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From Politics to Evil: Melodrama and State Power

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DRAFT

“We have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom.”¹

Introduction

In the past few years, the American state has generated power to declare war on two countries, to create laws without legislative, judiciary or popular oversight, to use mainstream media as a tool for circulating restricted communiqués that define the nature of state action, to use advanced technologies not only for surveillance but for harnessing and centralizing the gathered information at a moment’s notice, to ignore international binds by sloughing off multilateral protocols, to choose which of its citizens will lose the rights of citizenship by virtue of suspected knowledge of terrorist planning, and to “re-classify” certain humans as “stateless.” Many of these measures signal new terrains of action for the American state, and for the executive branch that often crafts its actions and coordinates its institutions. It seems that state sovereign power is making a resurgence in the twenty-first century, albeit in forms very different from what traditional theorists of sovereignty such as Bodin or Schmitt may have envisioned; this sovereign power is neither perpetual nor absolute, nor is it the visible authority of the law and its exceptions. The importance in contemporary American political life of such ideals as “We, the People,” popular legitimation of state power, and citizens as symbolic authors of their law, would deny the possibility of traditional modalities of sovereignty functioning openly. These new forms of sovereignty, I want to suggest, operate within the parameters of popular legitimation; they sustains subjects who view state power as a moral obligation and as such morally legitimize its use outside conventional modes of legitimacy. State sovereign power operates visibly, but is not seen to be political; it

¹ President George W. Bush, Speech to the Republican National Convention 9/2/04

discursively transmogrifies into a moral obligation. These forms of sovereignty utilize the techniques of normalization to generate new forms of political power. Or perhaps, they create extra-legal space for political power through the discourse of necessity and moral imperative.

Judith Butler has recently argued that the micro-politics of America's infinite detention policy represent a resurgence of new forms of state sovereignty.² Like Butler, I am concerned with new forms of state power that are not subject to the rule of law, and while I agree with her contentions, I approach the issue of sovereignty from an opposite perspective; I want to explore how the political discourse of state power generates new forms of state action. In other words, what is the constitutive power of the discourse that that state tells about itself?³ How might state power fashion modes of action outside existing, visible pathways of political legitimation? How might the state employ techniques of mass communication and discourses of melodrama to generate a politics that creates new action by recasting state power as a moral obligation, as necessary, as non-political? I examine the macro-politics of power that operate outside the juridical, yet still function with the imprimatur of popular legitimacy. Whereas Butler is concerned with the suspension of law, I want to see what happens when the law becomes unnecessary, when state power, as macro-power, worms its way outside the juridical realm yet magically and simultaneously naturalizes its movements. The type of sovereign power I observe is that in which the state, as a political power, disappears under its own naturalization, and at the same time its political subjects feel the author of this disappearance.

² Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life*. NY: Verso. 2004.

³ This is not to say that the state is a fully autonomous, self-aware, bounded entity, but that state power works through discursive formations and modes of operation that generate new forms of action.

In this paper, I argue that these new modes of sovereign state power are generated by the melodramatic narrative that constitutes contemporary American political discourse. Melodrama constructs America as a unified, virtuous nation that has been victimized, and thus can enact heroic retribution on the evil forces that caused its injury.⁴ Melodramatic political discourse generates three conditions that together create a centrifugal force enabling these new forms of sovereignty: 1) articulating state action morally good, especially when it fights evil and is endorsed by God 2) placing state action within a narrative that demands heroic retribution in response to victimization, and 3) fashioning a victimization that occurs at the level of an entire nation. In this paper, I will examine each of these factors in turn, parsing how they each contribute to sovereign state power. I aim to demonstrate that when state action becomes a moral imperative, is assumed to be disentangled from the political pursuit for power, and is ensconced within a narrative that demands righteous retribution for an injured nation, the pursuit of new forms of power by the state, and especially by the executive branch, is virtually unstoppable because of its being unseen; state power is discursively created as non-power, as non-political, reclassified as a transcendent defender of humanity's goodness.

Moralism and the Fight Against Evil

In the original Manicheistic concepts of good and evil, which Augustine helped popularize and normalize almost 2000 years ago, the good is fully rational, loving, pure, peaceful, and "of the mind." Evil is rage unmodified, irrational, uncontrollable, and "of the passions." Evil is, specifically, an *invasion* of the good, a hostile force determinedly

⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the melodramatic discourse that shapes American political life, see my "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media and September 11" *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 55, Issue 1, March 2005: 22-37.

focused on good's violation.⁵ With fury and wild violence, evil seeks out and defiles any form of goodness, beauty or rational mindfulness. This understanding of evil, as invasive and feral, lives on in its present usage. What has transformed, however, is the ontological status of evil and the living quality of the good. For the Manicheans, evil is timeless and indestructible; it cannot be abolished, and is fated to eternally lock heads in unyielding vigor with its nemesis. Evil can be restricted only by imprisonment in a finite space or scuttled away in the recesses of darkness, but its complete eradication is an impossibility. Good is passive, defenseless, always threatened with impingement by evil's ferocity, relying solely on the force of its purity for protection. Now, in the contemporary political use of these terms, evil not only can but must be completely destroyed; and goodness now harbors the violent, passionate power to accomplish this extermination.⁶ In contemporary American political usage, good acquires aggression without tarnishing its purity. And evil loses its cherished immortality.

While I will save a genealogy of this development for another chapter, I here want to question what it means to situate a mortal evil against a violent goodness in the context of national political life; I want to investigate the moralism inherent in melodramatic political discourse. All melodramatic forms insist upon moral polarities of good and evil in drawing up their understanding of events and individuals. The evil villain of melodrama is the masked, mustachioed, black-caped rogue; a nameless and often faceless enemy, a repository for any and all contrivances of horror, wrong, and destruction. His masked nonspecificity only fuels imaginative fantasies of his evil capabilities. In the

⁵ See Brown, Peter *Augustine of Hippo*. California: UC Press. 2000.

⁶ E.g. "So we're determined to fight this evil, and fight until we're rid of it." – Nov 6, 2001, "And this nation is leading the world in confronting and defeating the man-made evil of international terrorism" – Jan 28, 2003,

contemporary American political discourse of melodrama, villains are evil incarnate, drawn in the image of the masked rogue: The president describes political enemies as “a madman”, “the enemy,” “thugs and assassins,” “devious and ruthless,” “the worst in human nature.” In his first address to the nation after 9/11, Bush used the word evil four times to describe the attackers, and four more times later that evening in his prime-time television speech. Throughout his presidency, Bush habitually refers to “19 evil men,” “lives ended by evil,” “evil acts,” “the evil ones,” “evil-doers,” “a war against evil” and an “evil dictator.” The villain in his rhetoric is yet another incarnation of the repository of individual and collective fear embodied in the melodramatic antagonist who invades with viral force. And once the enemy has been established as evil, then both the victim of evil and the hero who punishes evil must of necessity be morally coded as “good.” Within Bush’s language in the days after 9/11, Americans became “innocent,” “great,” “the brightest beacons of freedom,” “good and just,” “heroic,” “peaceful,” “a loving and giving people”, full of “abiding love of our country.” As in all melodrama, the moral values attached to both victimization and a heroism predicated on victimization generates designations of purity, goodness and righteousness.⁷ Undeserving victims are virtuous for enduring the suffering they have experienced, and retributive actions taken in response to their injury are therefore right and just.

