THE BARBARA STANWYCK SHOW: MELODRAMA, KITSCH, AND THE MEDIA ARCHIVE

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To write history means giving dates their physiognomy.
—Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940)[1]

The Barbara Stanwyck Show lasted only one season on NBC from September 1960 to July 1961 and has been more or less relegated to a footnote in Stanwyck's long career. As an anthology drama series, each week featured a new story, a new cast of characters and guest stars, and a new setting. The show was directed and written by a rotating series of men, including directors Jacques Tourneur and Robert Florey. Stanwyck was very much the driving force behind the series, starring in all but two episodes,[2] and it was she who pushed for the series in light of the paucity of roles she was being offered at the age of fifty-three. Notorious throughout her career for being a hard worker, she outdid herself in the series, playing a wide range of working women, including businesswomen, scientists, a lawyer, a couple of sheriffs and bar owners, a journalist, and a fashion designer.

Stanwyck had already appeared in several other anthology shows and was one of many movie stars who made the move to TV in the 1950s. Christine Becker has argued that the small screen offered many top stars opportunities to restart their careers and to maintain more control over them. She also suggests that the professional involvement of A-list actors was instrumental to the aesthetics and standards of the new medium.[3] Later in the 1960s, Stanwyck starred in the long-running Western TV series *The Big Valley* (1965–69) as the widowed matriarch of a family dominated by hardy men. While that series may have helped solidify the formulaic moralism of the Western-as-family drama, its predictability and conservatism are in stark contrast to the idiosyncrasy of the short-lived *Barbara Stanwyck Show* (figure 1).

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Figure 1. Title screen for The Barbara Stanwyck Show.

Stanwyck introduces each episode of her show while wearing a new gown designed by Daniel Werle (who went by the couturier handle of "Werlé"). Most commentators say that she "had trouble being herself" in these intros, and she does indeed seem somewhat uncomfortable in the role of fashion model reading from a teleprompter. Loretta Young had perfected the gesture of introduction in her long-running *Letter to Loretta* (1953–61) in which she spins into her "living room" and reads a viewer's letter introducing the week's story. Stanwyck's short introductions usually credit the director, the writers, and her costars, and briefly describe the upcoming drama. These are frequently pitched as some kind of melodrama: a melodrama of decision, a melodrama set in the High Sierras, a dark melodrama, or a comic melodrama. Generically, the episodes borrowed heavily from a variety of film genres, including Westerns, film noir, adventure films, the woman's film, and comedies, but the general term *melodrama* pointed at the time to a combination of action (which was how the term was used in the popular press at the time)[4] and emotional tension.

As a critical methodology, melodrama is an invaluable tool for rescuing cultural productions that have been neglected by historians, particularly works produced by and for women. In conjunction with Walter Benjamin's conception of allegory, they can be frequently viewed as variations of mourning plays (*Trauerspiel*). For Benjamin, these seventeenth-century plays had a playful aspect, and he is not above punning on the word "spiel" as a form of play, and, following Friedrich von Schiller, he emphasizes the effect of art over its structure.[5] Resolutely secular, these mourning plays privileged emotions over action,[6] and, like melodrama, they displayed a baroque excess of signification. Given the parallels between melodrama and *Trauerspiel,* we may be able to recognize the value of kitsch for a cultural anthropology invested in the desires and unfulfilled futures of the past. In this sense, the melodramatic impulse within the kitschiest examples of popular culture may enable them to be redeemed as exemplary of the dreamworld of cultural history.

In what she describes as "the archeology of modernity," Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues for a feminine principle of baroque reason that is legible in the constellation of multiple temporalities, such as those of *Trauerspiel:* "theatre that *knows* itself to be theatre."[7] *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* exhibits a similar reflexivity produced in its historical slippage as archival media and as an allegorization of a film industry in decline. Each episode begins with an announcer saying, "Tonight, from Hollywood, *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,*" underlining the star's film-industry roots and connections, which were distinct from the New York–based theatrical roots of highbrow anthology drama. The show's sponsors included the American Gas Association and Albert-Culver hair products.[8] Since Stanwyck had a great reputation on the sets of many movies as a consummate professional, she was able to attract many high-profile costars, including Dana Andrews, Joan Blondell, Julie London, Lee Marvin, Dan Duryea, Buddy Ebsen, and Joseph Cotton, as well as a long string of utterly banal no-name male leads to play her various dull husbands. Her versatility gave the show a wide range of story possibilities, as if it were a capsule form of her entire career.

The continuing appeal of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* lies in the star's persona. Her mannered performance style is best described as allegorical, as a mode of doubling herself and her characters. The allegorical aesthetic is symptomatic of Classical Hollywood (roughly 1920–59), in which the stars often stand out from impoverished B-movie scripts and production values. *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is, however, further distinguished for its failed promise of roles for older women, in its negotiation of gender codes of the period, and, finally, in its cinematic sensuality. Few TV shows

of the period featured the dramatic lighting, expressive mise-en-scène, and fast-paced emotional plotting that characterized this show. The production employed the full vocabulary of sensual visual and audio effects for the condensed half-hour stories.

