Signifying Objects, Embodied Ideas, and Melodrama

Agustin Zarzosa, University of California, Los Angeles, US

Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay on melodrama, *Tales of Sound and Fury*, begins with a quotation by Douglas Sirk in which the director discusses his use of color in *Written on the Wind* (1956). Sirk explains that he intended to bring out the inner violence of characters by accentuating the harshness of objects (Elsaesser, 1991: 68). Extending Sirk's observation to the Hollywood family melodrama of the forties and fifties, Elsaesser notes that objects crowd in on the characters, invade their personalities, stand in for them, and ultimately "become more real than the human relations or emotions they were intended to symbolize." (Elsaesser, 1991: 84) As a result, everyday objects become legible signs, expressing both inner conflicts and emotional articulations inaccessible to the characters themselves.

Peter Brooks' equally influential account of the melodramatic imagination also attributes an important role to objects. Like Elsaesser, Brooks claims that objects cease to be merely themselves to suggest another kind of reality (Brooks, 1995: 9). Belonging to the material world, objects constitute an ideal means for extrapolating from the realm of reality to that of truth. Through such an extrapolation, Brooks explains, things become subsumed under a drama of morality; they exist merely to impose the evidence of moral forces and imperatives (Brooks, 1995: 13).

Although the widespread interpretation of objects in film analysis suggests that they remain a legitimate source of implicit and symptomatic meaning, the theoretical consideration of objects has shifted to questions of affect, body, memory, and time (Deleuze, 1986; Marks, 2000; Stern, 2004). Despite this shift, I believe that the question of how objects generate meaning has not yet been exhausted. Attempting to theorize the melodramatic object, this essay traces its genealogy by means of a classification of cinematic objects. My claim is that the melodramatic object's transformation into a moral idea depends on a threefold process that obliterates the object's fundamental role in human oppression.

I classify cinematic objects according to the three Kantian ideas of reason -- the world, the self, and God. For Kant, these ideas are problems without any definite solution: what characterizes them is their non-correspondence to any sensible representation or concept. However, despite our inability to represent or conceptualize these ideas adequately, Kant argues that we cannot avoid them because they regulate both our understanding of ourselves and of our actions (Kant, 1997: 394-408). Objects are a means of articulating, albeit inadequately, these three ideas. Accordingly, objects are *stoic* when they intend to represent the world as a rational realm, *skeptic* when they endeavor to clarify the identity of the self, and *devotional* when they attempt to connect us to God. The following three sections discuss, respectively, each of these types of objects. I conclude by explaining how this classification clarifies the function of the melodramatic object.

The group of films I discuss is deliberately eclectic: it includes melodramas such as *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Wings of the Dove* (1997), and *Hilary and Jackie* (1999); European art films such as *Senso* (1954), *L'histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975), *Jerusalem* (1996), and *Dogville* (2003); films of the fantastic such as *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955) and π (1998); a musical, *Dancer in the Dark* (2000); and a science-fiction film, *Total Recall* (1990). This eclecticism aims at suggesting, first, that the moral signification of objects is not a problem exclusive of melodrama and, second, that the meaning of objects is not constrained by genre boundaries.

1. Stoic Objects: From Bondage to Rationality

In Hegel's famous discussion of self-consciousness, nothing mediates the struggle that results in the master and slave figures. Nevertheless, the resolution of this struggle demands that the master and slave mediate their relationship by means of objects: the slave expresses obedience by transforming them while the master exercises power by consuming them. In other words, the object's everyday use concretizes a power relationship, whose constitutive poles are production and consumption. Hegel explains that the master's relation to things is "a fleeting one," while the slave's desire held in check "forms and shapes the thing." (Hegel, 1977: 118) In this process of transforming things, the slave imprints meaning, purpose, and sense on them, abstracting things from their everyday use and situating them in the realm of signification. By means of this abstraction, the slave creates a parallel, rational realm where freedom from bondage becomes possible. Objects not only create an imaginary space for this realm, but also embody and signify freedom itself.