The political articulation of the 9/11 events pits goodness against evil in a specific context: an attack on a country and that country’s response. Use of the terms “good” and “evil” in this fashion, whether as a noun, verb, adjective or epithet, becomes a profoundly

⁷ See Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1995. Elsaesser, Thomas “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama” *Monogram* 4, 1972. Gledhill, Christine. Ed. *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*. UK: British Film Institute. 1987. Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card*. NC: Duke U Press. 2001.

political act, one meant to both stifle political discourse and insist upon moral justification for future actions. To explain the 9/11 events solely as evil blocks discussion over the complicated and vague causes, effects and understandings of the events and how they should be connected to national life. To characterize an act, or a person, or a condition, as one of evil leaves no space to understand, let alone begin to question, the historical, social, political conditions that may have surrounded, shaped and nourished what is deemed evil, or that could help fashion what, if any, response is possible to a horrifying action. And the power of goodness carries the weight of moral righteousness; acts or individuals who occupy this signification garner immediate justification for their retributive actions. The power of “evil”, as of “good”, subdues more attentive understandings of human action.

When evil is used politically, two conditions arise. First: the use of the term evil mandates evil’s destruction. Melodramatic narratives insist that heroic action is mandated by unjust victimization. Heroic action becomes an imperative when avenging the victimization of an innocent; therefore, actions undertaken to combat evil become a moral obligation. Bush relies on this moral imperative when explaining, “Today, we are a nation awakened to the evil of terrorism, and determined to destroy it. That work began the moment we were attacked; and it will continue until justice is delivered.” The exercise of state power is now *necessitated* by the imperative to fight evil. If melodrama generates state action by requiring it through the demands of moralizing language and narrative expectation. Second: brandishing the term evil in a political context dehistoricizes political action, placing specific, historical events on a timeless, cosmological plane of transcendent duality. In the political sphere, placing conflict within

the realm of good and evil reorients the context of deliberation to a universal, transhistorical crusade. By attempting to resolve problems at the mythic level of a reenactment of the forces of good and evil, melodrama reorients political power toward reconciling transcendent dilemmas without addressing the immediate and specific problems these reenactments evoke.

The political value of using moralizing terminology in this way resides in morality's connotation as being above, beyond, and deeply antagonistic to forms of political power. Morality and politics are conventionally assumed to be deeply oppositional forces; choices emanating from moral principle (i.e. from "goodness") appear antithetical to the choices motivated by the quest for political power. To act morally is to act with goodness, with principle, to act justly, whereas to act politically is to act with power, with shrewdness, with calculation. In this formulation principle not only disparages power in its pursuit of right action, but deeply mistrusts any overt expression of power; principle understands itself in opposition to it.⁸ Yet morality's assumption of an antagonism with the political disregards principle itself as an enormous form of power: a power that mobilizes by its very ascriptions of goodness and moral obligation, by its capacity to generate power through the assumption of power's irrelevance to its own action. For instance, Bush justifies the war on Iraq through this moral/political antagonism: "So we have fought the terrorists across the earth, not for pride, *not for power*, but because the lives of our citizens are at stake . . . we are working to advance liberty in the broader Middle East, because freedom will bring a future of

⁸ For elaboration on this antagonism and the underlying assumptions it harbors see Wendy Brown, "Moralism as Anti-Politics" in *Politics Out of History*, NJ: Princeton. 2001.

hope, and the peace we all want.”⁹ Bush explicitly states that advancing liberty, an ostensibly political action, is not about “power” but about universalist values: life, hope and peace. His terms classify state actions as outside the realm of power, or outside the realm of the political; they are part of the pursuit of principle, part of the quest to combat evil, part of the transhistorical and global battle for good.

The problem of moral terminology that I am sketching is not endemic to moral values in general, but in how particular moral terms exercise and operate in this political context; in melodrama, transcendent moral obligation becomes the discursive motivation for political decisions, and as such abstracts these decisions from their contextual manifestation. Moral terminology rips political situations out of their local existence and transfers them into a generic condition residing on a theoretical plane. Whereas Nietzschean theories of political moralizing assume the moralizer’s discourse is a thwarted will to power, it seems that in this context moralizing is not, or not only, the desire for freedom turned inward. Moralizing becomes a technique of power, one that operates in this political context to articulate principle, not power, as the motivating force of state action. By describing political action as an obligatory rejoinder to the force of evil, the techniques of moralizing power that melodrama harbors serve to naturalize the employment of state power. In the specific context of the 9/11 events, moralizing terminology labels state action as heroic action in the service of good; thus, the state itself disappears inside the necessity of its mission. It appears to operate on a more universal level, one untrammelled by the particularities of politics. When political events are staged as a clash between good and evil, they render invisible the machinations of the state *as*

⁹ Italics mine: see www.georgewbush.com/news/read.aspx?ID=3422

power. The power of the state rhetorically evaporates under more awe-some principles of moral obligation.

Consider a concrete example: in Bush's presidential address on September 20, 2001, he explains that creating an Office of Homeland Security was necessitated by the crusade to safeguard the civilized world. In his speech, Bush announces the moral imperative for the Office's founding by articulating the drastic conditions that require its existence: "This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom," against those who "hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction." The Office of Homeland Security is instituted as part of a civilizational war of good versus evil, of freedom versus unfreedom, a war of those who practice freedom versus those who attack it. Bush concludes his address by asserting that "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war and we know that God is not neutral between them." The Office of Homeland Security becomes part of a fight larger than the nation, and in fact larger than this historical epoch; a fight, the president explains, that has "always been." The creation of the Office is part of the eternal fight for justice against the invasive power of embodied evil. Indeed, Bush insinuates that the office itself had been sanctioned by God. The discursive conditions surrounding the justification for the Office's creation are not about coordinating law enforcement divisions or centralizing spy technology but fighting evil: the terms of discussion were fashioned through a moralization of the problem. If the Office of Homeland Security becomes part of the cosmological battle of good and evil, its existence and methods cannot be subject to question or to debate. Placing the creation of the Office of Homeland Security in question, or placing it under terms of public

deliberation, becomes an act that is unnecessary and, essentially, immoral. The moral framing instantly delegitimizes any attempt to check the power of what fights evil; debate or questions about the state's functioning become discursively neutralized. Bush's rhetoric puts evil into the category of that which is unchangeable and irredeemable, and thus the only possible response to it becomes total annihilation.

