music in this scene is natural, unmuddled by composerly consciousness, that the orchestra is—for all intents and purposes—silent, with the actual music in the scene? Rather than seeing this contradiction as grounds for dismissal, I take the contradiction to be part of an attempt to capture something significant about the scene, and about its significance in a transitional moment in the aesthetics of musical drama. "Discreet background accompaniment," after all, is a phrase more commonly applied to film music than to opera, and in particular to the kind of music employed in commercial narrative cinema. It is a kind of music that is perennially lambasted for providing mere filler, mere mood, as in Adorno and Hans Eisler's complaint in *Composing for the Films* that commercial film soundtracks are designed such that "the spectator should not be conscious of the music."<sup>50</sup> A less polemical description appears in Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, which also stresses that a seminal feature of this kind of film music is for it not to be noticed. She describes a prototypical film experience in which "we" begin by noticing the underscore; at this point,

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<sup>50</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Hans Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 5.

the story is perceived to inhabit a world strangely replete with musical sound, rhythm, signification ... until, a few scenes or measures later, we drop off, become re-invested in the story again. Then the music is “working” once more, masking its own insistence and sawing away in the backfield of consciousness.<sup>51</sup>

What is the music doing when it is working? At the moment that we stop paying attention to it, we become “re-invested in the story.” We might say that the music’s work is to efface its own work so that it reappears elsewhere as a feeling of investment. The passage implies that the film spectator may not be aware that this feeling of investment is related to the work of music, “sawing away in the backfield of consciousness.” The music’s discreetness is not only to make itself unheard, but also to disavow its role in the production of investment elsewhere, so that the investment feels self-produced between spectator and story.

This is, at least structurally, the way that “discreet background music” functions in Abbate’s argument: it is discounted in order for the spectator (here the analyst) to become absorbed in the scene’s diegesis. What is interesting about the scene’s anonymous string music (note that it is only the strings that are excluded from the landscape that “shimmers with sounds,” which is composed of voices, woodwinds, and brass) is not that it does not fit within the reading of a fullness of onstage sound, but rather that it works exactly the way discreet background music is supposed to work: by producing the impression that it is not there. To say that this is a scene of natural sounds not yet burdened by operatic artifice, that “nobody produced what one hears other than the figures that sing it and play it or the objects that clang and blow,”<sup>52</sup> one must also acknowledge that there is music in the scene that follows a cinematic logic, that effaces itself to make possible a reading of the plenitude of diegetic sound against a silent orchestra. The

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<sup>51</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Pub., 1987), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 125.

music of Act I Scene 3 offers a contrast from operatic artifice, true, but it is not “natural” in the sense of being unconstituted by discourse. The sense of its naturalness is sustained by the concealment of a second term, just as the effect of cinematic diegesis, in Gorbman’s account, is rendered more vivid by music in the background.

The relationship between Abbate’s “natural” and “discreet” music, however, is not quite a binary in the way that Venus and Elisabeth, or the aesthetics of the Venusberg and the Wartburg, more obviously are. Those binaries provide the twin poles between which Tannhäuser seems doomed to shuttle: he craves the world of society when in the Venusberg, but longs to return once he has left it. The sense of the natural, open world traced by sound and the discreet orchestral music constitute each other differently: one erases its presence in order for the other to be experienced as an absolute fullness. The pair is asymmetrical: it is the role of one to disappear, to become in some sense unheard or unacknowledged, so that the spectator can become absorbed in the other.

I propose that this pair, like the pair Venus/Elisabeth, deeply structures *Tannhäuser*’s aesthetics. Yet while the symmetrical binary would produce a reading of the second-act finale as an event in which Tannhäuser, upon hearing the pilgrims’ chorus, has a change of heart that reorients him from one pursuit to another, the asymmetrical one offers a different way of reading the act’s closing representations of singing, being moved, and deciding to act. Specifically, Wagner’s revisions of the scene for the opera’s second premiere in Paris reveal an intensification of the *experience* of transformation for the opera’s protagonists while also amplifying the difference between their sound world and the one of the unnamed characters in the distance. When Wagner modifies select scenes for the Paris première in 1861, including the closing bars of this act, the changes he makes appear to be subtle. The sole musical change is that the return

of the orchestra after the chorale is slightly more insistent (a syncopated half note and triplets instead of just eighth notes), and very slightly longer. In the initial Dresden version, there are two bars of *fortissimo* orchestral bluster linking the end of the chorale and Tannhäuser's cry "Nach Rom!," whereas in the Paris version there are six. The other change is to the stage directions that occupy the brief space following the chorale. The Dresden version of the score contains the following stage directions:

Upon hearing the song, everyone's gestures change from passionate and threatened to mild and moved.<sup>53</sup>

In place of this sentence, the Paris version has this:

All have involuntarily moderated their gestures; Elisabeth, who tries again to protect Tannhäuser, had set herself against the new round of attacks; she now turns to the hopeful song of the young pilgrims. –Tannhäuser abruptly stops in his movements of passionate contrition, and listens to the song. / A sudden sunbeam shines on him; he drops with convulsive ferocity to Elisabeth's feet, fervently and hastily kisses the hem of her robe and breaks then, stumbling in fantastic excitement, into a cry: "To Rome!"<sup>54</sup>

What changes, exactly, in the Paris version? In terms of the action, not much: in both, a song is heard by the assembled crowd that modulates their aggressive mien into a more gentle one, and transitions into Tannhäuser's ecstatic cry. The primary differences seem less to do with plot than with presentation. For one, there is just a lot more detail in the Paris scene, with more specific character direction for Elisabeth and Tannhäuser. These additional and precisely tuned actions

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<sup>53</sup> "Alle haben, den Gesang vernehmend, von der leidenschaftlichsten und drohendsten Gebärde zu einer milderen und gerührten übergehend, gelauscht."

<sup>54</sup> "Alle haben unwillkürlich ihre Gebärden gemässigt; Elisabeth, wie um Tannhäuser nochmals zu schützen, hatte sich den von Neuem Andringenden entgegengestellt; sie verweist jetzt auf den verheissungsvollen Gesang der jungen Pilger. –Tannhäuser hält plötzlich in den Bewegungen der leidenschaftlichsten Zerknirschung ein, und lauscht dem Gesange. / Ein jäher Hoffnungsstrahl leuchtet ihm; er stürzt sich mit krampfhafter Heftigkeit zu Elisabeths Füßen, küsst inbrünstig, hastig den Saum ihres Gewandes und bricht dann, von ungeheurer Erregung taumelnd auf, mit dem Rufe: 'Nach Rom!'"

that the singers have to perform may be one reason for extending the music between the chorale and the cry by four bars. But the lengthening of the period of reaction and recovery after hearing the song is itself a significant change in the scene's dramatic conception, and not just a pragmatic one. In the Paris version, the effect of the pilgrims' song on its listeners is more *arresting*; it lengthens the refractory period before Tannhäuser is able to muster his voice again, even as it deepens and focuses the visual detail of the stage. The Paris version both emphasizes the tableau of figures on stage by holding it for an extra four bars while also telescoping attention to the smallest details, like the touching of lips to a hem.

One significant change is that the emotion-words in the first version are modified by the adverb “involuntarily” in the second, a gendered word for Wagner. Berthold Hoeckner has noted that Wagner, in his aesthetic treatise *Opera and Drama*, symbolized the relationship between music and poetry in the couple of Lohengrin and Elsa, insofar as “*Elsa* is that unconscious, involuntary element in which Lohengrin's conscious, voluntary nature longs to be redeemed”—a nature that he also calls Lohengrin's “specific masculine essence.”<sup>55</sup> Wagner maps this distinction onto the difference between orchestral music and stage action: just as he absents involuntariness from his male heroes in order for it to be rediscovered in women as the endpoint of a quest, so too does “involuntary” refer to that which is expressed in the orchestra but is only implicit in the characters' gestures:

The orchestra expresses musically ... what is revealed to the eye by means of gesture, and speaks it out so far as there was no need for mediation through verbal language ... We commonly say: “I read it in your eye”; which means: “In a way intelligible to it alone, my eye perceives in the look of yours an involuntary feeling in you, which I involuntarily, in turn, now feel with you.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, GSIV, 301; PWI, 346. Quoted in Hoeckner, “Elsa Screams, or The Birth of Music Drama,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 2 (July 1997), 100.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, 336-7; PWII, 32. Quoted in Hoeckner, “Elsa Screams,” 106.

Again, orchestral music expresses in sound what is silent and implicit in a shared gesture; and it is the displacement of what transpires within a gesture to the diegetically external zone of the musical accompaniment that gives the involuntary its unspoken, shivering power.

A consequence of the scene's revision is thus to intensify the sense of an implicit and involuntary transmission of affective knowledge. When Wagner revisits the scene for the Paris première, he arrests the scene's dramatic pace by intensifying its visual detail to a nearly cinematic degree, expanding the single blunt brushstroke of the earlier version into a series of minute events that render the action in high definition: Elisabeth's turn to Tannhäuser and then to the pilgrims in a pose of listening; Tannhäuser abruptly stopping; the sudden sunbeam; Tannhäuser dropping in response, kissing the dress, and then breaking out into speech. All of this occurs within the sphere of a scene of affective impact whose contours are now beginning to expand. What the new stage directions and expanded music appear to capture is the way in which the affective impact of singing translates immediately into an almost irrepressible action, as if Tannhäuser has made the decision before he has had time to think about it. The words "involuntary" and "convulsive," added to the Paris score, intensify the sense already present in the briefer Dresden description that the song works directly on the listeners' bodies. Coming at the end of the act in which the opera's song contest takes place, which is a contest premised on the question of what power singing can have on a listener, this last moment stands as a display of singing's ability to freeze the world of its hearers and modulate moods, to impact the course of a plot. It is a scene that stages the interruption of stage action by a song that arrests an assembled crowd into a tableau of absorbed listening. The scene therefore dramatizes the conventional form of the aria, but relocates it from the formal to the narrative register. Operatic convention remains, but it has been imported "into" the opera's action as an event in the plot.

At the same time, the sound of opera, the *Tannhäuser* music penned by Wagner, is not the default sound of the opera's world but looks more like the noisier, livelier surface that covers up a landscape of bells, shepherd's music, and the pilgrims' continuous chorale. Reinhard Strohm notes that *Tannhäuser* is unique for how close dramatic time and "actual performance time" are from Tannhäuser's return to the surface in act 1 and the end of act 2. Even the intermission between these two acts provides roughly the time needed for the knights, who mount their horses at the end of the first act, to arrive at the Wartburg in time for the opening of the curtain in act 2.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, the pilgrims are a kind of living *chronos*, reminding the audience intermittently of the passage of non-dramatic time with the relative distances of their voices from the stage. In other words, the actual time of the story is not only represented in the opera's mediation but is also unusually tangible and available within performances of *Tannhäuser*. Here, the idea of diegesis, the world that contains the characters and their actions, may not be sufficient to describe the different layers of world that seem to be in effect. The pilgrims seem to be flesh-and-blood characters like Tannhäuser and Elisabeth, who occupy physical space in the world. Yet there are also significant differences. They are not named, but only exist as a mass that sings in a single voice. They are engaged in an action—the pilgrimage to Rome—and yet the action seems to belong more to the time of ritual than the time of narrative. The beginning and the end of the opera do not affect them, though they have an effect on the drama. Their endeavor is cyclical instead of belonging to the linear action of protagonists, heroes, and villains. They are on the stage, but move freely off of it, and seem to be there throughout the drama of the opera, which sits upon their world like a layer of oil on water.

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<sup>57</sup> Strohm, "Dramatic Time," 5.

The style of their singing reflects this difference. The chorale is a musical form composed of textual phrases that follow the length of the breath, whereas Wagnerian operatic singing requires the extension of natural breath and natural range in the service of melody. In the chorale, each breath opens and closes a tonal phrase of a more-or-less identical length. And these phrases do not accumulate, do not follow one another in the course of a narrative that leads to a climax. Two, three, or four phrases may articulate a larger period; but the primary unit is the phrase itself, which can be repeated indefinitely in a theoretically endless series. The phrase marks time the way that breathing marks time, a communal lung that in- and exhales. When the named characters hear the pilgrims' chorus, listening is what links but also separates these worlds at the end of Act One: one world that is collective and cyclical, the other defined by protagonists and the linearity of narrative.

Indeed, though Tannhäuser will join the crowd marching toward Rome, he is never fully integrated in it, as we learn when he returns to the Wartburg in the third act. We do not see the scene in which he, alone in the crowd, fails to receive absolution in Rome, but hear it instead as a story that he tells Wolfram. But to say that he fails to be redeemed and comes back to tell the story of this failure misses the way that the opera's presentation of the event is already a part of its content. The fact that the events in Rome are relayed to us in the form of a story that has Tannhäuser as its protagonist already reveals that he could never be part of the mass of pilgrims. Even the story he tells reveals a twinned compulsion to both be part of the crowd and to stand apart from it. On the way to Rome, he tells Wolfram, he tried continuously to make the journey harder for himself than it seemed to be for the others. Thus, when the pilgrims walked on the grass, he sought stones and thorns; when they rested at a hospice, he would lay down in snow and ice; and so on. His shunning of Wartburg society and his disdain for the other minstrel-

singers' views of love is related to his state of penitence in this respect: in both, his feeling must be exceptional, he must stand apart from the crowd, he must demonstrate that his understanding of love or his suffering is superior.

In this mode, we might hear the cry he unleashes after his transformation by the chorale—"Nach Rom!"—differently. In her reading, Abbate discusses a repeated musical motif throughout the opera, first observed by Reinhold Brinkmann, in which the names "Maria," "Elisabeth" and "Venus" are all sung to a rising fifth or descending fourth at a moment in which a man seeks to escape his world for the promise of another one. Tannhäuser cries "Maria!" as his last utterance before exiting the Venusberg in Act I, and when Wolfram sings "Bleib bei Elisabeth!" Tannhäuser snaps out of his malaise and feels a renewed sense of purpose ("Zu ihr! Zu ihr! Oh, führet mich zu ihr!" / "To her! To her! Oh, lead me to her!"). During the Act II song contest, it is when Tannhäuser cries out Venus's name that the contest dissolves into chaos, and in Act III Wolfram's cry of "Elisabeth!" narrowly rescues Tannhäuser from the temptations of Venus. The repeated perfect fifth to which all these names are sung suggests to Abbate that "the male characters mysteriously sense an essence that is one Woman," that they are aware on some level, though not a conscious one, that the absolute difference they perceive between Elisabeth and Venus is the result of a binary they cannot think outside of.<sup>58</sup> To fail to see that the choice between Elisabeth and Venus is a false choice is, in a sense, the cause of *Tannhäuser's* entire plot, since we are told that Tannhäuser had already abandoned Elisabeth for the Venusberg we see him itching to leave at the start of the opera. It is his failure to recognize that these two women come from a single image that generates the linear dimension of the opera's narrative, whose action is a shuttling between two poles that ends in tragedy. It is this shuttling that sets the

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<sup>58</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 118.

narrative of the opera in relief from the ongoingness of the world, that projects a story out of historical time that has a concrete beginning and end.

Thus, it may be significant that “Nach Rom!” is also sung to the same perfect fifth, a rising B-F#, which the gathered crowd echoes two bars later. Like the others, the cry comes at a pivotal moment, marking the departure from one world for another. If, in Abbate’s analysis, the repetition of a musical trope across what appears to be an antithesis in the plot (Venus, Elisabeth) reveals that something has gone unrecognized—that what feels like a new direction is simply a reorientation within a binary whose structure remains hidden from view—then the addition of “Nach Rom!” to the other cries, “Zu ihr!” (“To her!”), “zieht in den Berg der Venus ein!” (“go to Venus’s mountain!”), may reveal that Tannhäuser’s compulsion toward women is undergirded by a deeper compulsion toward narrative itself, to the idea that events are sequential, that redemption is something that lies in the future as a goal, something to be achieved as the high point of a plot. When Tannhäuser hears the younger pilgrims sing these words—

At the sublime festival of clemency and grace. / I will atone for my sin in humility.  
Blessed is he who truly believes! / He shall be saved through penitence and repentance.<sup>59</sup>

—it appears that he hears them, and understands them. But what he seems to grasp in particular is the idea of Rome and the need for penitence, that is to say, what is carried in the song’s words. What he does not seem to absorb, however, is the form of life encoded in the way they are sung: a different concept of redemption that is not the result of a quest or the endpoint of a narrative, but one that is lived, continuous, and cyclical, whose time is not the narrative time of operatic drama but the time of the chorale, of the breath and the collective. That redemption is a song that

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<sup>59</sup> “Am hohen Fest der Gnad' und Huld, / in Demut sühn ich meine Schuld.  
Gesegnet, wer im Glauben treu! / Er wird erlöst durch Büß' und Reu'.”

is sung forever. Tannhäuser hears the message and springs to his feet, but as soon as he sings “Nach—”, picturing the thing he needs as ahead of himself somewhere, something to journey toward and to get, a failure to hear has already taken place. In this instance of hearing, the opera’s protagonist can pick up thoughts and words but cannot fundamentally alter the shape of his living.

Hearing, in this scene, marks the distance between the sound world of Wagnerian opera and another one against which it is set in relief. The pilgrims, first introduced in the open resonant landscape of Act I Scene 3, occupy a very different world from the one that houses the named characters’ drama, one that is carefully constructed to give the impression that it is not very operatic or theatrical at all. “Opera,” then, not as the name of the kind of work that *Tannhäuser* is, but as a form of world enfolded by characters and actions that spins out a narrative with a beginning and an end, is only part of a larger world that seems to be present in *Tannhäuser*, which is revealed in glimpses when the business of opera is peeled back.

We might say that the difference between these sound worlds marks a difference in forms of life—in the kinds of knowledge, interpretation, and epiphany that are available in each. In one, the world of “operatic” sound that Wagner constructs as only a partial element of the opera’s complete discourse, there is a narrative—but narrative is not only an empty and *a priori* structure into which the events of *Tannhäuser* are laid out. Narrative also refers to the knight’s movements, his restless convictions that the solution to his misery always lies elsewhere and ahead. The ending’s tragedy stops this movement but does not address its fundamental cause. In this sense the story’s template is not that of the fairy tale, which postulates a static and utopian “once upon a time” whose disturbance opens the temporality of a story. *Tannhäuser*, by contrast, begins *in medias res* because its story has no proper beginning. The disturbance is internal, and

narrative is part of the compulsion. (Chapter 4 will further explore how narrative can be an effect of a certain way of valuing presence.) What feels particularly modern in the opera is the way in which its central figure repeats a drama of disillusionment and epiphany over and over until it turns into the story; in these circumstances, what it would take to end the story or to find a different one cannot be found within the palette of sensations that it offers. It may not even change much for him to hear a thought from someone not caught within the same story, although it might feel to him like a revelation. When the thought arrives in the sensory envelope of an epiphany, it may have already taken on the color, the tone, of the drama.

### Chapter 3

#### The Structure of Romantic Affect: Soundtracks and the Intimate Event

Let us begin at the end of Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998), although it is not the first or the last time we have seen this ending: Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) stands in the middle of Manhattan's Riverside Park, awaiting the arrival of an anonymous man she's fallen in love with over the Internet. But she's also fallen for Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), a man who used to be her business rival but who, not a few hours before, had confessed his feelings for her outside her apartment. In this romantic comedy's last scene, Joe rounds the corner at the end of the park's path, and Kathleen sees his face just as Harry Nilsson's rendition of "Over the Rainbow" cues on the soundtrack. Joe gives a little half shrug, as if to say: this is it. "I wanted it to be you. I wanted it to be you so badly," says Kathleen, through tears. They kiss, and the camera pans up to a sky full of credits.

This moment is emblematic of the association, by now a cliché, of a swell of sentimental music with what Elizabeth A. Povinelli calls the "intimate event" of love: the kind of romantic encounter that binds a couple without regard to the categories of social personhood they happen to occupy.<sup>1</sup> As a product of entertainment, it also extends a musical and filmic convention now associated with the "golden age" of Hollywood romantic comedy, a period that begins sometime around Nora Ephron's *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989) and whose end might be pinpointed to a

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 176.

flurry of online pieces about the “death” of romantic comedy in the early 2010s.<sup>2</sup> This period capitalized on a convention, already present in earlier decades of classical Hollywood cinema, that seemed to exemplify film music’s excesses and rote significations: as one online appreciation of the rom-com’s golden decade attests, “[y]ou can anticipate the final kiss soundtracked by swelling strings even as the opening credits roll.”<sup>3</sup> Those swelling strings underscore an event—the coming-into-being of romantic love—whose significance in discourses of liberal subjectivity extends beyond the formation of a couple, since the possibility of a love that transcends worldly difference also serves as proof of an inner realm of the self that is more than its formation in culture. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s analysis of an emergent bourgeois public sphere in the broad moment of the Enlightenment, Povinelli writes that “the relay of intimate recognition stripped the social attributes from a person even as it locked this socially deracinated self into a higher-order couplet and, vis-à-vis such couplets, into still higher orders of abstract collectivity such as the democratic state.”<sup>4</sup> Romantic love does not only open the self into a relation with a single other, but also “constitutes humanity retroactively” by stripping away “the dictates of the social skin.”<sup>5</sup>

If it is in the intimate romantic encounter that the liberal subject gains what Habermas calls a “saturated and free interiority,” we might say that the soundtrack that swells under

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Tatiana Siegel, “R.I.P. Romantic Comedies: Why Harry Wouldn’t Meet Sally in 2013,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rip-romantic-comedies-why-harry-634776> (published September 26, 2013); Alexander Huls, “The Romantic Comedy Is Dying, but Cinematic Romance Is Thriving,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/the-romantic-comedy-is-dying-but-cinematic-romance-is-thriving/283252/> (published January 24, 2014); Amy Nicholson, “Who Killed the Romantic Comedy?,” *L.A. Weekly*, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/who-killed-the-romantic-comedy-4464884> (published February 27, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Grace Barber-Plentie, “Why 1992-2002 was the golden age of the black romantic comedy,” BFI.org.uk, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/boomerang-brown-sugar-black-romantic-comedies> (published December 6, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Povinelli, *Empire of Love*, 190.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

declarations of love provides that theoretical concept's visceral form.<sup>6</sup> While some music scholars (and no less a film music practitioner than Max Steiner) have linked the development of non-diegetic music with early attempts in sound cinema to represent the love scene, the potential implications of this association have hardly been explored.<sup>7</sup> And yet romance, as an ideology and experience central to the liberal subject, may be an especially useful site for exploring how popular film's musical conventions have taken part in shaping the significance of feeling within narratives of liberal life.

This chapter will not provide a comprehensive survey of film musical practice as it relates to cinematic romance. Rather, I focus on a genealogy of films, beginning in 1940s, that culminates in the two romantic comedies written and directed by Nora Ephron in the last decade of the millennium, both of which feature Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks as its stars: *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail*. Each of these films remakes, or refers to, earlier films: *You've Got Mail* is based on a play that had already been adapted in Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), with James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan, and Robert Z. Leonard's *In The Good Old Summertime* (1949), an MGM musical starring Judy Garland and Van Johnson. *Sleepless in Seattle*, meanwhile, unfolds in the shadow of Leo McCarey's *An Affair to Remember* (1957), a film that Meg Ryan's character watches and quotes compulsively as she formulates her own love narrative. I focus on remakes because they are documents of the changes that a

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<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 28.

