

**Deconstructing Melodramatic “Destiny”:*****Late Marriage* (Dover Koshashvili, 2001) and *Two Lovers* (James Gray, 2008)****Robert LANG****University of Hartford, USA**

In *Le Mélodrame américain* (L’Harmattan, 2008),<sup>1</sup> I argue that “destiny” in the Hollywood melodrama of the studio era—i.e., the way things turn out for characters, the “explanation” given by the narrative of why things happen the way they do—can be seen very broadly to have evolved in approximately three phases: the religious, the social, and the psychoanalytical. In the teens and twenties, most representatively in the films of D. W. Griffith, the “destiny” of characters was understood to be directed ultimately by a divine force, i.e., a Christian God. Things turned out the way they did because, in the final analysis, it was “God’s will.” A character’s fate might be understood to some extent in social and psychological terms, but the trajectory of his or her narrative would be shaped by a Christian logic, in which the struggles between Good and Evil would be Manichean. In the 1930s, with ordinary Americans increasingly faced with problems such as poverty, crime, and unemployment, the discourse of the Hollywood melodrama becomes more social. “Evil” may still be personified, but characters’ problems are more frequently understood in economic terms, or perceived to be caused by the unequal development of industrial capitalism. A character’s sufferings are caused not so much by an evil person, as by economic factors

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Lang, *Le Mélodrame américain: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*, trans. Noël Burch (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).

brought into play by a new class system based on economic power, and villainy has to be redefined. This period of the melodrama is best understood in Marxian terms. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, the melodramatic discourse in Hollywood cinema shifts once again. Characters' identities and destinies become intertwined with class issues and psycho-sexual considerations—the discourse becomes psychoanalytical, as it becomes understood that the essential struggle is one for individual identity within a familial context.

In 1998, Linda Williams published an essay, “Melodrama Revised,” in which she claimed to set out the terms of a revised theory of a melodramatic *mode*, rather than the more familiar notion of the melodramatic *genre*. She wrote:

Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures. It is not a specific genre like the western or horror film; it is not a “deviation” of the classical realist narrative; it cannot be located primarily in women’s films, “weepies,” or family melodramas—though it includes them. Rather, melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through adialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

Williams goes on to explain that “we should not be fooled, then, by the superficial realism of popular American movies ... If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama.”<sup>3</sup>

What interests me most about these comments is Williams’ focus not on the “causes of motives and action” but on melodrama’s ultimate concern with the “retrieval and staging of innocence.” The melodrama, she reminds us, wants us “to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims”—and this, I will argue, is crucial to an understanding of how melodrama functions ideologically. We need to ask *why* it is so important that the “victim” be shown to be “innocent.” This is where the notion of “destiny” comes in—for melodramatic characters are, in a sense, understood to be victims of their “destiny.” In the struggle between Destiny and Free Will—which is the essential struggle of every melodrama—we see Destiny triumph, every time. This is counter-intuitive, or paradoxical, if we consider that it is Destiny, precisely, that is the hallmark of tragedy.

“Tragedy,” Roland Barthes writes, “is merely a means of ‘recovering’ human misery, of subsuming and thereby justifying it in the form of a necessity, a wisdom, or a purification.”<sup>4</sup> He believes we should “refuse this recuperation” and should “investigate the techniques of not treacherously succumbing” to tragedy’s “insidious” logic.<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag, in

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 42.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

her essay, “The Death of Tragedy,” echoes this view that tragedy seeks to justify human misery: “Tragedy,” she writes, “says there are disasters which are not fully merited, that there is ultimate injustice in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike tragedy, melodrama recognizes that human misery is not inevitable.

Melodrama challenges human suffering, and tries to find a means, not of justifying human suffering, but of coming to terms with it, of questioning its necessity. In so doing, the melodrama in effect performs an analysis—although its method is not “analytical” in the conventional sense of the term—of what we have been calling “destiny.” The perennial notion of “destiny” in melodrama is a deeply philosophical question around which, in a sense, nearly every mainstream film’s meanings continue to be either overtly or covertly organized. In the recent *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008), for example, the premise of the film is that the hero of the tale, a big winner in a television quiz show, knows the winning answers because: a) he knows; b) he’s cheating; c) he’s lucky; or d) it is written. While these choices presented in the prologue of the film are a version of the four answers of the quiz show within the film, they are, in their variety, essentially the determinative forces in every melodrama character’s “destiny.” What *Slumdog Millionaire* shows is that all four explanations are valid. The fourth answer, “it is written” (i.e., “Destiny”), comprehends the other three, and is merely a convenient simplification/mystification given at the end of the movie, after an analysis has been performed of the hero’s trajectory from “slumdog” to “millionaire.”