Bush intones toward the end of his speech that Americans don't need to question the creation of the Office; they can "be assured of the rightness of our cause." Through melodrama, the political judgments of "right" and "wrong" used to evaluate political actions also become depoliticized in their equitability with transcendent renditions of good and evil. Right and wrong, which have the potential to counter the effects of "good" and "evil" by localizing moral judgments and insisting on their own contestability, now lose their specificity and malleability. They are instead codified as transcendental moral truths, hence unaccountable to political critique. When designations of right and wrong lose their political connotations and take on cosmological tones, they too begin to glimmer with the allure of transcendence that stifles public discourse and aborts debate with its prohibitions. Creating the Office of Homeland Security was the right move because it was the "good" one, i.e. one meant to counter evil in the battle for civilization. Yet its "rightness" was not subject to terms of political discussion. There is no opening available to think that its methods involve political choice, or that they may be unnecessary, ineffective, inappropriate, or "wrong." This technique of moralization both devalues and negates agonistic expressions of political life, sealing off critical, thoughtful modes of inquiry within a specific domain of contestation. When a conflict is articulated through world-historical, apocalyptic and monumental terms, it conceals the

disputable, arbitrary, contingent nature of political life, and thus loses any relation to politics.¹⁰

The speech inaugurating the Office illustrates the political function of melodrama: melodrama as a political discourse rhetorically eviscerates the state of its state-like operations, camouflaging its covert and continual exercise of power. This logic is easily seen in another speech given by Bush years later when he explains “Freedom is on the march.” And moments later, “Freedom is not America’s gift to the world, it is the Almighty God’s first to every man and woman in this world.” In the first quote, the state loses any sense of political agency; it is “freedom” which marches, and is the agent of action. In the quote which follows, God becomes the overarching subject of action, as the movement of “freedom” emanates from his will. In a similar rhetorical move, when the Office of Homeland Security becomes civilization’s defender, Bush’s audience is asked to forget its particular political functions. For within the logic of this melodramatic rhetoric, the American state completes on earth the work of God.¹¹

The Office of Homeland Security was justified under the same logic that Michael Ignatieff used to explain why, even though Americans did not find WMD’s in Iraq, and even though the war created thousands of casualties, he still supports the invasion. Particular justifications for the war are fungible if at bottom the US is still fighting evil and attempting to instate goodness. Ignatieff explains that “the essential issue” for going to war is “the malignancy of [Hussein’s] intentions,” and that “Hussein ran an especially odious regime,” so therefore, “the fundamental case for war” is captured in a quote by an

¹⁰ For a rich explanation of the anti-political tendencies in broader forms of normalization in modern political life, see Connolly, William E. *Politics and Ambiguity*. Wisconsin: U Wisconsin Press. 1987.

¹¹ See Ivo Daalder’s *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, DC: Brookings, 2004, for a detailed analysis of post 9/11 foreign policy that operates under the assumption that America performs God’s work, hence all its actions are justified thereby.

Iraqi man who explains what America has the capability to provide: “This is the first and only chance in my lifetime for my people to create a decent society.”¹² Ignatieff argues that when the American military is fighting evil (“an odious regime”) and establishing good (“a decent society”), any methods for achieving this goal become justifiable. The state’s political methods are thus washed away, divested of political significance and resignified as moral necessity. State power, *qua* power, is rendered nonexistent.

Like Ignatieff’s justification for war, Bush’s framing the inception of the Office of Homeland Security as a moral rejoinder to evil brushed the political questions and concerns that the office’s existence evoked under the rug of transcendent compulsion, hence justifying political decisions *tout court*. An ambiguous situation was made to appear clear, and an uncertain response, obligatory. No space was offered for political debate; the public had lost its voice, or perhaps more accurately, was not at this moment discursively fashioned as a thoughtful political body with the capability to share the power of choice-making. My concern is less that some sort of rational public sphere had been lost, in which a correct decision and a unifying consensus could have been fashioned through group deliberation, but rather that citizens were unable to share in the political power used to decide the actions of the forces that govern and shape them. The forms of power generated by the melodramatic political discourse aim to simultaneously defile and eliminate open-ended inquiry that marks the possibility for political life to be governed by an agonistic ethos. Within melodrama, the techniques used to protect democracy seem to foreclose its practice. Equally as despairing, by configuring political events as cosmological problems instead of historical and cultural formations of power, any solution to these problems inevitably cannot work; their target is temporally and

¹² “The Year of Living Dangerously.” *NYT Magazine*, 3/14/04. pp.13-18.

spatially unbounded, both above and beyond the register of lived experience. This form of depoliticization thus reformulates a solution to political problems outside of the conditions which had birthed it, engendering a problem with no context and a solution with no target.

A Nation of Victims

Let's return to September 11 to examine how Bush responded to the events of that day, and how he created terms for understanding them through discursive articulations of victimization.¹³ It's important to note from the outset that Bush's words were so powerful because of the context in which they were spoken; after the shock of large-scale murder and destruction, the country needed the guideposts created in Bush's rhetoric to make sense of, codify, and thus gain some control over the shock and ambiguity of the events. And as President, Bush was perhaps the only individual who had the influence and authority to fully explain and narrate the events for the American people.

On September 11, Bush articulated a melodramatic understanding of politics that was iterated multiple times in the following days and months, and would be used for the rest of his presidency to explicate foreign and domestic policy decisions. Bush began his speech by explaining that the target for attack was "our way of life, our very freedom." He later confirmed, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." He stated two days later, "They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender." From the outset, Bush informed

¹³ I follow David Campbell and others in referring to the events that occurred on 9/11 as *events*, and not *attacks* (unless I am referring to how they were discursively created), an approach which aims to emphasize their ambiguity and unaccountability. The term "attacks" carries connotations of understanding what did happen on September 11 by explaining the act's aims and motivations. See Campbell, David. "Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in Response to September 11" *Theory and Event* 5.4, January 2002.

Americans what was targeted and how they were implicated in that targeting: “freedom” and “our way of life,” general ideals and shared values, were intended for destruction. What the attacks aimed to destroy was named “the foundation of America.” Bush’s words were deeply generic; most citizens could find some way to agree that the values of freedom and opportunity were good, and may in some way factor into their own “way of life.” His terms were loose and fluid, easily adaptable to the ears of whoever was listening: freedom and opportunity were unmoored from any specific practice or specific way of life, besides “ours.” When robust terms such as freedom and opportunity are dehistoricized and untethered to any particularity, they become empty values, and thus subject to resignification by whoever wields them.¹⁴ In this context, Bush used nonspecific ideals to fashion the perception of a nationwide-attack. Within Bush’s logic, one could unhesitatingly assume that the targeted centers were intricately bound with the ideal of freedom and the American “way of life.”¹⁵ Arguing that freedom, ways of life, and opportunity were attacked, without binding these ideals to any particularity, beckons all Americans who identify in some way with these ideals to feel attacked, too.