<sup>7</sup> "There was nothing inherent in the nature of sound film that required that filmmakers develop the conceptual distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound in the way they did. ... What seems to have forced the issue, as [Max] Steiner astutely noted, was the need to reconcile the love scene with dramatic sound film." James Buhler and David Neumeyer, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30. Steiner's observation is, perhaps, remarkable for how unremarkable it seems to be, as if noting something that goes without saying: "They [producers and directors in 1931] began to add a little music here and there to support love scenes or silent sequences." Max Steiner, "Scoring the Film," in *We Make the Movies*, edited by Nancy Naumberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937), 216-238.

particular story absorbed as it moved through the American twentieth century. Of particular interest, then, will be moments when a later film encounters a plot event that seems anachronistic or no longer true in its time. The film must then find a way of retaining the essential structure of the adapted story while infusing it with a new causality, such that the film's form becomes a record of the transformations needed to refurbish an old convention for a changed cultural context.<sup>8</sup>

Take the final exchange between Klara (Sullivan) and Alfred (Stewart) in the pre-war *The Shop Around the Corner* as an example. All the disguises have been exposed, but Klara has heard a persistent rumor that Alfred might be bowlegged—and would she mind pulling up his pantlegs to show her? Alfred, and the camera, obligingly do. Then the music swells, the two kiss, and the film ends. The request is made playfully, maybe even jokingly. But if we take her request and the scene at their word, she cannot accept him and the film cannot end until an image of Alfred's legs appears on the screen. I will argue that the language of the remakes tracks a shift in romantic ideology over the course of the twentieth century from the notion of the suitable mate—indexed by external markers of class, wealth, and attractiveness—toward the conspicuous disavowal of those features in favor of the interiority and absoluteness of the “soul mate.” As romance's referent moves inward, the film image must grapple with the loss of its ability to provide proofs of love while the soundtrack becomes freighted with a newfound pressure to express the lyricism of the self. In this repertory, this lyrical self has to feel fuzzy and featureless

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<sup>8</sup> Here I am in dialogue with Stanley Cavell's theory of film genre, in which new works sometimes discover new ways of belonging to a genre while older traits, once deemed essential to belonging, turn out to be inessential. Cavell doesn't specify any kind of formal link between the traits that disappear and the ones they're replaced with, only that new features “compensate” for the absence of old ones while also clarifying them. In my reading of the remake, I am suggesting that the shape of new entries to a genre can emerge via the effort to trace new causal paths through the parts of a story that no longer “speak” in a new historical time. Thus, new traits are not only replacements of the old ones (as if traits sometimes just lose their urgency), but are formal inventions that preserve the shape of old traits in their creative avoidance of them. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuit of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 27-30.

in order to frame access to love as something universal and not contingent, which means that it must erase particularities that include whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle- to upper-middle-class position in order to claim the primacy of the inner self.<sup>9</sup> Here, liberalism's notion of unmarked subjectivity resonates with the structural implications of cinematic suture theory, in which the succession of a film's shots imply the place of a viewer at its unshown center.<sup>10</sup> Film's absorbing realism, in this account, depends first on the specific film viewer stepping into the place of this unspecific subject of cinema, which shears away the cultural identifications that the viewer normally carries. In this sense, suture theory is itself a kind of liberal theory of empathy and identification, insofar as it presupposes the self's becoming-universal as a conduit to accessing an experience that is "other."

Functionally, the shift away from the decisiveness of skin in the later romantic comedies means that *You've Got Mail* cannot end, as *The Shop Around the Corner* does, by simply showing Tom Hanks's body. What is shown or disclosed when he enters the park, then, will be a central preoccupation of this chapter. *You've Got Mail* renews a concern that extends back to *The Marriage of Figaro*, whose ending depended on the Countess emerging from a disguise in order to provoke recognition and reconciliation. Yet what the disguise consists of, and what it would mean to emerge from it, are questions that are posed newly in each historical moment. How do the late millennial romantic comedies, steeped in nostalgia and modernity, deliver the hit of certainty that can no longer be carried in an image? As I will argue, *You've Got Mail* engages the

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is only possible because these particularities are already coded as universals within the dominant of American culture. The literature that this sentence relies on is vast. For a start, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) on whiteness; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, No. 2 (Winter 1998), 547-566 on heteronormativity; Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (California: University of California Press, 2014) on the history of a cosmopolitan middle-class that defines itself in relation to an imagined working-class South.

<sup>10</sup> See James Buhler, "Psychoanalysis, Apparatus Theory, and Subjectivity," *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. David Neumeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 383-417.

aesthetic problem of revitalizing, by revisceralizing, conventional forms that have become clichés. Heavy with wistfulness for the unselfconscious romance of the past, its characters describe genre as a structure whose comforts have been withdrawn from the ordinariness of living, leaving it unprotected. Its final recognition scene, then, will involve the shock of recognizing genre itself, unveiling its quiet work in the backdrop of an ordinary that was not supposed to provide any guarantees.

Scholarship on romantic comedy has blossomed since the cultural turn of the 1990s, with most studies engaged in critiques of cultural scripts and representations of gender and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Yet the very proliferation of scholarship at this moment corroborates the notion, often expressed in the literature, that the genre is not typically seen as a site of interest for film form and aesthetics. Part of the reason may be that the genre's name is often used to invoke precisely that which escapes distinction, specificity, and analytic interest—or, as Celestino Deleyto puts it, if “a film threatens to be mildly interesting in cinematic, narrative or ideological terms then it cannot possibly be a romantic comedy.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the problem of how to discover value in the repetitive and the banal is a thematic of romance itself, when the new is no longer novel. The genre of romantic comedy thus poses a problem of critical reception that, in its demand for modes of attention and descriptive care that would preserve both the sense of the remarkable and the unremarkable, mirrors some of the concerns with which its characters also struggle.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Some major examples include Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); David I. Grossvogel, *Marianne and the Puritan: Transformations of the Couple in French and American Films* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005); Cherry Potter, *I Love You, But...: Romance, Comedy and the Movies* (London: Methuen, 2002); Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); and Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Vol. 34, *Short Cuts* (London: Wallflower, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Illouz locates the aestheticization of the mundane as a trait particular to middle- and upper-middle-class conceptions of romantic love; see Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 252. The norm of romantic ideology

The problem of how to attend analytically to the mundane, instead of what is specific or different in a given case, also attends the analysis of the generic string cue.<sup>14</sup> The melodramatic swell of strings marks a strange place between academic study and mass consumption, since its exemplarity as a trope of Hollywood film music is at odds with its relative unresponsiveness to the ways in which film music scholarship has traditionally derived rich historical, cultural, and analytical meaning from a film's cues. Its status as musical object is an example of what Adorno called pseudo-individualization, in which apparent differences of the cue from film to film mask the standardization of its multiple encounters, the fact that it is "already listened to."<sup>15</sup> In focusing on the structure of an affect, then, I am deliberately avoiding what may be this chapter's more obvious entry point: the love theme. To speak of the love theme is to speak of a theme that contrasts other kinds of theme, which index different situations, emotions, and events. The theme is tied to the specificity of what it represents; its function is to narrow the semantic field and to distinguish diegetic situations from each other. In its labeling as such, the love theme subscribes to a hermeneutic view of film music, in which it is the soundtrack's function to illustrate or render that which takes place in the story.<sup>16</sup> In this view, the relation between the non-diegetic soundtrack and the film's diegesis is known, or at least stable. Yet since the drama of romance is a drama of inner and outer, of fusing unseen and saturating feeling with its realization in the visible world, the "division" between the non-diegetic soundtrack and the diegesis is not just a

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this chapter traces also, therefore, includes a form of class aspiration, which I develop more fully in the section on *Her*.

<sup>14</sup> The pervasiveness of such endings would be one proof of Linda Williams's claim that melodrama is Hollywood cinema's dominant mode; see Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 42-88.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard D. Leppert (California: University of California Press, 2002), 445.

<sup>16</sup> The most influential text in establishing the hermeneutic paradigm for film music studies is Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Pub., 1987). See also Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

precondition of filmic representation, but becomes a formal thematic within the narrative's engagement of romance.

I begin with a parody of romantic comedy from the TV sketch show *Saturday Night Live* that introduces aesthetic features of the intimate event that will recur throughout the chapter's later cases. As these love plots move up through the last American century, their imagination of the feeling-event that signals the presence of love acts as an unsteady anchor within its adaptations to shifts in class structure, the meaning of work, and formulations of gender and desire.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, writing becomes a privileged site of authenticity within the epistolary structure of *You've Got Mail*, where it offers a space of endless time to think and express a thought that the outside world is too blunt to accommodate, an experience that the film associates with the possibility of love. I track the development and persistence of this association into the past and the future, from the films of the 1940s to Spike Jonze's science-fiction romance *Her* (2012), which tropes on the romance with a computer but dispenses with the person at the other end. In preserving the authenticity of writing as a sign of the true self confirmed in romantic love, *Her* suggests a variation of an oft-cited phrase of Jameson's: it has become easier to imagine dating a computer program than to imagine the end of self-realization in romantic love.<sup>18</sup>

The final sections of the chapter focus on what affective knowledge is disclosed in the swell of strings that underscores the event of romance, beginning with *An Affair to Remember* and then turning back to *You've Got Mail*. In order to emerge from concealment and provoke

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<sup>17</sup> For a predominantly cultural critical approach to romantic comedy, see Betty Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com*, in *Popular Culture and World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), and Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> This sentence tropes on Jameson's statement that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003), 65-79.

romance's affective shock, Joe becomes involved in the mechanics of romantic comedy itself—of scripting, plotting, producing, directing—such that his emergence in the park carries with it the emergence of genre's comforts in an age of romance's attrition. The movement between generic plot and generic apparatus that becomes Joe's obsession in *You've Got Mail's* closing act points to an analysis of the final music cue in which the question of its diegetic "status" is inseparable from the questions of romance in their modern form.

### ***Saturday Night Live* and the aria**

In 2014, *Saturday Night Live* ran a sketch on its fake news program, "Weekend Update," which featured Vanessa Bayer as a "romantic comedy expert" in an interview with Michael Che, who plays the anchor. She is there ostensibly to deliver a report on new TV programming, but the joke is that Bayer is a manifestation of the genre on which she reports: she is an adorable klutz who claims to have accidentally stumbled onto the program (even though Che has just introduced her) and who blushes furiously at every question she is asked.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Che's deadpan replies bring out the absurdity of Bayer's clichés:

CHE: Anyway, as a romantic comedy expert, what do you think of these new shows?

BAYER: What do I think? What do I think honestly? [Gentle acoustic guitar strumming begins] I think that um, that maybe I was meant to be here tonight. Because I was meant to meet you.

CHE: That is not actually why we brought you here.

BAYER: It's just that—and I think—well, you go first.

CHE: You're the only one going! So maybe get back to talking about romantic comedies.

BAYER: [Electric guitar enters as music gets louder] I guess what I'm saying is, it's New

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<sup>19</sup> This cliché of female protagonicity has been noted elsewhere: see Mindy Kaling, "Types of Women in Romantic Comedies Who Are Not Real," in *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* (New York: Random House, 2011), 100.

York City! And it's six days before Halloween! So do you just want to go somewhere, and talk, or ...

CHE: Daisy, I can't go anywhere, I'm in the middle of "Update."

BAYER: You're always in the middle of "Update." Why not be at the beginning of something? Stop reading the cue cards out there and start reading the ones in here [touches her heart].<sup>20</sup>

This parody of romantic comedy's stock phrases is also a parody of its musical praxis: the entrance of the strumming guitar gets a laugh from the audience. The entrance of the non-diegetic sentimental cue is enough in itself to constitute a reference and a joke, which is elaborated by the two performers: when the music enters, Bayer's megawatt smile never flickers, but Che's eyes flit suspiciously up and around the hall, as if seeking the source of the guitar music or the studio laughter it provokes.<sup>21</sup> The joke rests on the understanding that non-diegetic music should be imperceptible within the world whose events are, motivationally, its source. Che's glances around the room are funny because he breaks a convention, but his bemusement at an appearance of music that comes out of nowhere also establishes a form of difference between himself and Bayer. Her performance of a non-ironic attachment to romance becomes the comic fodder for the satiric tradition of late night comedy; Che doesn't have to do much because the non-irony of love seems to deconstruct itself as soon as Bayer arrives at the desk. The gender difference between the two male anchors and the female guest frames who gets to be in on the joke, and who the joke is: Che is, functionally, the straight man to Bayer's anomalous and egregious affects.

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<sup>20</sup> Saturday Night Live, "Weekend Update: Romantic Comedy Expert - Saturday Night Live," YouTube video, 3:37, published October 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxruI7Y7kww>.

<sup>21</sup> This parody belongs to a history of parodies of non-diegetic music's inaudible status: see, for example, Woody Allen's *Bananas* (1971) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1980) for characters who comment upon or discover the origin of music that is first implied to be non-diegetic.

Musically, the incongruity of the scene is not just the strangeness of the cue in Che's world, nor its total naturalization in Bayer's, but also the emergence of a split between their experiences of a world that they nonetheless share enough to have a conversation. What is the implicit explanation for the split? Che's bemusement is a sign that the cue, for him, is not a convention. It is as natural a part of her genre as it is alien to his; we might say that the difference in their hearing registers a difference of gender as a difference of genre. It could also be that the music does not surprise Bayer because it is spurred by her own romantic optimism as an effect of a momentum that she herself has produced. What has become naturalized for Bayer is not just a feature of her world (that events in her life will be followed with effusions of music), but also the aesthetic shape her feeling takes: the presence of music becomes part of what, for her, having a feeling *is*.

If part of this skit's comedy turns on a difference of hearing as a way of articulating a difference in genre, it reminds us that genres can imply phenomenologies, ways of experiencing the world. For example, Bayer continually invests the moment with significances that Che can hardly register as such, evident not just in the familiar romantic tropes of predestination ("I think that um, that maybe I was meant to be here tonight") and sudden marvel at the specificity of the present ("It's New York City! And it's six days before Halloween!"), but also in the sudden feeling of access to stretches of utopian, suspended time somewhere else ("So do you just want to go somewhere, and talk, or ...") and the proliferation of hypothetical worlds that pressure the present's contingency ("If I don't leave now, I'll miss my flight and you'll lose me forever!" "If we're not both married in, I don't know, fifteen, twenty minutes, do you wanna, um, meet at our special place?"). The contingency of expression itself becomes palpable when there is more to say than time needed to say it ("Well, you go first"). The intimate event evinces a remarkable

confidence not just in the continuity of the feeling it expands (“Why not be at the beginning of something?”) but also in narrativity itself, in the hidden linkages that make it possible to speak of beginnings and endings at all.

Bayer assumes that Che’s feeling is congruent to hers, with his total non-involvement seeming to have no impact on Bayer’s sense of her success. The skit, in other words, removes one half of the romantic couple, and discovers that this has *absolutely no effect* on the production of romance’s happy ending. Bayer’s last line reaffirms her embeddedness in the discourse of Hollywood romance<sup>22</sup> while also distilling its fantasy; her triumph shows us that the participation of a second person is not, in the end, the most essential component of romantic fantasy. What “romance” means, in the trope that this sketch parodies, is not the same as what Stanley Cavell saw as the goal of remarriage comedies from the 30s and 40s, which was the achievement of conversation, of finding a way of talking together. Here, the essential transformation happens not with another person, but in the way Bayer’s feeling dawns a new mode of feeling herself in relation to her world. (Chapter 4 will deal more extensively with the concept of the other that emerges alongside the self as lyrical expansion.)

The skit summarizes aspects of the intimate event’s musical and aesthetic form that have become conventional enough to be recognizable as parody. Yet though its objects of parody include the ending of *You’ve Got Mail*, the two previous film iterations of the story deploy musical aesthetics in a completely different way. The plot comes from Miklós László’s play *Parfumerie* (1937), which told the story of two employees in a small leather goods store who are unaware that they are each the “dear friend” from the classified ads with whom they have been

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<sup>22</sup> Renée Zellweger’s line—“You had me at hello”—delivered to Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), regularly features on lists of the greatest movie quotes of all time (“AFI’s 100 Greatest Movie Quotes Of All Time,” March 13, 2015, <http://www.afi.com/100Years/quotes.aspx>).

exchanging intimate letters. The Hungarian play was adapted almost immediately after its première into its first film version, Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*. The almost complete absence of music from this film (with the exception of brief non-diegetic cues over the opening and closing credits, and a music box that plays a Russian folk tune in the store's inventory) sharply contrasts with the play's second film version: Robert Z. Leonard's *In The Good Old Summertime*, an MGM musical and star vehicle for Judy Garland, preserves most of the story but updates the setting to a music shop in turn-of-the-century Chicago.<sup>23</sup> Though the location shifts to the New World, the music store's boss, Mr. Oberkugen, serves as a musical tie to European history and high taste: his office at the back of the store is something of a cross between a violin teacher's studio and a bourgeois sitting room, with busts and portraits of Great Classical Composers clustered around a homey fireplace. When in a foul mood, Oberkugen stalks to his office, defiantly stuffs a handkerchief into his shirt collar, and pulls out his prize Stradivarius, playing brooding Romantic violin idioms that bleed through the door and cause his employees in turn to stuff handkerchiefs into their ears.

Oberkugen's violin comically illustrates how, in the film musical, feeling's expression always seeks out an audience, even when this audience is not the one directly being addressed—it is an underscore in search of a story. In a late scene, Veronica (Garland) discovers that Andrew (Van Johnson), the co-worker for whom she has begun to develop feelings, is already engaged to a girl with whom he keeps up a correspondence. At this point, Andrew knows that Veronica is the person he has been writing to, but has withheld this information from her; crestfallen, she turns on him angrily and declares that she will quit her job at the end of the day. As she returns to

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the ways early sound film practitioners sought to manage the new medium's cultural status by controlling its use of music, see James Buhler and David Neumeyer, "Music and the Ontology of the Sound Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. James Buhler and David Neumeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17-43.

the sales floor, however, a customer asks to hear “Merry Christmas,” a melancholy song penned for the film by Fred Spielman and Janice Torre. With Buster Keaton (who plays another sales clerk) accompanying on the organ, Garland delivers via Veronica a performance whose hopeful lyrics are made wistful by their narrative context and the song’s slow tempo:

Merry Christmas, have a very very merry Christmas  
Dream about your heart’s desire  
Christmas Eve when you retire  
Santa Claus will stop and I know he’ll drop  
Exactly what you wanted from your chimney top

As she sings, the organ’s reedy consistency fades into the warmer tone of a body of strings garlanded by chimes, even though no other musicians are playing in the store. Instead, a crowd of customers has gathered around her and Keaton. Not surprisingly, the format of the musical demands and delivers a situation for Veronica to express her feelings at the precise moment that such a scene is needed. But the performance also conceals them: though the moment gathers listeners for her expression of sadness, they are also, in the world of the film, holiday shoppers who believe her merely to be at work. Garland’s performance is connected to her feelings as a subject of love, but it is also demanded of her by her employment in a sheet music store before the age of records. Only Andrew, who stands to the side and somewhat behind her, as if listening in rather than addressed by the performance, understands more fully the irony of the song’s delivery against the lyrics’ cheerful platitudes.

Unable to tell Andrew the truth about why she is upset, the film’s musical form delivers a stage and an audience in front of which she can pour out her heart. In *You’ve Got Mail*, however, Kathleen Kelly has neither access to a music shop nor the musical’s affordance to express her loneliness and suffering in song. In Ephron’s version of the story, released nearly fifty years after



Figure 5. Veronica sings "Merry Christmas" at work in *In the Good Old Summertime*.

the previous film, Kathleen runs an independent children's bookstore whose existence is threatened when Joe Fox, the heir of the Fox Books empire, opens a megastore around the corner from her little shop. Instead of exchanging letters, this couple connects over the still-new technology of the Internet, starting an e-mail correspondence that is already underway at the beginning of the film. In a sequence that takes place before Kathleen and Joe meet in person, Kathleen discovers the imminent arrival of a Fox Books megastore near her shop and, for the rest of the day, protests energetically to her colleagues that this turn will lead to increased patronage and profit. It is only when she is at home with her boyfriend Frank (Greg Kinnear) that she begins to voice her worries. Yet Frank, a pretentious writer, interrupts her and finishes her sentence, literally. Plunking himself down at his antique typewriter, he pecks out a line that captures his response to her state of distress: "You are a lone reed, standing tall, waving boldly in the corrupt sands of commerce." In the next scene, we see Kathleen sitting alone at her laptop, the camera outside her window in the dark of evening and peering into the circle of lamp-light

that illuminates her. Now it is Kathleen who is typing, and we hear her voice speak what she types in voice-over as a soft string cue suffuses the scene's single shot:

Sometimes I wonder about my life. I lead a small life—well, valuable but small. And sometimes I wonder, do I do it because I like it? Or because I haven't been brave? So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when—shouldn't it be the other way around? I don't really want an answer, I just want to send this cosmic question out into the void. So. Good night, dear void.

The cue, in the idiom of a gently tinkling piano line warmed up by strings, begins with a series of closed antecedent-consequent phrases but then swells lushly into a prolonged high note when Kathleen speaks of sending her “cosmic question out into the void.” Like Garland's performance of “Merry Christmas,” the cue fills out a duration in which a character is given time to express what the world of the narrative does not permit her to express. The scene is part of the story, of course, but it is also a kind of aside, a suspension of the narrative time of action for a lyrical time free from the risk of interruption.

Insofar as Kathleen's monologue is given a formal wholeness by the scene's single shot and the cue of music that expands around it, and in its expansion of a privately held feeling that contrasts with the recitative-like patter of the scenes of action and dialogue before and after, we may think of it as her aria. Though *You've Got Mail* features next to no diegetic music, we can nevertheless see how the film musical's “number” structure, inherited from operetta and opera, survives into non-musical narrative film as a rhythm of action and expression, or of linear time and lyrical time. Yet the difference between Garland's singing and the unheard non-diegetic cue has important implications for how each of these film worlds imagines agency, privacy, and the relation between characters and the medium in which they exist. In the musical, the film's musical register is sustained by characters through their performative charisma and skill; it is



Figure 6. Kathleen types an e-mail in her apartment in *You've Got Mail*.

only after Garland begins singing that her and Keaton's diegetic performance is able to call up the non-diegetic string underscore, which then continues on into the next scene after the performance ends, echoing the song's melody into the next stretch of action. In *You've Got Mail*'s aesthetic universe, however, music disappears from the world of representation and takes up residence entirely in the underscore. Music's expressivity no longer issues directly from the activity of characters who suffer and feel. Rather, the camera's placement outside the apartment and the soft underscore suggest the location of these sounds at the periphery of Kathleen's world, kept at bay from the circle of her lamp's light. In this version of the aria, music's expressivity does not issue from her body but hovers at the unheard edges of her world.

These differences in music's place within filmic signification track alongside a shift in the status of the visible for romantic ideology. Specifically, *You've Got Mail* understands the truth of romance to be concealed by public identity, locating it in an interior that cannot be read on the body. The clearest indication of this shift can be found in the way *You've Got Mail* revises

the ending of the story's earlier versions. In all three films, the man first discovers and withholds his knowledge of his pen pal's double identity. In the first two films, however, the last scene takes place in the store where the protagonists work, as the woman is about to leave to meet her pen pal (she thinks) for the first time. Before she goes, the man casually mentions that her pen pal had stopped by the store the other day. When she presses him for details, the man reveals that her lover is, unfortunately, ugly, dull, and—worst of all—unemployed, after which the woman crumples in despair. It is at this moment that the man, who has just been promoted to manager, reveals his true identity to her. The possibility of romance is written into the skin—and this is literalized in one of the last shots of *The Shop Around the Corner*, when the camera, per Klara's request, cuts downward to show Alfred's ankles as he hikes up his pants, revealing pasty flesh and the intimate sight of sock garters.

Significantly, neither of the couples in the 40s films makes it to the public rendezvous. In both the earlier non-musical and musical versions, the couple gets together *before* the encounter in the park, thereby dispensing with the scene that ends *You've Got Mail*, described at the top of this chapter. This is because the men in the earlier versions can marshal a disgust for class and body that is sufficient to override the intimate connection forged through the exchange of letters. In *You've Got Mail*, however, we see Joe attempt and fail to execute this very strategy. Near the end of the film, Joe and Kathleen have overcome, or at least suspended, the animosities of their business rivalry and become friends. When Kathleen confides in him about her e-mail exchange with a man whose screenname is NY152, Joe tries to suggest the man's undesirability through suggestions of what the number might represent: 152, he guesses, could refer to his age, or the number of pockmarks on his face, or the number of souvenir shot glasses he owns, or stitches from his nose job. Yet Kathleen, unlike her earlier incarnations, seems unmoved by these visions

of hideousness, and retorts: “152 insights into my soul!”