Stanwyck had performed in dozens of radio plays from the 1930s into the 1950s, many of them abridged versions of films she had starred in, including *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948). *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* was an extension or revival of that practice that made no bones about the status of the "play" as a production commodity in an industry delivering sponsored goods, including stars, to audiences. The conceit of fashion in Stanwyck's opening appearances points to the role of the image in opening up the dialectical fissures in these texts. For Benjamin, fashion is "the eternal deputy of surrealism."[9] Fashion is "the tiger's leap into the past"[10] insofar as it can alert us to the feel and texture of the sensual materiality of what was once novel and new. It alerts us to overlooked desires.

Stanwyck herself was associated with a variety of genres, including woman's films, thrillers, and Westerns. Throughout her career, she performed many of her own stunts as an accomplished horsewoman and, and since her success with *Double Indemnity* in 1943, had also taken the roles of "bad" (immoral) women. Although she played a lesbian brothel owner in *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), Stanwyck herself was adamantly heterosexual, which has not stopped subsequent generations from "queering" her. She certainly challenged the gender roles of her generation and, in doing so, complicated the conventions of the genre vehicles in which she was cast. In *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* she and producer Lou Edelman allegedly paid top dollar for scripts and managed to create a range of unusual female characters but seemed unable to follow through on the promise of women in positions of authority and power (figure 2)

Melodrama provides the umbrella term for anthology drama, especially as it was relocated from the Broadway ethos of New York to the Hollywood culture of genre cinema. *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* which was produced at the Desilu Studios in Los Angeles, is distinguished by its expressive lighting effects and fast-paced editing for action sequences. Because so many of the cinematographers, directors, and crew were drawn from the LA area, the series was fairly cinematic despite the thirty-minute length of each segment. One of the most distinctive features of Stanwyck's performance style is her husky voice, which is instantly recognizable and changes very little from one character to another. It is strong and confident—traits that are enhanced in her introductions to each episode. Her hairstyle and makeup are likewise unchanging throughout the

Figure 2. "The Choice" (1961).

extant series, with only two exceptions. Even if she is clearly not "herself" in the opening introductions, that performed self is a consistent performance style that Stanwyck perpetuates in each episode, despite the wide variety of characters. Out of character, she is the empty signifier of the star Barbara Stanwyck; when she is in character, she becomes more fully articulated as a persona. While she still may be doubled as the star and the character in each episode, her star persona provides a historical-materialist anchor for the series, interrupting and cutting across its fictions.

Melodrama also provides the critical tools necessary to read this fascinating series in which Stanwyck is almost too much for the slight stories to bear. Her fetishistic appearance in the introductions, followed by her star presence in the dramas, constitute a kind of excess that enables this neglected series to be redeemed fifty years after its demise. The series was never included in the canon of classic TV, and each episode was broadcast only once, with a handful repeated in the summer of 1961. In 2009, a DVD with the bulk of the series (twenty-seven of thirty-six episodes) was released by the Archive of American Television. Its simplicity dictated that *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* would be disposable, doomed to die in

the dustbin of history, and yet it is a valuable indication of the role of gender in the industrial transition from film to TV.

As archival media, the series demonstrates quite clearly how issues and anxieties about women's social roles were dramatized in popular culture in the years leading up to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The TV show "failed" because of the lack of industry support and sponsorship, as anthology dramas in general were falling out of favor, and yet a close look at the show itself enables us to see how the dramas written to contain Stanwyck's excess failed to contain her powerful image, personality, and star power. Christine Gledhill has suggested that "personalization" is the primary strength of melodrama and one key way that it feeds into soap opera: "The webs of economic, political, and social power in which melodrama's characters get caught up are represented not as abstract forces but in terms of desires which express conflicting ethical and political identities and which erupt in the actions and transactions of everyday life."[11]

My objective in this essay is neither to praise the show as a cultural monument nor to decry its excesses and contradictions, but to show how the failure of the series makes it a valuable cultural document. For this, I turn to Walter Benjamin, who claimed that some works only come into legibility at a certain time—when the historian is prepared to recognize their value or, in Benjamin's formulation, when "the image in the now of its recognizability . . . bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded."[12] Benjamin also makes the claim in "One-Way Street" (1996), that documents, such as those of children and "primitives," are more "true" as texts than are artworks. Without claiming that popular cultural texts should be classified as "primitive," I think we can use Benjamin's observations about the document to revisit kitschy works such as *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. The "document," according to Benjamin, "serves to instruct." Its innocence gives it cover; its subject matter is the outcome of dreams; it demands analysis.[13]

In her discussion of the relations between soap opera and melodrama, Gledhill argues that, whereas melodrama in its nineteenth-century form tended to feature women as cultural symbols, soap opera is derived from women's fiction that explored more "everyday" issues of women's lives.[14] Soap opera, originally a radio format based in turn in women's domestic fiction, is more of a realist genre, lacking the excessive stylistics of melodrama. These forms arguably come together in TV drama, which borrowed equally from radio serials and film genres, and *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is a good example of melodramatic effects

and dramaturgy being brought to bear in many episodes on real-world issues of everyday life. Even if the plots feature quite unlikely scenarios, such as Stanwyck playing an atomic scientist writing formulas in her bedroom, they dramatize the social anxieties of the time. How can one be both a woman and an atomic scientist (figures 3 and 4)? Would one really go into a catatonic shock (as Stanwyck-as-atomic scientist does in "Shock" [1961]) at the news of one's daughter's death before being able to convey the formula to the men at the office? Probably not, but in the dreamworld of Hollywood, it is destined to happen. Would a female psychiatrist be easily seduced by her patient and need to be cured herself by another doctor? Only in Hollywood, but, when it is in Hollywood, the patient will inevitably be a trumpet-playing juvenile delinquent, and the psychiatrist's office will have the noir fetish of a venetian blind (figure 5).