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Death of Tragedy” [1963], reprinted in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), 137.

For a further discussion of “destiny” in melodrama, I turn now to a recent American film, *Two Lovers* (James Gray, 2008), and the Israeli film of which it is a sort of remake, *Late Marriage* (Dover Koshashvili, 2001). Both films try to challenge the idea that our lives are ruled by an unfathomable “destiny,” and then, before film’s end, retreat from the challenge in fright and confusion. In these two tales, the young Jewish hero falls in love with a non-Jewish woman, and wants to marry her; but, in the end, “fate”—or, his “destiny” as a Jew—determines that he will not/cannot/must not marry her.<sup>7</sup> Both films stage a struggle between the young man’s Free Will (his desire to marry the woman he loves) and his Destiny (to marry the woman of his parents’ choice); and the question, at the final outcome, is whether he ever had any real choice in the matter (i.e., whether, to echo Williams’ phrase, he is a victim—an *innocent* victim—or whether, recognizing that he does not have the strength of character to transcend the familial law of melodrama—that the son will (metaphorically) marry his mother—he gives in, is therefore in some way complicit in his “destiny”). In both films, the hero is revealed at the end to have internalized a Jewish “destiny,” according to which marriage to a non-Jew is unthinkable (or, at best, extremely ill-advised). In both films, also, the hero is defeated; he is overwhelmed by the dictates and values of his parents, and is unhappy at the end.

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<sup>7</sup> In *Late Marriage*, Zaza’s lover Judith, despite her name (which means “Jewess”), is coded as not-Jewish. The vigorous opposition of Zaza’s parents to his relationship with Judith is based, they claim, on the fact that she is three years older than he is, and that she is a divorcée. It is possible to interpret the whole of their objection to her as exactly what they say it is; but we infer that their antagonism towards Judith has ethnic roots: she is a Sephardic Jew (of Moroccan ancestry), while Zaza’s family are Georgian Ashkenazim.

The fate of Zaza in *Late Marriage* and Leonard in *Two Lovers* is that they were born Jews, and in the ambivalent manner of melodrama, the films both insist on and undercut the notion that the hero cannot escape his “destiny” to marry within the tribe. As in the four “choices” offered in *Slumdog Millionaire*, however, the question of “destiny” in these two movies is revealed to be constituted by a complex of factors that cannot be reduced to a single force, least of all the mystificatory, catch-all category implied by the term “destiny.”

Both *Late Marriage* and *Two Lovers* pose the question: what is “Jewish identity”? And implicit in both films is the related question: is this Jewish identity worth preserving *at any price*? “Destiny,” after all, is a deliberately mystifying term that seeks to hide the fact that it is ideologically determined. The films insist that the hero is free to make his own destiny—then they show, or suggest, that he is a *victim* of destiny, in the form of a tribal imperative. The joke in *Slumdog Millionaire*, we should remember, when the film asks if the young hero will be able to overcome the many obstacles in his path and end up with his childhood sweetheart, is that, yes—of the choices put to the film’s viewers (will he win the girl by strategy, cunning, luck, or “destiny”?)—it is the last one, “destiny”: “it is written” by the screenwriter (for a whole host of ideological and economic reasons), that he should defeat the villains, overcome all significant obstacles, and end up with the beautiful young woman of his dreams.