I call these objects that express an ideal state of affairs stoic, insofar as they articulate a rational realm of freedom. In his discussion of the expressive qualities of close-ups (which refers both to faces and things), Deleuze explains, "The Stoics showed that things themselves were bearers of ideal events which did not exactly coincide with their properties, their actions and their reaction." (Deleuze, 1986: 97) Rather than identifying these ideal events with sensations, feelings, or ideas, Deleuze defines them as "the quality of a possible sensation, feeling, or idea." (Deleuze, 1986: 98) In this characterization of the close-up as an affective quality, Deleuze is surely referring to what the Stoics called first movements -- physical states such as contractions, expansions, appetites, and disinclinations that precede emotions. Emotions imply assent to these physical states and, therefore, constitute judgments. This distinction between first movements and emotions was essential for the ethical project of Stoicism: despite accepting the inevitability of first movements, Stoics believed one could control one's emotions, that is, one's responses to first movements, by means of a rational disposition.

The creation of stoic objects involves both first movements and emotions: objects generate first movements by implying or suggesting an idea to us; emotions substitute and efface first movements when, as Stoics, we consider that objects not only suggest ideas, but also manifest them. For the Stoic, the object corresponds to the idea. *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955) exemplifies how first movements devolve into emotional attachments to objects. Archibaldo, a rich and spoiled boy, is fascinated by his mother's music box. When his governess' death seems to confirm that the music box will execute any killing he wishes, Archibaldo assigns his feelings of omnipotence and narcissism to the music box. Years later, as an adult, Archibaldo (Ernesto Alonso) finds the music box at an antique shop. By rekindling Archibaldo's narcissism, feelings of omnipotence, and murderous

desires, the music box thwarts his relationships with women. Archibaldo can overcome his narcissism and initiate a healthy romantic relationship only by renouncing to the music box.

Stoic objects are essentially intellectual, expressing an ideal quality beyond their physical properties. Stoics imprint ideas on objects to construct a realm of interiority and to endure the hardships characteristic of the external world. In film narratives, photographs are perhaps the objects most frequently turned into signs of an ideal world, mainly because they reproduce a realistic image of such a world while bracketing it from any spatial or temporal continuity that would undermine its ideality. They easily embody the ideas of innocence, romance, family, home and, most conspicuously, loss itself. Such ideals may either serve the purposes of stoic optimism or defeatism: the photo of Elsie Stoneman which sustains Bennie Cameron during the Civil War in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), exemplifies the former; the idyllic photo of Letty in *The Wind* (1928), which offers her no hope but reveals the changes she has undergone in the West, illustrates the latter.

In *Now, Voyager* (1942), the photo album documenting the failure of Charlotte's (Bette Davis') only romantic relationship helps her endure her suffocating domestic situation by preserving a realm of romance, adventure, and transgression that offers her solace from her mother's tyranny. Once Charlotte repeats her adventure during a cruise trip to Brazil, the photo album loses its significance, and a camellia, signaling her undisclosed relationship with Jerry, occupies its place as the embodiment of mystery and transgression. Whereas the photo's inextricable link to the past imposes a complete separation between the realms of bondage and freedom, the non-referential quality of the camellia indicates a more sophisticated shape of Stoicism that inhabits the world instead of recoiling from it. In fact, the master's failure to decipher the meaning of the stoic object constitutes a source of joy for the Stoic. By means of such riddles and mysteries, the Stoic dominates the ideological struggle to impose meaning and purpose to the world.

Whereas the photo album and the camellia in *Now, Voyager* signal, respectively, the awareness of bondage and its overturning, other films stress the stoic object's role as a coping mechanism, that is, as a means for disavowing bondage by camouflaging it as freedom itself. The figurines in *Dogville* illustrate this coping mechanism quite emphatically. Grace (Nicole Kidman), a stranger looking for refuge in a secluded town called Dogville, becomes fascinated with seven china figurines at the town store. In the opinion of Tom (Paul Bettany), a resident of Dogville, believes the figurines reflect the awful character of the people in Dogville. The figurines, however, acquire a
different sense for Grace. When the town accepts her and she receives a salary for performing supposedly superfluous work, she acquires the figurines as "proof that, in spite of everything, her suffering had created something of value," as the narrator puts it. The figurines betoken her romanticized vision of Dogville as "a beautiful little town in the midst of magnificent mountains." The narrator belies Grace's distorted view of the town by commenting, "Calling Dogville beautiful was original at least."