For Gledhill, the cultural role of melodrama is its ability to enact ideological conflicts and to engineer symbolic confrontations. In its proximity to everyday life, and the emotional issues facing historical subjects, melodrama should not be opposed to realism but recognized as a gloss on the real.[15] Soap opera is a variant of melodrama but also has its own origins

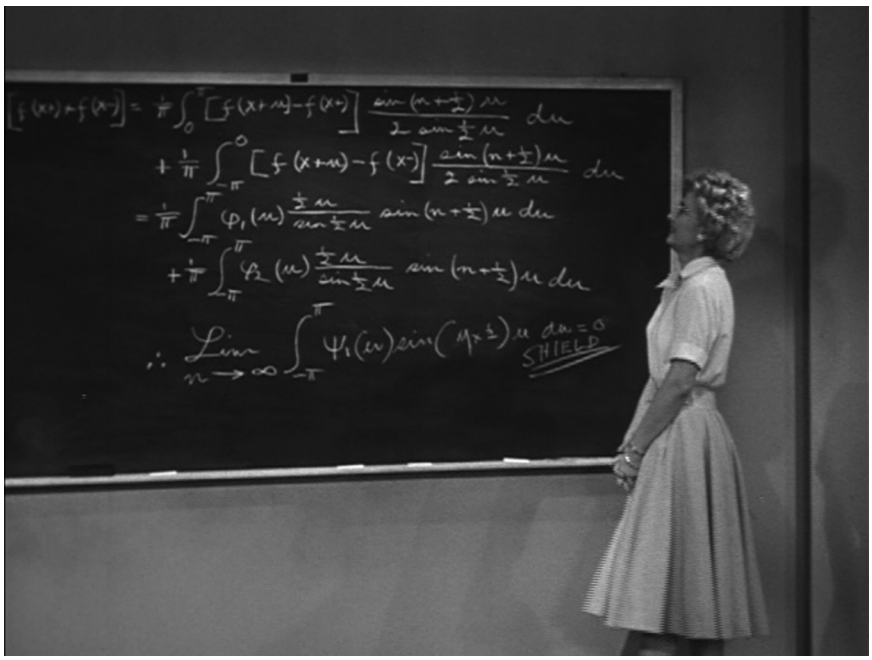

Figure 3. "Shock" (1961).

Figure 4. "Shock" (1961).

in radio, and its name refers to its marketing and advertising orientation to women and the domestic. *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* draws on both soap opera and melodrama and was likely designed to appeal to both men and women, given that it was sponsored by a gas company and a cosmetics company. Hair products are not soap, but belong to an industry of glamour and image, and the show certainly foreshadows the prime-time series such as *Dynasty* (1981–89) and *The Colbys* (1985–87) that Stanwyck appeared on in the 1980s. In soap opera, everything is out in the open as characters talk unstoppably about their problems. Not so much is hidden as in melodrama, and the address is more directly feminine.

The melodrama–soap combination on which *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* draws means that, on the one hand, everything is crystal clear (and sometimes objectionable in its narrative resolution) and, at the same time, uncanny and incomplete, perpetuating the ambiguities of film melodrama. Gledhill notes that "we are not supposed to find melodrama and soap opera satisfying; but, frequently, even, we find pleasurable on one level what on another is objectionable to us."[16] It is precisely this doubling effect that is potentially foregrounded in archival media.

Figure 5. "Shadows" (1960).

TV as Allegory of Cinema

The stories and scripts that constitute the thirty-six episodes of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* are best described as "fallen" examples of Classical Hollywood Cinema, which is not to say that they are pale imitations, because they are clearly conceived for a very different medium. They are fallen from the big-budget utopian promise held out by the movies to something more ordinary and everyday and yet, in its star power and cinematic mise-en-scène, the show bears the traces of Hollywood's glamorous aesthetics. I would like to suggest that the stories are allegories of Hollywood, using its melodramatic language of expression. Following Benjamin's theory of allegory, the series, in its archival form, becomes a melancholic text of unrealized possibility. "The profane world," which would be material history, is at once devalued and elevated in allegory.[17] As a failed cultural enterprise, the TV show constitutes a kind of ruin, which for the allegorist-critic becomes rich with significance. According to Benjamin, "It becomes the key to a realm of hidden knowledge; and he [*sic*] reveres it as the emblem of this."[18]