The melodrama, we know, is above all a drama of identity, and for the two films under discussion, we might consider the part played by trauma in the construction of personal (and national) identity, since Jewish identity, most especially—as *Late Marriage* and *Two Lovers*

acknowledge—is grounded in trauma. In my volume on *The Birth of a Nation* in the Rutgers University Press “Films in Print” series, which appeared in 1994, I examine how Griffith’s great film consolidated a trend in cinematic technique and an approach to dramatic narrative that define American cinema to this day. I consider the film as an historical melodrama; and by examining Griffith’s historiography as ideological practice, I trace the way in which fears and fantasies of miscegenation are bound up with the bloody, traumatic reality of the Civil War and Reconstruction, to become melodramatic myth.<sup>8</sup> E. Ann Kaplan takes up and expands upon this question of cultural trauma in her recent book, *Trauma Culture*,<sup>9</sup> and notes how politics intervenes to “manage” such trauma. She believes that “the political context was not right for 1970s and 1980s film theorists to ‘see’ trauma in what they were discovering about the cultural formation and functioning of melodrama,” and suggests that “the appropriate political context appears to be in place in the millennium, so that the relevance of trauma studies to melodrama emerges.”<sup>10</sup> Bringing several threads of melodrama theory together, and seeking to highlight what was already implicit in early theorizing about melodrama, she observes that “at certain historical moments aesthetic forms emerge (sometimes in a useful way) to accommodate fears and fantasies related to suppressed historical events. In repeating the trauma of class struggle, melodrama, in its very generic

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Lang, “*The Birth of a Nation*: History, Ideology, Narrative Form,” in “*The Birth of a Nation*”: *D. W. Griffith, Director*, ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 3-24.

<sup>9</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

formation, may evidence a traumatic cultural symptom.”<sup>11</sup> Kaplan acknowledges that the argument for trauma as a cultural symptom was made several years ago by Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*<sup>12</sup> (in which Silverman studies films made in the context of the Second World War), but feels that it is in the Hollywood melodrama—with its familiar repertoire of traumatic phenomena, such as flashbacks, phobias, and dreams—that we see most clearly the impulsion “to repeat the rent in the dominant fiction occasioned by historical trauma while at the same time seeking unconsciously to repair and reveal that rent.”<sup>13</sup>

Kaplan’s argument echoes Peter Brooks’ thesis in his groundbreaking study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, in which he identifies the French Revolution of 1789 as the historical trauma that gave rise to the melodrama. The French Revolution, writes Brooks, is:

[T]he moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society. Melodrama does not simply represent a “fall” from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question ... [I]t

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>12</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge), 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 74.



becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.<sup>14</sup>

The specific historical trauma to which all the meanings of *Late Marriage* and *Two Lovers* indirectly refer is the Shoah, and the centuries of Jewish persecution that preceded it. Yet to many people in the world today, profound sympathy for past Jewish suffering is balanced by the uneasy awareness that the State of Israel currently rules over many Palestinian Arabs without their consent in ways that mimic the worst features of western colonialism. It is against this background that these two films struggle to uncover, demonstrate, and make operative an essential moral universe. When Brooks writes that the melodrama “comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question,” we can see how, in the manner of melodrama, *Late Marriage* and *Two Lovers* not only seek to question the traditional identity of the Jew as victim, but are concerned also (in Williams’s phrase) “with a retrieval and staging of [his] innocence.”

*Late Marriage* begins with a scene clearly establishing that not all arranged marriages are happy. Zaza’s aunt and uncle, immigrants to Israel from Soviet Georgia, appear to have lived their entire married life together in a state of mingled mutual hostility and affection (or, more specifically, hostility on his part and exasperated resignation on her side—and both pretending it is a sort of game). Zaza’s aunt has found a girl whom she believes will make a

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 14-15.

suitable bride for her sister's son. Zaza's parents, Yasha (Moni Moshonov, who will play the same role, the protagonist's father, in *Two Lovers*) and Lili (Lili Koshashvili—the filmmaker's own mother), drag their son to meet the girl and her extended family. It is obvious that Yasha and Lili have coerced their son in this manner many times before:

*Zaza:* I'm sick and tired of doing this. I told you, let me be. I do fine on my own.

*Lili:* Admit that your life's a mess.

*Zaza:* I run my life as I want to.

*Lili:* [Turning to her husband, incredulous.] Did you hear his tone?

From the beginning, thus, the film establishes that the hero is in conflict with his family, with whom he is locked in a struggle for control of his “destiny.” Zaza (Lior Ashkenazi) is a “modern” man—a doctoral candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University—but his parents, to use one of Lili's phrases, “respect traditions.” Lili's sister gives her a fetish to hide under the bed of the girl (Ilana) they hope Zaza will marry, but Lili protests: “I don't believe in love charms!” Her sister nevertheless is insistent:

*Sister:* A famous Egyptian rabbi made this especially for Zaza. The foreskin of an eight-day-old baby boy. This is responsible for all the marriages in Haifa!

