

Private Fears in Public Places: Network Narrative and the Post-‘Smart’ American Melodrama

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A comparative analysis of *Crash*, *Babel*, & *Syriana* as contemporary political network narratives in dialogue with the properties of classical melodrama and Jeffrey Sconce’s concept of the ‘smart’ film which grew out of the American independent filmmaking trend of the 1990s.

In his latest book, *Poetics Of Cinema*, David Bordwell defines the network narrative as a film which:

opens up a social structure of acquaintance, kinship and friendship beyond any one character’s ken. The narration gradually reveals the array to us, attaching us to one character, then another. And the actions springing from this social structure aren’t based on tight causality. The characters, however they’re knit together, have diverging purposes and projects, and these intersect only occasionally – often accidentally. (190)

This “n-degrees-of-separation” structure is certainly not new to American filmmaking, as the work of Robert Altman serves as a definitive example of the network narrative form. As independent filmmaking flourished throughout the 1990s, however, films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) exemplified a renewed narrative trend towards “a rotating series of interlocking episodes, centering not on a central unifying character’s dynamic action (as in classical Hollywood cinema) nor on relatively passive observations (as in previous art

cinema), but rather on a series of seemingly random events befalling a loosely related set of characters” (Sconce 362). This resurgence of the network narrative corresponds closely with the ever-increasing societal concern over the effects of globalization. Mainstream Hollywood was quick to absorb the trend, and soon produced a series of epic films with underlying pretensions of art cinema, using the network narrative structure. The three films which will serve as examples of this trend are: *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006).

In his 2002 article, *Irony, Nihilism And The New American ‘Smart’ Film*, Jeffrey Sconce examines the late 1990s cinematic trend of “new nihilism,” in which the work of filmmakers such as Richard Linklater, Todd Solondz, and Wes Anderson established an aesthetic of ironic disengagement and disaffected intelligence. By creating a genre which fused filmmaking practices of Classical Hollywood with transgressive themes of independent art cinema, these ‘smart’ films:

displaced the more activist emphasis on the ‘social politics’ of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its ‘political’ wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the ‘personal politics’ of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture. (Sconce 352)

The three films which will serve as the focus for this

paper exemplify how mainstream Hollywood responded to the 'smart' genre by widening the thematic focus from the isolated white male to far-reaching multicultural alienation, and subsequently subverted the aesthetic of blank nihilism with a conventional melodramatic fatalism.

Bordwell notes that genre convention plays a useful role in clarifying and simplifying the potential complexities of the network narrative plot (219). Each of these post-'smart' network narratives activates central defining characteristics of the melodrama in order to suffuse global political commentary with relatable, humanizing pathos. In *Meanings of Melodrama*, Ben Singer emphasizes a non-classical narrative structure as a key constitutive factor of the melodramatic form. The melodramatic tendency towards an episodic form directly relates to the network narrative structure. This proclivity for a fragmented narrative construction "results from a greater concern for vivid sensation (or 'situation') than for narrative continuity" (47). Melodrama has historically constituted an aesthetic of astonishment, focusing on a series of rapid, powerful impressions which work against the continuous causal progression of the conventional linear narrative (48). In an attempt to generate an identifiable atmosphere of pathos, these post-'smart' network narratives activate an aesthetic of collective astonishment, as the films chart intersecting personal crises within an environment of political and social unrest.

Crash, *Syriana*, and *Babel* respectively thematize how race relations, the international battle for oil, and global miscommunication affect a representative cluster of individuals; marking a return to the social politics which Sconce claims to have been displaced by the new 'smart' filmmakers. These post-'smart' epics aestheticize fundamental global political crises through a subversion of the classical Hollywood melodrama. Throughout *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*, Elsaesser's insights are extremely relevant to the contemporary fusion of classical melodrama with the globalized network narrative. According to Elsaesser, melodrama:

at its most accomplished, [is] capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality and class-consciousness, by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces

directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collude to become their agents. (86)

His argument that the sophisticated melodrama produces pathos through a "liberal" mise-en-scene, which balances different points of view," summarizes the network narrative structure as it relates to the post-'smart' melodrama (88). The combination of Sconce's definition of the new American 'smart' film with Elsaesser's conceptions of classical Hollywood social melodrama translates to an enhanced understanding of the contemporary political drama.