Before elucidating the foregoing claims about allegory and melodrama, I would like to turn to a few specific episodes of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show*. "Confession" (1961) is introduced as a "melodrama in the manner of *Double Indemnity,*" unabashedly playing off one of Stanwyck's most famous film roles. Lee Marvin plays a divorce lawyer to whom Stanwyck's character Paula turns to help her escape an unpleasant husband. The episode is framed with Paula confessing to a crime, not unlike the opening of *Mildred Pierce* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1945). She wears widow's weeds and is surrounded by policemen and their recording equipment. Flashback to her fur-coated bejeweled life with a husband (Morgan, played by Kenneth MacKenna) who is rude and who is jealous of her ladies' bridge games. Marvin convinces Stanwyck that she should aim for a large settlement, and the two of them quickly fall in love (figures 6 and 7). He then convinces her to provoke her husband to threaten violence before a witness and then frame him for murder, all of which happens exactly as planned, with appropriately sinister lighting. Stanwyck stages her own death and then hides out in Marvin's apartment near the beach, but as the murder trial drags on, the merry-go-round music from the Coney Island fairground starts to drive her mad. Wearing slacks and smoking heavily, she paces and she nags her

Figure 6. "Confession" (1961).

Figure 7. "Confession" (with Lee Marvin, 1961).

erstwhile lover, who is out lawyering every day. Finally, Morgan is accused of the murder, but before Paula and Jud (Marvin) can escape to Brazil with all the stolen "negotiable bonds" (which is how Jud describes the suitcase full of paper that they have gained from the murder), Paula's former neighbor shows up, having tracked her to Marvin's address.

The neighbor, Betty Galloway (played by Josephine Hutchison), senses something amiss, and Paula breaks down and confesses, vowing to save her husband after all. Marvin scoops up the bonds and tries to convince her to flee with him, but she shoots him instead, once she realizes that he is more interested in the money than in her. The episode ends with her wrapping up her confession in the police station. Compared to *Double Indemnity,* the gender roles are reversed, because the woman's confession, not the man's, frames the story; it is the man who is duplicitous and who is shot. While the noir-inflected lighting of "Confession" and the steaminess of the affair evoke the 1944 film, the TV show lacks Billy Wilder's and Raymond Chandler's witty innuendo-laden dialogue. But the biggest shift is the woman's inexplicable change of heart and her willingness to return to a husband she initially vowed to divorce.

This kind of capitulation, which happens all too often in the series, is an example of what melodrama critics refer to as *containment*.[19] An ending that conveniently restores patriarchal order and the status quo is typical of TV writing, but in this case it clearly cannot completely erase the memory of Stanwyck being slapped and threatened by her husband or the electricity of Marvin and Stanwyck's brief liaison or her ability to change personas with a change of clothes. The musical setting of the fairground is a familiar melodramatic motif, offering a context of ambiguity, discontinuity, and excess in which everyday life can be disrupted and displaced. In keeping with the canonical film melodramas, "Confession" is set in a closed world in which, as Thomas Elsaesser points out, melodramatic discontinuities tend to erupt from the pressures of the domestic setting itself.[20] And like the melodramas of Vincente Minnelli, as interpreted by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Laura Mulvey, more is churned up by the emotional tensions and contradictions of the plot than can ever be settled or "contained."[21]

For Nowell-Smith, the family melodrama generates an "excess which cannot be accommodated," and, for the *Screen* critics of the 1970s, the symptomatic texts of Hollywood melodrama—particularly those of the 1950s—could be read as cultural critique. This strategy of reading melodrama tends to be somewhat formalist, depending on identifying reflexive strategies within the texts. It has been questioned most systematically by Barbara Klinger, who has demonstrated that, historically, Douglas Sirk's films were not perceived as critical but tended to be framed by marketers and audiences alike as adult films exploiting the sex and violence of an increasingly relaxed Production Code in the 1950s.[22] If we can identify the dynamics at work in a failed text like *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* some of the pitfalls of "progressive text" criticism might be avoided.[23] In archival media, the critical reading is mandated by history rather than form.

With a TV episode like "Confession," I would argue that the "excess" at play is neither simply a reflexive strategy nor simply a form of cultural critique. It is embodied in Stanwyck herself, who is too big for the meager plot. For example, she is all remorse and guilt in the brief segments of the framing story, but an active, dynamic, and sexual character in the actual drama. Given the reference to *Double Indemnity* and our recognition of Stanwyck in a similar-but-different role, the text is doubled as an allegory of another film—one in which Stanwyck by some accounts embodied the original femme fatale,[24] whose sexual power was destructive and spectacular. In "Confession," the idea that a woman may leave an unloved husband is symbolically represented; ideological contradictions

are enacted but not resolved. For audiences in the twenty-first century, the text is legible as a dramatization of the gender anxieties of 1960. The madness provoked by the merry-go-round is precisely the madness of a woman imprisoned within her own home. Stanwyck closes "Confession" with a directive to the viewer: "Let that be a lesson to you. If you ever commit a crime, don't hide out over a merry-go-round." TV is never afraid to offer lessons, and, if Stanwyck's seems to miss the mark of the episode's real significance, we can see now how the melodrama of film noir is domesticated as TV, only to strip the woman of her power. But Stanwyck arguably wrests it back by towering over the production as its historical inscription, and the trappings of genre swirl around her.

