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James R. Lehning, *The Melodramatic Thread: Spectacle and Political Culture in Modern France*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. 180 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-820717-X.

Review by Sally Debra Charnow, Hofstra University.

Theatre historian Peter Brooks claims that melodrama was a radically democratic theatrical form during the Restoration because its impulse was to make its representations clear and legible to everyone.^[1] Legibility was achieved by weaving universalistic concepts of good and evil into melodramatic plots. In his interdisciplinary study, *The Melodramatic Thread: Spectacle and Political Culture in Modern France*, James R. Lehning explores this relationship between melodrama and democracy through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This ambitious undertaking is concerned with the melodramatic form in theatre and film and its impact on French political culture. Lehning argues that by examining the relationship between public ceremonies and theatrical performances one can clearly trace a “melodramatic thread” that permeated French political life from 1789 to 1989. By paying close attention to the melodramatic form present in political as well as theatrical performances, Lehning maintains that readers will develop a new understanding of the process of democratization in modern France. According to Lehning, “the parallels we will see between the performances in French theatres and those on the Champs de Mars and the Place de la Nation are important aspects of the French experience with mass democracy” (p. 16).

The historical process of democratization is central for Lehning. Few questions are of greater importance than the development of democratic political systems in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European republics, he explains in the first chapter. Concern with democratization encourages “reflection of past experiences of European countries such as France as they moved from absolute monarchies to more democratic systems” (p. 4). In order to understand this process more fully, Lehning proposes an interdisciplinary approach to the investigation of “political culture.” By this he refers not to the static conception of political culture often articulated by social scientists but rather to a dynamic one responding to social and economic change and civic motivation, institutional practice, historical experience, and international diffusion as described by political scientist, Larry Diamond. More important for Lehning’s interdisciplinary approach, however, are the methods associated with the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s. In particular he points to Keith Baker’s notion of political culture as the discourses and practices “through which individuals and groups articulate, implement, and enforce the claims they make on each other” (p. 5). Lehning argues that by emphasizing the discursive aspects of political culture we will be able to see how political ceremonies and theatrical performances helped to constitute the process of democratization in modern France.

To link political culture with performance, Lehning discusses an array of thinkers from Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jurgen Habermas and Guy Debord who each grappled with the role of performance in a democratic public sphere albeit arriving at dramatically different conclusions. He also points to the empirical methods of historians citing work that explores public ceremonies as a way to understand their creative force in shaping national identity, political culture and modern consumer culture. Here he identifies Mona Ozouf’s study of Revolutionary festivals, Avner Ben-Amos’s history of republican funerals, and Vanessa Schwartz’s analysis of mass amusements. Ultimately Lehning suggests

that due to the paucity of anecdotal sources recording audience reactions to performances the methods of literary analysis and cultural studies offer an alternative framework for analyzing political culture.

Melodrama, “in which suffering heroes or heroines, villains, and well-meaning comics play a moral, humanitarian, and sentimental plot in a world divided into good and evil, where virtue is protected and vice punished,” was the hallmark of the French stage after the upheavals of the 1790s (p. 12). According to Brooks the origins of melodrama are located within the context of the French Revolution and moreover there are critical similarities between the ways melodramatic theatrical performances represented the world as a struggle between good and evil and the language revolutionaries used to describe the revolution itself. From the 1790s on, Lehning contends, public representations including festivals, trials and commemorations employed melodramatic forms as a way “of attaching citizens to the institutions, processes, and decisions of the Republic” (p. 16). The process of attaching citizens to institutions of the state, however, sounds more like forging national loyalty and identity than creating democratic participation or practices. Lehning argues that the “seepage of melodramatic conventions between stage and public ceremonies is an important aspect of that public life, creating a characteristic form that shaped modern French democracy as it became more participatory.” (p. 17) Up until now, Lehning continues, the narrative of French history has been constructed around the actions of political leaders while academic research on public ceremonies has been relegated to the margins. It is the task of this book to analyze these actions and words as performance rather than to take them at face value or see them as merely a backdrop for political activity (p. 17).

