

Bradford Nordeen  
Dissertation Sample  
Submitted September 14, 2009

*Ravishing!* Cinematic Pathos in the American Avant-Garde

Kenneth Anger's early short film *Fireworks* (1947) contains many provocative visions: his swooning sailor pieta, his phallic gags, a harrowing back alley attack and the curious piety his protagonist maintains throughout. On each occasion I've found to attend public screenings of the film, I've witnessed an audience awash in bemused chortles and then gasps as violence is heaped upon his body. These images which cause fits of laughter and exclamation evince pathos within one of avant-garde cinema's most canonical works. Pathos is a language of intent, a tactic used to evoke empathy, sympathy and to entrance the spectator in the scene. What place does this emotional appeal, typically the aim of Hollywood weepies and melodramas, have in such a dissident narrative?

The term pathos appears in many of the foundational writings on the avant-garde. Parker Tyler, P. Adams Sitney, and David James all refer to pathos in their studies. For these writers, pathos rests in the distilled moments, where a sincere sadness peeks through the compositions or performative nature of their early subjects. These readings are reflective of the Romantic or auterist approaches that early avant-garde studies undertook. In Sitney's *Visionary Film*, pathos ebbs its classical undertones and resonates through Willard Maas' delicate filming of sculptures and the mythological referents of Anger's swooning pieta. Parker Tyler locates pathos in the human elements that cut through spasmodic performances, dismissing the instances where elements of popular pathos are consciously exploited in the avant-garde text. He emphasizes the sober moments, behind the underground cinema's privileging of chaos and glitter; pathos lurks, for instance, under the make-up that clutters the face

of Jack Smith.<sup>1</sup> For Tyler, the crudeness of the frenzied performances filmed by figures like Smith, Mike and George Kuchar, and Ken Jacobs typically labor against any “human sweetness and pathos [that might] manage to come through...”<sup>2</sup> Yet the appropriation that these filmmakers engage in as they rend images and styles from older Hollywood models indicates a conscious criticality. The works that Tyler admonishes as “idiot-grin camp versions of commercial pop films” navigate through the pathos of their originary models.<sup>3</sup> But how do those structured forms of feeling function in the avant-garde?

This study explores traditional cinematic pathos in a different narratological system, ripped from the screens of Hollywood and collaged into three distinctive films. These objects of study look to past cinemas for their lexical rubric, from silent spectacles to *Mildred Pierce*, and span four decades of avant-garde film production. Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks*, George Kuchar’s *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (1966), and Tom Rhoads’s *Green* (1989) all rob from genres of pathos and set these formulae to work on disparate projects. This translation not only enables an emotional tactic to find resonance within a difficult genre, it forces the originary tactic to expand, stripping emotive cues from their familiar format to expose the constructed nature of their affectivity.

Pathos is a slippery topic; few texts explore the term as an explicit subject of study. Examinations in film studies predominantly observe pathos as it contributes to the machinations of melodrama and the woman’s film. I will approach these avant-garde films using texts which primarily analyze pathos in popular forms, from French theatrical melodrama, the 1940s woman’s film, to an overarching American tendency towards the melodramatic. An understanding of the persuasive function in these originary models will gain greater insight into how certain strategies function or falter

within this self-reflexive artists' cinema. I will follow the consciously incorporated affective gestures and the associative nature of generic objects within the text. To this effect, this study questions how viewers engage with a particular type of avant-garde film. Such responses arise, in part, from authorial intent. The incorporation of structural and narrative tropes and forms of signification can be exploited to provide more emotionally accurate uses of the language of dominant fictions. Resonant instances still occur in these most distancing films. As the analysis below will elucidate, distance is an unlikely key to pathos' functioning; it is the very separation from the *other* that causes the text to be moving. The avant-garde's method of distanciation offers a form of pathos that is critical as it points up this distinction and proves more facilitating to subjective forms of feeling that destabilize the sovereignty of its Hollywood models.

### **Pathos**

Pathos is pejoratively associated with pity, excess and typically feminine emotionality or passions. Etymologically, pathos comes from Greek where its meaning broadens into suffering, deep feeling, or sensation. Suffering layers the term with a persuasive purpose, as the victim must *suffer* something on behalf of another. Aristotle first employs the term in his *Rhetoric* book as one of the primary considerations in oration, since "things appear different to someone under the influence of emotion." The study of pathos was taken up to effect judgment through emotional address, where it is considered one of the "first-rate factors" to the presentation of an argument *as important as reason*.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle analyzes each affective emotion, not associating pathos with pity but instead using the term with regard to the persuasion of an audience. Anger, love, enmity, shamelessness and

indignation are some of the emotions he considers. Thus, pathos connotes an appeal, an emotional evocation that alters one's perception of the argument or scene. This persuasive act, putting the subject into a certain frame of mind, requires a speaking and receptive party, one who is willing to submit to something, to allow or endure. To be subjugated, as if by spell.