The Bush doctrine rallied the nation into a unified entity that jointly and equally bore the brunt of victimization. Bush stated that Americans have suffered “our wounds as a people”; pain is suffered as a collective, by citizens bound into a single body defined by joint injury. The pain is shared by all Americans, as all have been wounded.

Feelings of victimization were culled and justified by identification with general ideals

¹⁴ See Sheldon Wolin for a more detailed elaboration of the concerns that arise from governing elites’ use of non-specific ideals. Sheldon Wolin, “Democracy Without The Citizen.” in *The Presence of the Past*, NJ: Princeton, 1989. See esp. pp. 189-190.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that the buildings targeted were economic and military centers, and to observe how easily these buildings transmogrified into referents for “our way of life.” One could make the case that because the national identity in melodrama is so bound up with notions of economic and military might, this transmogrification was easily accepted.

and the collectivity that harbored them. Bush insisted, “A terrorist attack designed to tear us apart has only brought us together;” national unity was generated by the suffering of a joint injury. He informed Americans, “Our unity is a kinship of grief,” essentially claiming that national unity is grounded in and fashioned through emotive attachments to collective pain. Suffering takes on a normative value as a proper and sanctioned means to identify with others whom they are joined together in “a kinship”. To be a citizen in the US after 9/11 is first and foremost to empathize with pain and to *feel* the wound of victimhood. Unification is based on a sentimentality that reorients the focus of unity to injury. National identity in a post-injurious grief is based in emotive attachment to others through collective victimization.

This type of national identity translates into the exercise of state power when embedded within a melodramatic discourse. If all Americans have been victimized by an attack and are unified around that victimization, then the parameters of national identity become defined not only by victimization, but by the action melodrama requires to avenge and protect the victimized. The narrative expectations that shape the melodramatic discourse of Bush’s speech require, as in all American melodrama, that victimization calls forth heroic retribution. And expectations of heroic retribution at a national level necessitate state power.

Through declarations of nation-wide victimization, Bush’s first speech to the nation after September 11 contained two justifications for exercising state power which were unprecedented in American history. Bush first declared that America has the moral right to annihilate not only the 9/11 hijackers, but anyone in the world who may harbor or have harbored any terrorist. Second, Bush asserted that America will eradicate evil from

the world in general. Both claims justify virtually unchecked power for the American state at home and abroad. Bush could only make these assertions by affirming a nationwide victimization and combining with the moral righteousness of heroism. While of course Bush's speech is not itself a policy mandate, it will form the justification and backbone for much public policy in the Bush administration. The same language will be used to justify the Patriot Act, the Office and Department of Homeland Security, the invasion of Iraq, the covert policy of extraordinary rendition, the use of torture against suspected terrorists, and Congress's blanket approval for war in Afghanistan given to the president just days after he made the speech.

On September 11, Bush tells listeners within the first two minutes of his speech that America's military is powerful and it is prepared. A few sentences later he outlines what this heroic action will entail: "I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." Bush then ends his short speech by asserting, "We go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world." Already, on 9/11, the possible forms of state power had increased exponentially. In the first sentence above, Bush states that the nation will target for justice not only those people who committed the day's attacks but all who harbored them, thus creating new forms of justice that legitimize extra- or supra-judicial forms of action. This is an extremely powerful and extremely ambiguous statement: What does it mean to "harbor" a terrorist? His language is broad enough to include not only those who perhaps gave the terrorists weapons, but those who may have unknowingly nourished or clothed them. The looseness of the language, and the

indiscriminatory nature of its use, create enormous spaces for state power to inhabit when deciding who harbors terrorists and how they will be brought to justice. And what is justice in this context? Legitimizing the annihilation of those who harbor terrorists? Sending them to international tribunals? Again, the vague, non-prescriptive nature of the language generates potentially boundless forms of power for the state not only for dispensing justice, but in defining what justice means. In the second quote from the speech, the mission of justice is extended not just to finding those who committed the attacks or harbored the attackers, but to defending all that is good and just in the world. This claim alone is overwhelming in its aims, intentions and goals. The desire to protect “all” goodness and justice in the world is a mandate that extends far beyond the borders of the United States, and is a worldwide mission that commands unlimited power to protect and defend a generalized and nebulous concept of “goodness.” The expansiveness of this claim, combined with its ambiguity, provides the justification for much state action exercised at home and abroad in the following years. The claim was not limited by location, by time, by circumstance, or by particular understandings of goodness and justice: it was a claim for power unlimited.

Accordingly, within melodramatic discourse the “American people” cannot be separated from the exercise of state power. Through melodrama, “America” as a national identity becomes so abstract that it consists solely of the state action deployed to defend the victimized national ideal of freedom. The national identity in American melodrama contains only the ideals of freedom and democracy, the victimizations they incur, and the retributive/defensive state action their victimization requires. Bush fuels this identity when exclaiming in a speech about fighting terrorism, “In our grief and anger we have

found our mission and our moment.” Bush explains on 9/11 that “all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace.” Within the logic of melodrama, victimization naturally creates a unity that morphs into resolve; the itinerary leading from injury to action is pre-fixed. As Bush asserted one week after 9/11, “Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution.” During that week Bush declared, “A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”¹⁶ In this rhetoric, the foundation of American identity is the not only the ability but the resolve to defend a great nation; defense is the foundation of what it means to be American. All members of the singular “great people” have been moved to defend themselves as a collective entity; Bush calls this movement into creation at very the moment he speaks of it as already happening. Again, the abstract values of American identity, here referred to only as the foundation of America, are discursively linked to the vague yet potent state actions of “resolve” and “defense”.

The national identity constructed by melodrama is held together by empathic attachment to moralized state action: the specific desires satisfied and propelled by back-and-forth dialectical interaction between positions of victim and hero, “pain” and “resolve” toward future revenge. This may help explain a much-discussed phenomenon in what appeared to be an odd juxtaposition at the 2004 Republican nominating convention: after Bush crescendoed part of his speech with “I will never relent in

¹⁶ As Jane Bennett noted, this reference to steel is itself an wistful invocation of American national life; little steel has been produced in America for the past half-century, yet the nostalgia for a bygone era complements the nostalgia for a unharmed, infallible nation; both are invoked to rally the cause for state action.

defending America,” the delegates broke into an apparently spontaneous roaring chant of “USA! USA! USA!” While most pundits were befuddled, and some thought the chant may have arisen from the delegates’ confusion between the convention and the recently-ended Olympic games, the logic of the chanting becomes much more clear when looked at through the national identity fashioned by melodrama: what does USA stand for in the melodramatic post 9/11 era but the unrelenting defense of “America”? Relentless state action *is* the USA; it is the glue that bonds the American national identity constituted by joint woundedness. Melodrama legitimizes state action by encouraging empathic identity with a nationally-victimized populace that demands resolve through state-sponsored retribution.