*You've Got Mail* gives space for Kathleen's desire as a counterweight to the man's attempt to orchestrate her choices via their disparity of knowledge. Whereas the earlier films framed the woman's "choice" in the end as the result of a winnowing of options—the men bait-and-switch by proffering, and then retracting, the fantasized letter-writer, who leaves behind an absence into which the "real" man can conveniently step—Kathleen's fantasy trumps Joe's attempts at disqualification. A formal effect of the millennial film's introduction of this obstacle to Joe's plans are the sequences of verbal sparring near the end, in which Joe's repeated attempts to puncture the pen pal fantasy are parried by Kathleen's repetition of the phrase, "I don't care!" In the film's penultimate scene, Joe and Kathleen stand outside her apartment just as she is about to leave for her rendezvous in the park. This is the scene in which the couple formed and the film ended in the story's earlier versions, and Joe, as if aware of this heritage, here confesses his romantic feelings for Kathleen and proposes a vision of domestic life they could someday share. But she does not accept. Unlike her earlier incarnations, she will force the plot to go one scene further to the promised meeting in the park.

*You've Got Mail's* variation of the basic story's ending, in other words, bears directly on a shift in the locus of romantic ideology from the currency of the social skin to a hidden quality (what Kathleen calls the "soul") that one's visible, public identity serves precisely to conceal. It is because of this shift, and Joe's inability to disqualify the other man as his predecessors did, that the film's last scene exists at all: the encounter, itself a trope and a cliché of the genre, in which a moment of public and intimate recognition is suffused with music's pathos. The shift in the men's talk from Alfred's wish for a "lovely, average girl" to Joe's invocation, some sixty years later, of "the one person in the entire world who fills your heart with joy," marks a number

of aesthetic shifts—from the average to the exemplary, from surface loveliness to something that “fills,” and to a scale of relation that joins the “one” and the “world.” But it is also a shift toward conceiving of romance *qua* the aesthetic, as the monologue in which Kathleen compares her life to books makes clear. As the soundtrack increasingly assumes the responsibility to convey, if not exactly to represent, the presence of a saturated interiority that lies beneath the social skin, the idea of one’s authentic self as something that lies hidden and must be brought out becomes a metonym for the process of falling in love itself. As romantic love increasingly absorbs the burden of expressing what Eva Illouz calls the “originality of the individual self,”<sup>24</sup> the love theme too becomes freighted to express not just a feeling of relation but also of self-presence.

### **Cribbing vs. the “originality of the individual self”**

The *Saturday Night Live* parody suggests a moment in a genre’s history in which its tropes have become familiar enough to be recognizable, and funny, as abstractions. Yet the parody’s indication of aesthetic saturation is already present as a form of anxiety in the question Kathleen addresses to the void: “So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when—shouldn’t it be the other way around?” This strange formulation suggests an impossible wish to experience the pleasures of conventionality before they are conventional, to have her experience initiate or inspire tropes that might be written about in books rather than experiencing her own life as something already written.

*You’ve Got Mail* stakes itself in relation to the memory of past works, from *The Godfather* to *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Shop Around the Corner*, whose status as a previous iteration of the current film is acknowledged by its use as the name of Kathleen’s bookstore. At

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<sup>24</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 83.

one point, Kathleen confronts Joe about putting up a sign on the corner that declares Fox Books to be “just around the corner,” to which Joe retorts, “You do not own the phrase ‘Around the Corner!’” Ephron’s filmmaking is constantly aware of its use of past materials. In the film’s opening sequence, as the camera tracks into Kathleen’s apartment through a window, it diverts briefly along its path to glance at a bookshelf at the moment the “Based on ‘The Shop Around the Corner’” credit appears. When Kathleen raises the thought that everything she sees reminds her of something that has happened before, she also describes the film’s stance to its own status as yet another remake.

The saturation of references to earlier works suggest that the film’s concern with romance is, at the same time, a concern with originality. To live not a “small” life but a big one would be to escape the repetitions of a world saturated with representation, to do something that has not already been written about, but *will be* written about. Yet this does not mean that Kathleen wants to be exempt from genre’s familiar promises, which includes the promise of love. She still longs, as she says, for the “dream of someone else,” even if she doesn’t want the event of love to only recall for her the love stories that she has already read, and even if she uses those stories implicitly or explicitly as a guide in her pursuit of love (as is the case, implicitly, with *Pride and Prejudice* in this film and, explicitly, with *An Affair to Remember* in *Sleepless in Seattle*). This means, in effect, to wish to escape the state of abstraction that makes genre possible, in which a gesture recalls the body of gestures that have come before it. The aim is not to do something unprecedented, exactly, so much as it is to resist a gesture’s intertextuality: to *feel* something to be new even when its features are generic.

Given their epistolary narratives, it is unsurprising that *In the Good Old Summertime* and *You’ve Got Mail* visit the question of originality most forcefully in scenes of writing. In these

films, writing is the semiprivate zone in which the subject can rehearse and revise the version of the self to which others have access; the page and the screen become surrogates for the face as that which both grants access to and conceals another's interiority. A key entry *You've Got Mail* comes when Joe must write an e-mail to explain to his pen pal why he failed to show up to their date the previous night. For Joe had, in fact, gone to the café at the appointed time, only to discover that his pen pal was also the woman whose bookstore his corporation was trying to put out of business. He had entered anyway and spoken to Kathleen as if he, as the businessman she knows, had only happened across the café; they get into a fight that ends when Kathleen dismisses him as "nothing but a suit." After Kathleen sends her pen pal an e-mail to ask why he failed to show up that night, Joe begins to craft a response. At first, the music cue is bouncy and unserious as Joe attempts a few possible excuses ("I am in Vancouver"), its comic pauses timed to coincide with Joe's grimaces and his dog's disapproving looks. The scene exemplifies what we might call the sentimental comedy rule of three, in which two comic instances are followed by the instance that tugs the heart, the pattern of the first two leading not to the comic third's punchline but rather a smoothing out into lyrical time that explodes the rhythm of the pattern.<sup>25</sup> After his second lie, Joe makes a show of deleting everything he has written, and the music cue cuts out. Before beginning the e-mail for the third time, however, he removes his suit jacket and lays it carefully to the side. The message is clear: only by removing the suit can he write to her without being one.

At this point, something strange and nearly imperceptible happens in the film's sound mix. After the music cue ends, but before Joe begins typing, there is the unexplained sound of a

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<sup>25</sup> The same device is used in *Sleepless in Seattle* when Annie listens to Dr. Marcia Fieldstone's radio show in her kitchen. The show is playing teaser clips of past interviews, but a series of comic callers is followed by a reprise of Sam's speech about his wife, which lasts far longer than the teaser format would seem to allow.

clock ticking. Yet this lasts only for a few ticks, and emerges out of and disappears back into total silence. Aurally, the tick might continue the light snare beat that accompanied the previous music cue, although no other instrument now plays, and the tick's timbre strikes me as slightly different from the cue's percussion track. Whatever its cause, the light ticking and its sudden cessation as Joe turns to compose his third e-mail further emphasizes the silence that follows, and seems to contribute to the impression that Joe's typing happens in a suspension of ordinary time. He begins:

Dear friend, I cannot tell you what happened last night. But I beg you  
from the bottom of my heart to forgive me for not being there.

On the words "bottom of my heart," a lyrical cue fronted by a solo oboe begins on the soundtrack. But when he reaches the end of the line, he pauses, deletes the last three words, and replaces them with:

for what happened.

As he corrects the half-lie with a statement of truth, the strings behind the oboe gain in richness, and soon the oboe phases out as a sentimental piano line enters, the strings gaining greater depth as the e-mail continues. The sentimental cue emerges when Joe chooses to stop lying and instead commits himself to the truth (though it is not yet the end of dissembling completely; Joe is still careful not to reveal his identity).

That is, the scene posits an essential relation between love and truth-telling. It may seem unsurprising for a personal ethics of truth-telling to be part and parcel of the love plot, for a film to suggest that only someone who refuses to lie could be worthy of the genre's promised closure.

And yet one need only go back to the earlier versions of the *Parfumerie* tale to see how contingent the hinging of the authentic utterance to the idea of true love really is. In *The Good Old Summertime* has Andrew blatantly crib lines out of a book of poetry into the letters he sends Veronica, which he and the film seem entirely unanxious about—there is no transformative moment in which Andrew puts away the book and begins to write words of his own, for example. The effect of the lines he writes bears no relation to their originality. As he writes, music filters into his room from his neighbor, Louise Parkson, who is practicing the violin. Louise is played by Marcia van Dyke, an actress-musician with the San Francisco Symphony who made the cover of *Time* in 1948 as a promising “Starlet-Violinist.”<sup>26</sup> Yet she is also one of the film’s strangest additions to the basic *Parfumerie* plot. Her function is ostensibly that of a secondary love interest for Andrew, thus generating a further complication in the main plotline. Yet Andrew never shows any romantic interest in Louise, who plays the violin in a restaurant and has aspirations to win a scholarship to study in Leipzig. We first encounter her when Andrew walks into the restaurant; she is playing with a group of women—a pianist, a violinist, a cellist, and a harpist—all dressed in old-fashioned white and frilly dresses. The waiter informs Andrew that she has been perking up every time he walks into the room, which seems to disconcert him. When she comes to visit his table, he casually and tactfully mentions that he has a “lady friend,” by whom he means the girl he has been corresponding with. She expresses disappointment but not surprise, since “the only thing we ever talked about was music.”

If Andrew never shows any interest in the violinist, what is the purpose of her addition to the plot? It is true that Veronica thinks Andrew is engaged to her, and becomes jealous. But this was already true in *The Shop Around the Corner*, when the woman expresses jealousy when the

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<sup>26</sup> “Starlet-Violinist,” *Life*, January 19, 1948, cover. See also Liz Ronk, “Virtuoso Starlet: Marcia Van Dyke, Her Violin and Fickle Fame,” Jan. 10, 2014, <http://time.com/3878647/marcia-van-dyke-virtuoso-starlet-life-magazine/>.

man talks about his love for his pen pal. It would seem that Louise exists not as a romantic possibility for the male lead, but instead to be paired off with the violin: when she finally manages to secure an audition for the scholarship, she finds herself short of a violin, and Andrew rushes her the boss's Stradivarius. Hearing his precious violin played for the first time "as it should be played" sours the boss on ever again playing a single note, and he asks Andrew to bequeath the instrument to Louise. Louise thereafter exits the film, banished across the ocean to a lifetime of monastic devotion to music. The film effectively disqualifies her as a love interest by suggesting that she is more music than woman. (This is pointedly captured when, in the midst of flirting with Andrew at the restaurant, the pianist calls her back to the stage for the next set by pounding out the opening theme of Beethoven's Fifth symphony.) Here, Oberkugen's violin, dissonant to the century and the genre of the film it belongs to, finally exits the film once it has done its proper work.

Louise's true role within the love plot is clarified in a scene that begins with Andrew reading his most recent letter from Veronica. Behind him, through the window, we see Louise practicing her violin in an adjacent apartment. He looks up from his letter, as if listening. But the gesture that looks like listening also may be the gesture of sudden inspiration: Andrew gets up and walks to his writing desk, puts the letter away, and opens a book of poems by Frances Anne Kemble. As he moves to the writing desk, the camera pans to follow him, and Louise moves out of the frame as the camera focuses in on Andrew in the act of reading. As Louise is panned off-screen, a richer orchestration blooms around her solo violin line, including a larger body of strings, *pizzicato* double basses, and a high chime. The sound of a neighbor practicing in an adjacent flat is abstracted into a sound that suffuses the diegetic scene of intimate writing that follows: Andrew begins to copy lines from the book of poems into a fresh letter. We might note,

here, the different ways in which the writing of a love letter is represented in two films a half century apart. While, in *You've Got Mail*, the failure to write from your authentic self becomes an obstruction to the entrance of the lyrical underscore and of the right to continue in the love plot, it is also that the lyrical cue in the non-diegetic is completely disembodied and no longer tied to musical acts of creation in the world. The sound that blooms around Joe's act of authentic writing is evoked directly from his decision to tell the truth. The atmosphere generated by the figure of the violinist has now become internalized as a presence that is called forth through an act that affirms the essence within.



Figure 7. Andrew listens to Louise as he reads the latest letter in *In the Good Old Summertime*.

### **The intimate event's social skin**

In Habermas's account of the emerging European bourgeois private sphere, it was first "through letter writing [that] the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity."<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 49.

*Parfumerie* remakes outline a progression by which the abstraction of the non-diegetic soundtrack from sources in the world corresponds to an increased pressure and urgency in the subject's expression to be authentic and original. *You've Got Mail* differs from its earlier versions in its insistence on the creation of a self-authoring subject as a precondition to the intimate event of romantic closure. One possibility is that this difference results from its economic world, which sharply contrasts that of the earlier films. In the first two film versions, the protagonists are working-class, and the prospect of romantic love is deeply enmeshed in the economic conditions of wage labor (in one scene, James Stewart's character compares the excitement of meeting his pen pal with opening an envelope that contains an unspecified bonus). By contrast, Kathleen is a small-business owner to whom other people are dependent on her ability to provide wages. Even when she closes her shop, the question of money is not raised at all (she continues to live, unemployed, in her spacious Upper West Side apartment).<sup>28</sup> Later in the film, she is offered a job as a children's book editor at a major publishing firm, which she apparently turns down in order to become a children's book writer. Yet the decision to become an artist is matter-of-fact and free of anxiety. Instead, Kathleen's job as the owner of a children's bookstore neatly fulfills the neoliberal fantasy of a career that is both creative and lucrative, thereby aligning work not with labor but with passion.

*You've Got Mail*'s subscription to an ideal of creative work, therefore, locates its particular romantic fantasy within the affordances of a particular class privilege. To this point, Eva Illouz has argued that the correlation between love's authenticity and aesthetic originality is

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<sup>28</sup> In his study of Hollywood remarriage comedies of the late 1930s and early 1940s, Stanley Cavell argues that the relative wealth of the characters in those films is less proof of their status as economic fantasy than a necessity, in removing material obstacles to well-being, for the exploration of more abstract questions about happiness. This would seem also to be true of the class differences amongst the *Parfumerie* remakes. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 2-5.

a mark of middle- and upper-middle-class identity: in a survey proximate to the themes of this chapter, working-class and upper-middle-class participants who were asked about the kind of romantic card they might send a lover had exactly opposite associations with the generic and the original. Those belonging to the upper-middle-class responded negatively to cards with pre-written messages and clichéd symbols of romantic love; as one respondent put it, with a blank card, “I could write what I wanted and be sort of the message I wanted it to be,” rather than have “somebody else doing the talking for me.”<sup>29</sup> Working-class respondents, by contrast, favored generic romantic cards because they expressed exactly the sentiment that they wished to send. In Illouz’s findings, middle- and upper-middle-class respondents also tended to evince an “elaborate anticonsumerist ethos” involving the “rejection of goods manufactured explicitly for ‘romance’; an emphasis on originality and creativity; and an emphasis on anti-institutional values such as spontaneity, informality, and authenticity,” as well as praise for the category of the “mundane.”<sup>30</sup> In the arena of romance, Illouz writes, working-class respondents were concerned primarily with emotion, while upper-middle-class respondents were concerned with aesthetics. The latter seems to accord with Kathleen’s monologue in which the value of a life is articulated within a framework of aesthetic originality.

How enduring is the class privilege of embedding love in the notion of the writerly self’s authenticity, of associating the originality of one’s troping of romance with the exceptionalism of its feeling? Consider the opening of Spike Jonze’s futuristic romance *Her* (2013): the film begins with the protagonist, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), in the offices of *beautifulhandwrittenletters.com*, where he spends the day mimicking others’ distinctive writing styles to compose letters to their loved ones. Like *You’ve Got Mail*, the romance in this film

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<sup>29</sup> Illouz, *Romantic Utopia*, 253.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

centers on the presence of a computer, though in this case it is not with a human at the other end but with an Operating System, or OS, named Samantha (“Sam”). Much of the film’s romance is mediated through screens and, as a result, it resembles *You’ve Got Mail*’s filmic style in its frequent use of one-shots coupled with a voice-over. Yet the voice-over is one of several examples of the way *Her* both abstracts and literalizes the aesthetic functions of the earlier films, since the voice constitutes the entirety of Sam’s sensuous existence. Just as Louise the violinist became disembodied and abstracted in the transition to *You’ve Got Mail*’s non-diegetic cue, we might say that Kathleen is disembodied and abstracted in the transition to *Her*, leaving the female protagonist’s voice-over as the only remnant of her material presence.<sup>31</sup>

The bourgeois entanglement of romance and aesthetic novelty is projected into the future in *Her*, which takes place in a twice-whitewashed city: filmed largely in Shanghai but taking place in a futuristic L.A., the predominant whiteness of the cast suggests the racial inflection of the film’s commitments to normative romance and sex, bourgeois restlessness, and creative work. Jonze’s imagination of the future remains fully within *You’ve Got Mail*’s attachment to originality as a necessary condition in the creation of the self. The film ends when Theo, after years of writing other people’s letters, finally begins to pen a letter to his ex-wife, telling her what he has been unable to say and signing at the bottom—for the first time in the film—with his own name. Though romantic coupling doesn’t happen in this film—Sam, the OS, evolves to embrace forms of relationality that Theo, attached to monogamous coupling, is not able to comprehend—the romance plot catalyzes the transition from a “fake” writing to a genuine one, as if the creation of a subject capable of genuine utterances were sufficient substitute or

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<sup>31</sup> In this sense, *Her* is a science-fiction thought experiment in literalizing some of the significances of the cinematic voice-over that have been explored in theory; see Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 60, *Cinema/Sound* (1980): 33-50.

compensation for the absence of a couple.

Yet the film does include an intimate event, which takes place around the midway mark. Theo, who we encounter in a depressive state, has just gone on a failed first date with an acquaintance who ends the night by calling him a “creepy dude.” Later, in bed, Theo confesses to Sam,

I was lonely. I wanted somebody to fuck me, I wanted somebody to want me to fuck them. Maybe that would have filled this tiny little hole in my heart, but probably not. Sometimes I think I’ve felt everything I’m ever gonna feel, and from here on out I’m not going to feel anything new, just lesser versions of what I’ve already felt.

Like Kathleen, Theo worries not about the end of feeling entirely, but rather about the end of *new* feeling. A life full of feeling but absented of novelty is this film’s articulation of its deepest fear, which is a fear of the end of aesthetic surprise. Continued feelings are only “lesser versions” of what one has already felt in a view of life in which repetition does not anchor you to life but dulls it. Theo is rescued from this fate, however, when his confession to Sam turns sexual. Following Theo’s confession, Sam begins to voice her own doubts, which center on whether the new feelings she has experienced as her program expands are real—to which Theo responds, “You feel real to me, Samantha.” The soundtrack that accompanies this scene adapts to its futuristic setting while retaining the essential features of the sentimental cue from earlier films: as Samantha tends to Theo’s wounds, the cue that expands around their conversation is composed of strings whose swelling marks a steady, rhythmic pulse. Then, as Samantha begins to speak of her feeling, a gentle piano enters above the strings, keeping to the strings’ pulse while also hinting at the connectivity of a melody. As Theo and Sam begin to make love, describing the sexual acts they perform on each other’s bodies, the soundtrack swells with their voices, and the screen fades to black, the majority of the sexual encounter and its climax occurring over a

dark screen. If the cue of strings mixed with piano marked, for Joe Fox, the abstract creation of a self that attended his shedding of a suit and the truth of his writing, here a similar cue's underscoring of Theo's moment of self-realization is literalized in the creation of Sam's body. As Theo describes the parts of Sam's body that he touches in sequence, it is as though he names those parts into existence (as Sam exults: "This is amazing—I can feel my skin"). Theo's participation in the intimate event that rescues his sense of self, or fills the "tiny little hole in his heart," draws its weight and concreteness from the corporeal transformation undergone by Sam.

As Theo says, having sex with someone would "probably not" fill the tiny little hole in his heart. But romantic comedies have always relied on a vision of sex divorced from intimate feeling to shore up a reliance on heterosexual romantic closure. Thus, while Jeff Scheible mentions that most critics were "surprisingly supportive" of the unconventional romance between a man and an OS, *Her* is a case study in how progressive identity politics can nevertheless obscure and provide an alibi for the sustenance of traditional forms of life.<sup>32</sup> This is nowhere more clear than in the way the film's transformative portrayal of the intimate event between Theo and Sam contrasts with the film's other sex scene involving Theo and a disembodied female voice. Earlier in the film, Theo is lying in bed and connects to an audio cybersex forum. He is paired with a woman named "sexykitten," voiced by Kristen Wiig. As they start to have sex, Theo's absorption is broken when sexykitten asks him to "choke me with that dead cat," and from here on out, Wiig's arousal is played for comedy, as Theo continues to improvise maneuvers with the dead cat, clearly repulsed while doing so, until Wiig climaxes. It is clear that the film thinks of one of these sex acts as desirable, and the other undesirable. Not only that, but the failed sex act occurs in the first act of the film, which establishes the emptiness

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<sup>32</sup> Jeff Scheible, "Longing to Connect: Cinema's Year of OS Romance," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2014): 23.

of Theo's life before Samantha enters it, while the successful sex act with Samantha reattaches Theo to life. In *Her*, it is the sex act that grows out of confession and tenderness, in which no fetishes are present, and in which the participants achieve simultaneous orgasm that is valued, while the caricature of the act in which the participants may have preferences that do not align, in which pleasure may not be simultaneous, founded on anonymity rather than a baring of the self, is associated with the part of the plot that the later sexual encounter enters the film to transform. *Her* is heterofuturist in a somewhat different mode than in Lee Edelman's designation of the term, which refers to a cultural and political mentality in which optimism for continued private and public life is founded on the capacity of heterosexual reproduction.<sup>33</sup> Although *Her*'s technological premise forecloses the possibility of biological children, it nevertheless shows that heterofuturity can inhere not in children nor even in the presence of a heterosexual couple but rather in a feeling or an experience that secures someone's sense of being attached to life. Even if *Her* featured couples that were not heterosexual, its normative vision of transformative sex is anchored to the liberal project's erasure of particularity and the achievement of an undifferentiated human essence mediated by touch.

The aesthetics of *Her*'s transformative feeling, moreover, rely in large part on a specific imagination of the woman, as the title would seem to suggest. Sam, who is voiced by Scarlett Johansson, is warm and a good listener, asking gentle questions and nurturing Theo through his depression. The choice of a female voice for the OS, which aligns with Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana, itself already has a U.S. location, since the default voice of Apple's OS in the UK was, at the time of the film's production, male.<sup>34</sup> The film's science fiction, in other

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<sup>33</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Devine, "iOS 7.1 makes British Siri more human, and female!" Mar 11, 2014, <http://www.imore.com/ios-71-makes-british-siri-more-human-and-female>.

words, makes use of the voice-over as a more general cinematic technology, which itself maps onto existing gender and sexual paradigms: in the same year as *Her*'s release, Johansson also starred in *Under the Skin* (2013), a film in which she plays an alien sex predator who hunts men and that ends when one of her intended victims chases her through the woods and forcibly peels off not only her clothes but her skin, revealing distinctly alien flesh underneath. *Her*'s elision of Johansson's body and her abstraction into a voice-over performs, though in less explicitly disturbing terms, the peeling back of a famously sexualized body whose excesses must spill over into the audio track. Though *Her*'s themes are romantic courtship and heartbreak, it engages no less with Tim Dean's formal insight about pornography that "the difference between a body's exterior and its interior may be more powerfully motivating than sexual difference."<sup>35</sup>

The visceral excessiveness that blacks out *Her*'s screen at the moment of the "creation" of Sam's body thus resonates with an extensive discourse in film music studies that notes the close association between women and music's excessiveness as a representation of the unrepresentable. When the camera is trained on a woman's body, writes Claudia Gorbman, "[i]t is as if the emotional excess of this presence must find its outlet in the euphony of a string orchestra."<sup>36</sup> The way in which Kathleen and Samantha enter cinematic representation during their scenes of lyrical expansion would seem to run counter to the gendered norm of classical Hollywood voice-over, which is traditionally male. Yet their scenes of voice-over nonetheless accord with the way theorists have long described the "the euphony of a string orchestra" that takes up the slack of expressing an interiority that the image cannot capture.<sup>37</sup> Mary Ann Doane,

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<sup>35</sup> Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 111.