The film invokes Stoicism explicitly when Vera (Patricia Clarkson) confronts Grace about the latter's hypothetical affair with Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård), Vera's husband, who has been raping Grace habitually. Grace tries to calm Vera by reminding her of the doctrine of Stoicism, which Grace has taught to Vera's children. Vera tests Grace's Stoicism by slashing two of the seven figures. If Grace fails to control her emotions, Vera will slash the rest of the figurines. Grace's Stoicism collapses as she cries for the first time since her childhood. As the narrator explains, the figurines were "the offspring of the meeting between the townspeople

and her." The film underscores this transformation of the China figurines into "human tissue" by equating them to Vera's children. When Grace orders her father's henchmen to kill the whole town, she offers to spare Vera if she can hold her tears while watching her children die. Grace's reasoning becomes clear if one recalls Hegel's scenario of Stoicism: by acquiring the China figurines, Grace disavows her slavish condition, turning her forced labor into a consensual relationship bearing imaginary benefits for her. This transformation explains why, after the destruction of the figurines, Grace may no longer disavow her slavish condition and must escape. The figurines sustain her fantasy that Dogville is a place unlike the corrupted city she has fled. Once they are destroyed, only the drab reality of slavery remains.

Besides sustaining this realm of freedom, these objects may also offer a reading of the Stoic's emotional trajectory through their changes of meaning. *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), another stoic film by Lars von Trier, illustrates how objects record this emotional trajectory. By means of her relationship to glasses, Selma (Björk) demonstrates her commitment to Stoicism in two different sequences. The first demonstration occurs on a railway bridge, where Jeff (Peter Stormare) realizes that Selma is blind and asks if she is able to see. Selma throws her glasses to the river and starts singing, "I've seen it all," a song that conveys not only her resignation but also her freedom from any worldly attachments. Throughout the song, Jeff asks her about things she hasn't seen, such as the Great Wall, Niagara Falls, and her grandchildren, to which Selma replies, "To be honest, I really don't care." The glasses acquire a slightly different meaning in the last scene. Before Selma is hung, Cathy (Catherine Deneuve) bursts in the room and gives Gene's (Vladica Kostic's) glasses to Selma, reassuring her that her sacrifice has been worthwhile and that Gene "will see his grandchildren." Selma holds on to Gene's glasses and, for the first time, enters her fantasy world without any aural cues. Although in both occasions the incongruous gestures signal her entrance into a fantasy space as well as her renunciation to the world, the first instance is marked by a somewhat evasive Stoicism (demonstrating a false disregard for the world), whereas the second one assumes the pain that accompanies Stoicism: she can only renounce to the world by recognizing her worldly love for Gene.

Despite their different senses (hope, adventure, mystery, or resignation), all stoic objects manifest a rational world that appeases the hardships of bondage, thus dividing the world into two opposite realms. By interiorizing this dual world, the slave abandons Stoicism to inhabit the realm of Skepticism. Accordingly, objects acquire a different function, which the following section will address.

2. Skeptic Objects: Identity Problems as a Solution to Bondage

By superimposing a rational realm over the empirical reality of bondage, the Stoic tries to undermine the importance of slavery and posit a truth inaccessible to the master. Objects are a fundamental site of struggle because they clearly distinguish the slave (the one who produces them) from the master (the one who consumes them). Stoicism overturns this relationship by creating an object that the master can't consume. Fittingly, the value that the Stoic adds to the object is always intangible, essentially of a rational nature: the stoic object may not be exchanged for labor. For Stoicism, the truth of the object is no longer its production or its consumption, but its meaning. This transformation of the world inevitable reaches the Stoic who, like the world itself, will hang between the realms of freedom and bondage, translated in Skepticism as the realms of truth and falsity. Once the problem of knowledge shifts from the creation of a rational world to the knowledge of this world and the self, we are in the domain of Skepticism.

Instead of signaling a realm of freedom, skeptic objects point toward establishing the truth of the self's identity. As withdrawn as Stoicism, Skepticism disavows earthly bondage by focusing on the internal experience of doubleness. The iconicity of photographs also makes them ideal objects for these dramas of identity. Films as dissimilar as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Music Box* (1989), and *Memento* (2000) dramatize this evidential quality of photographs. I will consider more closely the use of another recording device -- video -- as proof of identity in a science-fiction film, Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990). The hero, Doug (Arnold Schwarzenegger), is a construction worker obsessed with Mars. He goes to Rekall, a company that implants vacation memories, to take an "ego trip" -- a vacation from oneself -- as a secret agent on a mission to Mars. At this point, Doug's obsession with Mars appears as a stoic retreat from his tedious existence. However, the film turns the doubling of his world into a doubling of his own identity. The film forks into two possibilities the moment the procedure begins. The first possibility proposes that the implant fails because the procedure has triggered memories about Doug's past life as Hauser, a secret agent in Mars, which would explain his mysterious obsession with Mars. According to a second possibility, the failure of the implant constitutes the beginning of the ego trip, which becomes successful not only by inscribing its own failure but also by taking into account Doug's present life as part of a conspiracy to conceal his real identity as a secret agent.