In this melodramatic rhetoric, citizens identify with the state because the state *defines* who they are as citizens and what it means to be an American. Yet it is also state action which *defends* what it means to be American. Identity enters a double bind with state action, relying on it for both meaning and protection. American national identity does not exist without the state action that it inexorably delineates, but that also delineates it. Bush often speaks for all Americans when he makes his claims for state action: it is “our” resolve to fight for freedom, not just his. It is the resolve of those who are unified by their practice of freedom and their victimization from the 9/11 attacks. His easy slippage between “I” and “we” accomplishes the rhetorical feat of being both of and above the American people, as he fluidly switches roles between head and member of the American citizenry. Bush is the distinct voice of and for America, one that produces the America he articulates, one that defines what America is, and is not. He discursively creates the American people in this fashion through his pronouncements of what they

experience: he states that “all our hearts have been seared,” “we are determined to see this conflict through,” and “our purpose as a nation is firm.” And to cement these alliances, the “we,” the “us”, the “our,” the “All Americans” in each of Bush’s statements serve to discursively attach “us” to the state and its engagements, defined by the president and the governing elite who craft his rhetoric and coordinate forms of state power.

By virtue of this equating of the state and the people, the state’s *raison d’etre* becomes the defense and revenge of the victimized populace. Justice becomes either the pre-emption, or the punishment, of injury. When melodrama discursively creates the role of the state to protect citizens from pain, then state action is judged by its subjects in how it alleviate their wounds. Justice becomes what deeply, personally, affectively, feels right in assuaging pain. And importantly, a strong felt revulsion becomes a clear indication of injustice. In this I agree with Lauren Berlant’s contention that in contemporary American political life, justice is that which stamps out pain and ill feeling. “National sentimentality” unites the country through evocations of empathy for those deprived of the “American dream” in which the dream is constituted as a space free from pain.¹⁷ Berlant argues that the desire for “fantasy reparation” justifies acts of revenge, and then identifies the state itself as the realm of repair. I agree with Berlant’s claim that the nation’s purpose has come to be defined as an eradication of its citizens’ victimization, and I share her apprehension for the dependence on state action that this fosters. Yet Berlant most often identifies the origin of trauma as the state that injured persons call upon for relief; I am concerned with sources of trauma presumed to originate outside the

¹⁷ Lauren Berlant “The Subject of True Feeling” in Jodi Dean, ed, *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*. NY: Cornell. 2000

state and which threaten to destroy its very existence as a state. The pain used to unite the populace after 9/11 is a national victimization caused by something seemingly outside the sphere of “American-ness.” Woundedness at this moment is caused not by being left out of the American dream, but by very (threat of) destruction of the dream itself. Justice therefore becomes any action that avenges the pain felt by “all Americans” in its “kinship of grief” over the attack on “our ideals.” State action is *apriori* legitimate if it relieves this felt pain; its reach legitimately exceeds territorial boundaries of nationhood and the regulatory boundaries of law when an external force causes the wound it avenges.

Just as moral imperatives become self-justifying, standing above calculation and deliberation, so too does this felt sense of woundedness. Like moral obligation, the pain of unjust injury appears to reside in opposition to power. Within melodramatic national discourse, victimhood is conceived as a more legitimate motivation for state action than the desire for power, because it emanates not from self-interest but from pure motives: healing suffering. The desire to mend injury can only be “good,” and therefore is an accurate indicator of what is right and what can be trusted. The feeling of pain conveys a moral goodness that usurps political calculation; it resides patently outside, and even in opposition to, the realm of heartless, shrewd power. Motives for action based on unjust victimhood are pure, virtuous, unsullied by the desire for power that animates so much politics. Salving an injury is a valid motivation for state action because it appears so patently non-political. A felt empathy with injury proffers a motive for state action uncomplicated by and antithetical to the drive for power, and as such becomes complicit in further normalizing state power by sanctioning pain as a valid ground for justice claims. Hence, state action prompted by injury can be employed as well as extended

without the appearance of it being political power. Within melodrama, a felt victimization generates a moral imperative for healing that replaces political considerations as the means for deciding justice and correct action. Actions motivated by healing are assumed to be void of motives grounded in a desire for power, and thus obscure the state power employed toward this task. Melodrama's imperatives fashion a subjectivity that accepts and encourages state action to resolve injury, and that increasingly depends on state power for justice and security even, and especially, after the 9/11 events that denuded the state of its assumed capacity for protection.

Melodrama veils state power through reconfiguring the relations between empathy, morality and political life; it naturalizes state action as a moral imperative dictated by victimization. Political debates become moralizing plays about good, evil and unjust suffering, not debates over political options, political actions, or the murky, messy and ambiguous causes, effects and understandings of national events and national life. Problems are themselves glossed over and subsumed under ascriptions of injury, feelings of victimization, and the manicheism of the melodramatic narrative. Citizens share state power solely by legitimating its action through the moral obligation that felt victimization discursively creates. In other words, subjects of melodrama understand state action in response to their unjust pain as morally necessary. They thus not only give sanction to it but see themselves as the author of this action; it arises out of their determination that it is a required response to their felt injury. Perhaps it would be inaccurate to say that melodrama erases space for political debate, as it more accurately creates subjects who exist beyond debate – in a space beyond legitimation, in which they feel they impose moral obligation upon the state. Melodramatic discourse both generates and maintains

the felt sense that state action has been popularly, and personally, legitimated. Framing national identity melodramatically takes national political issues outside the realm of the political and hence makes state power politically unaccountable to its subjects, while at the same time it encourages subjects to assume that they make up, have control over, and dictate this use of state power through the moral imperatives they demand for repair. Thus, the most dangerous implication of the melodramatic national identity is that it creates forms of power that encourage subjects to feel that state power is employed because of their will. Not only is state power rendered invisible, but subjects feel they author, and demand, this transformation to invisibility. The state's melodramatic discourse generates a political subjectivity out of injury that demands, on moral principle, state power to heal its wounds through acts of retribution.