<sup>36</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 39.

for instance, points out that “[m]usic takes up where the image leaves off—what is in excess in relation to the image is equivalent to what is in excess of the rational. Music has an anaphoric function, consistently pointing out that there is more than meaning, there is desire.”<sup>38</sup> This “more than meaning” is extruded from and does not re-circulate back into the text, instead becoming self-sufficient as something to be directly, and viscerally, grasped. Hence James Buhler disputes that “understand” is the right word for the apprehension of film music in this register because of its association with the mastery of rational thought. Rather, “it is more that music allows audiences to believe that they experience moment to moment something like the feel of a character’s fluctuating emotions, emotions that are beyond the mastery of rational thought, not to mention language.”<sup>39</sup>

But to capture the way in which film image and sound have traditionally posited female interiority as something “beyond” understanding conflicts with a perspective that would see how, at the same time, this indescribable excess occurs with a specific set of cultural conditions that are very much constituted in discourse.<sup>40</sup> Thus the viscosity of the string orchestra’s “euphony” or the swelling strings of romantic comedy point simultaneously to sheer vibrational presence, to existence beyond signification, while also occupying moments in a generic narrative that are fulcrums for the emergence of socially acceptable kinds of identity (such as the subject of love). The next section will explore how the string cue’s affective surge discloses the operations of genre in *An Affair to Remember*.

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 97.

<sup>39</sup> James Buhler, “Gender, Sexuality, and the Soundtrack,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. James Buhler and David Neumeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 369.

<sup>40</sup> For a reading that sees Samantha’s orgasm as subject to normalizing, disciplinary power within discourses of sexology, see Karly-Lynne Scott, “Orgasms Without Bodies,” *World Picture Journal* 10 (Spring 2015), [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_10/Scott\\_10.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_10/Scott_10.html).

## **Affect and *anagnorisis***

The intimate event marks a point in which affective excess and the suspension of the rational touches the narrative's embeddedness in cultural discourse. At the same time, the moment of coupling is almost always the apex of the love plot, which means that its viscerality is perhaps the most emblematic exhibit of the genre's repetitiveness and conventionality. Thus it stands as the narrative point at which the body, culture, and genres of identity coalesce in a subject that is at once particular and general. Music, in opera and film, has always been a central means through which subjectivity has been rendered as an atmosphere; it simultaneously blurs the subject's boundary by opening a rhythm or tone of potential intersubjectivity while also reinscribing the subject as an agent of feeling and expression. We might say that romantic comedy's fantasy of love is founded in part on a fantasy of affect: of the way the bodily and the excessive can be destabilizing and also profoundly securing, of affective disorder as the ultimate evidence of order.<sup>41</sup>

In this section, I turn to the imbrication of feeling and discovery in the intimate event, and ask about what is discovered or made secure in the swell of the sentimental soundtrack. The intimacy of knowledge and affect in such a moment is suggested in its belonging to the category of narrative event that Aristotle called *anagnorisis*, which refers to the climactic moment in a narrative when a character makes a critical discovery.<sup>42</sup> Though discovery seems to connote knowledge, *anagnorisis* is also fundamentally about affect, since it refers to the experience of a structural collapse of a barrier to knowledge (which could be between a character and the audience, another character, or himself) that suddenly becomes available to circulation in an

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<sup>41</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), especially 169-231.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1465.

evening out and release of tension.

The ending of *An Affair to Remember* shows how closely discovery, bodily feeling, musical affect, and the very conditions of narrative itself are entwined in romance's *anagnorisis*. The film begins in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, where we find Nickie Ferrante (Cary Grant), a well-known playboy, onboard an ocean liner ferrying him to New York, where he will be married amid much media attention. During the trip, he develops a flirtation with another passenger, Terry McKay (Deborah Kerr), who, too, is already engaged. The turning point comes when the ship docks on the Mediterranean coast in the south of France, and Nickie invites Terry to visit his grandmother with him, who lives in a small villa at the top of stone steps set into a mountain. The villa, with a fountain in the middle of a courtyard ringed with plant life, immediately strikes Terry as utopian. "It's so peaceful here," she says, "it's like another world." Later, she calls it "a perfect world." When Terry tells the grandmother that she thinks she could stay there forever, the grandmother responds, "No no no, you are too young for that, my dear. It is a good place to sit and remember. But you have still to create your memories." If this utopia is promised to Terry as a place she can one day return to, it will be after the plot's end, after the time of events has passed.<sup>43</sup> Though she does not say so, it is implied that the memories and events being referred to are of the romantic kind: Nickie tells Terry that his grandmother is living out the period between her husband's death and her own, and that he suspects she is anxious to rejoin him. The villa is a symbol for life after the love plot, which is here eventless and timeless. Thus the utopia, and by extension the grandmother herself, is sharply demarcated from the rest of

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<sup>43</sup> The film's account of utopia resonates with the term's widespread definition as a place outside of space, but also time. Here (narrative, successive) time refers to the drama of the love plot (which ends with the death of the grandfather); for Marx and Engels, it is the progression of history in its current form. In its figuration not necessarily of a *better* world but simply an escape from the march of time that structures the subject's existence, utopia could also be thought of as what the aria expands in minor form. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. Samuel Moore (Chicago: C. H. Kerr & Co., 1906).

the world as the space of the narrative's action: as Nickie and Terry prepare to leave, the grandmother stops at the top of the steps that lead back to the town and the docked ship: "This is as far as I go. This is the boundary of my small world."

The film to which Annie, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, aspires in her own romantic pursuits seems to include something that her world does not: the evocation of utopia on Earth. It is within this small world protected from the time of narrative that the film's main theme, titled "An Affair to Remember (Our Love Affair)," composed by Harry Warren and written by Leo McCarey and Harold Adamson, is first heard within the movie proper. (It first appears over the opening credits and a still shot of a snowy Manhattan, in a crooning version sung by Vic Damone.) Here, it is the grandmother (who Nickie tells us used to be a concert pianist) who plays the tune, which consists of two four-phrase sections, the first ending in an imperfect, and the second in a perfect, cadence. The theme can be repeated *ad infinitum*, as this performance demonstrates: after the first four-phrase section, Terry joins her in humming, and then—when the grandmother begins the theme again from the beginning—by singing its lyrics in French. Yet the song is interrupted in mid-phrase by the distant sound of the ship's horn, which announces that the idyll must end and the plot continue. Terry and Nickie return to the ship, but now the love theme has taken up residence in the soundtrack, cycling through a few harmonically unstable iterations before returning to its original, triumphant form when the two kiss for the first time, on a stairway on the ship that echoes the villa's steps.

What we might observe about the relation between this film and its main theme is that the tune does not always already exist in the film's non-diegetic realm. As with Garland's "Merry Christmas," the cue is tied to a place in the world, to the grandmother's chapel and the impromptu performance in the house (with the grandmother providing the musical

accompaniment on the piano).<sup>44</sup> Only then does the melody enter the diffuse realm of the non-diegetic, where it will, up to the end of the film, not only reflect but effectively create the drama's twists and turns. The "Affair" melody does precisely this over the course of the film's second half, beginning with the new couple's pledge to break things off with their partners and reconvene in six months at the top of the Empire State Building. On the appointed day, as Terry is rushing to the rendezvous, she is struck by a taxi, and eventually learns that she has lost the use of her legs. Out of pride, she refuses to inform Nickie of the reason she missed their date, and a year passes with barely a word between them. In the meantime, Nickie returns to the villa in France. The film wordlessly shows him walking through an empty house, and as he places a hand on the now-closed piano, the sound of his grandmother playing the film's theme sounds, only muffled and distantly, as if from underwater.

With the death of the grandmother comes the loss of utopia, and this is a fact from which the film never recovers. When Nickie finally discovers what has happened to Terry, and they pledge to be together, it is a resolution made in the knowledge of the grandmother's death and of the future of hardship they face (Terry says: "If you can paint, I can walk," expressing the kind of optimism that arises only against all odds). The film's ending is bittersweet, contrasting the less contingent resolutions delivered by the Ephron romantic comedies. Yet despite the permanent loss of utopia on Earth, the theme authored by the grandmother that seemed to fade upon her death returns once more to the film in full force. Just as he is about to leave Terry's apartment, Nickie recalls a story his co-worker told of a woman in a wheelchair who came in to purchase a painting he had made of Terry. As he speaks, we see him suddenly falter, and gears begin to turn. He begins to cast about the apartment, and then opens a bedroom door to reveal the

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<sup>44</sup> See also Berthold Hoeckner, "Auratic Replays," in *Film, Music, Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).



Figure 8. Nickie Ferrante sees the painting and the story hits him in *An Affair to Remember*.

painting of Terry he had just spoken of hanging over her bed. As his eyes lock on the painting, the love theme surges, restored to the soundtrack.

We may summarize Nickie's moment of *anagnorisis* as follows: the painting fills in the mystery of the woman who came in to purchase the painting, and tells him inferentially that Terry is wheelchair-bound, which in turn explains why she has remained seated throughout the preceding scene, declining to offer him the seat next to her where her legs rest. Of course, the painting tells him much more than this too. Small unexplained details from the last hour of the film now have their cause colored in: for instance, he now understands why she hadn't gotten up to greet him when they ran into each other at the theater, why she had missed their meeting, why she has been so distant and uncommunicative, and what, ultimately, was missing in the conversation they'd just had—what could not be said. All of this hits Nickie in a wince that absorbs everything that he now knows. The wince is the impact of narrative on the body: of the moment when the events of the story, up until now indecipherable to him, are supplied with the interpretive key that makes them spring into a causal chain, as a magnet will do to a scatter of shavings.

The wince is a clue that the climactic resolution of the love story exists not only as the arrival of an emotion that is indexed by the love theme, but also more primally as affect. If, in the arena of feeling, film music studies often focuses on emotion, it also reifies an understanding of the soundtrack's function as that of informing the audience of the content of a character's interiority.<sup>45</sup> The hermeneutic understanding of film music's relation to feeling works best with emotion as a category of feeling, since emotion refers to a state whose identity is sussed out by a feeling subject in relation to an available system of cultural codes. For instance, Illouz describes love as an emotion that is "situated at the threshold where the noncultural is encoded in culture, where body, cognition, and culture converge and merge."<sup>46</sup> But affect incorporates impingements on the body before their conversion and labeling within the palette of available emotions provided by a subject's language.<sup>47</sup> Under this model, the film score cannot inform the audience of what the character is feeling, insofar as affect is pre-conscious and pre-linguistic. The return of the "Love Affair" theme at the film's climax does index and evoke the scene's mood; but the physical excessiveness of the wince allows us to think past the cue's denotative properties and into the way the soundtrack's surge seems to evoke what is happening in Nickie's body as his chest tenses and his eyes are forced shut.

To leave aside the way the music illustrates or accompanies the narrative allows for a reading of the cue as that which produces, affectively, the feeling of an indecipherable series of events suddenly acquiring the clarity of a *narrative*. In this way, the music cue's hermeneutic function re-enters the analysis, but the hermeneutic function is not located in the cue's

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<sup>45</sup> This is the explanation given by Buhler and Neumeyer for how the love theme resolved the embarrassment early sound film audiences felt during love scenes: "Without music underscoring the scene, however, Mary's actions in [*Between Office Doors* (1931)] are difficult to decipher with confidence, and the result is an intense unease over her response [to a man's advances] that would likely produce precisely the audience whispering and coughing mentioned above." See Buhler and Neumeyer, *Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory Reader*, 1.

interpretation or rendering of an emotion in the scene. The scene, rather, records a hermeneutic act, in which Nickie reads his past in a way that brings a buried pattern to the surface of his consciousness. In the chapter's remaining sections, I will argue that the non-diegetic soundtrack's formal relation to the film's diegesis as an agent of interpretation, as something which is excluded from the field of visual representation, acquires a newfound significance when the terms of romance migrate inward. In the wake of romance's retreat from the photographable, the very existence of a soundtrack that interprets, renders, and makes sense of interiority (thereby confirming that one's interiority is sensible) crucial to the kinds of concerns that the promise of love is meant to assuage.

### **Everyday Hiddenness**

I return now to *You've Got Mail* to consider a textbook case of film music's use in a narrative fiction film. Following the failed date in which Kathleen thinks she was stood up by her pen pal and forced to spend the evening with Joe Fox instead, we watch as she walks home (tossing a rose into a trash can), checks her e-mail (to find that there are no new messages), and collapses on her bed. Meanwhile, Roy Orbison's mournful "Dream" plays on the soundtrack. The sequence includes few diegetic sounds; the soundtrack provides the scene's atmosphere, its lyrics saying what Kathleen does not. Here, the film is typical in its use of the non-diegetic soundtrack to render or clarify feelings or moods in the plot.

Yet the idea that Kathleen's night requires an interpretant is raised in the very next scene. It is the following day, and she is greeted by colleagues at her business who are eager to hear of the previous night's events. "He didn't show up," she has to explain again and again. Treating the failed evening as their text, Kathleen and her coworkers brainstorm reasons that would make

sense of the night's otherwise inexplicable events (they imagine, variously, situations in which the date was stuck on the subway, or in the hospital, or in prison), searching for the hermeneutic key that would restore the coherence and order of the love plot she wants to be making. In other words, the film presents the evening twice: first in real time, and then as recollection and commentary. The first presentation of the scene is through Hollywood's system of realist representation. Yet the second presentation explicitly marks the first as *missing something*, as lacking a cause that needs to be filled in.

Lauren Berlant has commented on romance's closeness to the detective story, since the activity of love

involves the lover's production of a sort of epistemic frenzy, a drive toward and aversion to knowledge. *What is the scale* of an event of attachment? *What is the difference* between this one and that one—this tone of voice, this touch, this encounter, this aversion? *Why should I believe* I can read the lover, and how well do I want to read her?<sup>48</sup>

The necessary part-hiddenness of the object of romantic knowledge produces a correlative anxiety around interpretation and certainty, which casts the lover in the role of a detective who is always too late to the scene of the crime. The detective's role is to disturb silence, to draw testimony out of secrecy and recirculate knowledge that threatens to remain buried. A typical spokesperson for this function in romantic comedy is the figure of the best friend, with whom the protagonist destined for romance shares her feelings and thoughts when she is not with the love interest.<sup>49</sup> In *Sleepless*, the friend is played by Rosie O'Donnell, who is unhappily but securely married and who offers Meg Ryan's character unceasing guidance, commiseration and

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<sup>48</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Love, A Queer Feeling," in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 435.

<sup>49</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald writes that romantic comedy's habitual association with female audience members "[recognizes] and interrogate[s] the genre's inclination towards self-reflexivity and quotation." Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, vol. 34, *Short Cuts* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 2.

cheerleading, both in person and (when they are in different cities) on the phone. The best friend figure has a practical and expository function, providing an alibi for the protagonist to express thoughts and feelings that might otherwise remain internal.<sup>50</sup>

We might note that the soundtrack's role as an interpretant of the action is functionally similar to that of the best friend figure: both exist in the romantic comedy to elicit testimony of feelings that might otherwise not be shared, and therefore exist in relation to the story as agents of commentary. Romantic comedies often alternate between scenes involving the primary storyline of the central couple and scenes involving one member of the couple and their best friend, in which the unexpressed thoughts and emotions that took place during the previous scene can now be verbalized for the friend as the film audience's surrogate. The alternating form of event and commentary, here, recalls the action-expression cycle of opera, in which a passage of action is followed by a musical number that clarifies and expunges the emotional "content" of the preceding scene (see Chapter 1). In the romantic comedy, the necessary interiority of romantic feeling requires compensation from a variety of sources to fulfill Hollywood film's promise of transparency and the legibility of genre. If we think of the "border" between diegetic action and non-diegetic music as a formal partition that exists simply to make one such form of compensation possible, then we may also draw the border elsewhere, within the film's diegetic representation: what counts as event and as commentary cannot be known *a priori* through a simple zoning of music and image, but must be read for within the film's presentation of narrative.

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<sup>50</sup> The best friend figure also represents in the plot the intimate female public within which films like *Sleepless in Seattle* circulate, providing pedagogy and comfort through "a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*." Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.

An account of romantic comedy as a genre, then, also requires an account of the formal properties of its realism. We might begin by noting that both Ephron films unfold specific and related conceptions of space. *Sleepless in Seattle*'s opening credits appear over a map of the continental United States; when it fades out, the word CHICAGO appears on a dark screen, after which the film's first shot materializes a father and son at a funeral, the camera then panning out and up to frame this tableau of intimate mourning against the city's skyline. The film's opening act shows Sam (Hanks), whose wife has just died, attempting and failing to focus at work while also tending to his son Jonah (Ross Malinger). If the film's opening stresses the locality of tragedy, it is unsurprising that Sam's solution for his melancholy will be to fly himself and his son across the country to begin a new life in Seattle.

The plotline that brings the central couple together begins when Jonah calls into a radio program hosted by Dr. Marcia Fieldstone, a psychologist. When he coerces his father into speaking on the air about his dead wife, Sam's speech is so touching that women all over the U.S. send him letters, including Annie (Meg Ryan), who lives in Baltimore and is engaged to a man named Walter. The opening sequence's U.S. map is replicated diegetically in Sam's Seattle home, which features a large pull-down map that Sam uses to explain to Jonah why he can't date Annie, whose letter had charmed his son: "One two three four—there's like twenty-six states between here and there." Seattle, Chicago, Baltimore, and eventually New York: the film tracks the characters' continental displacements by returning to insert shots of the opening map, an animated dotted line tracing their lines of flight.

*You've Got Mail* takes the opposite extreme of this thematization of cartographic space. Whereas *Sleepless* seems to be amazed at how two people from near-opposite ends of the vast U.S. could end up together, the later film takes place entirely on Manhattan's Upper West Side,

stressing the related but opposite amazement that two people who fell in love online might be from the same neighborhood. Thus, when Ryan's online pen pal chooses a neighborhood park as a meeting place for their first date, this exchange is possible: "That means he's a Westsider!" "I know, isn't that wild?" This seems to make clear that, in *Sleepless*, the marvel is not at how two people who are so far away could come together (the fantasy that distance can be overcome), since closeness is no less liable to produce amazement. It seems more like marvel at the fact of distance itself—that the object of true love should have a specific location at all.

Coordinates are obsessive in *You've Got Mail* and *Sleepless*, which is nowhere more evident than in *You've Got Mail*'s opening sequence. The first shot is an image of a computer's desktop screen whose frame is congruent with the film's frame; then, as a mouse pointer clicks its center, we enter a long zoom-in through computerized outer space, whooshing past Saturn and other planets before closing in on Earth, on whose gridlike surface only Manhattan is rendered. The zoom-in continues, and as it does, the bare pixelated black and white begins to take on realist detail: now the camera swoops in on the Upper West Side, then a residential street, and then floats through the open second-story window of a brick walkup as the image finally assumes photographic reality. The camera's final destination is Kathleen's face just as she opens her eyes. This opening zoom-in figures space in two ways: it establishes a vast space, in particular the world of the internet as vast, and a single person as a mere point within that space; and yet it also suggests, in alighting on Kathleen in bed just as she opens her eyes, that this vast space is dreamed up by her, that this movie will take place in her universe. Thus the millennial romantic comedy preserves the fantasy of romantic exceptionalism in the midst of romance's increasing rationalization (in, for instance, the statistical and psychoanalytical accounts of love offered by minor characters in *Sleepless*, for comic relief).

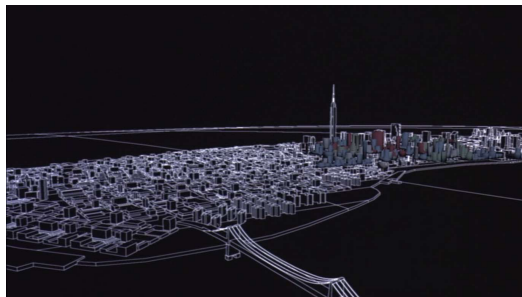
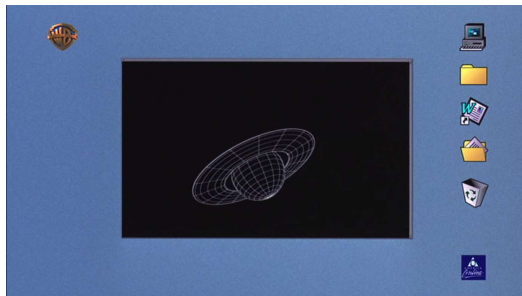


Figure 9. *You've Got Mail's* opening sequence.

It would seem, then, that romance in these two films is conceived in relation to a particular conception of the world, one we might think of as characterized by a rational or Cartesian sense of space. Or, to put it another way, their worlds' Cartesian rationality is revealed to be subjective and romantic: romance unfolds along its grids and lines, its maps and screens. This sense of space can be historicized. It is part of a world, for example, whose possibilities include the radio, which in *Sleepless* beams Sam's voice into homes, diners and cars all over the country, and thereby produces the mass infatuation that leads to reams of fan letters arriving on

the widower's doorstep. Similarly, *You've Got Mail* triangulates a vastly open cyberspace to the particular and intimate through the anonymity of the online chatroom: here writing becomes a medium that bridges the endless open of the modern world to the belonging of the romantic couple.

The rationalization of space—where one's true love might be as far as Baltimore, or right in your neighborhood—is a particular mediation of the idea of the “local” unfolded in the late-millennial romantic comedies. When Kathleen describes what is valuable about her lover in terms of his insight into her soul, she is also suggesting that the body's physical vessel is incidental, and thus that the field of candidates who might be NY152 extends in theory to all men. Thus Joe can joke that her online lover could be the zipper man who works on Amsterdam Avenue, or indeed point to any man they pass on the street—as he does, in a late scene—and suggest that it might be him. Of course, this is not to say that Joe and Kathleen lack vanity, nor that in the early films all that mattered was a candidate's status or looks. Yet the historical shift from the suitable match to the soulmate emerges alongside the importance of cartographic location, of finding the one person who is right for you (in Baltimore!) out of the national female radio-listening audience.

The idea of romance as an event within a particular concept of space is dramatized in an early montage in *You've Got Mail* in which Joe and Kathleen repeatedly cross paths on the Upper West Side, oblivious to one another, as they each walk to work. Set to the Cranberries's song “Dreams,” the montage shows Kathleen and Joe walking down the same streets, then Kathleen leaving a Starbucks just as Joe enters, then Kathleen and Joe passing each other at a flower stand. What is the effect that this montage is meant to produce? It seems to find something to marvel at, or at least something notable, in the fact that there could be an intangible

but real bond, the bond of intimacy or relationship, that remains hidden in the everyday, in the public world of streets and markets and strangers. This is a montage of the city coming to life (a long-standing cinematic trope that has stood, among other uses, as a demonstration of film's visual possibilities), and in it Joe and Kathleen are just two more strangers, no different from any others they might pass by. The camera's agnosticism or neutrality in simply recording people wherever it is pointed reveals nothing about the specialness of one stranger over another. The point seems to be that the visible ordinary, that which photography is equipped to record and represent—the positivity of photographic presence—is also the concealment of something, which it is the task of the romantic comedy plot to bring out. When romance is no longer premised on attributes such as looks, wealth and class, and becomes instead the attribute-less “anyone,” the “anyone” in turn conceals the content of romance from the province of the photographable. It would seem, then, that the genre's relation to the medium, the way in which romance becomes filmic, will involve a process of unconcealment, of coming into visibility.