Women and Power

As Gledhill argues, genre provides the conceptual space where we can begin to "understand the life of films in the social."[25] Genre as a category incorporates textual aesthetics alongside industry and reception, and melodrama is central to this process. Gledhill writes,

> As a genre-producing machine, melodrama is forged from the convergence of two broad-based cultural traditions: one, excluded from official culture, which contained a mix of folk and new urban entertainment forms, and another, more formally coherent, deriving from an increasingly influential middle-class fiction and theatre of sentimental drama and comedy.[26]

Among the unofficial traditions feeding into anthology drama are women's domestic fiction and soap opera; these become mixed with the Hollywood glamour and high-end studio vehicles with which Stanwyck was associated at the peak of her career. If the underlying theme of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is Stanwyck's own power within the TV industry, in several episodes the question of a woman's corporate power is directly addressed. Stanwyck introduces "Big Career" (1961) with the following:

> Are women fitted to take their place in the higher executive positions in American business? And what if a woman's success in business is bought at the price of her husband's failure? These are the questions examined dramatically

> in our story tonight. . . . I play the role of a high-powered woman executive who could make decisions in her office, but not in her home.

In the first scene following this tantalizing intro, it is evident that Stanwyck's character Harriet (befurred and bejeweled again) is married to a two-timing lush who clearly doesn't deserve her. They live in an opulent home with a black maid (who eavesdrops on Harriet's behalf), and the husband comes from a good family, whereas she has working-class roots. She feels guilty about his unhappiness and announces her resignation, vowing to be a good wife instead of a department-store executive. The delinquent husband is conveniently hit by a car and dies in a noir-lit urban street scene. Harriet is about to leave town to accept a job in New York City when her late husband's mother tells her that she should forget about her no-good son. The two women have a heart-to-heart talk, after which the mother-in-law convinces Harriet's boss, a department-store executive, to propose to Harriet because "she doesn't want a career. She wants what every woman wants."

The moralizing tone of this episode may be offensive, and the triumph of the old lady over the younger one is somewhat regressive; yet, because Stanwyck is utterly convincing as a corporate executive and states her desire to resign with neither expression nor passion for her husband or any other man, the episode itself remains inconclusive. She clearly made a bad marriage, and the episode warns women away from hard-drinking frat boys who grow up to be losers. The second love interest, Harriet's boss, respects her career, and they have developed a professional bond that becomes romantic. "Big Career" stops short of the utopian solution of a woman possibly being successful in both work and marriage, but, in dramatizing the dilemma, it addresses real-life issues for women of the time.

The elderly mother-in-law is a recurring figure in the series, frequently setting up obstacles for Stanwyck's characters. Their encounters and power struggles are a dramatization of domestic authority, although, in keeping with Hollywood fictions of social mobility, the elder woman is often defending her class. The mother–daughter relationships of the Hollywood woman's film, which Stanwyck emblematically dramatized in *Stella Dallas,* are largely absent from *The Barbara Stanwyck Show.* In the episode "High Tension" (1961), she plays a wealthy woman trying to abandon an adopted child because he is deaf. An electrical storm hits the bus they are traveling on (slumming to evade the law), and, through the spectacular drama and the kindness of strangers, she is reconciled with

the boy and decides to keep him after all.[27] In another episode, she plays a mother who keeps her illness a secret from her wild teenage daughter and philandering husband, but the family is reconciled at her bedside, moved by her self-sacrifice.

Most often, Stanwyck is a single woman, either widowed or divorced, or wedded to her career. Her male suitors are played by second-string actors as an indistinguishable sequence of dull middle-aged men who never seem to deserve her spunky hardworking characters. In "Size Ten" (1961), set in New York's cut-throat garment district, Stanwyck plays a fashion designer with her own business (figure 8). When she discovers that someone has been stealing her designs, she accuses all her staff before discovering that the culprit is her fiancé. He confesses, saying that he wanted her business to fail so she would spend more time with him. The episode concludes with Stanwyck reconciling with her staff and making them partners. As a manager, she starts out as bitchy and heartless but learns to respect her employees as people, not things. The melodramatic reversal in this story is generated by the gender politics of the home, not the office. The strong character actors who play the staff point to the need

Figure 8. "Size Ten" (1961).

for reconciliation; Stanwyck's character is taken advantage of by the man who mixes her drink and is invited into her home. As a story about the abuse of power, "Size Ten" redeems Stanwyck's character as inherently virtuous, and exceptionally competent.

Melodrama and Kitsch

A program like *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is clearly somewhat removed from the "high melodramas" of Hollywood. Yet, as an allegory of those films, it can yield new insights into the role of popular culture in negotiating ideological conflicts and contradictions. Linda Williams, working from Gledhill's studies of melodrama and the woman's film, has argued that, if we recognize the full implications of the melodramatic mode in American cinema, it can provide valuable critical tools. By appreciating the power of affect and pathos as not simply manipulative and deceitful, but as part of the fundamental appeal of Hollywood, the dramatic discontinuities of melodramatic narration can be both moving and instructive. As Williams argues, "The understanding of melodrama has been impeded by the failure to acknowledge the tensions between different emotions as well as the relation between thought and emotion."[28]

Both Williams and Gledhill point out that the opposition of melodrama to realism is misguided. Film melodrama consistently exploits a highly detailed mise-en-scène, including the landscapes of Westerns, the historical accuracy of period settings, and the location shooting of film noir, for expressive effects. For Williams, film melodrama needs to be understood as "an important cultural form inherited from the nineteenth-century stage, in tension with and transformed by realism and the more realistic techniques of cinema."[29] She insists that if all classical American cinema is made within the sphere of capitalist, patriarchal ideologies, "melodrama should be viewed, not as an excess or aberration but in many ways as the typical form of American popular narrative."[30] The melodramatic mode provides mythic resolutions to conflicts deeply embedded in American culture, and realism, action, and "classicism" need to be understood as working with the affective power of melodramatic pathos to produce their narratives of moral resolution and recognition of innocence, victimhood and suffering (figure 9).