The Fragility of Melodrama

It can arguably be claimed that once 9/11 was fashioned within a melodramatic framework, the unfolding of events after 9/11 could have had little narrative divergence. The trajectories of narrative, of moralism, of injury *demande*d in some sense, that a victimized America use massive power to enact a spectacular form of retribution on a clear enemy. The path to war in Afghanistan, while repulsive to many, may have been inevitable once the administration articulated the events of 9/11 through melodrama; the fact that every congressman except one voted to authorize war illustrates the intoxicating hold of narrative expectations for revenge. And when the spectacle of the Afghan war faded rather quickly, a new war resumed the mandates of narrational retribution. Invading Afghanistan was insufficient to eradicate all evil -- in which the personified face of evil,

Osama bin Laden, was nowhere to be found -- and required a new evil face to fuel its larger mission. This is why the argument to invade Iraq was not misplaced or simplistic for being based on Weapons of Mass Destruction; yes, Hussein was classified as an “evil madman”, but that alone was insufficient to motivate a felt desire to attack him.¹⁸ Melodrama requires a *felt* victimization in order to jump-start its heroic narrative; WMDs were therefore necessary to initiate the fear of another bodily victimization of America. And the feeling of fear instigated by the threat of WMDs could be so successful by being temporally adjacent to the still-oozing wounds incurred from 9/11. The ominous threat of a WMD attack provided an anticipatory pain that reverberated with the aftershocks of the 9/11 attack. Explained as “pre-emptive war”, anticipatory victimization produced ample justification for an invasion of Iraq.

Yet melodrama’s strength as a potent discourse simultaneously hearkens its inability to account for actions, situations, feelings that don’t accord with its narrative possibilities. The failure of the war in Iraq demonstrates the limitations of melodrama in its attempt to narrate political life. The unintended effects of adhering to melodrama’s narrative may have caused the disastrous post-“Mission Accomplished” occupation. American melodrama assumes that the hero always succeeds in his task to eradicate evil; while there may be near-misses and close calls, heroic retribution is inevitable. A triumphalist world view cultivated by melodrama requires that one’s heroic success is never in question, that righteous might quells all unrest and villainous action. In the post-9/11 melodrama, America’s justification for war was grounded in moral righteousness and unjust victimization, and thus melodramatic expectations for heroic victory asserted

¹⁸ Though Saddam’s persona was not insufficient as retrospective justification once the invasion was deep underway and WMD were nowhere to be found; but by that point, the feelings used to *initiate* the war were no longer required.

that the war would go well, that Americans would be greeted as liberators, and that post-war reconstruction would be self-generating. The melodramatic narrative does not leave space for the exigencies of a reality in which America's image at home does not translate abroad, in which the moral goodness of American state action is perceived as imperialism and domination by the very people whose lives it is trying to free. Planning for insurgency, for deeply adverse conditions, and for the possibility of failure went unprioritized because these circumstances existed outside the possibility of the melodramatic. Nuance and deliberation are unavailable in melodrama, yet nuance and deliberation are precisely what are most necessary to approach and make sense of the complex, contingent situations of political life and state power. Melodrama as a national discourse thus highlights its own aporias. The same trope that classifies state action as a necessity, as an unquestionable moral imperative, is also what reveals most strongly the fragility of a narrative that cannot account for the surprises and contingencies of political life.

This points to another primary weakness of melodrama as a national political discourse, namely the challenge in sustaining a felt sense of injury over long periods of time. Melodrama is impossible to uphold as a world-view without continual injury and the repetition of felt pain. The constant references to 9/11 by the Republican campaign in the current 2004 election race testify to the predicament that occurs when the discourse of melodrama is used to script world events. In order to both justify his past actions and explain to America why his militaristic leadership is best, Bush must reinhabit a unified America, with all Americans bound to the state he figureheads through fear, victimization, and moralizing righteousness. Incessant references to the pain,

devastation, and injury incited by the 9/11 attack help revivify a weakened melodramatic framework for understanding state power and the decisions of governing leaders, and for justifying the necessity of a sustained militarism. The continual felt experience of victimization becomes the sole form of justification for heroic revenge, and for understanding one's actions through moral imperatives. This is why a felt injury has not stayed firmly with America over the contingencies of the Iraq war – melodrama as a long-term identity reveals its inability to sustain itself without the constant dialectic of victimization and heroism; neither can exist for long without the meaning-making the other provides. And yet this is why Bush must continually resurrect 9/11 to justify current state action.

Without the melodramatic narrative that immediately generated the national understanding of 9/11, the events might have provoked a period of national self-reflection. Through its shock, horror and disorientation, 9/11 could have provided an opening for encountering new ways of thinking about the world. When the state's promise of protection is broken, fissures split apart the rhetoric of heroic infinite capability and open space for fresh considerations of state power. The 9/11 events may have been intensely generative by confronting brittle national self-understandings, dislodging the naturalized American right to unquestioned world supremacy, conceding the weakness of a national rhetoric that claims its own infallibility, and reminding Americans that vulnerability is a shared experience for all humans in modern life. The shock and brutality of the event may have provoked the very instability necessary to open new forms of understanding the world that could overcome inadequate and ossified conceptions. Interestingly, the one public intellectual to date who has called on

Americans to radically dismiss the melodramatic narrative in the wake of 9/11 is Richard Posner, who has asked Americans to recognize both the state's incapacity for heroic total protection and the vulnerability this realization awakens.¹⁹ In his most Nietzschean moment, Posner exhorted Americans to drop their preconceived yet safe notions of national infallibility, and grapple with the recognition that a new national self-understanding must be crafted after 9/11.

While Posner's proclamation is heroic in its own way, he nevertheless does not acknowledge the difficulty in shaping new self-understandings, a process which requires that stable knowledges of the self, of the nation, and of truth become rigorously challenged. Openness to new self-understandings, to new ways of thinking about the world and one's relationship to it, require the not only the courage to critique present understandings of political life, but the desire to fashion new and more expansive counter-narratives. These actions require a situation of profound ambiguity, in which the reassuring signposts of moralizing judgments and affective attachments remain out of sight. Only without rushing to preformed judgment or the comfort of moral proclamations could the experience of 9/11 lead to a productive openness, in which old guidelines do not prohibit new understandings of unexpected events. Ambiguity is the antithesis of melodrama; it is a space of disorientation, unmapped by circumscribed notions of right and wrong, in which thoughtful, measured, painstaking and deliberate debate and contestation over history, particularity, options, actions and judgments can germinate. Ambiguity is the precursor not only to radical critique but to the possibility of

¹⁹ While many on the Left have also argued this point, their voices are often marginalized or mocked by mainstream politicians and new outlets. Richard Posner, "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent." *NYT Book Review*, 9/29/04

organizing political life in a more egalitarian, thoughtful, and agonistically democratic way.

