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The Return of Melodrama

On nostalgia and neo-noir in contemporary culture



HBO's *Sharp Objects* (2018)

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In certain very visible arenas of pop culture there has been a considerable interest in what I would call a kind of neo-noir-Americana—an amalgamated revival of film noir tropes alongside a valorization of a distant or unattainable American identity whose quaintness seems ironic and earnest in equal measure.

Some prominent examples include Lana Del Rey's (in some ways unexpected) mainstream success, TV shows like *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018) or *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017—) that are awash in the visual culture of film noir, and the reboot of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return* on Showtime in 2017. Though their respective vehicles of delivery are unique, what unites these cultural objects is an obsession with the simultaneous longing for and impossibility of an American identity. These instances of neo-noir-Americana are brimming with what movies and music videos tell us an American dream could look like—surreal and folksy erotic thrills alongside easily legible moral quandaries.

A lurid goodness

For instance, the women of *Sharp Objects* and *Big Little Lies*, in the tradition of melodrama (the original term used for many films now considered quintessential noir), face a patriarchal monolith that compromises their agency, and we crave seeing justice meted out in some way. Yet, alongside any appetite for goodness to prevail, there is a lurid quality as well. One could understand *Big Little Lies* as a complex rape fantasy, and the ending of the first season not as an instance of empowerment, but rather as a masochistic conclusion to the ugly joy that all of visual culture takes in images of abused women. So, we likewise love and condemn Lana Del Rey for letting a biker gang pass her around like a cigarette in the video *Ride* (2012) and we long to be Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks*, even as we repudiate her as a product of a masculinist imagination.



TV shows like the reboot of David Lynch's "Twin Peaks: The Return" on Showtime are examples of neo-noir Americana

Americana has, in some way, always been melodramatic and nostalgic at its core. As the film scholar Linda Williams argued in her book "[Playing the Race Card](#)", melodrama (and by extension nostalgia) form a cornerstone of American culture: "Melodrama can be viewed, then, not as a genre, an excess, or an aberration, but as what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions."

Those moral questions are often terrifying ones. It is important that neo-noir-Americana has been especially prevalent in the years leading up to and throughout the Donald Trump administration, whose motto "Make America Great Again" is a rallying cry for nostalgia. The Trump campaign has betted that an appeal to an abstract America of yesteryear is the most profitable way to mobilize voters. The recent increased visibility of white nationalism is tied to Trump's often racist rhetoric—both using nostalgia in seeking to rescue mythical claims about white male supremacy. As Toni Morrison has [argued](#), paranoia and shame are the operative emotions in this nostalgic impulse, and they are two qualities often manifest in melodrama and *film noir*.

Sure, melodrama can offer a vision of the new

Sure, melodrama can offer a vision of the new, or the good life, but in recent years its *modus operandi* has been to revel in the doldrums of cyclicity. Consider the nihilism of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, which ends with Laura Palmer finally understanding that there is no way out of an endless cycle of abuse and despair (and reboots). From a Lynchian space of cruel repetition emerges even more recent examples of neo-noir-Americana, like Natasha Lyonne's *Russian Doll* (2019). [Sherrie Levine's recent work](#), always an endless iteration of Levine herself as it appropriates from an ever-expanding list of

other artists, feels like the peak of a glorious depression sprung from the postmodern realization that nothing can ever be new.



Artists like Lorna Simpson engage with nostalgia as a potentially recuperative strategy (Here, *White Roses* (2011)). © Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth)

Queerness is implicated in this history, since camp and drag (themselves often cyclical in their reliance on appropriation) draw heavily on melodramatic and noir-ish discourses. Moreover, the American stage and screen at the height of melodrama's and film noir's popularity often displayed elements of queer subversion and excess. Many gay men have drawn inspiration and empowerment from weeping starlets and strapping onscreen hunks who we imagine might switch teams from time to time (as Rock Hudson, a figurehead of melodrama, did in a very public way with his AIDS diagnosis). An erasure from mass culture may result in a persistent attachment to it—a longtime contention of queer theorists of color.

Visual artists including Steve McQueen and [Lorna Simpson](#) engage with nostalgia as a potentially recuperative strategy: in a way that de-centers the whiteness of the past and opens up a space for artists who were often previously marginalized to love the fragments of culture that they also interrogate. They advance the radical enjoyment of popular culture by people whose representation in that culture is tenuous at best (which is also a queer/feminist strategy). It is no mistake that melodrama and *noir* have always dealt forcefully with race, as with the *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a foundational melodrama in American popular culture whose seemingly progressive intent belies an ingrained racism—or more recent examples like McQueen's *Widows*, which foregrounds a history of the erasure of black bodies in crime and action dramas.

Sentimentality as a meeting place

In the work of artists like [Anne Collier](#)—whose feminist examination of filmic media could be considered to include the sentimentality (both affirmative and deconstructive) that has come to be associated with queerness—sentimentality itself

might be the essential meeting place for feminism and queer theory, which have often been kept apart.



David Benjamin Sherry, *Wildfire At Heart, Page Arizona* (2015). Courtesy of the Artist and Morán Morán, Los Angeles

Nonetheless, the most formative pop star of my lifetime, Lady Gaga, has made her career through a queered and feminist noir with her fabulous clichés of dark streets, lounge singers, *femmes fatales*, B-movies, evil lurking in the shadows of everyday life, sentimental love stories, and glamorous dames of a bygone time. (Still, there has always been a potentially conservative element to queer nostalgia—as with all nostalgia: note the feverish reception of Lady Gaga’s *A Star is Born*, which I view as ultimately hetero-patriarchal).

We are in a widespread state of re-rehearsal (there have been three *A Star is Born* remakes)—a productive sampling of avant-garde and nostalgic elements of culture alike. David Benjamin Sherry’s work is a useful example. It has often been understood as a “queering” of a nostalgic, patriarchal Americana and his subversion of the great white men who photographed the Western landscape was how I [initially reviewed](#) his work. However, as we have seen, queerness, melodrama, nostalgia and the “American dream” have always gone hand-in-hand. I wonder, though, if there is a way to understand Sherry’s engagement with sentimentality and melodrama that is not purely critical or oppositional.

Enjoying a problematic idea

What artists like Sherry, Levine, Collier, Simpson and McQueen are insisting upon is that that one can attach to a problematic idea—like “America” or “glamour” or “Hollywood”—in a way that is both critical and composed of honest enjoyment. That enjoyment can be radical. At its worst, nostalgia is synonymous with regressive politics: at its best, it represents an investment in interiority.

In the words of the [title track](#) from the album “American Dream” by the band LCD Soundsystem: “Find the place where you can be boring / Where you won’t need to explain / That you’re sick in the head / and you wish you were dead.” We are indeed in the place where we can be boring, and that boredom can be fantastic and transporting.

In the recent onslaught of cultural phenomena that we feel we have seen before, there is both dread and possibility. It is neither pure postmodern nihilism nor a state of post-irony or sincerity (there are thousands of Twitter users ready to turn every genuine experience of enjoyment into a sardonic meme). All we can do perhaps is take solace in knowing that every epoch is marked by moments of simultaneously crippling and freeing ambivalence. Even that is not new either.