In Chapters 2-5 Lehning deftly moves through nineteenth and twentieth-century French history selecting ceremonial and theatrical representations of the Revolution of 1789 and the First Republic to support his claim that “French mass democracy is closely linked to the commodified spectacle in modern France” (p. 17). His documentation and analysis of performances on stage and screen as well as those played out in the streets, courtrooms and textbooks of modern France are rich in detail and suggestive in their interpretive framework. In Chapters Two and Three Lehning is particularly successful in showing how melodramatic form infused performances —theatrical and political—in the nineteenth century.

In the first half of the nineteenth century melodrama owned the popular stage. Fabrice Labrousse’s *La Bastille* (1837), Alexander Dumas’s *Le Chevalier de la Maison Rouge ou Des Girondins* (1847), and Francois Ponsard’s *Charlotte Corday* (1848 and 1850) exemplified the genre. Revolutionary characters abounded in these scenarios including Lafayette, Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and Robespierre. In some cases Robespierre and the Terror were portrayed as a threat to French national unity while in others Robespierre was depicted as a self-sacrificing martyr. What is key for Lehning is that melodramas cast the issues, whether domestic or political, in a particular sensibility in which virtue is threatened by vice and the conflict unfolds through the intervention of a heroic character. This struggle between good and evil might be played out in any number of ways: republicans versus monarchists or counter-revolutionaries, radical republicans versus liberal republicans, and so on. Even though there was no agreement on what embodied virtue, Lehning argues that this struggle between good and evil became, through the impact of melodrama, the legitimate way of viewing politics.

Melodrama also unfolded in the streets of Paris in 1840 as a million people watched Napoleon’s remains being pulled down the Champs Elysées to the Invalides. Although Louis-Philippe was intent on using the memory of Napoleon to legitimize his own view of the past, many republicans saw the June Days of 1830 as a “revival of the spirit of 1789...” (p. 32). More radical republicans, however, saw only failure in the Revolution of 1830 and in their newspapers, pamphlets and speeches articulated a version of national virtue that was tied to the First Republic inspired by Robespierre and especially his Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1793. Lehning links Robespierre’s Declaration of 1793 to the founding of the *Société des Droits de l’Homme* and consequently the silk workers revolt of 1834 in Lyon.

As illuminating as Lehning's insights are concerning the melodramatic sensibility found across these various texts, one feels a certain unease in treating all representations-- declarations, processions, plays, legislative debates--in the same way without considering their disparate audiences, the particular conditions of their production or the fact that some were geared toward entertainment and others toward the construction of the national polity or an oppositional political constituency. Even if, as Lehning insists, these performances "created forms of viewing that constructed the world--whether the world on stage or the world of politics, society and economics--in melodramatic terms" (p.46) surely there are critical distinctions to be made between the first and the second.

Lehning is less successful in demonstrating the consistency of the melodramatic form as well as its impact on political culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Politics certainly became more performative and melodramatic over the period; we can conjure images of women dancing in front of the Bon Marché during the strikes of 1936 or the pomp and circumstance surrounding Pétain's regime. Theatrical melodrama, though, ceased to dominate the French stage, as Lehning himself admits. Certainly the playwright Victorien Sardou was a mainstay of the Parisian stage during the latter years of the nineteenth century; his plays are often seen in relation to the formulaic "well-made plays" of Eugene Scribe rather than as strictly melodramatic. They were known for their wit, satire and irony, with all conflicts wrapped up neatly in the end offering up a clear moral message in which family values were prized. Lehning is particularly interested in Sardou's plays set during the Revolution including *Les Merveilleuses* (1873), *Paméla, marchande de frivolitiés* (1898) and *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1893, 1900). By insisting on the primacy of the melodramatic in these plays Lehning diminishes much of their actual content and context including Sardou's critique of the nobility old and new and the complex representations of upward mobility (especially in a period associated with the growing aspirations of the petite bourgeoisie).