Cinema, the world of scripted life and centered subjectivity, is also the place where this type of decentering and ambiguity are most powerfully illustrated. And most surprisingly, it is in a war film, usually the most melodramatic and state-discourse-upholding films in American cinema, that this sort of challenge can be found. The film *Three Kings*, directed by David O. Russell in 1999, generates just such ambiguities that subvert what could otherwise be a traditional melodramatic script of heroism during wartime. My turn to film may seem odd for a paper so concerned about political speeches delivered through mass media, but film performs crucial modes of representation beyond what news media can provide: it illustrates face-to-face interaction between political enemies, and provides direct encounters with violence that can loosen, and perhaps counteract, narrational expectations. It is this face-to-face encounter that disrupts the melodramatic reduction of politics to evil, of complexity to manicheistic imperatives, of individuals to ideology. Whereas melodrama distorts and reduces the ambiguity of experience, *Three Kings* vividly illuminates spaces of moral and political complexity lurking in the interstices of melodrama, and thus unsettles what spectators presume to comprehend. In its unsettling, the film can help to think through counter discourses to state rhetoric and alternative possibilities for understanding contemporary American life. *Three Kings* demonstrates ways of moving beyond melodrama in relation to state, personal and national identity by showing the complexity and convolutions of militarized state actions at a site in which historically they are often least questioned: the moment of personal combat with the enemy.

***Three Kings* and the Politics of Ambiguity**

In the opening shot of *Three Kings*, spectators hear running footsteps and heavy breathing, yet all we see is a black screen, which flashes with the title: “March 1991. The War Just Ended.” Whereas beginning titles are often meant to center the narrative and center the spectator, we immediately begin to experience a radical decentering: the black space opens to a scene in which we are not watching someone else (par usual in film), but instead our eye becomes the bouncing eye of the camera. We are running through a Daliesque surreal landscape. The ground we run on is caked dry mud extending into the distance, limited only by a white horizon. With nothing in sight through the shaky lens of the hand-held camera, we continue running across the mud, seemingly toward nowhere. The landscape is a physical vacuum, with no markers or signposts to guide our frantic movement. After a few seconds, the camera shifts down and to the right, and we realize that the footsteps and breathing we hear belong to a running American soldier who appears at the bottom of the screen. The scene begins to come into focus: the camera is following a military soldier sprinting in the desert. Yet this initial disarming of expectations is unnerving, and a profound sense of disorientation, of slippage between the real and the surreal, lingers throughout the scene. The soldier stops short, and we can see why: in the top left corner of the screen a man appears in the distance standing on a hill. He seems to be waving something, but is positioned too far away for us to clearly see what he is doing. The soldier’s head is in the bottom right of the screen, kitty-corner to the distant man, and he appears to be as confused as we are. He begins a dialogue with someone behind him, who we don’t see.

“Are we shooting?”
“What?”
“Are we shooting people or what?”
“Are we shooting?”
“That’s what I am asking you.”
“What’s the answer?”
“I don’t know the answer. That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

It seems there is no answer: Our spatial disorientation is now combined with the moral and political disorientations initiated by this Beckett-esque dialogue. Who is this man and what is he waving? Should the soldier be afraid of him? Is he still the enemy now that the war is over? Is it morally or politically legitimate to shoot this man now? How has his status changed, and therefore how has the soldier’s relationship to him shifted? Who is the soldier talking to and does he have the authority to make these decisions? Political markers have been erased, and it is apparent that the political markers were also tethered to moral ones: in wartime, without the political key, the moral map is nonsensical.

The soldier stops shouting questions, and the camera pans a quick and dizzying 180 degrees across the surreal desert landscape, yet a deeper unbalancing, a further unmooring. We see a few military men in the background and none are paying particular attention to the soldier. He will have to decide what to do on his own. His is unguided by a moral compass or clear narrative, inhabiting in a space of radical ambiguity, perhaps one of fear, but also of potential options. His next move can be entirely unscripted by military, moral or political stock narratives.²⁰ The *mise-en-scene* contains the externalization of the soldier’s internal struggle. It allows the viewer to experience at a

²⁰ A following scene further highlights the inability of scripted narratives to make sense of experience; we see a reporter struggle to find the right frame to describe the picture behind her of soldiers dancing in the desert, and we watch her cut herself off multiple times, never satisfied with the clichéd phrases she chooses to narrate the action.

bodily level the destabilization inherent to a space of ambiguity, highlighting both the unease and the possibility it heralds.

The soldier looks through his rifle's binocular and sees that the man in the distance is waving a white flag, but also has a gun, though he is not brandishing it and seems to be holding it more out of protection than attack. Yet through the rifle's monocular viewfinder we see the man notice that the soldier is pointing his gun at him, and so begins to pick up his gun. His move restabilizes the soldier: the soldier sees a gun and sees that it is about to be pointed toward him; his military expectations come back, his options have diminished, and perhaps he experiences a desire to relieve the fear of disorientation and escape this uncomfortable and dizzying state. The soldier quickly shoots and kills the man.

This ending of the scene is not what I find most provoking, although it does show the profound desire to escape the discomfort provoked by radical ambiguity; in fact, it is a lesson as to the difficulty of committing to disorientation as a practice. The soldier seems to recognize only after he shoots the man how his actions may have provoked the man to hold up his gun, how his movements may have instigated the shooting; he turns away in disgust and shame over the dead man's body while his military friends cheer him on in the background. The soldier has no resources at this point to think outside the narratives governing his understanding of the event. He may not have had the courage to stay in a place of ambiguity, but as spectators we are able to experience the unscripted, decentering space of a world without clear signposts or guidance. What is most powerful about this scene is not the action that occurs on-screen, but the space that this action and disorientation creates for the spectator; the scene provides the conditions for reexamining

the military action it displays from a new perspective. By disrupting the givenness of narrative expectations, the soldier's choices become re-politicized; his motives are the consequence of a series of calculations and decisions which were not inevitable, and which we do not have to sanction or legitimate. The initial ungrounding the scene creates provides the grounding for the spectator to question the soldier's decision right away. This is not to say that the scene provides any answers, but instead opens a space where decisions can be questioned. It is unclear for us what concrete or final judgments to make during that scene, and we are left unsure (as is the soldier) as to whether he made the right choice, although we do know for sure its devastating consequence.

In a later scene in *Three Kings*, the army soldier from the earlier scene, Sergeant Troy Barlow, has become captive of a soldier in the Iraqi army after illegally attempting to steal gold that Saddam Hussein had originally stolen from Kuwait. The situation at first seems quite clear: Barlow is tied to a chair with electric wires attached to his ears, and the Iraqi soldier is towering over him. Yet the interrogating soldier starts to ask Barlow questions about Michael Jackson; this initial disarming of expectations is furthered by the dialogue that follows. The Iraqi soldier explains why he finds America a "sick fucking country" that hates blacks in the same way it hates Arabs, and then asks Barlow if the Americans are coming back to help the children of Iraq survive after the devastation of war. Barlow responds that the Americans are not coming back, a statement which in this context implies that the American military does not care about the children it leaves behind. This dialogue has the power to undermine American assumptions about why Americans went to war, what they were aiming to do, and whether their actions were morally righteous; American spectators experience the

interpretation of this war from an entirely different angle. While there is no condoning of Iraqi actions, this discussion complicates the conventional moral coding of American intervention; the scene is not asking us to decry America as now evil and Iraq as now good, but instead asks us to observe more nuanced readings that complicate easy moral designations.