While Doug is escaping from his persecutors, he receives a briefcase that includes a video recording where he explains to himself that he is in fact a spy working for the resistance and that he must return to Mars. After Hauser has led Cohaagen (Ronnie Cox), the colony governor, to the resistance leaders, Cohaagen tries to convince the hero that, as a double agent, Hauser has been implanted with Doug's identity to successfully infiltrate the resistance. Cohaagen shows him another video recording of Hauser that contradicts the first one and confirms Cohaagen's contention. At this point, the hero decides to disregard the evidence provided by the video recording: "Too perfect," he says. He identifies himself as a resistance leader and proceeds to save Mars. The film shows not only that objects establish the Skeptic's identity, but also that this identification ultimately hinges on the Skeptic's assent. Objects pose a challenge to the Skeptic, who, through action, either confirms or negates the proof that objects provide. Despite its evolution from Stoicism to Skepticism, the film remains aware of the stoic underpinnings of the hero's skeptic dilemma. The skeptic drama not only includes everything that the stoic ego-trip promised ("You get the girl, kill the bad guys, and save the entire planet"), but also concludes with the hero's doubts: "What if this is a dream?"

Undoubtedly, the most widespread shape of Skepticism involves the oscillation between two polar identities: for instance, in *Blade Runner*, several characters waver between identifying as humans or androids; in *Total Recall*, the hero can't decide whether he is a secret agent or a lowly construction worker trying to escape from mundanity; in *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (2003), Sinbad dithers between becoming a hero and remaining a thief. A derivative form of Skepticism no longer dithers, but rather casts doubt over the need of thinking of oneself in terms of identity. Whereas the first kind of Skepticism seeks freedom in the choice between polar identities, the second one finds it in the rejection of identity altogether. Accordingly, instead of establishing the identity of Skeptics or offering them an opportunity to ascertain it through an act, objects provide Skeptics with lines of escape from identity. In other words, objects function as fields of attraction that stray characters away from social identity. The cello in *Hilary and Jackie* (1998) exemplifies this function.

The film centers on the relationship between Jacqueline du Pre (Emily Watson), the famous British cellist who died of multiple sclerosis, and her sister Hilary (Rachel Griffiths), who remained an amateur flautist despite her enormous talent. More specifically, the film centers on a process of Deleuzian becoming, which leaves identity behind in search for the intensities of becoming in another. As children, Hilary is a more accomplished musician than Jackie. Jackie starts taking music seriously when Iris (Celia Imrie), their mother, warns her, "If you want to be with Hilary, you have to learn to play as well as Hilary." Although at first the cello is nothing but a means for becoming-Hilary, Jackie enters a process of becoming-music that eventually leaves Hilary behind. Accordingly, when the cello makes Jackie famous worldwide and separates her from Hilary, Jackie starts resenting it. During a concert tour in Russia, she places the cello in the balcony to expose it to the snow, but unexplainably the cello finds its way inside the hotel room the following morning. When she goes to a party, she intentionally leaves the cello in a taxi to prove that she is something else besides a cellist. However, the cello finds its way to the party, where Jackie, unable to attract Danny (James Frain) by her own means, seduces him by playing the cello. Taking for granted her becoming-music, Jackie seems to use the cello to attain worldly means. In fact, the film implies that her disease results from the cello's revenge: because Jackie chooses to become-Hilary over becoming-music (she marries Danny trying to imitate Hilary), the cello makes both her becoming-Hilary and her becoming-music impossible. What is left for Jackie is the cello's shrieking dissonance, which Jackie is condemned to replicate through her uncontrollable movements.

The object here does not represent an idea; instead, it enables a field of becoming where both subject and object disappear. If anything, it represents the impossibility of Jackie's becoming-Hilary indirectly. Whereas the first kind of skeptic object clarifies the meaning of an internal confusion (like the stoic object clarifies the meaning of an external state of affairs), the second kind of skeptic object enters an unmediated relationship with the hero/heroine, creating a realm of unmeaning. In other words, the former dispels confusion while the latter engenders it. Nevertheless, despite this essential difference, both kinds of skeptic objects catalyze the transformation of oppression into a problem of identity.