Stanwyck's characters in the TV series cannot be described as innocent victims. In most of the thriller episodes, she gets accidentally involved in criminal activity and must find a way out. In this sense, she sustains the trajectory of the adventure heroines of silent-film serials, such as Pearl

Figure 9. "Night Visitor" (with Julie London, 1961).

White.[31] Melodrama as an action vehicle provides the narrative momentum for new subjectivities to be produced in modern culture, in keeping with Miriam Hansen's model of vernacular modernism. Hansen draws on Benjamin's theory of experience to argue for the sensual, affective role of the classical paradigm in modern mass culture, especially when it is integrated into the vernacular idioms of global culture.[32] The anachronism of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* pushing the classical mode to a certain kind of limit, is yet another instance of its affective power. As a glamour queen with a heart of gold, Stanwyck's persona is almost familiar as a drag icon, and in this sense constitutes a kind of postmodern subjectivity that was not quite legible in its historical moment (figure 10).

Stanwyck presides over the series as a glamorous icon of Hollywood celebrity. In her stilted introductions, she uses the same vocal intonation as many of her characters but lacks any narrative context other than her own celebrity to pull it off. Her "excess" thus consists of her star image coupled with the tension between her characters' professionalism and their containment in generic narrative resolutions. The consistency of characterization is underscored most clearly in the episode "Frightened

Figure 10. Stanwyck performing her introduction.

Doll" (1961), in which Stanwyck plays a barroom floozy. She wears a black wig for most of the episode, but, when she needs to escape a bad situation involving a dying gangster in her room, she disguises herself as an elegant blonde. It's as though she transforms herself into Barbara Stanwyck herself. Instead of donning a disguise, she has actually shed her disguise.

If it seems like the melodramatic mode is being pushed here into something more like cultural kitsch, this is precisely what I want to argue. As an archival document of a specific period of American cultural history when there were very few public images of woman professionals, the show presents an unusual form of cultural memory. As the ruins of the classical mode, the TV show is emblematic of what Benjamin refers to as the "world of things," things that are not quite inert. Kitsch is the last mask of the banal, "the topmost face on the totem pole."[33] Benjamin aims to redeem the world of kitsch for its access to the dreamworld of commodity capitalism. Precisely because it disappeared for fifty years, *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is not nostalgic, but melancholic, presenting a view of unrealized possibility. As Celeste Olalquiaga—following Benjamin—describes melancholic kitsch,

it "revels in memories because their feeling of loss nurtures its underlying rootlessness."[34] This manner of kitsch is allegorical rather than symbolic. She says, "Melancholic memories are shattered and dispersed, referring only to the process of loss that constitutes them, their mythical quality enhanced by this ungraspable condition."[35] In this type of kitsch, the intensity of experience is preserved or glimpsed in fugitive form, and not fossilized into symbolic, nostalgic form.

In *The Arcades Project* (1999), Benjamin further aligns kitsch with the "warming" and sentimental aspects of the cinema. He describes the potential of film in terms of its embrace of kitsch:

> Kitsch . . . is nothing more than art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption. Precisely within the consecrated forms of expression, therefore, kitsch and art stand irreconcilably opposed. But for developing, living, forms, what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening—that they take "kitsch" dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch. Today, perhaps, film alone is equal to this task. . . . Only film can detonate the explosive stuff which the nineteenth century has accumulated in that strange and perhaps formerly unknown material which is kitsch.[36]

Again, my aim is not to use kitsch or melodrama as terms of classification, but in keeping with Benjamin's radical historiography, to use them methodologically, as critical tools to better grasp the significance of a "failed" media production such as *The Barbara Stanwyck Show.* It was in many ways out of synch with its own time, and at the same time points to an historical undercurrent of female professionalism and independence that has remained virtually unrecognized in popular culture. When Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, in which she questions the ideals of domesticity for women's happiness, it addressed an undercurrent of popular culture that has not been well understood. The dominant images of women throughout the 1950s were maternal figures and oversexed fantasy women along the lines of Marilyn Monroe and Dorothy Malone, but there were other women, appearing in television and film vehicles, who have been sidelined by dominant historical narratives. *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* offered an alternative view of women that was quickly sidelined and forgotten. To claim it now as a cultural "memory" is thus a critical act of melancholic kitsch.