This trio of post-'smart' epics amplifies the 'smart' film aesthetic of irony through the melodramatic trope of coincidence. Sconce argues that the classical Hollywood film avoided excessive use of coincidence for the sake of realism; yet the coincidence is a widely theorized device central to the classical Hollywood melodrama. In the conventional melodrama, there is an "excess of effect over cause, of the extraordinary over the ordinary," a feature which results in the prevalence of terms such as Fate, Chance, and Destiny in the narrative construct (Neale 7). According to Sconce, the consistent use of unrealistic coincidence is a development unique to the 'smart' film, which has consequently constructed a "new realism of synchronicity" (363). These post-'smart' melodramas continue the 'smart' conception that random occurrences ultimately generate meaningful insight into everyday life.

The network narrative expands from a lone protagonist to an episodic cast of characters, which corresponds to the shift from isolated incidents of coincidence to a narrative dependency on a general belief in the logic of the random. For the classical melodrama, Steve Neale argues that "time in general and the timing of the coincidence of points of view in particular are indeed crucial – not that the coincidence is always too late (though it may be, of course), but rather that it is always delayed" (11). The post-'smart' melodrama generates pathos through multiple realizations of mistiming by way of a 'too-late' temporal sensibility common to the classic melodrama.

Crash exemplifies a significant narrative dependency on irreconcilable conflict as a vehicle for generative pathos. In order to produce a semblance of narrative continuity, the film relies on recurring chance encounters between disparate characters. *Crash* ultimately forces a suspension of belief on the part of the viewer in order to follow a particular pair of narrative strands to their (unrealistic)

conclusions. A pair of police officers, one bigoted, the other idealistic in his supposed racial blindness, pull over Cameron (played by Terence Howard) and Christine (Thandie Newton), a black upper class couple; an incident which sparks two divergent narratives when the bigoted Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon) expresses his racial hostility when he sexually humiliates Christine. The subsequent narrative strands intersect once again when circumstances force Ryan and Christine to overcome their racially-fuelled differences when Ryan comes across a trapped Christine in her burning, overturned car. The idealistic Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillippe) also happens to be the first officer to come across an enraged Cameron and subsequently prevents him from blindly venting his racial frustrations in an act of aggression towards a group of police officers.

These examples of repetitive, artificially constructed encounters correspond to the melodramatic tendency to produce meaningful realism by way of random occurrence. *Syriana* generates pathos through the destruction of the family unit by way of arbitrary incidents; a narrative element which will be explored in further detail as central to the theme of domesticity which runs throughout the film. In contrast, *Babel* centers on a deliberate avoidance of excessive coincidence. The coincidental use of a single object, the hunting rifle, functions as the material means which brings the globally diverse characters together. The film begins with the rifle being sold to a family of goat farmers in Morocco; the rifle is then used by the goat farmer's two sons to inadvertently shoot an American tourist on a bus, and is then eventually traced back to a Japanese businessman who had given the rifle to his Moroccan guide as a gift. While *Crash* artificially aligns its characters for purposes of depersonalizing social commentary, *Babel*'s storylines chronicle the direct effects of individual actions, all of which relate back to a single object.

In keeping with Michael Stewart's observations on Iñárritu's 21 *Grams*, *Babel* circumvents the 'too-late' temporal structure of the classic melodrama. According to Stewart, Iñárritu's approach to the melodramatic form relies less on a generative production of pathos, than on a pervasive atmosphere of unrelenting emotional suffering and unfulfilled desire (42-43). In *Babel*, the rifle functions as a controlled yet continual source of pathos. *Babel* illustrates Sconce's concept of synchronous realism and avoids the narrative improbability which plagues *Crash* as the film posits a single object as the symbolic point of narrative conflict. While coincidence is integral to its narrative construct,

the measure with which it is used attempts to establish a realistic logic of the random.

The narrative structure of *Crash*, as the exemplar of excessive coincidence, warrants further analysis. Through its aestheticization of intertwining, oscillating victimhood amidst an atmosphere of overwhelming racial tension, *Crash* exemplifies Michel Foucault's concept of the social apparatus [dispositif]. Structural comparisons between the dispositif and the network narrative can be found in Gilles Deleuze's description of Foucault's social apparatus as:

a tangle, a multilinear ensemble. It is composed of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not outline or surround systems which are each homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another. (159)

The narrative structure of *Crash* corresponds to the concept of the dispositif through the film's focus on the larger social impact of each individual action. Deleuze's interpretation of the lines of force and lines of subjectification which comprise the dispositif are of particular relevance to the network narrative. The line of force directs the curving aspects of the dispositif which determine what one says or sees, and creates conflict between various words and elements within the apparatus. A line of subjectification constitutes a circumvention of the line of force, causing it to turn back in on itself, instead of establishing a linear relationship with another force. This cluster concept correlates the dispositif to the repetitive nature of the network narrative.