The soldier registers Barlow's information for a moment, then motions to the other soldiers and they begin to shock Barlow, which they do while shielding their faces from watching – their reaction is yet another complication as to the moral coding of the evil other. Barlow's face registers enormous pain, which dramatically ends when the electric current is shut off; he seems dazed, but the conversation quietly resumes. The Iraqi soldier coolly explains to Barlow that the Americans had bombed out his entire neighborhood, and that a concrete block fell on his wife – she now has no legs. The horror of this image registers on Barlow's face and he responds sympathetically (if not self-servingly), to which the soldier then explains that her amputation wasn't even the beginning of his horror– his infant son died when a bomb blew up his house. The Iraqi asks Barlow to “imagine in your heart” what that would feel like, and Barlow does, as the image of his own infant daughter blowing up flashes on the screen. The man who first appeared to be the embodiment of evil is a man who both tortures Barlow and deeply suffers the death and wounding of his family from what seems to him a completely unjust military action perpetrated by America. Barlow is a man who wants to protect his family and his fellow soldiers, yet he is also the same soldier who commenced the film by killing a man, who attempts to steal gold, and who wants to leave a small village where the shooting of Iraqis, which he may be able to prevent, is imminent. Through this

dialogue and its concurrent images, we are provided a much more critical and convoluted picture of American military action, and how it registers in the individual lives of human beings who are perpetrating its action or being targeted for destruction. The given assumptions of good and evil, right and wrong, are radically destabilized: American action both liberated Kuwait and killed human beings, many of whom seem just as human and as fallible as the American soldier protagonists on screen. We see the war from the eyes of those it hurts and kills: a perspective that provides a deepening, a complexity, an ambiguity of the conventional designations of right and wrong permeating state justification for military action.

The film cuts away from the two soldiers to follow other courses of action, but when we return they are engaged in another dialogue. The Iraqi man explains that he entered the army to make money for his family, but now he is unable to leave. We know from earlier scenes that Barlow also joined the army for the same reason, and that his desire to provide for his family is why he attempted to steal the gold. The Iraqi then explains that all of his Army training, including his English language skills and his interrogation techniques, came from America. He also asserts that he is not proud of his army's actions, and that Barlow should be more critical of his army as well. Another shifting occurs here; the men identify with each other (or we identify them together); both are in similar military positions with no power over the course of their military's actions, both are young middle-class fathers, both joined the army to provide a decent lifestyle for their families, and both use these motives to engage in less-than-noble action. In some sense, they become interchangeable: who is good now, and who is evil? The answer is neither; both have become too complex for either clumsy designation. The evil man, the

villainous other, is humanized: he does not become “good”, but rather he becomes “human”; he exists in a localized space, with a family, a life and an anger because all of it has been destroyed. And these are the same designations used to characterize the American sergeant, who both cares about his family and tries to steal gold from an Iraqi village, an act that inadvertently causes the death of Iraqi civilians. Both men are part of a larger apparatus that enacts horrible destruction on others. And both are victims of their government’s rhetoric; we hear the Iraqi’s blanket hatred of America and empty justification for entering Kuwait, and we also hear Barlow’s flimsy explanation for why America invaded Iraq: “for stability” and “to stabilize the region”: he repeats these phrases vacantly without knowing how to go further in understanding his military’s mission. Both men feel they are guided by necessity, and attempt to make good personal calculations, but both make judgments with dire consequences that can be deeply questioned.

These two scenes open a space for profound recognition of human vulnerability and moral ambiguity, and both emphasize the devaluation of state rhetoric in favor of more complex renderings of lived experience. While neither of the scenes I discuss lead to redemptive action – the waving Iraqi man is still killed, the American army soldier is still tortured – the end of the film concludes with more emancipating and unexpected measures. The American soldiers who attempted to steal the gold repudiate military protocol, military rhetoric, and the commands of military leadership to help the Iraqis who were slated for death by Saddam’s army escape across the border to Iran. The escape is enacted by preying on the limitations of the military: the soldiers arrange for the media to film live their rescue of these people -- an act which, though humanitarian, breaches

military protocol. Once the rescue is broadcast nationwide, the military leadership cannot punish these “heroic” soldiers without tarnishing its own reputation for humane action. The ending is not fully uplifting: one of the four main American soldiers has died, and The power of the ending is in the soldiers’ deliberate effort to slough of the military narratives of good and evil, right and wrong, which have previously governed their behavior, and then exploit the limitations of the military and the media to generate new forms of action. Each soldier has come, in different ways, to challenge or renounce earlier understandings of themselves and their role in the world; we can only surmise that Barlow’s experiences at the beginning and middle of the film had disoriented and dislodged the rhetoric that governed his earlier behavior, and allowed him to open to the ambiguity of his disorienting voyage. It seems he did allow himself to question and critique his previous forms of understanding, which thus provided him the resources he lacked at the beginning of the film, and which now lead him to more original and imaginative judgments. *Three Kings* doesn’t proscribe new mandates for state action but instead, by demonstrating and critiquing the qualities of state military action, shows us one way of working around and outside of these hegemonic forms, of subverting these institutions through their own constraints.

Three Kings has itself taken on huge resonance in the Post-9/11 era when Americans are mired in another war with Iraq; the film is slated for a rare theatrical re-release in the winter of 2004. A film that attempts to work through the assumptions of national rhetoric seems most important in the current political climate, and may perhaps open up a nationwide space for questioning the logic of melodramatic discourse. In much of *Three Kings*, traditional moral markers have been erased, and viewers are thrust in a

space of disorientation, ambiguity, fear, and yet possibility and critique. Spectators don't have to agree with or condone the choices made by the actors on screen; these moments of ambiguity can unground us enough from narrative expectations so that we have the space to be critical of the characters' decisions, so that we can reside for a little while in an ambiguous situation and see what new thoughts, what critical readings, arise. The openness to ambiguity, which *Three Kings* illuminates, is a practice that works against the constitutive power of melodrama by orienting oneself to the randomness of events, to the contingency of life both personal and collective. This practice divests one of the assumption that life is played out on a battlefield of good and evil, and consequently encourages the reexamination of life from new perspectives undictated by melodramatic expectation. Dislodging expectation allows one to see the world, and one's place in the world, anew. A bold and perplexing film can open up the space of deliberation once again at a time when this space is most desperately needed. The film can hopefully help to disrupt the givenness of the contemporary moment, and while it does not house any concrete answers for grappling with the present, or provide detailed prescriptions for the future, it can contribute to denaturalizing and repoliticizing present action to the point that questioning and critiquing this action, and imagining creative alternatives, become nationally revalued methods of profound political work.