3. Devotional Objects: From Representation to Divinity

If representing the rationality of the world or the essence of the self are complicated tasks, representing divinity is fraught with additional difficulties. Besides imaging divinity, the devotional object purports to bring the worshiper closer to the deity and to create a space to become-divine. Consequently, the devotional object is highly unstable, taking at least two different forms: the first one operates like a contract, bonding worshiper and divinity; the second one attempts to eradicate mediation itself and, like the derivative skeptic object, triggers a block of becoming.

In his analysis of π (1998), Paul Eisenstein attributes the sinister effect of the tefillin on the hero (Sean Gullette) to the tefillin's role in the pact made between God and the Jews: God delivers the Jews from slavery but requires their obedience. He writes, "[t]he knots and straps placed on head and arm involve, as it were, a symbolic performance of self-binding of one's intellectual and bodily prowess." (Eisenstein, 2004: 16) As this example suggests, the devotional object expresses the worshiper's desire for self-enslavement. As I explained above, the Stoic uses objects to endure bondage; resorting to a different strategy, the worshiper uses them to substitute unearthly for earthly bondage. In other words, whereas the stoic object is intellectual, the devotional object is essentially spiritual. Furthermore, devotional objects are

caught in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, they function as desperate attempts to make contact with the deity; on the other, they constitute the ultimate proof that this relation with the deity is not fully unmediated. One should understand the hero's rejection of the tefillin as the search for this unmediated access to the universe.

In two films of unconditional love, *L'histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975) and *Senso* (1954), the heroines use objects (and people) as a means to establish a pact with their respective lovers. Despite her precarious situation in Halifax, Adèle (Isabelle Adjani) offers her father's money (as well as a prostitute) to Albert (Bruce Robinson). In *Senso*, Livia (Alida Valli) establishes a pact with Franz (Farley Granger), an Austrian officer, by offering him money to bribe a doctor who will declare him unfit for war. However, these objects establish weak ties between the heroines and their lovers, ultimately separating the couples rather than uniting them. Adèle's gratuitous offers render her pathetic in the eyes of Albert. Franz resents Livia precisely because she has provided him with the means for becoming a coward and a deserter. In fact, we can formulate the problem in terms of means and ends: for Adèle and Livia, money is a means to attain their respective lovers while, for these men, Adèle and Livia are a means to obtain money.

This reversal between means and end already points toward the dissolution of mediating objects. However, this dissolution spawns a transformation of the master and slave relationship, which for the first time becomes a relationship between subject and object. Only through this process of becoming-object can the worshiper enter an unmediated relationship. What is perhaps most perplexing about this relationship is that, in a certain sense, the slave becomes an object to secure the master's desire and, in another, the master is nothing but an object onto which the slave projects his/her own desires and fantasies.

Wings of the Dove (1997), adapted from Henry James' homonymous novel, focuses on this becoming-object. Depending economically on her wealthy aunt Maude (Charlotte Rampling), Kate (Helena Bonham-Carter) is afraid of repeating her late mother's "mistake." Opposing her parents' wishes, Kate's mother married a poor man; their poverty ultimately led to estrangement. Following a similar pattern, Kate has fallen in love with Merton (Linus Roache), an ill-paid journalist. Threatened by her aunt, who also supports Kate's father (Michael Gambon), Kate refuses Merton's marriage proposal. However, when she meets Millie (Allison Elliot), a wealthy but fatally ill American, Kate finds a way of renouncing neither love nor money: Merton must seduce Millie, who has fallen in love with Merton, and inherit her money.

Throughout the film, Kate struggles to become a subject and leave behind her role as an object of exchange. Inadvertently, Kate has been an object of exchange between her father and her aunt, who becomes Kate's guardian by giving him "a few shillings each week" in exchange. For Kate, money constitutes a means for leaving behind this role as an object. However, she may only become a subject at the expense of turning both Merton and Millie into objects: Merton as the object of exchange between Kate and Millie, and Millie as the vanishing mediator that should enable Kate and Merton's union. Paradoxically, to avoid repeating her mother's mistake, she repeats her father's act of sacrificing others to achieve his own ends. As Kate's father tells her, "You and I are the same."