Deleuze defines the line of subjectification as "a process of individuation which bears on groups and on people, and is subtracted from the power relations which are established as constituting forms of knowledge" (161). The individual character strands of *Crash*'s network narrative structure function as attempted lines of subjectification, as each character engages with the theme of racial conflict, which is the narrative line of force. Each character's subsequent inability to circumvent their racially-infused circumstances ensures a perpetuation of the line of force. *Crash* emphasizes each character's delusion that they have the agency to disengage from racial conflict; with the conclusion of each strand, the reality of such a futile belief becomes

apparent.

An example of the definitive contours which direct each character's actions is found in the scene which introduces Anthony (played by Ludacris) and Peter (Larenz Tate), a pair of black carjackers, into the narrative:

Anthony: I mean look at us, dog, are we dressed like gangbangers? Huh? No. Do we look threatening? No. Fact: if anybody should be scared around here, it's us. We the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of overcaffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So you tell me, why aren't we scared?

Peter: Because we got guns?

Anthony and Peter proceed to steal the car belonging to Jean (Sandra Bullock) and Rick (Brendan Fraser), whose subsequent trauma will formulate another narrative strand. While Anthony's words express an assertive line of subjectification against the line of force that is racial stereotyping, his subsequent actions ultimately perpetuate his socially determined categorization.

The characters of *Crash* exemplify Singer's differentiation between melodramatic and tragic characterization through their entrapment within the dispositif. Singer appropriates the theories of Robert B. Heilman when he writes that melodrama characters are 'whole' or 'monopathic': "they are defined by one-sided, unified, unchanging psychological attributes, and the problems that beset them derive from external forces" (57). Whereas the character of Tragedy is subject to internal contradictions, these characters' psychological perpetuation of the determining force of racism reinforces the static nature of ingrained prejudice.

Sconce borrows the Bordwellian conception of European art film protagonists who are "without clear-cut narrative goals, wandering as passive observers through a certain social milieu in a series of seemingly unconnected episodes," and who eventually achieve a form of epiphanous clarity (362). Accordingly, *Crash*'s atmosphere of insurmountable victimhood recalls the submissive estrangement of the classic art cinema figure, a characteristic that is also common to the melodrama. Both the 'smart' and post-'smart' films expand from the single, alienated art cinema protagonist to a rotating range of characters where only a select few prevail. The modernist protagonist's search for inner meaning draws comparisons to the Tragic characterization of the internally conflicted, existential figure, while the

postmodern network narrative suggests a melodramatic subordination to external forces.

The narrative strand which centres on Daniel (Michael Peña), a Hispanic locksmith, concludes on a sequence wherein his daughter is accidentally shot by Farhad (Shaun Toub), the enraged Iranian storeowner who believes Daniel is to blame for a break-in at his store. A mistaken purchase of blanks instead of bullets inoculates the ostensibly fatal impact of Farhad's actions. The scene effectively summarizes each character's failure to separate from the racial line of force and their collective incapacity to achieve any form of lasting social impact. *Crash* ends with the murder of carjacker Peter at the hand of the idealistic Officer Hanson, who believes he is exempt from the social apparatus of racial conflict. This final, unintentional act of racial violence represents the ultimate circularity not only of an overwhelming social crisis, but of the narrative itself.

Crash consequently aestheticizes the problematic nature of the dispositif through melodramatic characterization, as the film dramatizes the effects of individual subordination to an external social force. The superficial characterization results from the consequence of one-dimensionality which the political network narrative form is often subject to in its efforts to summarily address a universal issue. The dramatic personae of the melodrama "figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation," according to Elsaesser (69). In this respect, melodramas have a "myth-making function, insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualised experience" (69). While certain storylines conclude with the promise of potential change, the film's nihilistic ending ultimately promotes an atmosphere of circular futility, furthering a general sense of immobilizing entrapment through both the defining contours of the dispositif and the onedimensionality of melodramatic characterization.