This is the particular way in which these films are “realist.” As Daniel Morgan has argued, realism isn't simply an index of a film's photographic veracity as an objective value; rather, “[t]he work of style is to generate a social fact by taking up an attitude towards physical reality, showing it in a particular way.”<sup>51</sup> Understood this way, realism is not a direct function of cinema's ontological conditions but a “negotiation” with those conditions.<sup>52</sup> *You've Got Mail* is structured throughout as a series of scenes that later recall and put into question the veracity of earlier scenes, subjecting that which is recorded by the camera to the interpretive act of reading. In the love plot, this happens as early as Joe and Kathleen's first in-person encounter, when Joe

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics” *Critical Inquiry* 32 No. 3 (Spring 2006), 461.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Morgan, “Bazin's Modernism,” *Paragraph* 36.1 (2013), 16.

takes two young children into Kathleen's bookstore. Kathleen, of course, thinks that he is only a customer, and when she asks him for his name, he conceals his other identity—that of the book chain mogul who has just opened a megastore around the corner—by answering, “Joe. Just call me Joe.” Meanwhile, one of Joe's “children” begins to recite the letters F-O-X, to which Joe adapts by asking him about the spellings of other animals. In the act of omitting an identity, Joe acquires the role of the actor: not so much in the sense of a professional actor, whose audience is aware of both the actor and the character, but in the sense of a spy, who embodies a character only to the extent required to keep certain information (about their identity or allegiances) from coming out.

There are reasons to resist using the term “acting” for Joe's lying here, since acting is also the name for what Tom Hanks does in this scene. To call Joe's lying “acting” may be too quickly to force a correlation between matters of plot and matters of production. Yet this path is suggested by the film itself: when Kathleen finally discovers Joe Fox's full identity at a cocktail party and confronts him about his lie of omission, his immediate response is to launch into an impression from *The Godfather*, and to recount a scene involving a movie producer. Kathleen's response, in turn, is to accuse him of having rented the children who had accompanied him to the store. Kathleen, in other words, has received new information that a scene was other than how she had lived it. She becomes a critical reader caught up in the task of trying to extract a narrative that's different from the one she thought she was living the first time; as she searches the memory for clues that she might have missed, the scene becomes a surface of detail that she can scan precisely because her new knowledge has pulled her out of it. As she learns to become a better reader, what she must read through is the kind of artifice present on film sets, in which children might only be actors supplied by a casting director for a movie not unlike this one.

Like the failed first date at the café, the film presents the bookstore scene twice: it is first depicted, and then recalled at the party. For Kathleen, the commentary pulls the veil back on the earlier scene, revealing innocuous details to be clues whose status as such she only realizes now that they have been solved: for instance, Joe's omission of a last name and the little boy's constant recitation of the letters F-O-X. What was just an ordinary encounter in the course of her day turns out to have contained a secret in need of spelling out. Thus the skills of reading and interpretation are not confined to the e-mail subplot, but are also thematized elsewhere as the reading of reality itself, of the reality in your everyday which may turn out, retrospectively, to have been a pattern of effects in search of an interpretive key.

The film's largest movement from hiddenness into a spatial unconcealment, however, takes place on the soundtrack. "Over the Rainbow" does not only appear at the film's climax, but is also concealed in fragmentary and unobtrusive forms from the film's very opening. It is present as soon as the film begins as a thread in the DNA of the movie's opening sounds: as we hear the dial-up tones that accompany the opening zoom through pixelated space, an oscillating motif drifts by, just a minor third followed by a minor second. It is almost certainly not enough to identify as a motif from the bridge of "Over the Rainbow"; only those who know that the song is used during the film's final scene and who are attentive during the opening will remark the connection. If this reference is meant to be part of the experience of the film, it requires a mode of attention in which the viewer is either recalled to this moment at the end (the fragment flaring in the memory at the moment of the final song's appearance), or the film is watched more than once. Either way, the first appearance of music already projects the film as something not only to be watched linearly but to be remembered and grasped retrospectively in a moment of realization or connection; the opening fragment of a motif is like a puzzle piece awaiting the completion of

the frame that will pick it up and imbue it with significance. “Over the Rainbow” appears again before the first date that Kathleen arranges with her pen pal—the one that ends disastrously. As she types the e-mail in which she raises the possibility of meeting, the oscillating motif from the beginning returns in counterpoint to a *legato* clarinet melody written for the film by George Fenton. The oscillations begin as a kind of background piano filigree to Fenton’s melody; this time, however, the excerpt from “Over the Rainbow” continues, overtaking the clarinet melody as strings come in to buttress the piano’s sound. Just as the bridge is about to transition into the octave leap that marks the iconic beginning of the song’s chorus, however, the scene changes and the music cuts to a jaunty, non-lyrical motif in another key. The cue approaches, and evades, the most identifiable part of the tune.

If the appearance of “Over the Rainbow” at the film’s end conveys effects of familiarity, it might also be because Harry Nilsson’s voice, which largely fills in for Joe and Kathleen’s speechless embrace, appears two times previously on the film’s soundtrack—on “Remember” and “The Puppy Song,” which plays over the opening credits. These connections to the final number are joined by a visual reference that is so slight it is likely to remain unseen: an ornament in the form of a pair of ruby slippers that Kathleen hangs on her Christmas tree. The slippers are the brightest point in the shot and the focus of Kathleen’s action. Yet they are also not overtly emphasized—the camera does not cut to them in close-up, for instance. As she hangs them on the tree, Kathleen is reciting the lyrics to a Joni Mitchell song in voice-over while Harry Nilsson’s “Remember” plays on the non-diegetic soundtrack. If the ruby slipper ornaments are meant to connect with the song at the end of the film, that reference is bound up with several others. Nor has the song or *The Wizard of Oz* been mentioned in the film’s dialogue. The slippers, at least on first watching, are not framed in a way that solicits the film audience’s



*Figure 10. Kathleen hangs ruby slipper ornaments on her Christmas tree in You've Got Mail.*

notice, just as the various fragments of “Over the Rainbow” omit the most recognizable portions of the melody.

The appearance of “Over the Rainbow” in the film’s last scene does not only index the mood at that moment in the film’s narrative, although it does that too. Nor is it enough to say that the moment of the cue’s entrance has been in preparation since the very beginning, that the film enacts a movement by which subliminal events throughout the film are brought out in a final scene of feeling. It is also that the soundtrack’s position outside the diegesis allows for a form of interpretation and retroactive apprehension that captures the way the film thematizes the activity of romance itself. Just as the intimate event retroactively constitutes the humanity of its participants, so too does the song’s arrival at the film’s end retroactively establish the completeness of a progression that has been at work from the very first shot.

## Hearing and hiddenness

These larger matters can be traced in the specific ways in which Joe proceeds in his seduction of Kathleen, which is intertwined with the logic of what we could call the film's seduction of its audience. In both cases, the affective hit of recognition and pleasure is long prepared through a willful hiddenness, though *what* is hidden, and to whom, or *what* is achieved in the act of unconcealment, remains to be seen. The most explicit statement of what *You've Got Mail* understands to be promised in the promise of romance comes in the penultimate scene, just before Kathleen leaves Joe for her meeting in the park. In that scene on the sidewalk, Joe offers her a vision of shared life as a vision of domesticity, which he describes in the subjunctive as the sentimental cue—strings mixed with piano—swells around his description of an ordinary Saturday night they might spend choosing and watching a movie. Yet this is not the film's first invocation of domesticity as something to which Joe and Kathleen might aspire. An earlier instance comes immediately after Joe's father, while commiserating with him over both of their recent break-ups, asks Joe if he's ever met "the one single person in the world who fills his heart with joy," to which Joe seems to perk up. Suddenly, the scene cuts to Joe striding down a city street with a bouquet in hand as Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" blasts on the soundtrack:

Like a fool I've waited too long  
Girl I hope your love still strong  
Here I am babe, signed sealed delivered, I'm yours!

The meaning of the scene seems clearly enough telegraphed to the audience: Joe has now realized that Kathleen is the one person in the world who fills his heart with happiness, and he's on a mission to win her. He has been sending her e-mails, causing the little envelope icon to

appear in her virtual mailbox; now the song imagines him as the letter, arriving at Kathleen's door. From the flowers, we might guess that he's on the cusp of a romantic declaration; the song croons that the letter is "signed", after all, meaning that it will bring him out of his anonymity. Yet, as the scene unfolds, we will see that Joe repeatedly sends Kathleen signs whose meaning he also camouflages. The letter, then, remains "sealed."

The scene that follows extensively thematizes reading, or interpretation, as the practice whose successful performance will allow the couple to come together. The bouquet is, let us say, the first challenge of reading that Kathleen is presented with. Is it obvious what it means when a man shows up at your door with a bunch of flowers? Kathleen, in fact, asks Joe several times why he is there. She first asks him when he buzzes up to her apartment on her intercom, and then again when he is at her apartment door. He evades the question the first time; the second time, he offers a string of statements that don't quite add up to an answer: "I heard you were sick. And I was worried. And I wanted to make sure ... is there somebody here?" Joe leans past the doorframe, peering around: he has heard the Home Shopping Network that Kathleen has left on, and as she goes to shut it off, he discreetly steps inside the apartment and shuts the door behind him. It is only after the third time that he offers an answer with a ring of honesty, though it is palpably cryptic. He says: "I wanted to be your friend." This might sound like any number of things to her: "I wanted to see if you would forgive me," for instance. Or perhaps he really is looking for friendship, for a relation with her that is, we might say, personal and not business. Or perhaps she suspects that "friend" euphemistically indicates romance. Yet "friend" also has a fourth hearing, one she doesn't likely register: "friend" is the salutation and signature they use in their e-mails, the chosen noun that allows them to omit their names and thereby remain anonymous. When Joe tells her that he wants to be her friend, he is (also) meaning the word in

the particular, and not only in the categorical: he wants to be not one of her friends but the “friend” of her letters.

There is, therefore, a structural rhyme between the way fragments of “Over the Rainbow” are flashed before the film audience and the way Joe offers the bouquet and the line about the “friend” to Kathleen. Just as Kathleen encounters signs that gain significance only when Joe reveals himself later at the park, the film’s audience encounters signs that gain significance only when Ephron reveals “Over the Rainbow,” also at the park. Like the bouquet, the answer he gives to her question about motives is both thrust plainly forward (willingly given to be read) and presented in a context that has been tampered with or left deliberately incomplete. She doesn’t pick up the valence of the word that is available to him because he has not yet chosen to bring her into his fold of knowledge. In that sense, the hearing she needs to decode his sign lies ahead, in a future moment when the withholding stops. It may be that then she will think back to this conversation, and the correct reading of the line will dawn on her (no less than the correct reading of the bouquet). Here we see how Joe’s privacy or hiddenness is not just a position that opposes unconcealment or the open. It is part of something like a dialectic, since the future-directed writing made possible by his private knowledge projects one gigantic movement of synchronization, of the hidden and the open eventually coming to a point of mutual transparency.

Joe, in other words, instrumentalizes his hiddenness. The temporal form that connects a prior “text” with a later hermeneutic dawning becomes something like a medium that Joe now uses to deliver messages. This is a kind of gain in power, of his rising, we might say, a little above the level of character, not only acting in the present but also controlling to some extent the narrative’s structure of enunciation. And this power is granted to him because he has withheld his knowledge of Kathleen’s and his other identity from her, knowledge that he cannot come out

with lest he lose this power and be reduced again to speaking only in the literal present. The play he is afforded in the film's narrative and semantic fields depends on his remaining within a certain kind of hiddenness.

His encoded signs, however, are a challenge not only for Kathleen but also for the film's audience. Can we know if there is a second hearing in the following lines?

Joe:            Tea?  
Kathleen:      Yes. I was upset and horrible—  
Joe:            Honey?  
Kathleen:      Yes.  
Joe:            I was the horrible one.

Joe delivers these lines in such a way that the last two statements could be heard as a continuous thought: "Honey, I was the horrible one." On the last statement, Ephron cuts to a one-shot of Joe, generating a slight directorial underline. What the word "honey" means depends on whether it is tied to the statement before it ("Tea?") or the statement after it ("I was the horrible one"). Its ambiguity, in other words, is possible only in talking, not in writing, which could show in punctuation how the phrase means. The sense that Joe has just emerged from the world of writing into that of speech is also present when he asks her for a vase, but tests out both pronunciations—"a vah-se? a vai-se?"—as if exhibiting a self-consciousness in the movement from writing to speaking.

It is, I would say, not difficult to hear the word "honey" in this way, but it does require an active hearing-for. But to hear for it means to unearth a pattern of emergent meaning in Joe and Kathleen's dialogue, from the line about the friend to the exchange, right before Joe decides to reveal his identity to Kathleen, in which she tells him that she thinks his mango is ripe and he responds, "I think it is." These are all statements with a second hearing that is available only to

those who know the full story. “I think it is” is a line delivered half to an audience, though there is no audience in the world on the screen as Joe walks with Kathleen. If it is half delivered to us, the movie audience gathered in the dark on the other side of the screen, it means that he is half speaking in a voice intended for this form of hearing, that he is speaking in a voice that corresponds to the form of overhearing characteristic of the watching of movies.

But what is the point of hiding this sentence, of concealing its hearing, in his address to Kathleen? “Honey, I was the horrible one” sounds like a rote phrase of long domestic union, something repeated ritualistically in a couple’s bedroom in the debrief after a night out. The quality of domesticity it impresses in Kathleen’s apartment is mirrored by Joe’s increasing fluency in her kitchen. Though he could not locate the vase, he is soon pulling things together effortlessly for tea, putting the kettle on and finding mugs and teabags without missing a beat. This happens at the back of a shot that centers on Kathleen in front, and it is very easy to miss Joe’s sudden mastery of her kitchen. But that is, we might say, exactly the quality of domesticity that he wishes to impress upon her—not to make her notice it, but precisely to accommodate her within a sphere of domesticity that feels so natural it passes beneath her notice. He wants to show her—but not exactly show her—that it is something the two of them can do.<sup>53</sup>

The way in which domesticity enters into this scene is significant in its comparison with the later one on the sidewalk. As Joe says the words, “for as long as we both shall live,” an oboe enters over a bed of strings, then is replaced by a solo piano. On the words “if only,” the strings crescendo to take over the melody. Domesticity is again figured as something not immediately

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<sup>53</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald notes that while radical sex comedies from the 60s and 70s stress the importance of sexual fulfillment for both men and women, 90s romantic comedies saw an “Ephronesque turn” in which the desire for sex was either returned to its primary association with men or was de-emphasized entirely. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, “Homme-Com: Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy,” in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 151.

accessible in the film's representation; but here, rather than being read for within the interstices of the narrative action, it is narrated as a distant possibility, a utopian stretch of time somewhere in the subjunctive mode. The underscore takes over a function first demanded in an act of interpretation: to gesture toward new meanings that are hidden within the everyday, waiting to be read for and discovered.

### **Celebrity and the ordinary**

In *Affair to Remember*, the grandmother's utopia that provided an access to timelessness within the world of the narrative disappears, at the end of that film and in later ones, into a feeling that must be uncovered within the everyday, and that is secured by the intimate event and its reliance on the establishment of the self's originality. But other differences can be tracked between *Affair* and the 90s films that find romance in its shadow. That the romance story's anagnorisis is brought about by the surfacing of narrative within the plot is also true, as we will shortly see, of *You've Got Mail*. Yet there is a significant difference between these endings: namely that the absent cause that would restore order and sense to the plot's chain of events cannot, in the millennial romantic comedies, be as tangible as a broken leg. The concealment of cause in *Affair* is literal, the leg hidden in-frame under a blanket for most of the final scene. It is as real as the utopia of the grandmother's garden in France. In the millennial romantic comedies, however, neither the sense of a promised utopian place nor the cause that would undo or redo the couple's cohesion are given physical manifestation in the world—they have become internal. What is, then, their absent cause?

To answer this question, we first have to look at what happens to Joe in the film's final stretches. I have already mentioned that Joe cannot assume the privileges of the male romantic

lead simply by disqualifying the other man on the basis of his attributes. Each of the men in the *You've Got Mail* series faces the problem of replacing, or dissolving, the virtual man with which the woman had fallen in love; and this is where Joe gets stuck. How else can this bifurcation of be overcome? By, as it turns out, instrumentalizing it: just as Joe instrumentalized his hiddenness in the apartment scene, so too does he make use of his doubled relation to Kathleen at the movie's close. Relocated from his bourgeois apartment to what looks like the dark cabin of a ship's control center, Joe, as NY152, sends Kathleen a deliberately cryptic message: "I'm in the middle of a project," he types, "that needs tweaking." Later, Joe happens upon Kathleen in a Starbucks, and helps her to decrypt the message—or so Kathleen thinks. What Joe actually does is to feed her interpretations of the text that send her back to NY152 with questions, questions to which Joe has already formulated yet more cryptic responses. In this sequence, the camera cuts back and forth *from* Joe (in the ship's cabin) *to* Joe (with Kathleen), visually emphasizing his bifurcated self.

The sense here that Joe is directing or scripting the conversation—suggesting action, feeding lines—joins with his increasing control over the movie's final scenes, during which he literally points to locations that the film subsequently occupies. Consider the scene where he asks Kathleen to meet him on Saturday around lunchtime as he points off-screen. There is then a cut back to Joe on his ship's bridge, and a voice-over that narrates his typing: "How about meeting Saturday. Four o'clock. There's a place in Riverside Park at 91st street where the path curves and there's a garden. Brinkley and I will be waiting." This e-mail amounts essentially to a location description, the kind written into screenplays at the top of every scene; the shot then cuts to Joe and Kathleen standing in the restaurant to which Joe had just pointed. The final scene of the film, of course, materializes the very scene that Joe had earlier described, while also returning to the

opening montage's maplike conception of the world, of the function of romance as a function of space. As the story's end approaches, Joe begins to assume more and more the roles of the producer and director of a film—the very roles that Kathleen had earlier accused him of occupying after their initial encounter in her bookshop. We might say that one of Joe's responses to the loss of the power, experienced by the men in the story's earlier film versions, that allowed their greater knowledge of the fantasized partner to puncture the woman's desire for him, is to assert control not over the content of the fantasy but its *mise-en-scène*—determining pace, setting, the quality of light at a particular time of day—such that the granting of Kathleen's wish at the end of the story still takes place within the man's elaborate orchestration.

It is as if these aspects of the mode of production of Hollywood movies, whose concealment is necessary for the production of the effect of an independent and autonomous diegetic world of action, now begin to intrude into the fabric of the diegesis. Unlike midcentury backstage musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *The Band Wagon* (1953), in which the exposure of the skeleton of film production was itself glamorized—i.e. whose own mode of production was concealed—the exposure of the mode of production in the Ephron films does not take place in the material circumstances of the plot. Rather, it is that the concerns of romance begin to express themselves in the terms of the mode of production, which become something like an allegory (rather than the literal setting) of the drama of romance. This is also evident in the way that Kathleen's *anagnorisis* at the park bears simultaneously on the romance plot and the form of the genre itself. When Joe appears at the end of the path in Riverside Park, Kathleen is struck with the knowledge that her pen pal and her nemesis-turned-love are the same person—yet, as was the case in *An Affair to Remember*, the disclosures do not end there. As with that ending, a whole chain of events now has its cause colored in: it dawns on her that Joe had set up

this meeting in the park, that he had known it would end this way when he confessed his love on the street in front of her apartment. It dawns on her why he had become her friend, and also what it had meant for her to go to Joe for advice about NY152. The meaning of the bouquet must eventually dawn, as does the reason she had been stood up at the café, and what was still invisible to both of them when they first met in the bookshop. What dawns, in other words, is something like the entire plot of the film *You've Got Mail*, and the knowledge that she has been a protagonist in a story that looks very much like a romantic comedy. At this point, Kathleen approaches more closely than at any other point the consciousness of the star who plays her. The climax of the romantic comedy offers a kind of resolution to the problem of the star-actor, whose recognizability on screen always exists in tension with the requirement, imposed by the fiction, that she be believed as another person.<sup>54</sup> Kathleen's discovery of herself as the lead in a story that has been scripted and prepared is also the discovery that Joe has been a director of sorts, one whose emergence out of hiddenness at the end is a sign that this ending was not arbitrary but designed, that she has been secure in the structure of genre.

In fact, both of the Ephron romantic comedies draw on the closeness of the ordinary and celebrity in service of the love plot. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, it is only because Tom Hanks's character becomes a celebrity after his appearance on Dr. Marcia Fieldstone's radio program that Annie discovers him at all. The scene in which we see Hanks arriving home to a huge pile of fan mail may be taken as an extra-diegetic joke; Annie's and Sam's only sightings of each other before the film's final scene, one as Annie is deboarding at an airport and the other as Annie surreptitiously stalks Sam as he spends time with his family, both have the quality of celebrity sightings, and indeed their romantic recognition of one another at the end of the film, which is of

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<sup>54</sup> The romantic comedy *Notting Hill* (1999) more explicitly thematizes this point by making its female lead, played by Julia Roberts, a major American movie star.

intimately recognizing someone you have just met, closely mirrors the kind of relation that modern-day celebrity culture makes possible. Indeed, *Sleepless* dramatizes the romantic resolution as a kind of becoming-star, most explicitly figured in the actual stars that pop up next to each actor's name over a map of a darkened U.S. night during the opening credits. The arc of the film involves Sam and Annie transcending the flatness of this national landscape to meet at the top of the Empire State Building (their initial encounter is facilitated by another tower, the Sears tower in Chicago, from the top of which Dr. Marcia Fieldstone's radio show is broadcast), described by Terry in *Affair* as "the nearest thing to heaven."

This is to say that it is not only Joe who emerges from hiddenness at the end of the film. The film's climax is a kind of answer to the earlier scene in which we see Kathleen worry about the smallness of her life while sitting alone at her laptop (see Figure 2 above). Though it is implied that Kathleen is typing the words to Joe, since he is the only person she writes to in the film, it is worth noting that this is also the film's only e-mailing scene to not explicitly indicate the addressee: she writes not to Joe but to the "void." It is dark outside; the lit frame of the window takes up only a small portion of the film's frame, which is partially obscured by a tree's branches, out-of-focus in the shot's foreground. It looks, in fact, as though the camera is peeking through the branches, as if using them for visual cover, even though it is too dark for Kathleen to see out. The blurriness of the tree in contrast to the apartment interior's visual sharpness seems to suggest that the branches and its gently shivering leaves are *very close* to the camera, as if the lens is right up against them. The implication of the scene's visual composition seems to be that the camera's position is not merely efficient, a neutral choice in service of optimal film narration, but rather that it occupies this specific point in the film's world, tucked behind the tree outside Kathleen's apartment. It is the kind of shot that would be used in a horror film to suggest the

presence of someone outside of whom the protagonist is not yet aware, and to project a future moment in which whatever occupies the camera's position and the person in the house will come face-to-face.

The camera shoots Kathleen in this way at the moment of her worry about the smallness of her life. The void into which she sends her "cosmic question" most immediately refers to the Internet; but it is also evoked visually in this scene by the dark that lies beyond her little circle of lamp-light, where the camera and her audience are placed. Her longing for an audience, for a life that she would then encounter traces of in the books she reads, is framed in a shot in which the audience hears her words scored to an expansive string cue and peers in at her from the enclosure of the darkness outside. This resonance and distance between what Kathleen longs to know about herself and what the film's audience already knows thematizes the gap between the diegetic and the non-diegetic as the very locus of Kathleen's desire. To have the answers to the questions she poses would be to collapse what the separation of the diegetic and non-diegetic holds apart.