Much of the writing on cinematic pathos is indebted to Peter Brooks's foundational study of the melodramatic mode in literature. Brooks analyzes melodrama through its history in French theater, leading up to its incorporation into the modernist novels of Honoré de Balzac and Henry James, who utilize the economy and metaphoric nature of melodrama's Manichean means of storytelling. As his literary study traces the popular format from which Hollywood melodrama would evolve into the high art domain of the modernist novel, *The Melodramatic Imagination* proves an exemplary text in following the translation of pathos from Hollywood to avant-garde film.

Brooks defines melodrama as a style of interpretive clarity; even in the most turbulent stories, the scene *visually* yields precise interpretive schemata. "Significant things and gestures are necessarily metaphoric in nature because they must refer to and speak of something else. Everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it."<sup>5</sup> Therefore plot is not the sole messenger of meaning. The entire diegetic world conveys purpose in a moral physiognomy. As Thomas Elsaesser later observed, the scene works to create an entire emotional terrain.<sup>6</sup> Not simply a matter of narrative, pathos is invested in each element that fills its discursive diegesis, constructing a psychological environment that yields its moral or emotional meaning through its very appearance. In the popular cinema, the viewer

engages with this world – protagonist, antagonist, the couch and the throw pillows – all of which parlays the message at an affective and symbolic level.

The pathetic text in this popular cinema is immersive, implying a form of emotive possession, one who is gripped by the emotional situation, narrative or scene.<sup>7</sup> The protagonist would seem the likely point of identification, as it is through her that we gain access to this diegetic world. Linda Williams' important revision of melodrama gathers prior theoretical interpretations of pathos and illustrates how such viewer engagement is deceptively complex. Interpreting the genre work of Christine Gledhill, Williams posits pathos as a conflicted remove from a text that appears to promote pure identification. In melodrama, the spectator's omniscient viewpoint on the diegesis creates distance from the protagonist who does not share in this knowledge of the broader scene. "Pathos in the spectator is thus never merely a matter of losing oneself in 'over-identification.' It is never a matter of simply mimicking the emotion of the protagonist, but, rather, a complex negotiation between emotion and thought."<sup>8</sup> Like a broken Jimmy Stewart peering through the telephoto lens, the viewer observes more than the protagonist is able to ascertain. And like Stewart, the powerlessness to intervene contributes greatly to the surmounting pathos of a scene.

In her study of desire and the 1940s woman's film, Mary Ann Doane describes disproportion as "the very mechanism of pathos."<sup>9</sup> An uneven balance in cause and effect, crime and punishment elicits in the viewer an elevated sense of injustice. In the mode of melodrama it illustrates moral definitude: the virtuous are without fault and the evil, irredeemable. Such a language is not one of ambiguity or sophistication but immediate access, excess, and clarity. Pathos speaks in the language of the narrative subjects it frequents; if the pathetic subjects of melodrama

are predominantly women and children, so its language is evident and unfettered by the intricacy of complex and esoteric models.

Doane revisits pathos within more critical environs in her recent article, 'Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes'. There, she observes pathos as "an object, a topic, a content" of this experimental cinema. Haynes' films use genre forms to investigate the inner workings of filmic and social conventions to a degree that is not merely affective, Doane argues, but enables a critical engagement with the formal qualities of pathos where it is "signified", less "tactic" than "topic".<sup>10</sup> What Doane and others have found so appealing in Haynes' cinema is his capacity to access this critical position while maintaining a degree of affect.<sup>11</sup> Though pathos confronts its structural conventions, it continues to move.

In her article, Doane positions pathos as functioning in several different formulations within narrative: as directorial intent, spectator space and marginalized subject position. In its customary approach, pathos functions as a direct appeal, a tactic taken to on the filmmaker's behalf to arouse an emotional response. Yet pathos implies further the receptive viewer in reading narratives, "one who is taken in, often to the point of tears;"<sup>12</sup> pathos names an immersive space from which the spectator is positioned *to be moved*, broadening the function of pathos beyond a structural device. Doane also assigns pathos to the subject of representation, where it constitutes an abjected social position, one who lacks the status or agency required of the tragic figure. The subject of pathos is a character of lower social standing who will collide with the oppressive social factors and is typically a woman, child or queer.