Conclusion: It's a Man's Game

By 1960–61, Hollywood classicism was waning and giving way to the more critical and more explicitly modernist aesthetics of art cinema, foreign cinema, and independent cinema. Before TV culture absorbed and transformed the classical mode into serialized dramas, the anthology programs were more or less pitched at the boundary between film and TV, preserving the classical idiom not only in their dramatic narratives but also in the pantheon of movie stars who acted in them and hosted them. *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* was one of the last anthology drama shows on the air. Economies of scale and the conservative power of sponsors cautious of the unpredictability of anthology writing forced broadcasters and TV producers to abandon the format in favor of serials with recurring characters.[37]

From the preceding descriptions of some of the episodes of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* it should be evident that they are a species of melodrama. Even those set in the West tend to involve not only action, violence, and horses, but family relationships, romance, and domestic space. Throughout her career, Stanwyck played action roles, and the series enabled her to carry that active persona into the professional milieu without ever losing her "woman's touch," which typically entails the empathetic emotions associated with romance and family. As examples of a decadent classicism, the moral dilemmas and ideological conflicts in the series are condensed and simplified, while its expressive effects of lighting, music, and editing are familiar and still effective. The show's main appeal is in the persona of Stanwyck herself, who plays essentially the same character from one episode to the next. Even though she threw herself into every different role, her virtuoso performances are often undermined by her own power of personality and by the consistency of visual style.

Stanwyck had some harsh words for the industry when her show was canceled, along those of Loretta Young, Ann Southern, and June Allyson, in 1961: "I don't know who 'they' are, but they've decreed no more women on television. The only woman who will be left next year is Donna Reed. . . . [W]e all had good ratings."[38] Stanwyck herself won the Emmy for best actress in a TV series in 1961, and even if her show is far from a feminist vehicle, she evidently felt that she had a place, as a woman, in popular culture. In retrospect, we can see how her TV show tended to reproduce the historical tensions and contradictions that led to its own demise. It survives as a form of kitsch, an allegory of history, in keeping with Benjamin's remarks on the *Trauerspiel* as "the crossing of the borders of different modes."[39]

Stanwyck was not the only woman to have her own TV show but she was the last to host an anthology series. Jane Wyman and June Allyson also hosted such series in the 1950s, in addition to Loretta Young's long-running series that ended in June 1961. In comparison, although Stanwyck's show was shorter-lived, she brought significantly more star power to it, as she had a long career as an A-list star behind her. Donna Reed, Ann Sothern, Ida Lupino, and Lucille Ball, who starred in their own sitcoms in the 1950s, were all powerful women in Hollywood, owning their own production companies. Ball was an especially important figure because both Stanwyck's show and Sothern's were shot at Ball's Desilu Studios in Hollywood. The cancellation of several of these shows in 1961 did not mean the end of women on television of course, as Stanwyck herself starred in the very successful *Big Valley* later in the decade. Reed's show continued through 1966, and Ball continued starring in her own shows into the 1980s.

Joanne Morreale has discussed *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–66) in some detail as a program that reveals ideological fault lines and critical tensions in the social fabric, especially around gender roles, and the same can be said of most of these programs.[40] The melodramatic tenor of the Stanwyck show was unique, especially in the way it drew on women's genres and in the way it represents a cusp or melancholy transition from cinema to TV. It marks the end of melodrama as a marketing genre. This was a program that used music (the merry go-round in "Confession"), lighting, emotional drama, and violence for heightened states of expression and feelings. *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–62) and *The Twilight Zone* (1955–64)—two of the last anthology dramas with similarly cinematic aesthetics—traded less on melodrama than on generic features of suspense and science fiction. Because melodrama draws heavily on social fissures that are so often irreconcilable, it is closer to the fragmentary forms of allegory that Benjamin sees in *Trauerspiel*.

Among the thirty-six episodes of *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* four set in Hong Kong had Stanwyck playing the wheeling and dealing importer-exporter Josephine Little. Shot by Jacques Tourneur, with Anna May Wong as Stanwyck's confidante and ladies maid, Stanwyck finds herself on the frontier of the Bamboo Curtain. One of the episodes was singled out in Congress as being an exemplary instance of anti-Communism in an entertainment industry that was seen as being reinfested with Reds,[41] and indeed Stanwyck herself was always a hard-core Republican. She cannot be described as a feminist in any way, and yet her show is an important site for feminist cultural critique. Its archival redemption is not as a great work of art, but as a dramatic expression of the gendered landscape of Hollywood in decline.

Two of the last episodes of the show are comedies. In one, "The Assassin" (1961), she wears a wig and glasses, and plays opposite Peter Falk, one of the new generation of method actors (figure 11). She holds her own against Falk's casual self-deprecating performance as a hitman who can't quite pull the trigger.[42] It is proof of her acting ability and evidence that the show's writers may not have been able to fully tap into her potential, although, like many others, the episode was written by A. I. Bezzerides. The other comedic episode, which is also the last in the series, is "A Man's Game" (1961). Stanwyck assumes the role of sheriff in a Western frontier town. As a parody of the genre, it has all the requisite iconography, but Stanwyck warns us in the introduction not to take it too seriously. She provides commentary in her distinctive no-nonsense voice while the drama is paused at climactic moments. When she has the episode's chief bad guy in her sights, she pauses to ask, "Will she pull the trigger? Is she a big tough sheriff or just a woman after all?" As it turns out, she can't do it. Her erstwhile lover, who has effectively set up the situation she finds herself in, arrives for the final shoot-out with the bad guy. She goes back behind the bar, he becomes the sheriff, and order is restored. But what if we were to take such an episode seriously? What if Stanwyck is more

Figure 11. "Assassin" (with Peter Falk, 1961).