Whereas *Crash* submits to a nihilistic conclusion through its overarching attempt to summarize the impact of racism on society, *Babel* establishes a coherent narrative focus in its approach to the ongoing affliction of global miscommunication. A transitional object serves as the centering force in the narrative, which allows for a tentatively tangible conclusion in contrast to *Crash*'s encapsulating nihilistic fatalism. As previously noted, the hunting rifle is the connective element between the narrative strands, and ultimately coheres the film's

thematic exploration of the extreme consequences of individual actions.

In *Thresholds: Film As Film And The Aesthetic Experience*, Annette Kuhn analyzes the relation between the transitional object and cinematic aesthetics. The transitional object, according to Kuhn, serves as an intermediary site of connection between the interior psychical reality and the external world (401). Kuhn's emphasis on the sense of shifting time and space generated by the transitional object corresponds with the function of the rifle as the connective centre between the individual storylines. *Babel* takes Kuhn's cinematic interpretation of the transitional object as a site of negotiation of our inner and outer worlds to international levels. The rifle was originally intended as a signifier of friendship beyond the boundaries of language and culture, yet ultimately serves as the symbolic point of destructive global miscommunication.

Kuhn's arguments directly relate to *Babel*'s melodramatic properties when she suggests that the transitional object can organize the spaces of home and the liminal boundaries between home and 'not-home'. "Melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small-town setting," according to Elsaesser, "its emotional pattern is that of panic and latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors to the point where the world seems totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs" (84-85). In the post-'smart' melodrama, a discourse on the contemporary home expresses a cultural anxiety over the shifting boundaries of the modern domestic space. Elsaesser interprets the significance of objects in the 1950s Hollywood melodrama as symbols of repression and enclosure, as "pressure is generated by things crowding in on them, life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them" (84). In contrast to this enclosed atmosphere, post-'smart' melodramas such as *Babel* use transitional objects to symbolize a latent anxiety over the uncontrolled exposure generated by the effects of globalization and modern technology.

Each character must endure the severe impact of their respective climates of miscommunication: American couple Richard (played by Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett) are subject to the primitive ways of a tiny Moroccan village while waiting for medical aid; Santiago's (Gael Garcia Bernal) unwillingness to communicate with a U.S. border guard results in Amelia's

(Adriana Barraza) deportation; the deaf-mute Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) expresses her social and emotional frustrations through nymphomania. The narrative conclusively resolves the conflicts at hand through the presence of the rifle, the tangible transitional object, which provides a symbolic point of narrative cohesion. In *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics Of Recognition*, Charles Taylor argues that the central feature of our basic human identity is its fundamentally dialogic character (32). *Babel* obscures the dialogic relationships through which we define ourselves, as the narrative conflict emphasizes the fundamental disparity in modern human communication. According to Taylor, this development of a modernized notion of identity has led to a politics of difference, which represents the tenuous balance between universal equality and individualized cultural identity (42). Taylor's conception of the modern politics of difference translates to the network narrative form, as the post-'smart' film includes multiple points of view within universal themes of political and social preoccupation.

The postmodern melodramatic properties of the post-'smart' epic invert Elsaesser's conceptions of the 1950s melodrama as these three exemplars chronicle the contemporary cultural preoccupation with globalization. On the subject of globalization as it relates to cinema, Jinhee Choi writes:

through processes of globalization, networks that connect different parts of the world become faster and more dense. Economic and cultural commodities as well as information travel the world more rapidly than ever before. But what seems to be at stake is not merely the fast circulation and distribution of goods and information around the world, but also the fact that such cultural and economic exchanges blur what we used to think of as national boundaries and identities. (310)

The increasing permeability of identity and individual territory thematizes the construct of these post-'smart' network narratives. *Crash* opens with a meditative monologue on the cultural dependency on the private spaces of cars, concluding that car crashes are violent manifestations of a latent desire for human contact. *Syriana* and *Babel*, on the other hand, fixate on the cultural anxiety over the dissolution of identifiable boundaries which previously translated to a definable sense of self through the melodramatic trope of domesticity.

With *Babel*, modern modes of communication generate

a transient climate which replaces the claustrophobic atmosphere of the domestic space. In the post-‘smart’ network narrative, the absence of self determination reinforces character conflict. While each character expresses alienation from their respective homes, the narrative strand centering on Amelia, the Mexican nanny, best exemplifies this crisis. Her decision to take her American charges across the border without their parents’ knowledge in order to visit her native home ultimately results in deportation after a near-death experience in the cavernous desert. Her permanent exile from her adopted home of California to her Mexican birthplace exemplifies the modern multifaceted definition of home. Whereas the 1950s melodrama characterizes the suffocating effects of bourgeois suburbanization, post-‘smart’ epics such as *Babel* chronicle the crisis of individual displacement amidst the ever-expanding global politics of placelessness.