## Avant-Garde

In the 1940s and 50s, the avant-garde cinema was a dramatic affair; many of the trance films that remain today are linear constructions based around performances (typically taken to by the filmmaker) staged within an oneiric atmosphere. Though these were not the only type of film produced within a diverse cinematic movement, trance films were the primary mode of American avant-garde filmmaking in its infancy. There, the diegesis was intended to evoke dream logic with associative properties invested in the objects and situations through which the protagonist drifted and acted out against. The protagonist's slow and dreamy passage through space played to the archetype of the somnambulist, visually epitomized by the character of Cesare in *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* (1920). These trance films frequently accrue the additional moniker of psychodrama, as the (self)performance seemed to enable the character-as-filmmaker a critical environment to work through the personal and emotional drama at the root of these staged plights. The camera was a tool to create or interpret the dream and primarily framed the scene at a distance, a third party to this theatrical staging of psychical drama.

As approaches within the avant-garde evolved, footage was filmed with a waning emphasis on focal protagonists, through a hand-held camera which suggested points of view. The filmmaker, still the protagonist of these films, was positioned behind the camera in a direct attempt to suggest the reproduction of individual visions and the associative nature of thought processes. Editing in these lyrical films generated metaphors in montage juxtapositions and began to privilege the image in a symbolic way – connoting a mythology that extended beyond the physical world captured by the camera. The causal linearity in the first wave of production gave way to a more free-form assemblage strategy. From this position, with the screen vying to

indexically reproduce the ocular sensations and personal psychology of the filmmaker, the viewer is placed in a literally embodying position, presented with a work which is intended to accurately portray the psychological and cognitive perceptions of that artist. As avant-garde historian, Paul Arthur describes it, this “direct subjective seeing mobilized montage strategies in order to express, through rhythm and metaphoric image combinations, a sensual immediacy of perception.”<sup>13</sup>

The melodramatic nature of Hollywood narratives presented an emotional model from which to work and amend. Pathos flowed through many of these genres (in particular: weepies, Westerns, children’s films), and from the margins, members of the avant-garde took to that formal and narrative rhetoric and expanded it. The avant-garde filmmakers were primarily social or economic minorities not represented by the dominant cinema.<sup>14</sup> But certain mainstream objects contained fleeting moments of truth that seemed to press through the constructed particulars of these pop narratives.<sup>15</sup> Jack Smith based entire reveries on a fleeting moment of utopian glee glimpsed in the smile of Maria Montez. George Kuchar’s homemade melodramas convert the plastic materiality of 40s and 50s sci-fi matinees and weepies into deeply personal and hysterical narratives of sexual parody. When these divergent worlds collide in the disproportionately melodramatic or kitsch moments to which Parker Tyler so objects, the popular mode is not merely mimicked, but it is entirely reformulated and the content is similarly subverted. In the hands of Luther Price, this melodramatic material is obsessively torn from its conventional structure and its familiar metaphoric registers of signification are deployed in the most distancing of projects. In his film, *Green*, the destabilizing nature of these effects generate the sensation of alienation and turmoil in the spectator that is the film’s subject. Price

deploys the affective tactics of melodramatic cinema to reproduce in his viewers the very topic of the film.

This study employs theories of pathos as they appear in writings on melodrama. The initial theorists who took up Brooks *literary* observations and applied them to film studies did so at a period where interest in the “genre” of melodrama (with its many subsets: family melodrama, weepie, underworld melodrama...) provided popular examples to the political concerns of the 1970s and 1980s academe. That period was prolific and predominantly governed by advances in the field through Feminist and Neo-Marxist film theories closely aligned to psychoanalytic models of approach. While several of the cinematic studies I will refer to in the following pages do emerge from this period, and with this psychoanalytic tendency at the forefront of their concerns, the governing methodology of my approach is not psychoanalytic in its designs.

Instead, I would like to explore the writings on a cinematic tactic to arrive at a discursive approach to these forms. I propose, contrary to the sensations it produces, pathos has more to do with distance than it might seem. Defined by the separation between protagonist and spectator, where, across this division, emotional resonance grows, pathos finds an unlikely counterpart in the avant-garde. Though the pathetic text is created to draw in the spectator to the breaking point, the tears this yields arise from the felt divide between viewer and character and the powerlessness of the former in the tale at hand. As the narrative unfolds and peril strikes, the viewer can only watch, helpless to intervene. And while melodrama works to conceal the constructions of this diegetic space through editing and further cinematic conventions, the avant-garde proposes a reflexive space of distance. In this project, I wish to