Supplementing this repetition, the film proposes a striking asymmetry between Kate and Millie. At some point, both of them realize that they are playing the role of objects in someone else's scheme. Refusing her role as an object of exchange between her father and

her aunt, Kate reacts by confronting her aunt, giving her father the expensive bracelet that her aunt offers to her, and plotting to keep both Millie's money and Merton. She tries to change her situation, that is, she becomes a subject. On the other hand, Millie reacts by embracing her role as an object. Instead of confronting Merton and Millie when she realizes that they have plotted to keep her money, Millie forgives them and leaves all her money to Merton. Through this majestic act of self-sacrifice and forgiveness, she secures Merton's guilt and love. Consequently, when she dies, Merton falls in love with her. The money supposed to secure Kate and Merton's union is now tainted by guilt and the memory of Millie, making their union impossible. By assuming her role as an object (by equating herself with money), Millie enters an unmediated unity with Merton in death.

Carrington (1995) presents a scenario in which the three main characters assume their role as objects. Despite their love for one another, painter Dora Carrington (Emma Thompson) and author Lytton Strachey (Jonathan Pryce) can't consummate their relationship because Lytton is a homosexual. Therefore, they establish a relationship through Ralph (Steve Waddington), an attractive but boring womanizer. Lytton, who falls in love with Ralph, uses Carrington to remain close to him; Carrington uses Ralph to make Lytton happy; and Ralph uses Lytton to secure Carrington. Despite the triangular nature of the relationship, only Carrington's devotion to Lytton is strictly devotional: only she assumes her role as an object knowingly. In a telling scene, she explicitly identifies with an object: when Lytton tells her that it is a mystery why she takes care of him, she hands him his pen wiper (inscribed with the words "Use me") and tells him, "That's how I see it. I'm your pen wiper." Furthermore, only she is struck by the love-pain complex characteristic of devotion: in a pleading letter to Lytton, she describes her passion as "all-absorbing" and her love as "self-abasing." Accordingly, after Lytton's death, she kills herself.

Whereas it is understandable that worshipers would devolve into objects to relate to the deity, it is somewhat less obvious how this process turns the deity itself into an object. One must remember that devotion eradicates earthly bondage by means of three consecutive phases: first, recognition of one's oppression; second, projection of freedom onto an object (either actual or phantasmal); and third, submission to this deified object. Therefore, the deity is essentially a projected object that must pose as a free subject to facilitate the slave's search for independence.

Toward the end of *Adèle H.*, a revealing scene exemplifies how the deity itself is secondary to the slave's movement toward freedom. After following Albert to Jamaica, Adèle encounters him in the street. Although he hails at her, she passes by him and fails to recognize him. At this point, it becomes evident that Adèle has left Albert behind and entered an unmediated relationship with her self-fashioned deity. This scene recalls Kierkegaard's argument that once "the knight of faith" makes the infinite movement of resignation, the princess is lost. Kierkegaard writes, "He is no longer finitely concerned about what the princess does, and precisely this proves that he has made the movement infinitely." (Kierkegaard, 1983: 44) The film also suggests that Adèle enters this relationship to overcome her sister's death and, especially, to surpass her father as a writer. What justifies Adèle's devotion to Albert is the literary creation it spawns. Albert simply provides an occasion for passionate writing. Although Adèle's unconditional love appears as a selfless act, it paradoxically triggers a movement toward self-contained, yet productive, interiority.

Like the stoic and skeptic objects, the devotional object obscures its connotations of bondage; what gives the devotional object its specificity is the unity it seeks. Since the object itself gets

in the way of such a unity, slave and deity enter a bidirectional subject-object relationship without mediation. In regards to this lack of mediation, this subject-object relationship resembles the block of becoming that characterizes the second strain of Skepticism. However, in this case, we have a block of becoming-divine. Subject and object are simply the vanishing elements that facilitate this movement toward divinity and self-sufficiency.

4. Melodramatic Objects: from Signification to Embodiment

I have thus far described three kinds of objects that not only differ from the melodramatic object, but that may also help clarify the latter's specificity. Despite the different roles that Brooks and Elsaesser assign to objects, both critics coincide in ascribing to them the ability to signify moral ideas. In other words, both of them consider objects a materialistic means by which abstract moral ideas are made apparent. As I have shown, stoic, skeptic, and devotional objects fit this description: they obliterate their materialistic signification (bondage) to represent, however inadequately, ideas of reason. For an object to become melodramatic, it should supplement this movement from objects to ideas with the opposite movement, that is, the one from ideas to objects: stoic, skeptic, and devotional objects are signifying objects; melodramatic objects are, more specifically, embodied ideas. Consequently, whereas the former kinds of objects demonstrate our inadequacy to represent ideas, the melodramatic object suggests the idea's inability to manifest itself adequately in objects.