Syriana contributes to the post-‘smart’ examination of the contemporary home through a thematic emphasis on the ongoing significance of domestic spaces and the family construct amidst the global tension produced by the international oil industry. As Elsaesser argues, the family melodrama “records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape the events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling social milieu” (79). *Syriana* depicts the ineffectiveness of a range of patriarchal protagonists, as the destruction of their families allegorizes their collective inability to achieve political impact.

The Bryan Woodward storyline begins with the accidental death of his young son at a party thrown by a fictional royal family of an oil-rich Gulf state. The accident leverages a business deal between Woodward (played by Matt Damon) and the royal family, and subsequently leads to the dissolution of his marriage. The film reiterates the theme of familial destruction when Woodward unwittingly spares himself from an American missile attack: he offers to switch to another vehicle in the prince’s convoy so the family can be together, effectively ensuring their collective demise. Elsaesser’s theorizations on the classic domestic melodrama correspond to the immobilizing characterization of the dispositif narrative when he writes that “the world is closed, and the characters are acted upon. Melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world” (79). While the men of *Syriana* attempt to

effect positive change in the face of the invincible oil industry, the dissolution of their families and, in turn, their individual identities ultimately results in death or emasculation by the end of their respective narratives. The obliteration of the family structure as chronicled in *Syriana* indicates the personal consequences of global political strife through an invocation of melodramatic convention.

Syriana occasionally dwells too long on its protagonists’ respective familial dynamics in an effort to construct a cohesive thematic commentary on the fatherson relationship. The perpetuation of the family structure marks a concerted effort to convey the idea that these political and social crises are generative culminations which are destined to be passed onto the next generation if they remain unaddressed. For example, the storyline which chronicles the tenuous relationship between an oil company lawyer (Jeffrey Wright) and his alcoholic father ultimately appears superfluous and inconsequential to the overall narrative structure. For the sake of this argument, however, the excessive attention devoted to domestic dysfunction effectively establishes the film as a generic example of the post-‘smart’ melodrama.

The film centres on a recurring discourse of the home throughout the narrative. Early on, the financial promise of the impending oil merger is summed up as an accomplishment which “will buy lots of homes in the Vineyard”. A direct cut to the exterior of the Woodward suburban family home accompanies this offhanded comment, setting the stage for a scene of utopian domestic bliss. The thematic significance of the home continues in an exchange between Bob Barnes (George Clooney) and his son, who voices a desire for a “normal home,” and subsequently expresses bitterness over the fact his parents’ careers as C.I.A. operatives has precluded a conventional domestic situation. In keeping with *Babel*, *Syriana* establishes a discursive representation of the contemporary conception of ‘home,’ or lack thereof. The depersonalizing effects of global politics and industry subsequently translate to a negation of identity through an increasing sense of individual displacement.

Syriana expands the thematic significance of the domestic space as through the narrative recurrence of home invasions. Multiple confrontations between government agents and business colleagues occur on driveways and during backyard barbecues, explicitly establishing a point of intersection between sites of domesticity and issues of global political conflict. The

permeable boundaries between the home and these global crises become apparent when Barnes triggers Dean Whiting's (Christopher Plummer) home security system in order to get his attention, as he is the man behind Barnes's professional demise. This scare tactic results in a clandestine meeting wherein Barnes threatens the safety of Whiting's family, if anything should happen to his own son. While the classical Hollywood melodrama centres on the oppressive nature of the claustrophobic home, the domestic spaces of the post-'smart' *Syriana* are points of anxiety due to the ultimately tenuous construction of the family and the structures which house them.

While the classical social melodrama chronicles the domestic isolation of the oppressed individual, the post-'smart' network narrative allegorizes the modern conflict between personal identity and cultural homogenization. *Crash* activates the classical melodramatic characterization of one-dimensional exteriority to emphasize the subordination of subjective identity to the external force of racial conflict. *Babel* and *Syriana* emphasize similar ends of individual subordination through the dissolution of the home and the family in the face of global miscommunication and the omnipotent oil industry. The renewed prevalence of the network narrative in Hollywood filmmaking activates melodramatic character construct and a contemporary discourse of domestic displacement in order to dramatize the inconclusive nature of social conflict through an aesthetic of paralyzing pathos and ineffectual action.

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