The longing for the aesthetic that is identical to a longing for romantic love develops, in this network of films, in tandem with an aesthetic process by which music is disembodied and abstracted, banished from the diegetic and into the murky realm outside it. This is the state in which the worlds of the Ephron romantic comedies begin, in the sense that what they seek is not on Earth but outside it, and that the transformative event that would secure their sense of being attached to life will appear to them from outside the ordinary in an irruption of feeling. The soundtrack's location outside the diegesis may be a conventional feature of Hollywood narrative film, but it also articulates the structure of a desire that is not universal but particular, one that can be narrated within a history of aesthetic representations of the intimate event that enters the life of a liberal subject to secure its sense of an immanent, socially transcendent self. Its

separation from film's diegetic worlds is a technical feature that is co-opted by genres of liberal fulfillment to express a gap that must be integrated or resolved. The glossiness of the sentimental cue may also be thought of as a textual glossiness: as a sign that the lives rendered onscreen by the camera have been underlined and interpreted by an agent whose very existence projects a future moment in which the text is no longer yet-to-be-written, and has begun to be read. The soundtrack is synchronic, occupying a vertical relation to the image that renders its feeling and affect, but it also projects a gigantic movement toward closure at a point where the knowledge of genre and fictionality—of the aesthetic—will no longer be held at arm's length from diegetic reality. As a film character who faces the approaching millennium while caught in a nostalgia for the stories of the past, Kathleen's inability to hear the soundtrack is threaded into a story of disclosure from within the ordinary, projecting a future moment in which the soundtrack outside her window will flood into her world and erase the distance between them.

## Chapter Four

### The Voice of Feeling

#### (Three Speeches by Colin Firth)

... the subject is depleted to the extent that something of the subject is found in the object, though enriched by feeling.

D.W. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object"

Near the end of the 2003 romantic comedy *Love Actually*, a man enters a restaurant in search of a woman. When Jamie (Colin Firth) sees Aurelia (Lúcia Moniz), standing behind a balustrade above him, he begins to confess his romantic feeling for her in a voice that cuts through the restaurant's chatter and turns all attention to him. She was his housekeeper in the weeks before, which they had spent alone together at his cottage. But the speech includes the first words that are understood between them, because neither had been able to speak the other's language. Now, as he addresses her in a broken Portuguese he has just cobbled together, the camera cuts between him on the restaurant's floor and her above as a love theme blooms under his stammered words. When the speech is over, she assents, and the theme swells to amplify the crowd's cheers as the camera follows her down to the restaurant floor, finally drawing face-to-face with Jamie in the film's frame.

In this scene, a social order coheres around the formation of a couple, whose two-as-one unity is captured in the symmetry of this final gaze. In work on sentimentality and the scene of recognition, feeling often spreads across paths first paved by sight. James Chandler, for instance, describes sentiment as that which circulates through a relay of looks, while Elizabeth A.



Figure 11. Jamie and Aurelia at the end of *Love Actually*, their eyes locked on each other.

Povinelli, writing about the significance of the romantic couple in liberal cultures, summarizes its transformative promise with the motto, “In your gaze I become a new person, as do you in mine.”<sup>1</sup> Implicit in these accounts is a certain way of imagining the relation between sight and feeling: the gaze marks an event of contact between people, and this contact is the scaffolding through which feeling flows. The connection of sight serves as the structural condition of feeling’s possibility—witness, above, the portrait of the romantic couple as a closed visual loop.

The bind between feeling’s flow and an event of recognition is foundational to certain widespread modes of storytelling, such as melodrama, in which the exposure and recognition of a character’s hidden virtue often produces the occasion for excessive affect.<sup>2</sup> The idea that feeling *should* accompany meaningful moments of interpersonal contact is also commonly found in political hope. Lauren Berlant, writing about the United States in particular, calls this national sentimentality: a “rhetoric of promise that a nation can be built across fields of social difference

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<sup>1</sup> James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 12; Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

through channels of affective identification and empathy.”<sup>3</sup> At the heart of this form of political belief is a link binding reciprocity and feeling, since affect is a sign that channels between people are open, that feeling is flowing *somewhere*. This somewhere, in turn, quickly becomes the *there* of narrative, since to feel moved by someone else’s suffering can feel like *moving in* the right direction, the evidence that something politically productive has already begun to happen. Feeling, reciprocity, narrative: the promise of national sentimentality is the algorithm that connects these terms into a seamless sequence.

The scene that opens this chapter appears to exemplify this seamlessness. Jamie exposes something privately held that Aurelia recognizes and reciprocates, bringing about a flow of feeling (rendered in the soundtrack that swells under cheers and applause) that ushers the couple together and the plot to a close—romantic comedy’s cadence, perfect and authentic. Yet this analysis leaves some details unaccounted for. Does the fact that Jamie has only known Aurelia in the capacity of an employee have any bearing on the liberal story of love’s equally shared feeling? Or that Jamie, a British citizen, declares the feeling he cannot ignore to a roomful of Portuguese immigrants in the south of France, having abandoned everything to fly there under the aegis of love? These matters of plot only emphasize the way that the conventional heterosexual love story is already founded on discrepancies of freedom and power, even while its ending promises the beautiful symmetry of one soul’s recognition by another. The sentimental model of feeling can only account for the end of the story, since it understands all people’s feeling to be equally suitable for eliciting the empathy and recognition of others. How, then, might we model the scene in a way that accounts for its disparities of power, and not just its

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, Politics,” in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, eds. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999): 53.

promise of symmetry? What aesthetic figure could capture not only the event of fusion, but also the exercise of power, in feeling's flow?

We might begin with the speech, instead of the gaze. Beginning an analysis with the gaze predisposes a reading of the scene that centers recognition—a contact of sight that stands for empathy or identification. The flow of feeling then serves as the affective accompaniment to an interpersonal event. But the speech relocates feeling in the scene: feeling is not just attached to a moment of contact between people, but is also mobilized *in the voice itself* that fills the room with the sound of its affection. As Jamie speaks, his voice floats over a love theme whose melody repeats and expands until it underscores the roar of the crowd's approval. Here, the voice is not just used to communicate something within the speaker, but also produces a rhythm and a tone in the room that magnetizes a collective's sense of itself as a unit. What concept of the voice one begins with will determine how one understands the scene's fantasy of the social. To see how the voice produces a tone that becomes the basis of collective affect, for instance, would be to recognize how a scene that is superficially about recognition may also involve the speaker's protection and continued hiddenness from the social, insofar as it abrogates the time of the other's response.

This chapter addresses the nature of social worlds that coalesce around events of speech in three contemporary, popular films: *Love Actually*, *The King's Speech* (2010), and *A Single Man* (2009). Though the first centers on romantic union, the second on the union of nation, and the third on the self-clarifying viscosity of feeling alive in the “present,” all three films nonetheless culminate in scenes whose formal outlines are nearly identical: a character played by Colin Firth delivers a speech that was to this point foreclosed by a stuckness or a stutter; the achievement of an experience of self-realization depends on his ability to produce the voice's

flow. I call these generic endings' common form an *infrageneric* structure: a hidden lattice that reveals familiar elements at work in the representation of specific generic fantasies, such that the "local" generic concerns are underwritten by a more pervasive set of ideological demands that each film realizes via its particular genre of self-integration. In this chapter's cases, Colin Firth's voice produces, respectively, the recognition of the romantic couple, the coherence of national affect and agency, and the experience—much valued within liberal aesthetics—of living in the moment, the aspiration to endless presentness. Yet these different experiences of resolution rely on a shared formal mechanism, which posits a concept of the voice that seamlessly bridges individual expressiveness with the realization of collectivities magnetized by feeling.

This chapter's cases could have been drawn from speeches delivered by other actors too, since its discussion of speech as a fantasy of self-integration is endemic to liberal cultural production. Yet there are fortuitous and apposite reasons for focusing on Colin Firth. For this dissertation's purposes, a British actor who is also a Hollywood star bridges Europe and the United States, the founding terrains of the Enlightenment; two of the three films in this chapter are transatlantic productions. There is also something thematically indicative of melodrama in Firth's physical reticence, as Tom Ford, the director of *A Single Man*, seems to suggest in his story of how he came to select Firth for the lead role:

I ran into Colin at the *Mamma Mia!* premiere and was standing there chatting with him and just kept looking at him and could not believe it. He didn't know that I wanted him, because his agent said he's not available ... What I loved about him and the reason I thought he was right is that he's often a little bit flat, on the surface, but he's not flat. There's an inner life to Colin coming through his eyes you just feel, there's just so much more there.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Thompson, "Sixteen Questions for A Single Man's Tom Ford," *IndieWire.com*, [http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/a\\_single\\_man\\_ten\\_questions\\_for\\_tom\\_ford](http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/a_single_man_ten_questions_for_tom_ford) (accessed August 15, 2017).

For his Sirk-inspired melodrama, the director selects an actor whose countenance he describes in language that is near-identical to Sirk's own descriptions of *Written on the Wind*, whose "hard, enameled surfaces" heightened the volatility of a violence "which is all inside them and can't break through."<sup>5</sup> Ford's narration of Firth's casting takes the narrative form of a romantic comedy, which begins with an obstacle to the couple's formation ("He didn't know that I wanted him") and whose implicit ending unites a film director with the very embodiment of Sirkean aesthetics: as Ford comments elsewhere, "[t]here's something about Colin that does seem very contained on the surface and yet inside you know there's enormous emotion."<sup>6</sup> The choice of Firth for *A Single Man*, a film that begins with flat colors to symbolize depression but whose "color heightens when George really starts to look at thing [*sic*] and the beauty of things starts to pull on him,"<sup>7</sup> thus invokes a style of filmmaking in which the claim to a melodramatic mode is located in a tonality of restraint; or, in Alfred Hitchcock's formulation, "I use melodrama because I have a tremendous desire for understatement in film-making."<sup>8</sup> Understatement, Hitchcock claims, is integral for fantasy, because representations of sensational events in the form of cinematic sensationalism would strike audiences as stylistically overblown, even if this sensationalism were mimetically accurate. Rather, for a representation to feel rich and alive, its tone should communicate the existence of a sensory world that the representation displaces or mediates. The ideal mediation, therefore, is one that is *translucent*: it forwards a tone, an

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<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram* 4 (1972), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Roberts, "Colin Firth nearly turned down the part that won him a best actor Bafta," *The Telegraph.co.uk*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/baftas/7287770/Colin-Firth-nearly-turned-down-the-part-that-won-him-a-best-actor-Bafta.html> (accessed August 15, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Steve "Frosty" Weintraub, "Director Tom Ford Interview A SINGLE MAN," *Collider.com*, <http://collider.com/director-tom-ford-interview-a-single-man/> (Accessed August 15, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, "Why I Make Melodramas" (1936), [https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Film\\_and\\_Stars\\_\(1937\)\\_-\\_Why\\_I\\_Make\\_Melodramas](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Film_and_Stars_(1937)_-_Why_I_Make_Melodramas) (accessed August 15, 2017). For a historicized account of the relation between melodrama and flat affect, see Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling."

affective plane that simultaneously and continuously telegraphs the presence of another one that is just beneath its visible surface. Thus the exemplary melodramatic genre for Hitchcock is the newspaper, whose simple, indicative sentences and deadpan delivery most fully allow the reader to “live” the story.<sup>9</sup>

Colin Firth’s appearance in each of these three films, then, is an aesthetic thread that suggests their shared reliance on melodrama’s categories of inner and outer, of the hard, resistant surface and the truth waiting to bubble through. Yet, in locating the drama of subjectivity in the individual’s capacity to produce a voice, these films dispense with the formal mirroring of the other’s gaze. Instead, they resonate with accounts of liberal subjectivity that emphasize the way in which speaking itself produces an efflorescence of personhood. These cases explore at greater depth the notion already introduced in the parody of romantic comedy discussed in the last chapter: namely, that the voice’s capacity to inaugurate a texture of sociality all by itself suggests that the other, even when present, is structurally negligible for the recognitions of scenes of feeling.

### **Private Language, Public Confession**

Speeches are legion in the endings of romantic comedy. But the story of Jamie and Aurelia in *Love Actually*—which is made up of a number of interconnected stories—makes speech a central condition of its romantic intrigue. The event that launches the story is Jamie’s discovery of his brother’s affair with his girlfriend. He retreats to a holiday cottage, where he is introduced to Aurelia by the cottage’s proprietor as a “perfect lady to clean the house.” From this point until the closing sequence, the storyline will feature no other characters and no settings

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

apart from the cottage and the car in which Jamie drives Aurelia home every night. Confined to them, the story adumbrates a world of language in which instrumental communication is not one of its uses. As it happens, Jamie and Aurelia both talk a lot, but apart from mimed gestures and the occasional cognate between Portuguese and English, this romance derives its comedy from the absence of language's social utility. And its pathos: in one scene, Jamie and Aurelia, face to face, confess their romantic feelings for each other in a symmetry that can only be grasped by the film's audience, who are assisted by subtitles. That the mutual confession of love does *not* produce a couple suggests what is still missing (and what the remainder of the plot must supply): not the capacity to put feelings into words, which they have, but the dimension of language that is social, that allows confession to have meaning for someone else.

After the holiday, the two leave the cottage, and a montage shows glimpses of Jamie learning Portuguese. Then, a few weeks before Christmas, Jamie arrives at a family gathering bearing gifts—only to drop them unceremoniously and dash off to the airport. Running usually marks the point in romantic comedy when the last decision has been made, and all that's left is distance. If the story's ending is about reciprocity, then the purpose of the run is to bring Aurelia within hailing range of the voice, to bridge the distance so that feeling can be confessed and heard. Yet *Love Actually*, which threads together a number of love stories in different guises, includes three sequences in which a man, having decided to pursue his crush, hurtles through space while underscored by a triumphant orchestra.<sup>10</sup> These balletic displays through streets and airports, buffeted by horns and crashing cymbals, tie the moment of romantic resolve to a delight

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<sup>10</sup> It is significant for the film's understanding of gender and power that one of these men is the Prime Minister—i.e., the most powerful man in Britain—whose summoning of resources as he pursues his former assistant, including security detail and a full motorcade, provides the material expression of the momentum that his desire can produce in the world. The next section explores further the logic by which a head of state, in his very exceptionality, becomes the general model of a liberal political subjectivity.

in physical freedom, a joy in sheer motion that almost makes it seem as though the character had formerly been shackled. These triumphant runs are not only in the service of covering a distance. Rather, they suggest that to possess desire, to be organized by its clarity, and to be able to transform intent into bodily action can be profoundly affirmative of one's subjectivity, regardless of what the other's response will be.

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that desire becomes a material for subjectivity through the very terms of liberal political structure. While liberalism initially proposed only a political, legal, and economic framework in which people with "widely different and incompatible conceptions of the good life" could express and debate their preferences in a public arena, it followed that individuals would have to know and express their preferences in order to become politically legible as persons in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Under these conditions, desire becomes a fraught object of knowledge. The individual must ideally be on constant alert for the emergence of new desires, which can then be voiced in public as both the raw material of democratic world-making and as badge of personhood. But the possibility of incoherent or contradictory desire is always a threat to the coherence of the individual's subjectivity: desire is never only that when not knowing what you want is tantamount to not knowing who you are.

If saying "I want" in a liberal cultural order is also to announce that I am, the run in romantic comedy presents the clarity of desire as a freedom of the body. Hence the run does not bridge a distance so much as it inaugurates a new spatiality: it marks the point where the drama of desire shifts from the internal to the external, when the subject's anxious interior monitoring comes to an end and the newly clear desire propels the body through the world. The run is a sign that no contradiction or incoherence remains in the runner's psyche. Instead, the business of

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<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Liberalism Turned into a Tradition," in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 336.

noticing and expressing preferences is simplified into the mere crossing of a gap, traversable by taxis and planes—as if the universe’s physical extension, its existence as a field of non-identical locations, could be itself a diagram of desire.

To describe the closing scene of recognition as a convergence of bodies and gazes in space, then, fails to consider how a concept of space and time is part of the scene’s fantasy. Consider how the speech and the soundtrack generate the scene’s closing representation of an affective public. When Jamie storms into the restaurant where Aurelia works (bringing with him a crowd of people who had gathered on the way), the triumphant cue that had underscored his journey fades out and exposes the ordinary sounds of a restaurant: dispersed conversations, clinking silverware, and the sound of an in-house band. The camera cuts around the room, alighting on unfamiliar faces. Then Aurelia enters the frame. At this moment, the band stops playing, and a single, closely-miked piano note over sustained strings saturates the sound mix. The entrance of this note replaces the restaurant’s din with a warm aural focus that turns out, as it continues, to have been the beginning of a melody: the “Portuguese Love Theme,” written by the film’s composer Craig Armstrong, that had underscored all the couple’s previous scenes together. Then Jamie begins to speak, and the restaurant goes quiet as the camera pans around the room to reveal faces turned to him in rapt attention.

This moment marks the couple’s first emergence from the privacy of the cottage, but it is also the storyline’s first representation of a public. And the speech’s effect is not just to communicate something to Aurelia. It also cuts through the dispersed temporalities of a dozen private dinner conversations and replaces them with a collective sense of a beginning, in the beginning of the speech. When Jamie first entered the restaurant, the band music that washed around islands of conversation marked what Henri Bergson called a spatial concept of time:

metrical, a click-track, free of contouring by specific human experience.<sup>12</sup> When Jamie begins to speak, however, his voice cuts through the chatter and produces a collective apprehension of time in the time of his speech, in which each moment is not simply “one point alongside another”—as it was before the speech—but is now enmeshed in the movement of an “organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.”<sup>13</sup> It is fitting that musical melody was Bergson’s chief example of the temporal experience he called *duration*, since Jamie’s voice is joined with a melody that extends across the length of the speech.<sup>14</sup> Yet the underscore does not so much accompany an event in the narrative as it provides the condition for that event’s possibility: its sound is tied to the voice that breaks through the restaurant’s scattered pockets of time, forming its diners into a collective by forming them as an audience.

That the feeling of togetherness can be taken as proof of actual togetherness is a basic feature of sentimentality. When politicians give speeches announcing a new day or a new beginning for the nation, this abstract claim feels credible in part because the speech itself enacts, for a dispersed audience, the experience of feeling a given moment in time as a collectively apprehended present. Yet this also suggests that a voice laden with feeling can produce a sense of the social in itself, and therefore bypass the need for the response and returned gaze of others. To see the confession itself (rather than the other’s acceptance and recognition of the confession) as the central formal event of romantic closure makes it possible to read for inequalities in each person’s role in producing the social, as the English subtitles translating Jamie’s mangled Portuguese seem to suggest: “I know I seems crazy, but sometimes things are so transparency,

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<sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

they don't need evidential proof. And I can inhabit here, or you can inhabit with me in England.” But the fact that Aurelia works in Marseille when she is not working at Jamie's cottage suggests that she may not be as free as he is to inhabit wherever she likes. Indeed, as Jamie delivers his plea to an audience of immigrants in the south of France, the desperation of his offer recalls that those with the least material and structural encumbrances can leave the most gorgeous sacrifices at the altar of love. Here, the association between material resource and love's universal concept echoes the last chapter's analysis of writing as an exhibit of subjectivity. Where romantic self-encounter is staged as self-integration, cinema represents this inner achievement externally in writing, in physical movement. As a result, these acts serve not to index privilege but rather the hard-earned self-understanding of the sovereign subject.

And this is an analytical weakness of the model that takes feeling to circulate through a relay of looks: its location of feeling in the *relay* presumes the points along its path to be essentially contentless and identical. When what matters is the feeling that flows between people, there is no account of the ways that feeling's flow could be built on a ground of difference, as it is in the gendered story of heterosexual romance. Yet Jamie's speech seems to deliver a fantasy that the individual voice of desire can lead directly to an experience of the social, skipping (we might say formally) the other's response. Here, the voice itself inaugurates the drama of communication, though not in the sense that the other absorbs and responds to the claims it forwards. It is rather that the social is born with the voice, that his effort to produce a voice, to put into the world the thing he must say, *is* the culmination and the ground of the social. The exemplary figure, then, is not the gaze but the stutter—the sound of meaning struggling to escape the body, the tension and release of the voice as the locus of life itself.

## The Voice of the People

Seven years later, Colin Firth finds himself again faced with the task of delivering a speech at the end of a film. Though its concerns seem distant from those of holiday cottages and restaurant proposals, there are nevertheless continuities between *The King's Speech* (2010) and the conventional story of romance. For instance, it centers on a couple: the titular monarch (played by Firth) and his speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). Moreover, the structure of the film has been compared by Firth, in the DVD's special features, to that of romantic comedy ("boy meets therapist, boy loses therapist, boy gets therapist"); and one could also note that the director Tom Hooper's first choice for the King was, apparently, not Firth but Hugh Grant (Walker 2011), who is famous for using his stammer in romantic comedies as an instrument of charm.

But the stammer in this historical drama is not just a quirk—a repetitive detail used for character color. Rather it is imbued with a history and trajectory, and drives the story. The film follows Bertie (as the King is known to intimates) as he ascends the throne and is faced with the task of delivering, over the radio, an address to the English empire at the outbreak of the Second World War. But Bertie has spoken with a stammer since childhood, a personal problem whose implications for public life are made visceral in the film's opening scene. The year is 1925, and Bertie, still a prince, must deliver his first live address over the radio at the closing ceremony of the British Royal Exhibition, staged at the cavernous Wembley Stadium. As Bertie ascends the stairs to a microphone placed squarely in the middle of the stands, the crowds all around him rise to face him (their wooden chairs scraping noisily), their bodies and expectant faces pressed close. Alexandre Desplat's minimalist underscore—which here floats a high, isolated piano melody over a sustained string pedal, the musical equivalent of a held breath—evaporates just as the

flashing red light next to the microphone goes solid, abandoning Bertie to the silence of dead air. We see Bertie's face up close as his mouth works silently. Then, a sound, but not a human one—a horse neighs from the field, and the camera cuts away to track its source, already distracted from recording Bertie and the speech he is supposed to give. It is not just feedback from the human and animal bodies clustered around him that interrupt the voice's issuing in this opening scene, but also the way that the PA system turns his voice against itself, picking up the surplus frictions of Bertie's stammer and sending them echoing around the arena until their mechanical repetitions suffocate his faltering attempts to make sense.

What seems to unravel Bertie's speech, in other words, is its environment—the fact that it is delivered into a real space filled with real bodies. His voice is broadcast widely, but it is also absorbed by the crowd gathered around him in the arena, who breathe and produce sound into the same air that carries the sound of his voice, and whose faces register in real time a growing embarrassment as the speech falters and grinds to a halt. The overpresence of other bodies in the stadium, their sounds and expectant stares, unnerve the voice and its efficient delivery. This is how the film introduces the problem whose overcoming will occupy the remainder of the story, which largely centers on the therapeutic relationship between Bertie and Lionel. The two meet only after Bertie is unsuccessfully matched with a series of other speech therapists, who all offer him prosthetic solutions that range from cigarettes to a mouthful of marbles. What distinguishes Lionel is that he does not, at first, treat the problem as a mechanical one, instead asking Bertie about his earliest memories and his relationships with his family. His treatment of Bertie's "speech" problem with the procedures of psychotherapy suggests a belief that the voice cannot be healed until the whole self is healed.