This difference is quite significant: as I have emphasized above, stoic, skeptic, and devotional objects are involved in dramas of coping with obedience; they result not in the complete obliteration of bondage, but rather in its transfiguration. These three kinds of objects extrapolate bondage and the struggle of freedom into the realm of ideas. Accordingly, what distinguishes these kinds of objects is not only the kind of idea they refer to, but also the concept of freedom they propose: stoic objects identify freedom with the realm of withdrawal they create; skeptic objects construct freedom as a matter of choice between two polar identities (or between identity and becoming); and devotional objects enable an understanding of freedom as willing submission to spiritual unity.

Nevertheless, such an extrapolation does not eradicate bondage altogether; it simply clears the ground for a struggle for and against ideas, that is, for melodrama. In melodrama, the signification of objects becomes a ground for battling ideas. The paradigmatic example of the melodramatic object is the Christian cross. In his lecture manuscript on *The Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel writes, "That which is represented as the lowest and which the state uses as an instrument of dishonor is here converted into what is highest." (Hegel, 1998: 129) As this example indicates, the melodramatic object performs not only its own transvaluation, but also that of ideas themselves.

If photographs are the most common stoic and skeptic objects, money is the utmost melodramatic object, superseding its materiality by means of its allegedly unlimited capacity for equivalency. As I discussed above, devotional dramas such as *L'histoire d'Adèle H.* and *Senso* already dramatize the exchange value of money. We can observe the passage from devotion to melodrama when the emphasis shifts from the worshiper's desire to give it all (as in these films) to money's own failure to fulfill its promises of universal exchange. In this sense, films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), *L'argent* (1983), and *Shallow Grave* (1994) are equally melodramatic, showing how the flawed idea of equivalency haunts the pursuit of wealth. *Jerusalem* (1996) offers a good example of the melodramatic use of money. On his deathbed, the village hero bequests his farm to his

daughter Karin (Pernilla August), but gives his son Ingmar (Ulf Friberg) enough money to buy the farm back from her when he becomes of age. Before his father dies, Ingmar agrees to replace him as the community leader. However, Karin's husband steals Ingmar's money and dies before he can reveal where he hid it. Years later, convinced by Hellgum (Sven-Bertil Taube), a charismatic American preacher, that Christ's Second Coming is imminent, Karin decides to sell the farm and sail for Jerusalem alongside other members of the community. After convincing Gertrud (Maria Bonnevie) that she should marry him and abandon her faith, Ingmar betrays her to fulfill his promise to his father: he marries Barbro (Lena Endre), whose father will buy the farm for Ingmar. The melodramatic reversal occurs during the wedding. Gertrud visits Ingmar to give him the money he inherited: she has found it a few days earlier inside a pillow auctioned by Karin. In typical melodramatic fashion, the object arrives too late. Money has lost its exchange value: Ingmar can't undo his betrayal.

I conclude by citing an example of a different kind of melodramatic object. In *Golden Balls* (1993), Benito (Javier Bardem), an uneducated but ambitious construction worker, dreams of building a skyscraper that would outwardly express his manhood. He succeeds in getting the money to build it by marrying Marta (Maria de Medeiros), a banker's daughter, and by convincing Claudia (Maribel Verdú), his lover, to bed potential financiers. Instead of expressing Benito's manhood, the skyscraper embodies the inconsistencies of machismo itself: paralleling the fall of Benito (who eventually loses the two women he humiliates, most of his money, and his social privileges), the building is demolished because it has been built without city permits and with substandard materials. Such is the purpose of the melodramatic object: not to demonstrate the existence of ideas, but rather to embody and stage them, thereby demonstrating their fissures. The existence of these ideas is merely the dramatic ground for melodrama.

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Citizen Kane. 1941. Dir. Orson Welles. RKO.

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Golden Balls. 1993. Dir. Bigas Luna. Lolafilms S.A.

Hilary and Jackie. 1999. Dir. Anand Tucker. Channel Four Films.

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