Figure 12. "A Man's Game" (1961).

than a cross-dressing comedian? What if we are disappointed in the inability of the writers, directors, producers, and star to follow through on the role reversals that are promised but not delivered? The way she carries herself in the role of a sheriff is evidence enough of her rightful place in the fictional dreamworld of the Old West (figure 12).

From the perspective of fifty years later, *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* is clearly an allegory of cinema, a ruin of its promise to create new myths for new subjectivities thrown up on the crest of American cultural history. It is a melodrama of missed opportunity and too-lateness. Stanwyck may get her man at the end of "A Man's Game," but is that what she really wanted? At the end of "The Assassin," she and Falk are both led off to jail: he for attempted murder, and she for embezzlement. In comedy, she is allowed to be bad; in melodrama, she is repeatedly locked into romantic situations, such as her remorse at the end of "Confession," that may affect the viewer fifty years later with a pathos unknown at the time of production.

The Barbara Stanwyck Show challenges many key conventions of melodrama, given the limited role of romance and family in its plotting.

Yet, the discontinuities of the story lines, with their abrupt accidents and revelations, together with the expressive lighting and detailed set design, are consistent with the tropes of Classical Hollywood Cinema and its melodramatic underpinnings. Condensed into the collectible format of the DVD archive, the program offers a unique view of the older woman challenging the industry to meet her halfway, on the threshold of a new medium. This is kitsch of the highest order, offering a glimpse into the dreamworld from which, as Benjamin insists, we need to awaken.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–40,* trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 390–97.
2. The two episodes which Stanwyck introduced but did not appear in were each a showcase for two other stars: Milton Berle and Andy Devine.
3. Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television,* Wesleyan Film (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 10.
4. Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press," *Velvet Light Trap,* no. 32 (1993): 66–89.
5. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborn, Radical Thinkers (New York: New Left Books, 1977), 82.
6. Ibid., 99.
7. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity,* trans. Patrick Camiller, Theory, Culture & Society, vol. 28 (London: Sage, 1994), 71.
8. When the show was canceled, Stanwyck complained that they never even sent her any free samples (Axel Madsen, *Stanwyck* [New York: Harper Collins, 1994], 324).
9. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 64.
10. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.
11. Christine Gledhill, "Speculations on the Relationship between Soap Opera and Melodrama," in "New Directions in Television Studies: Essays in Honor of Beverle Ann Houston," ed. Nick Browne, special issue, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, nos. 1–2 (1992): 103–24, quotation on 108.
12. Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 462–63.
13. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926,* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 444–88, quotation on 459.
14. Gledhill, "Speculations," 110.
15. Ibid., 114.
16. Ibid., 105.

17. Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama,* 175.

18. Ibid., 184.

19. See, for example, Christopher Orr's analysis of *Written on the Wind* (dir. Douglas Sirk, 1956), in which he argues that the film cannot "contain" Marylee within its "circular structure and hence its ideological project" ("Closure and Containment: Marylee Hadley in *Written on the Wind,*" in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama,* ed. Marcia Landy, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991], 380–87).

20. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Landy, *Imitations of Life* (see note 19), 68–91, quotation on 84.

21. Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI [British Film Institute], 1987); and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," in Landy, *Imitations of Life* (see note 19), 268–74.

22. Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

23. Klinger has also provided a succinct critique of the progressive text line of film criticism in "Cinema, Ideology, Criticism Revisited: The Progressive Genre," in *Film Genre Reader III,* ed. Barry Keith Grant, Film Studies/Popular Culture (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 75–91.

24. Richard Schickel, *Double Indemnity,* BFI (British Film Institute) Film Classics (London: BFI Film Classics, 1992).

25. Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies,* ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 221–43, quotation on 221.

26. Ibid., 227.

27. This story has a curious affinity with that of Stanwyck's own estranged adopted son, who in the early 1960s began to make public his story of "bad mothering."

28. Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory,* ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42–88, quotation on 49.

29. Ibid., 50.

30. Ibid.

31. Pearl White starred in the twenty-part film series *The Perils of Pauline* in 1914 and in fourteen-part *The Exploits of Elaine* series in the same year. As one of the first female action heroes, she had a significant influence on global modernity (see Jennifer Bean, "Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body," *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 3 [2001]: 9–57).

32. Miriam B. Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10–22; and Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," in Gledhill and Williams, *Reinventing Film Studies* (see note 25), 332–50.

33. Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism" (1927), trans. Howard Eiland, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 236–39, quotation on 238.

34. Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 297.
35. Ibid.
36. Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 395–96.
37. Becker, *It's the Pictures,* 221–37.
38. Ibid., 227.
39. Benjamin, *Origins of German Tragic Drama,* 177.
40. Joanne Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show,* TV Milestones Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).
41. Madsen, *Stanwyck,* 324.
42. Jack Nicholson and Dennis Hopper starred in two of the episodes (not collected in the 2009 DVD package), indicating how the show straddled two very different periods of film culture.