The film's telling of a story about speech through a psychoanalytic plot constitutes a claim that it makes about the voice. Bertie initially resists Lionel's questions because he does not think of his speech problem as a personal matter. But by the end, this romance will unite the voice's physical being with the imprint of personal history: the film's finale forwards the argument that the voice generating national solidarity cannot just be a voice, something transmissible through radio waves, but must also have a backstory, specifically one whose narrative begins in a scene of childhood trauma. The moment in the film that most explicitly presents this idea takes place immediately after the death of Bertie's father and current King, in the meeting between Lionel and Bertie that most resembles a session of psychotherapy. The mood on this occasion is more relaxed than usual: Bertie plays with a model airplane left behind by Lionel's sons, all while the therapist nudges him into recalling the various abuses to which he was subjected as a child. When he arrives at the story of the maid who deprived him of food for three years without his parents' knowing, however, his voice falters in the telling, and stops short of the essential detail. Lionel suggests that he try singing it, because, he says, "continuous sound will give you flow." What needs flow, here, is not just the voice but something in Bertie's relation to his past, which is not so much a repressed memory as a lump of unredeemed pain that prevents the present from becoming expressive. There is a stall in the narrative of his life, a knot that has never been smoothed over, and this knot becomes the knot in the throat that afflicts him in the present. Because the film's narrative drama depends on the improbable notion that all hope of English resistance to the Nazis rests on Bertie's ability to deliver a speech, the stutter is the mechanical hinge that unites personal and national history—or as Geoffrey Rush glosses the plot on the DVD commentary, "it's the journey toward becoming a King and becoming a human being."

That is, to complete the narrative line from the failed speech that opens the movie to the successful one that ends it, the plot must first introduce another narrative line via the psychoanalysis plot: that of biography. Bertie is compelled to narrate his life from his earliest memories, but the story stalls—and this stall turns out to be what keeps the other story, the film’s plot, from reaching its end. In the notion that the English people will not be ready for war unless Bertie acknowledges his voice’s history and confronts its origin in traumatic experience, we may detect the premises of Berlant’s notion of national sentimentality, which forwards the belief that significant political change will come about when those who do not have a particular experience of being socially subordinated are exposed to poignant and moving evocations of the pain experienced by people who do. Under this model, an individual’s pain is linked to a vision of a healed or whole social order through an act of *testimony*, a genre of speech that typically represents private experience as a narrative to make it available as social material.

Collectivity can only be pictured, literally, in the sound of a voice that is the outcome of a narrative that reiterates the possibility of traversing the distance between past trauma and some future moment beyond pain. For Berlant, there are costs to imagining national togetherness in this way:

The desire to find an origin for trauma, and to rework culture at the violating origin, effectively imagines subjects only within that zone, reducing the social to that zone [...] It is to think that the moment of its gestation is, indeed, life itself.<sup>15</sup>

Or to put it in terms of *The King’s Speech*: if empathetic nationhood is only possible through a voice that *must have* originated in trauma (otherwise it could not lead to the speech’s excess of affect), it is as if the very possibility of the collective is born in the birth of Bertie’s private

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<sup>15</sup> Berlant, “Subject of True Feeling,” 77.

trauma. The individualistic project to resolve one's past pain and find a voice also amounts to an act of translation, of making something private a material of communal empathy. Like the desire MacIntyre says liberal subjects must constantly be on alert for and volunteer for the smooth functioning of democratic world-building, the pain of the marginalized—as soon as it enters and isolates the individual it afflicts—is also on a trajectory (in a culture that values itself in the valuing of this kind of narrative) toward world-affirmation, toward becoming the kind of material through which the persons inhabiting a society can sense each other at all.

Hence Berlant's assertion that "[s]ubaltern pain is a public form because its outcome is to make you readable, for others."<sup>16</sup> Yet is subaltern pain something that is readable—is pain a signifying form? There is a paradox here that suggests a confusion of epistemology at the very basis of using testimonies of experience as a way of grounding collective assent: "Subaltern pain is not considered *universal* ... But subaltern pain is deemed, in this [political context of national sentimentality], universally *intelligible*, constituting objective evidence of trauma. [...] But, if historical contexts are incomparable across fields of simple and complex distinction, how can someone's pain or traumatized identity produce such perfect knowledge?"<sup>17</sup> How does something like private experience become a signifying form?

Berlant's ruminations on identity politics distill to this unresolvable juncture. It is also the point in her essay that comes closest to sounding like certain straits of philosophy, for instance the language of Stanley Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging," in which the central question concerns whether one can know someone else's pain the way they know it.<sup>18</sup> Though Berlant's and Cavell's purposes are different, we can see them at this juncture squaring off against the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238-266.

same (seemingly) intractable problem: what happens to private experience when we enter into relation with other beings? What status or authority does it have? Or, to put it in terms of these films' endings, what place does the individual's voice, born of pain, have in producing the social? One answer comes from Jacques Derrida, whose major project was to argue that writing was not simply a technology that extended the reach of one's presence and effect on others. Rather, in order to speak or make sense at all, there must exist words, or "signifying forms," that have a stable existence outside of any given context where someone tries to communicate something. Hence there is already something that looks like a technology, something "severed ... from communication and its context," that must pre-exist any instance where I, present in a given context, use speech to express my intentions.<sup>19</sup>

Derrida writes that a word becomes a signifying form "by virtue of its essential iterability," that is, its repeated and consistent use across different contexts. And this is no less true of how experience works: "And I will extend this law even to all 'experience' in general, if it is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks."<sup>20</sup> This idea accords with Berlant's suggestion to treat subaltern pain not as prelapsarian knowledge but as ideology, that is, something already wholly structural and linguistic, and not as something that merely enters and is only then mediated by language. For Derrida, iterability is what dismantles the possibility of experience as "*pure* presence"; but Cavell points out, in his response to these passages, that Derrida does not offer an explanation for *how* a word's "essential iterability" takes place. How do we know that "feed the lion" and "feed the meter" are suitable iterations of the word "feed," while my saying "feed the car" is not only wrong, but wrong

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 318.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

enough to make you doubt whether I am a speaker native to your land at all? “What’s left out,” writes Cavell, “is that the iteration necessary for language comes from elsewhere ... the “recognition of recurrence,” the form, comes from the place of the other.”<sup>21</sup> What determines a word’s meaning, and so the contexts in which it is and is not appropriate, what Cavell calls its criteria of use, can only be found out once the other, that is, the social realm, is involved.

Thus Cavell, in giving an account of how words can become signifying forms, useful to others, also introduces the temporal spacing of conversation, the time it takes to hear from others. To Derrida’s idea that the iterability of a word comes from its capacity to be severed from specific contexts of use, Cavell responds that

in philosophy, for some reason, context seems a fragile, erasable, perhaps we can say extra-logical, feature of making sense, so that in analyzing whether and how sense is made, such a thing as intention, and a private intention at that (public space having been erased, you may say enclosed, or subjected to reduction), appears to have to do all the work of, as it were, communication. It is in such straits (straits of metaphysics) that intention is to preserve, and I would say, reattain, or represent, presence (beyond myself, to someone or something).<sup>22</sup>

Here, the realm of the public is placed in parentheses, or “enclosed.” In doing so, the fantasy of presence is born, which “strips our criteria from ourselves and so transfigures, or disfigures, human language into a private possession, or possessor, a structure in which we are each [...] said to live, that is, to preserve ourselves.”<sup>23</sup> Presence, or the wish that my speech could in itself secure my subjectivity, that my speech could also be my personhood, comes only when I deny that language and meaning do not originate with me, but emerge only in their public use, in a negotiation with others. For this to happen, I cannot rely on the fantasy that my voice simply

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Cavell, “Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice,” in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

bears meaning, but instead recognize that every speech act takes place in a context that involves my whole person, and others' whole persons, and whose effects cannot be known until we take a survey of what has happened.<sup>24</sup>

The lyrical self-presence that Bertie longs for—the self-presence that would indicate both the healing of his past trauma and the rescue of the nation from the trauma of war—attempts to preserve the idea of speech within the “private,” something concerned only with producing utterance, while closing off the life of speech in the “public,” where it operates contextually, in exchange with other people. Like Jamie before him, Bertie’s eventual delivery of a lyrical voice *will be* the achievement of mutuality in the sphere of the social. In the ideological weight it places on speech as self-presence, the film can only conceive of stuttered speech as obstructed speech, and not as something that Bertie may learn—unevenly and imperfectly, perhaps—to live with, in an ongoing and ordinary way.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the film conceives of “life” as something strung out on a narrative trellis between trauma and transformation, and imagines the eventual release of the voice to be the sign that the self is no longer stuck in past trauma but has “moved on,” fulfilling its life trajectory. The voice is like the superhero: an initial trauma wracks the body with both pain and promise, such that pain is never just itself but is also the beginning of something, an incipient moment that already contains the kernel of some future redemption. The same is true of pain in sentimental politics. If testimonies of pain are supposed to lead to healed and whole social orders, then it is as if the initial experience of pain retroactively becomes the birth of the social itself, which the suffering subject incubates painfully until it can be spoken

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<sup>24</sup> For an extended discussion of this point in Cavell’s response to Austin’s theory of the performative utterance, see Stanley Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 155-191.

<sup>25</sup> Here, I am thinking of Berlant’s proposition, in contrast to the trauma/reparation model of pain, the idea of subordinate pain as shocking but not surprising, ongoing, and everyday. Berlant, “Subject of True Feeling,” 77-84.

into existence. It is significant for this point that the film's protagonist is the King who, as Bertie himself admits, has no purpose outside the people's belief that "when I speak, I speak for them." Here we see how a political rhetoric is made into drama: if sentimental politics holds that it is through testimonies of pain that a nation is able, through the identification and empathy those testimonies generate, to renew and heal itself, the film selects as its protagonist the one person for whom an inability to speak *presents a national dilemma*. Thus the King, who is by definition not a subject, becomes in his very exceptionality the general model of a liberal political subjectivity.

Yet how does the conversion from private pain into a socially healed order actually happen? Berlant argues that the logic of sentimental politics rarely seems to work, in part because it fails to account for how specific experience of subordinate pain—to which only some people in a social order have access—can become a basis for universal identification and empathy (Berlant 1999, 72). The remainder of this chapter will focus on how the fantasy of this conversion takes place in the film's finale, when the King's voice finally issues forth, righting his own and also world history in the process. In the climactic scene, Bertie and Lionel are huddled in a small, soundproofed recording booth, the receiver of a microphone bisecting their eyeline. When the speech is about to begin, Lionel delivers a sweeping conductor's gesture, and the *Allegretto* from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony cues on the soundtrack (an addition by the film's editor, Tariq Anwar). The movement begins with a single chord in the orchestra, but in the film, the chord is intoned twice, in a kind of instrumental stutter. As Bertie begins to speak, however, the strings' dactylic rhythm chops up the mostly static string textures heard so far in Desplat's score, driving the texture forward as the cue expands in pitch range and instrumental thickness. The scene seems to recall Lionel's earlier advice to Bertie that the continuous sound of

singing would give his voice “flow.” And flow is invoked here again, though in the metadiegetic register of the director’s commentary. Until this point, Hooper says, the film’s visual style has been dominated by static shots and the slight shakiness of a hand-held camera, but in the speech scene “the camera really starts to move for the first time,” the earlier style giving way to the lyricism of the Steadicam. When the stutter in Bertie’s throat releases into flow, the camera also begins to roam, cutting away from the little recording booth to reveal shots of ordinary people gathered in tableaux of absorbed listening, the radio becoming the organizing center of citizens’ bodies in pubs, factories, and battlefields across the land. Their movement is arrested into a suspended tableau, a kind of cinematic *quadro di stupore*, though one here that is held in place by a single voice. For when the speech ends and the music stops, the camera ceases its roaming across the vast expanses of the British empire and returns to the confinement of the little recording booth.

What are the differences between this scene of successful speech and the failed one at the beginning? Their settings seem related in their extreme contrast: where Bertie was earlier flummoxed by the crowding of bodies around him and the sounds that ricocheted back to him in Wembley’s cavernous arena, he now disappears into a tiny room draped with fabrics meant to absorb all extraneous sound, including the possibility that his own voice might return to him. The King can only speak when he removes himself from an environment populated by others, and when his voice is no longer pitched to and absorbed by bodies who use the same air and who can affect him in turn. To put it more bluntly: it is only when he recuses himself from *the scene of the social itself* that his voice, paradoxically, can generate an image of the social in the film’s visual field. It is true that the speech is spoken to an intimate other, Lionel, who tells Bertie before he begins to “say it to me as a friend.” And yet Lionel is not the speech’s addressee. The

ears it is meant for are out there, somewhere through the medium's relay. The fact that Lionel's conducting gestures seem to invoke the presence of music (even though the Beethoven is non-diegetic) seems to indicate what is essential in the speech: less the sense of its words than, say, its musicality, the simple fact that it is expressive. Lionel's role in the booth is not to receive a message, though his presence there makes the message possible. His role is simply to keep the message going, to draw it out of its speaker.

Taking these two films together casts Jamie's speech in *Love Actually* in a different light. That is, *The King's Speech* allows us to consider what it might mean if the speech's addressee in the Portuguese restaurant were not Aurelia but the crowd, and the intimate relay with Aurelia served only to generate the kind of voice through which the crowd could sense itself as a collective, held together by a shared affective contour, a rhythm of being-together opened by the voice of feeling. Here, the social is not what emerges after the other absorbs the voice's claims and, in responding, opens a *second* realm of desire that might force Jamie to compromise or abandon the shining futures he has imagined. Rather, Aurelia's assent is like the necessary cadence that rounds off a melody whose impression has already been made. The scene ends, it is true, with Aurelia and Jamie mirroring each other as they step into frame, their eyes locked in the classic two-shot of romantic comedy. Yet it is instructive to note that *The King's Speech* frames Lionel and Bertie in the same way, but bisects the gaze with a microphone that picks up the voice made possible by their intimacy. Intimacy, here, is not the end, but rather the means by which Bertie comes to generate the voice of a king.

The shift in the voice's status from the intimate to the public also attends the music selected for the scene. Hooper justifies his use of Beethoven to underscore the speech (instead of music by Desplat) because of its recognizability, which, he says, "elevates the scene to the status



Figure 12. Lionel and Bertie in *The King's Speech*, a microphone bisecting their eyeline.

of a public event.” This is a contrast to scores written for a film, which Hooper considers “internal” to the movie that they are scored for. Thus the shift from Desplat to Beethoven in the speech scene amounts to a shift in how the audience is interpellated: no longer as the “private” audience of this film’s score, but, in their recognition and prior knowledge of the Beethoven cue, as part of a larger publicity. Yet Hooper’s attempts to describe exactly *who* is included in this larger public reveal the structural limitations of a climactic scene that is, in principle and by Hollywood convention, supposed to generate recognition for anyone who has a heart. Hooper explains his choice of the symphony by saying that “we all have some memory, or most of us have some memory, of this music. Some of us know it very well.” Who is this “we” that becomes “most of us” and then a “some of us” that he does not specify? It is a claim that might be less plausible, for instance, if made by an American director on the DVD commentary of an American Best Picture winner peopled with an American cast. Note too that Hooper does not emphasize “our” collective familiarity with the music in the present but rather the fact that we

have “some memory” of it, projecting a shared past of collective listening. Is Hooper, speaking in the first-person plural, thinking about growing up with the BBC’s broadcasts of classical music, a cultural signifier that the BBC has long associated with itself and thereby with the nation’s identity? Such a connection would be corroborated by the film’s framing as a history of English broadcasting and by the delicate voice of the BBC presenter that opens the film.

We might notice, here, the circularity of romanticizing a major event of English broadcasting by using music whose belonging to what Hooper calls “public consciousness” presupposes an audience already formed by that history of broadcasting. On this point, Sara Ahmed has described the ways in which a sense of national coherence can arise through “loyalty to what has already been established as a national ideal” (Ahmed 2010, 122). The Beethoven cue, therefore, does not do quite what the film’s plot seems to suggest, which is that channels of affect are working to bind together an aggregate of people who are fractured and dispersed. Hooper’s comments suggest instead that those he means to bind with the cue have, in a sense, already been bound, which complicates the scene’s depiction of a structural event of *coming together*. Feeling’s flow is not proof that a wall has collapsed, nor that some new structural configuration has viscerally come into being. It is more like a leftover charge that surges through old wires.

Nor is feeling the proof of Bertie’s true self, or the evidence of his interiority. Here, the film seems almost to offer a critique of the cliché that climactic speech comes in response to an experience of great feeling. Bertie’s speech is not written by him, but handed to him as a script covered in expressive marks that are meant to guide his performance. His speech does not reveal anything essential or meaningful about him as a person—which, in the model of the scene of recognition, would then be heard and understood by the national audience in a surge of feeling—

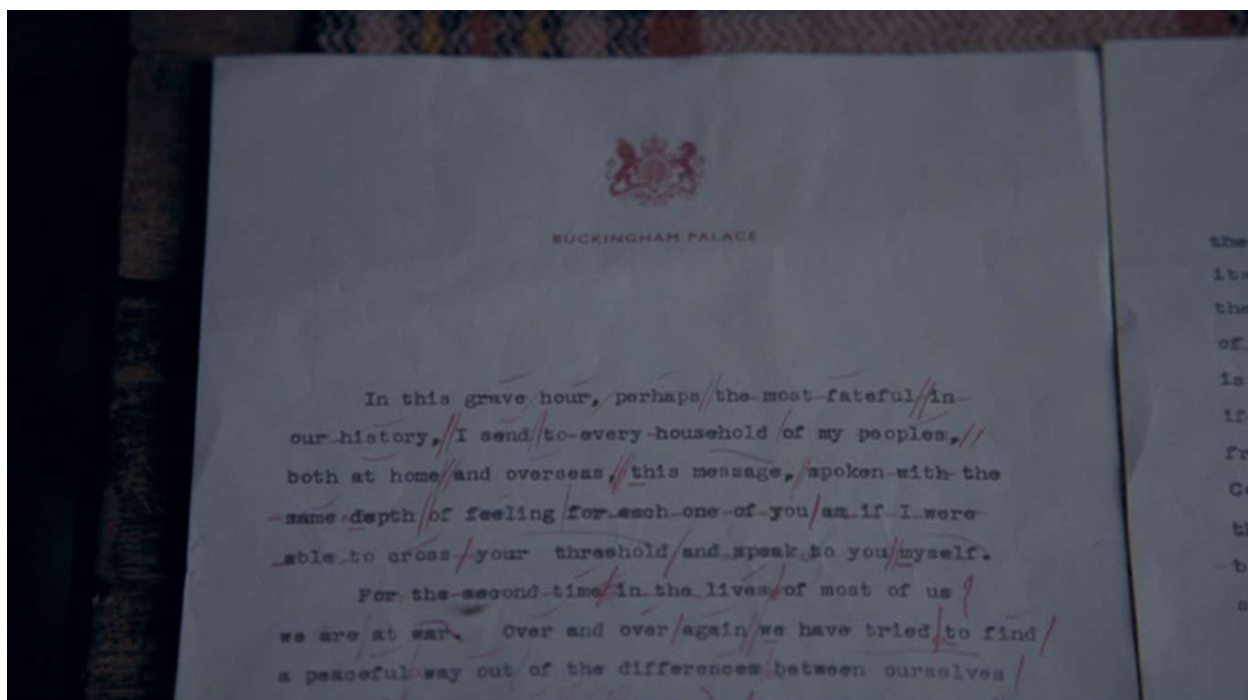


Figure 13. The king's speech in *The King's Speech*, with expressive markings.

but is closer to the performance of a score. The Beethoven cue does not primarily relate to the speech as an index of the feeling or core of personhood it conveys; rather, what seems to bind the cue and the speech is simply the fact that they flow, that they are both instances of an expressivity that is consciously performed. This is consistent with the way that feeling has been conceptualized throughout the film. Over the course of his treatment with Lionel, Bertie has been told to sing, dance, and swear as ways of relieving his vocal difficulties. Thus, in Lionel's office, cursing is not an expression of anger, nor are singing or dancing external proofs of someone's feeling or artistic intent. They are rather a part of a toolbox of tricks that are used to lubricate a flow of words that do not necessarily reveal anything about the speaker's inner life. In the spirit of William James's reversal of the common sense of feeling's causality, where, as he proposed, we do not cry because we are sad but are sad because we cry, we might say that Bertie's speech functions not as a medium for feeling, but rather that feeling functions as a medium for speech.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> William James, "What Is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9, no. 34 (1884): 188–205.

The former registers an anxiety about feeling, and delivers the fantasy that we have interiors, that we can make our individuality known. The latter registers an anxiety about speech, and delivers the fantasy that the existence of feeling will make it possible for us to understand each other, that conversation between us is possible.

If the question the movie asks is whether a monarch can produce the coherence of an empire, and the answer takes the form of the King producing the empire as an audience, then we learn something about what audience means for this film, and how it conceives of the audience's relation to the heroic utterance. Unlike the audience in the Portuguese restaurant, whose collectivity, we might say, is guaranteed by the fact that they exist physically together in a room, the audience of the king's speech can only be counted as a collective through their mutual absorption in the speech. It is as if, in this film, there is no room or hall that could guarantee *a priori* the togetherness of a group of people—that this togetherness comes into existence only so long as the expressive utterance persists in producing them as an audience.

The status of the voice in this film introduces a variation, or further stipulation, of the fantasy in melodrama of the hero's exposure of a moral or emotional truth, which is a fantasy that presumes the existence of an audience—let us say a society—that is present to witness and recognize this truth. This would be the fantasy, as in *Love Actually*, that there is an audience for a character's declarations, for whom their proofs of goodness or innocence will count; and this would be the comedy in romantic comedy, where the ending figures not just individual or even coupled happiness, but the happiness of the individual's or the couple's reintegration into society. But the question animating *The King's Speech* is not only whether someone can assert or expose their essential goodness (this is the Manichean concern of the nationalist war plot), but also whether there exists an audience at all to whom the proofs of goodness could be presented,

who could either affirm or deny one's place in the world. The central difficulty, then, is not just to be good, but also to be expressive, because only in the utterance's production of an audience will there be anyone to deliver the needed recognition. But if the only way to imagine a people is through the utterance that produces them as an audience, then the only people one could imagine is a people in thrall. If the film makes it possible for us to empathize with the king, to feel ourselves, through the usual Hollywood magic, in his story of struggle and overcoming, it is also that the expressive utterance makes it possible to speak of an "us" in the first place, as if the possibility of togetherness were contained in the voice's ardent impress.

Both *Love Actually* and *The King's Speech* end with the ratification of social worlds. But what purchase does the social have when both films show their protagonist in the process of learning to speak (which suggests that he cannot yet fully speak), and when the climax of each film centers not just on an act of speech, but on a sense that the protagonist has finally achieved speech—that he is, in a sense, speaking for the first time? To end a film with the birth of speech indicates the interest that a film takes in speech. It is not, say, an instrument used to provoke, cajole, persuade, soothe, or otherwise affect another, where what the speech means—that is, what effect it has within a negotiation of shared life—can only be found out once the other responds, after which the speaker may have to speak again, adjusting for what he has learned from the response. This would be a model in which the life of speech takes place after the birth of speech. But the films locate their interest in speech before the moment of its birth, an event that ends each film and thereby compresses the time of a shared life in language to a solitary gasp. It would seem that the power carried by speech in these endings is possible only in the face of a denial that recognition and identity may come belatedly, after the interval of the other's response. Here, it might be useful to conceive of the other's difference, formally, not as a spatial

displacement (implied in the returned gaze) but as the temporal lag of response. It is a lag that these films deny to sustain their closing scenes' power, bringing up the credits almost as soon as the hero's speech is done.

The lag is suppressed, and the time of plot takes its place. Could we not now tell the origin story of narrative and feeling in a different way? Conventionally, a movie unfolds a narrative in which actions take place. The flow of feeling, recognition's reward, will come at some point along the narrative, tied to some event within its sequence of action. Alternatively, we might begin, rather than end, with feeling, with sheer vibration that impacts the body in the present. But at some point, fantasies of personhood are loaded onto affectivity, so that a suffused and sonorous being-in-the-body is imagined to be the proof and experience of subjectivity. It is when viscerality becomes attached to this intangible promise that feeling no longer operates only in the present, but projects backward the horizontal dimension of a narrative that culminates in the achievement of presence. Here, narrative itself is a vital component of the fantasy that the true self *emerges* at an incandescent point when what I say is also who I am, merging the voice's inner and outer halves to produce the sense that I exist in the fact that I speak. It is the story that I will become myself when I become completely communicative, an event always to come that turns the interest of the life before into simply its becoming.