Lehning chose Sardou's plays because they can be seen as representative of the Parisian stage due to their popularity, but that cannot be said of Romain Rolland's *Le 14 Juillet* (1902). It lasted only 29 performances. Rolland, like the director he collaborated with Firmin Gémier, came out of the modernist theatre world of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. They were both previously associated with the Théâtre de l'OEuvre renown for its Symbolist productions.[2] In the early years of the twentieth century Rolland became a lead spokesman for the burgeoning popular theatre movement in France crystallizing his ideas in his manifesto *Le Théâtre du peuple: Essai d'esthétique d'un théâtre nouveau*. In it Rolland railed against melodrama, it was "a big lie," he wrote, it was soporific and contributed, like alcohol to the inertia of the people.[3] Perhaps Lehning is correct that there was a "melodramatic thread" embedded in Rolland's play but more importantly from a theatrical perspective was the avant garde *mise-en-scène* -- the decision to break down the fourth wall, the barrier between performer and audience, encouraging spectators to participate in the singing and dancing of the final act.

The theatrical performances that Lehning chooses to discuss in the twentieth century move even further away from classic melodramatic form. Dramatists such as Jean Anouilh, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre and Henry de Motherlant explored themes of alienation and human agency in the context of post-war existentialism. As Lehning explains, these playwrights were not interested in entertaining or enthralling the audience but rather "establishing a relationship between actor and audience that would show the origins of a particular action" thereby running against traditional melodrama with its simplification of character and plot (p. 102). These plays were generally marked by a rejection of the melodramatic and the depiction of a much more complex social and political fabric reflecting the uncomfortable ambiguities of wartime France. Even the work of avant garde theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine and her Théâtre de Soleil while offering a clearly Marxist interpretation of the Revolution (unlike Anouilh's *Pauvre Bitos*) in the plays *1789* and *1793* cast the democratic movement in the words and actions of the sans-culottes rather than in the historical role of leaders such as Danton and Robespierre. Like Rolland's theatre, Mnouchkine's *mise-en-scène* encouraged audience participation. Concerns of workers and the activities of women were prominently represented in the two plays as well.

Beyond the tenuousness of categorizing any of this work as melodrama, the relationship between these performances and the abstract process of democratization in modern France was not as clearly illuminated as promised.

By using melodrama as the unifying principle which draws together such a broad spectrum of performances under a single vision, Lehning reminds us of Isaiah Berlin's well-known characterization of the hedgehog whose particular type of mind comprehends the meaning of things under one master principle. Berlin contrasts the hedgehog's way of thinking with the fox, which knows many things, who is interested in the flux, uniqueness and variety of human experience.[4] By viewing public ceremonies and other political spectacles including the anniversaries of the Revolution of 1789 (1889, 1989), the assassination of President Sadi Carnot, the Dreyfus Affair, and political performances associated with the Popular Front and the Vichy Regime through the lens of the melodramatic struggle between good and evil the dynamic processes by which multiple expressions about the French Revolution (and French politics more broadly) might have been expressed, interpreted, exploited or ignored become emptied of their particular meanings. Consequently Lehning's notion of a monolithic political culture obscures key distinctions in French politics and culture. It seems critical not to collapse the differences between creating national attachments or national identity and participatory democratic practices, between the production of official, commercial, and oppositional cultures even when there are important continuities among them, and between melodrama and other theatrical forms. A deeper understanding of the divisions within French politics may be gained by exploring these critical distinctions.

NOTES

[1] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 61.

[2] Sally Charnow, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in fin-de-siècle Paris, Staging Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 173.

[3] Romain Rolland, *Le théâtre du Peuple* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1913), 114.

[4] Isaiah Berlin, *The Fox and the Hedgehog: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953).

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