### **Presence and Presentness**

*Love Actually* and *The King's Speech* are films that play within a certain syntactic polyvalence: namely, that "voice" can refer to something ordinary and sonorous while also being the name of an intangible property that is nearly synonymous with personhood itself. Thus, to "have a voice" or to "find your voice" are phrases not about your voice but about *you*; when used

in a creative context, they mean that traces of you are recognizable in your utterances, as if they each bore the imprimatur of who you are. A voice is something that defines you by virtue of your ownership (it is something you “have”); at the same time, it is not something you generate or fashion, but rather something you simply stumble upon, as if it were concealed somewhere (it is something you “find”). These idioms imagine the achievement of expressive personhood as an archaeology, and the task of the voice’s possessor to be one simply of uncovering or unearthing that which was always waiting to be discovered. They also imply that a worthy goal of creative effort is to reach a point at which your expressions begin to communicate something like an identity, some core of consistency whose value is measured by the extent to which its signature spreads outward while remaining, at its foundation, uncopyable (or to use the popular phrase: imitated, never duplicated).

It is unsurprising, then, that the voice will be an object of fascination wherever singular and innate personhood is valued, where the achievement of distinct personhood is considered to be a worthy life project, and where the measure of its distinctiveness is taken in economic terms (the degree to which it attracts imitations of itself, while also resisting duplications). In its political connotation, “voicelessness” is the term used to indicate an absence of power, a condition that requires others with voices to speak “for” you. Under such a conception, an equal society is figured as one in which the power of voice is equally distributed, as if the voice itself already contained the premise or promise of equality. But the use of “voice” as a metaphor for (valuable) personhood contains contradictions that are inseparable from its power. “Voice” speaks at once to the irreducible core of your personhood and to the degree and form of others’ response to your personhood (in the political sense, it is not you who gets to determine, at least initially, how much of a voice you have). If the proof of a voice’s singularity lies in the fact that

it is often imitated but never duplicated, it would mean that a voice's singularity could not be determined without first looking elsewhere. Imagine the singular voice on a spray graph: a shining dot around which imitations cluster, drawn by its gravity, yet where no other point has quite the identical color—as if the value of the singular voice were simply its possession, within a field of economy, of a property that cannot be repeated. Yet if it makes sense to say that one can only measure the singularity of a voice in the social, that is, after the voice has spoken, how can the concept also claim to represent an innate property that existed in you before it was “found”? The fantasy of having a voice seems to express an ambivalence toward the social as such: it is the fantasy of having an existence that is both determined and undetermined by the social.

To close, then, I turn to a third film that ends with an extended passage of Colin Firth's voice: Tom Ford's 2009 film *A Single Man*. Yet to call this passage a speech would fail to specify that it is not delivered to anyone except for the film's audience: it sounds entirely in voice-over, in the non-diegetic. Hence the film abstracts or distills many of the concerns that occupied this dissertation's earlier cases: there is no final recognition in the world by those around him, and there is no suggestion that the speech implicates anyone other than its speaker. Instead, it narrates a concept of life whose value resides in moments that, as Firth's character says, “pull me back to the present.”

Firth plays George Falconer, an English professor living in Los Angeles in the 1960s who is living in the wake of two events, one public and one private, that have both eroded the assurance of experiencing the present within the security of narrative: it is a month after the Cuban missile crisis, news of which still comes over the radio, and it is an unspecified amount of time after the death of Jim, George's partner, in a car crash. The film, therefore, does not so

much begin as merely open, detailing the mundanity of dressing, eating, and driving to work he has forced himself through, so many times, just to “get through the goddamn day.” The stutter in Bertie’s voice becomes, in this film, a stutter in the living of a life, which threatens to end before it can resolve into flow: the film opens on this particular day because George has determined to kill himself at the end of it.

But this is not a melodrama that ends with a scene of public recognition. In fact, the film enacts twice, in both a narrative and a metanarrative context, the problem of generalizing particular experience into the basis of universal recognition and empathy. The closest George comes in the film to mentioning his sexuality publicly comes in the course of a lecture he gives in one of his classes. He describes the experience of “minorities” with a keen sense of its phenomenology, as if letting on that his knowledge is acquired from personal experience; yet, for the sake of this experience’s transmission in the pedagogical context of a classroom, George speaks of minority feeling as something available to anyone who can experiences themselves categorically (the example he uses for the class is “blondes”). The way in which a site of transmission can function also as a site of concealment is repeated in the marketing of the film, in which promotional posters featuring Colin Firth and Julianne Moore, who plays George’s friend Charley, struck some as an attempt to straightwash a film about love between two men. Partly in response, Ford insisted that he was not trying to make a “gay” movie, but a movie about love.<sup>27</sup> Hence a film becomes socially circulable, a public property, a place to meet and to experience “love” as an emotion known to all, only through the concealment of something, a residue of the particular that is lost in translation.

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Podolsky, “Tom Ford On ‘A Single Man’: ‘This is Not a Gay Film,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2009/11/23/tom-ford-on-a-single-man-this-is-not-a-gay-film/> (accessed August 15, 2017).

The stripping of the context of private experience as a way of making it universally identifiable is also a theme of the subplot involving Charley, another transplant from England around his age, and who spends her days drinking gin, dolling herself up, and wheedling George to keep her company. They are both marking time, both suffering in the long *durée* of a life that didn't work out as planned: only Charley's self-identified tragedy is to have merely outlasted the time in her life when she was young and fresh. Charley understands her gender to be her fate: when George tells her to stop living in the past and start thinking about the future, she responds: "living in the past is my future—it doesn't have to be yours. You're a man." Hence the film's rapturous ending would not be a possibility for Charley, who cannot escape being locked into an eternal loop of past and future that only circles around the present.

Over the course of the film, George flirts with one of his students, who then meets him for a drink and eventually returns to George's house, at the end of the day. They drink, and George falls asleep. When he wakes up, he discovers the young man asleep on his couch, cradling the gun that George had planned to use on himself. He puts it away in a drawer, and then opens a door to the outside: as he does this, an owl startles up from a branch, shot at a radically reduced frame rate, registering the sudden sensory acuity that comes with surprise, but also slowing the scene down. The scene brings the film audience's perception in line with the rate of film perception, with shutter speed. The implication seems to be that the audience's visual sense in this moment becomes mechanical, rid of subjectivity: it sees all that there is to see. George gives the slightest of nods, the tiniest trace of a smile. Then, George's voice sounds in a voice-over, closely miked, over the film's main string theme:

A few times in my life, I've had moments of absolute clarity. When, for a few brief seconds, the silence drowns out the noise, and I can feel rather than think. Things seem so sharp. The world seems so fresh. It's as though it'd all just come into existence. [*deep*

*exhalation*] I can never make these moments last. I cling to them, but like everything they fade. I've lived my life on these moments. They pull me back to the present. And I realize that everything is exactly the way it's meant to be.

Like the King's speech, there is an intimate other in this scene, though this apotheosis doesn't center on the formation of a couple through the gaze: indeed the young man's eyes are closed, and the fact that he is asleep seems to be part of what allows George to experience what he calls a moment in which "the silence drowns out the noise." In fact, this figurative phrase also literally describes the drowning out of the quiet night scene, the sounds of crickets, as the saturation of the string cue, homogenous, molasses-like, comes in. The sleeping student is proximate but not present, that is, cannot speak or interject, and this means that the voice-over will not be interrupted, will go on as long as George remains in this most precious of states. But the speech's socially unmarked aspiration—to live in the present, to feel the world as fresh—also quietly obscures the way in which this ending was only available to George and not Charley, whose ending had been decided long before; and it also obscures any of this experience's specificity to George, the real and lived conditions within which it has meaning for him. Like the classroom, the film's ending renders the specificity of a story into a sensuous material that, in its implicit claim that feeling is shareable, confirms the conviction that it is through feeling that we become social, that others' mysteriousness is put to an end.

George's speech seems to end affirmatively: everything is "exactly the way it's meant to be." Yet this final line can't quite conceal that the speech in its entirety is in the genre of lament, whose language iterates a certain set of familiar idioms. Consider the following lament in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *The Production of Presence*, which comes in the course of his description of an experience he calls "the perfect day":

I suspect that what lies behind my fixation on the form and the substance of the “perfect day” is a longing—disappointment of which is ultimately, needless to say, for the better—for those moments of intensity to last, which, of course, they never will.

Short of ever letting myself be convinced that a day was a homogeneously perfect day indeed, I have come to accept that an alternation between intensity and perfect quietness would probably be good enough.<sup>28</sup>

The same terms recur: fixation or clinging to that which, “of course,” cannot last, and a heavy sigh of grandiloquent resignation that almost conceals all the riches that must go unremarked for the “perfect day” to be the focus of someone’s most desperate pursuit. The lament of presence is a lament about narrative, about its helplessness to make sense of or predict the appearance of moments of intensity that are littered across a life. And its almost inevitable wish must be for death to come in the midst of one of those moments of presence, since no other option would be acceptable for someone who lives their life on such moments, for whom life consists of an “alternation” between intensity and its other.

This is precisely what happens in *A Single Man*: earlier in the film, we see George attempt to commit suicide. This sequence begins when the end of the day so carefully planned by George—all his papers in order, his funeral clothes laid out—is disturbed by sounds of merriment coming through the window from the neighbor’s party next door. George goes to put on a record, to drown out the noise with music, but picking up the record stimulates a flight of memory, rendered in the film as a flashback. But what the film flashes back to is not just a memory of listening to records with Jim: it is, more specifically, a moment when, as George and Jim are sitting together on the couch, a record has just come to an end, and the silence it opens as the disc’s empty spinning fails to produce more sound transitions into a period of recitative, of

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<sup>28</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 136.

talking before the next number begins. In this suspended moment between records, in the reawakening to the present and to the ordinary sounds of the day produced by *returning from* the music's transport to another time and rhythm, it strikes Jim to say about animals, wistfully, that "they really just live in the moment. It's like now—what could be better than being tucked up here with you. I mean if I died right now, it would be O.K." When the flashback and the memory stops rolling, the sounds of the neighbor's party return to the soundtrack. George puts the record on, and it is opera, a soprano aria. The choice of opera is like the choice of tie knot that he notates, with a precise calligraphic flourish, for the person who will dress his dead body: they signal his formality, his love of beauty that is detached, precise. The aria, "Ebben? Ne andrò lontana" from Alfredo Catalani's neo-romantic 1892 opera *La Wally*, signals the defensive petulance that is present in George's misery: the sentiment expressed in the aria's title, "Well, then? I'll go far away," is also spoken by him to a stranger he meets in a parking lot. And yet it seems that George cannot simply decide the soundtrack for his own death. As he props himself up in bed with the gun, no posture or position he occupies seems like the right position in which to die—it is as if *any* bodily configuration he tries is inadequate because it is only and exactly what it is; each of them seems too specific and too banal for a life's final frame. At this moment, he is like Jamie in the restaurant before the underscore comes in and the speech begins: time and space are external, and the present is measured by the clock's Cartesian objectivity; human actions are only measured within them, and do not encompass them. It is not enough for the noise to be drowned out by music, which means that what the presence of *music* stands for in the movie's final scene is something other than music, not only music. It is not the particularity of the cue, nor even the presence of music, that matters at the end of the film, when George experiences an encounter with the here and now and a heart attack dutifully and punctually takes

him out—an end not intended or prepared by him but which rather appears to him as a gift, a surprise—before the moment’s intensity fades.<sup>29</sup>

The wish to live in the present is not much different from the wish to die in the present, then, and here we might consider the way in which romantic comedies have always ended as soon as the couple comes together, as if to freeze them forever in the incipience of the first embrace;<sup>30</sup> or how, once Bertie delivers his speech, the screen goes black and words appear that summarize the major events of the remainder of Bertie’s life. This is a convention of documentary and of movies based on true events, but it is also telling of how the film zones the part of life that counts as drama and the part that is subject to summary. That this text sounds also like an obituary emphasizes the nearness, narratively, of presence and death, of the way the film’s achievement of voice will only have its intended effect if followed as soon as possible by death.

Yet the arrival of the voice is also a kind of natal moment. In both *Love Actually* and *The King’s Speech*, there are scenes of Colin Firth learning to speak, and the struggle to speak in each of their endings is an image, not exactly of birth, but of first words, of the moment of a child’s entry into the social through the acquisition of speech. Taken together, it would appear as though these films wish to plot the event of one’s entry into the social and one’s exit from it through death as closely together as possible, to compress the period of one’s existence in what Cavell calls the “public” into a momentary, incandescent gasp. There is no interest in what happens

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<sup>29</sup> By contrast, Christopher Isherwood’s novel, upon which the film is based, aggressively and constantly reminds the reader of how fractured George’s subjectivity is. There is no moment of presence to cap off a life before death takes hold, only a failure of the body at a moment that could have been any other. The film’s end, then, might be an instance of what the book calls, in another context, an “almost indecently melodramatic situation.” Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), 157.

<sup>30</sup> Buster Keaton’s *College* (1927) ends with the formation of a couple, after which follow four quick shots: the couple getting married; the couple with their first child; the couple sitting together in old age; and a shot of two tombstones next to each other, followed by the words “THE END.”

once language becomes social, or once the protagonist acquires the speech that allows him to emerge into public, facing the response of others for the first time; the films stop on the cusp where private experience teeters over into collective life.

In *The King's Speech*, this plot is bookended by a failed speech and a successful one, between which lies the entire drama of Bertie's quest for symbolic restitution to his place at the head of a social order. In the film, however, each speech is accompanied by an animal cry: a horse's neigh interrupts the first one, and a dog barks immediately before Bertie disappears into the studio to deliver the second. They might be taken as forms of mockery, contrasting their ease of utterance with Bertie's difficulty. But this is not quite right, because neighing, for the horse, is not in itself easy or difficult; it is not a site of *drama*. If, as Nietzsche claimed, animals are external to history and memory, then these two animal utterances are, in a sense, simultaneous.<sup>31</sup> Their spacing in time is not measured by human stories. The contrast between the temporal world they imply and the time of the film's narrative is like that between the pilgrims and the protagonists in *Tannhäuser*: it is a source of their inability to understand each other. The two animal barks in *The King's Speech* appear separately in time, the first at the beginning of the speech plot and the second at its end, only by virtue of the fact that humans have made a drama out of utterance.

To feel that the movement of this drama enacts one's coming-into-presence, capturing nothing short of what it means to feel alive, allows the perfection and closure of narrative to offer protection from entering the region of what Cavell called "improvisation in the disorders of

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<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche's parable, incidentally, is itself a lament of presence that objectifies the animal in order to frame an image of human tragedy: "A human being may well ask an animal: 'Why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only stand and gaze at me?' The animal would like to answer, and say: 'The reason is I always forget what I was going to say'—but then he forgot this answer too, and stayed silent: so that the human being was left wondering." Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60-61.

desire.”<sup>32</sup> In this region, after I have spoken, I must then wait to discover what effect my speech had, and so what new status I bear in relation to you and the world, after which I will then speak again—and this process, he says, is “endless.” My presence is not settled by the very fact that I have spoken; rather, it comes only after the interval of the other’s response, which tells me the extent and nature of my effects on and status within the world. The desire to experience one’s presence in the present, to feel one’s subjectivity as a viscerality, is a protection from opening oneself to the temporality of the other’s response, to admit that my presence in the social is always negotiated within the social.

If these three films that end with speeches by Colin Firth are not arbitrary cases but instances of a pattern, then we can see how *The King’s Speech* figures the origin of the voice-over that ends *A Single Man*; or that *The King’s Speech* exists as a kind of middle stage between the fusion of the intimate couple and the speech delivered only to the audience. They teach us to recognize the visual bias of a formulation of sentimentality such as “In your gaze I become a new person, as you do in mine,” which is reinforced by the visual bias of film and film theory more generally, and which tends to emphasize a certain aspect of the sympathetic encounter with the other: the aspect of recognition, of mirroring, of being addressed and refashioned through the other’s gaze. This aspect is a part of these scenes. But to focus on the soundtrack allows us to uncover other aspects too. If our eyes meet in recognition, it can also mean that I keep something of myself quiet so that we can both enjoy the amplitude of your sovereignty as if it were ours. Here the visual symmetry of the gaze allows us to call connection the pleasurable stretching out of a feeling that looks shared, but may only be permitted at the cost of my silence. If the gaze as model of encounter emphasizes connection, the soundtrack allows us to model what is also so

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<sup>32</sup> Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” 185.

often present in the making of shared life: silence, elision, and the sometimes quiet decisions to reserve your speech for another time.

## Conclusion

The idea for this dissertation first emerged when I noticed certain features that recurred across works in related genres but from different historical locations—*The Marriage of Figaro* and *You've Got Mail*, for instance. In this opera and this film, separated by two centuries, social harmony (in the form of attenuating the gender and class tensions that drove their respective plots) is achieved when an interpersonality mediated by writing (in *Figaro*, the sending of notes; in *You've Got Mail*, e-mail) collapses into a face-to-face encounter, and the recognition afforded by a final removal of disguises is imagined as an occasion of lyricism, of the appearance of song. The recurrence of such a feature, and others like it, seemed to call for a frame of analysis that would encompass both works and the historical frame they subtend. Yet as I went on, it became apparent that the association of the voice's musical fluency with the possibility of social harmony went beyond the archetypes of comedy and romance. Looking back from the present, generic features that seemed wholly characteristic of a certain genre and traceable to a contingent historical context also constituted a logic of expressivity that was far more general and extended across an array of narrative subjects. This raised the methodological question of whether an eighteenth-century opera, rooted in the practice of stock characters and types, could nevertheless be related in some sense to the psychological interiority of twentieth-century film characters. Thus, while the dissertation is occupied throughout with genres, its topic is not genre as a field of difference. It is interested, rather, in the shared cultural tissue that each genre absorbs and filters into its particular moods, themes, and concerns, a broad commonality that might point to a larger story: the emergence of the modern liberal subject.

Thus the dissertation takes a bird's eye view of the genealogy of modern feeling. At the same time, my constellation of case studies reveals the considerable strain that historical

particularities exert on such a neat narrative. How does the logic of expressivity in scenes of feeling touch down in different locales of post-Enlightenment subjectivity? In the third chapter, for instance, I began with Hollywood film in the time of the Great Depression and end in the era of the dot-com boom. For women in the 1940s films, time in the work force occupies a period antecedent to the time of marriage, which means that the narrative drive toward coupledom also aims at the end of work; by contrast, Kathleen in *You've Got Mail* is a business owner, thus uncoupling romance from financial security and retreat to the private sphere. The latitude afforded by capitalist autonomy modifies the terms and conditions of the romantic contract: for Kathleen, the two romantic options offered to her (the idealized pen pal and the business rival) are no longer *interchangeable* in the sense implied by the earlier films. The ending comes out of this difference.

But the chapters track other historical shifts as well: from *The Marriage of Figaro* to *You've Got Mail*, the general attributes of class position (the Count) turn into a celebrity star-text (Tom Hanks); handwritten notes ferried by servants become emails sent anonymously over the internet; the performance of a score gives way to the cinematic recording of specific individuals and of gestures seared into the film strip. Though comic opera and romantic comedy are both genres marked strongly by convention, differences in medium and production in their respective work-objects suggest that their protagonists achieve generality in different ways: in opera, the general type of the Count produces distinctiveness in its array of performed embodiments, while Tom Hanks, in his cinematic incarnation as the capitalist mogul Joe Fox, is a “type,” a patterning and style of millennial masculinity that tracks adjustments to the erotic in gender convention.<sup>1</sup>

These aesthetic, affective, and conceptual differences suggest that the continuities on the surfaces

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Pfeil, “Getting Up There With Tom: The Politics of American ‘Nice,’” in *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 90-118.

of these works' endings are, rather than simply an indication of what remains constant historically, instead a result of the effort of cultural production to constantly find new ways to preserve a set of conventions within constantly changing social conditions.

What might the consideration of modern, recorded performances of opera alongside exegeses of the score—something largely sidelined in my inquiry—contribute to understanding these phenomena? Performances are records of an attempt in the present to mediate a text in the past, but they are also not the only genre in which this happens. The film *Amadeus*, alongside the extracts of musicological commentary that open the first chapter, are also examples of mediations that construct an impression of an original historical experience from within their present's expressive intelligibility. Yet attending to contemporary productions as sources of cultural imagination closer to the present day may offer further opportunities to explore the genealogy of contemporary scenes of feeling, further enabling what Lawrence Kramer called “a digging up of the remnants of the present in the past.”<sup>2</sup> While this dissertation's version of that project has focused on comedy as a structure that tends toward social resolution, and romance, meaning love, but also the teleology of the knight's quest, other strands in the history of the West's valuation of expressivity might begin with the collective rather than the individual expressive project, and unearth instead genealogies of choral singing as the basis of national sentiment; or focus on folk idioms as a trope that lends to “cultured” discourses the fantasy of originality, of a naturalized time before the corruptions of self-conscious culture. The association of expressivity with authentic selfhood coalesces in a variety of generic and affective forms; I focused on the ones that trace the emergence of the feeling individual as central to the deeply personalized perspective of contemporary political and social sentimentality.

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “Wagner's Gold Standard: *Tannhäuser* and the General Equivalent,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 2 (July 2009), 140.

The logic of expressivity traced across this dissertation's chapters, particular—as I have argued—to cultural inheritance in the West, may also mediate fantasies of the transformation of that culture. Here I am reminded of Lauren Berlant's notion of Diva Citizenship:

Diva Citizenship does not change the world. It is a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity. Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation; as though recording an estranging voice-over to a film we have all already seen, she renarrates the dominant history as one that the abjected people have once lived *sotto voce*, but no more; and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent.

Berlant details the rhythms and affects that are part of the fantasy of addressing and educating the nation: first “startling the public,” the Diva Citizen then puts the ongoing churning of the world into “suspended animation”; in the sudden audience gained through the iambic impacts of a shock followed by a suspension, the Diva glosses the everyday with a voice-over that also fades the volume up from a submerged voice, *sotto voce*, to full-throated vocality. Are we licensed, even liable, to recognize these characteristics as proto-typical in an early nineteenth-century work like *Das Liebesverbot*? As a literal citizen of the operatic, Wagner's Isabella seems to attempt this very act, but is told that her speech will not induce the transformation of public affect that she hopes for. In Chapter 2, I argued that operatic structure—in which privately-held emotions and unutterable complaints produce suspensions in narrative time, dilating pockets of space in the drama that allow each feeling to be sung through—is a compensatory formation in relation to the disappointments of expressive life, of the fact that “the scene of public life” cannot always be made into “a spectacle of subjectivity.” In this opera—and others deploying its dramatic forms at the time and in productions today—the world of action stops until the diva is

finished saying everything, and even death will wait in the wings for the end of a phrase. Opera continues to be cavalier with people's bodies and fates but not with their feeling. By saying, simply, that characters in opera experience or express feelings—say of rage or love—the concept of feeling remains individual and unspecific to its cultural epoch. It misses a perspective which sees in operatic form an epistemology of world centered on human feeling.

Diva Citizenship is about the desire to produce changes in another's consciousness, including the consciousness of a nation. As a fantasy of expressivity, it suggests how embedded scenic thinking is in fantasies of political change, since it conjures the capacity of bodies to spring up and surprise, to interrupt and intrude, to lasso with the voice. It teaches us that fantasies of producing recognition and democratic sympathy are mediated within the particularities of an aesthetic tradition. In the foregoing scenes and chapters, the imagination of recognition involves an idea of volume and of commandeered space, shot through with affects of surprise, disturbance, and suspension; of recognition and empathy in the midst of an intimately amplified voice. How else could we know that something collective has taken place?

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