*Lili:* That may be, but not for my son. His fortune will change on his own.

*Sister:* This is no time to play around. You might be right, but this rabbi's blessing can't be rejected. The mother must carry it against her skin.

In the event, Lili will take the love charm, and on the occasion of their visit to meet Ilana and her family, will surreptitiously kick it under the girl's bed. (Here and elsewhere, the film is suggesting that Jewish tradition – and by implication other national/traditional identities that stake their legitimacy on religious grounds – is little more than superstition dressed up as divine “truth.”) When Zaza and Ilana conduct their interview in the privacy of Ilana's bedroom, the discussion resumes this debate about belief, and the way in which it is manipulated (first, by parents, and then also, of course, by rabbis and other politicians), for purposes of social control:

*Ilana:* What do you do?

*Zaza:* I ask myself if God exists. I'm working on my doctorate in Philosophy.

*Ilana:* And the answer?

*Zaza:* [He leans forward, and beckons her to come closer.] If, suddenly ... a monster came out of the ocean and said: “I am God,” would you believe it?

*Ilana:* It depends on how much he paid me.

*Zaza:* [He seems satisfied with this answer, or at least, by her honesty.]

Everybody has his own God. Objective truth is hard to find.

*Ilana:* Who's your God?

*Zaza:* If that monster was able to convince my mother that love exists, I'd believe in him.

*Ilana:* [Coolly.] You're on the wrong track, waiting for that miracle.

Eventually—when, sadly, it is too late—Lili will come to see that love does exist. But in the meantime, she and her husband remain convinced that it is their responsibility to direct Zaza's "destiny." At the very moment that her son is realizing he would never be happy with Ilana ("I want a rich man," she tells him matter-of-factly), Yasha is explaining to Ilana's uncle Bessik why their son is a great catch: "My Zaza has it all!" he brags. "A five-room apartment, a big-screen TV, a brand-new refrigerator, a Sony CD player, a bedroom, a living room, a brand-new Lancia. What more could one ask for? A doctor at Tel Aviv University. A really smart boy!" Bessik responds with the obvious question: "So, why isn't he married, yet?" Yasha pauses for a long moment, then replies enigmatically: "Fate! I don't expect anything. Give her to me as she is. I'll take her in that dress alone." Bessik seems satisfied: "In that case, dear Yasha, we needn't say more. We're not shady dealers." He puts an arm around Yasha's shoulders, and lifts his glass in a toast: "*To changing Zaza's fate!*"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The English subtitle uses the word "fate," although, regardless of the Hebrew or Georgian original, it should probably be "destiny."

The biblical story of “The Binding of Isaac,” illustrating the Judaic command that the son submit to the authority of the father, is reenacted in the film when eight members of Zaza’s family storm his lover Judith’s apartment, in an attempt to intimidate the couple and force them to bring an end to their relationship. According to the Hebrew Bible, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac; Abraham sets out to obey God’s command—he binds Isaac to an altar, and prepares to cut his throat. At the last moment, however, seeing that Abraham is willing to obey his command, God has his angel stay Abraham’s hand, whereupon Abraham sees a ram caught in some bushes nearby, and sacrifices the ram in Isaac’s stead. The story is usually approvingly interpreted as an illustration of Abraham’s unquestioning submission to God’s authority, and likewise, of Isaac’s absolute submission to the authority of his father.

Crucial to the meaning of the story as a parable that is meant to reinforce the patriarchal dimension of filial identity—as in its reenactment in *Late Marriage*—is the fact that the son is not a boy, but a fully-grown man (i.e., the son has internalized this law of submission to the father; he is not coerced by force of physical strength). According to Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, Isaac in the biblical story is twenty-seven; according to the Talmudic sages, he was even older. Zaza is thirty-one, which not only renders quite remarkable the spectacle of his parents’ hectoring attempts to make him submit to their will (it is explained that they are paying for his schooling, and that he is completely dependent on them financially), it threatens to undermine Zaza’s plausibility as a character—until one remembers that, like Isaac, he is an allegorical figure, and we should not interpret him too literally; or, to echo Williams’ phrase, we should not be fooled by the superficial

realism of the situation. (“It is a disgrace to the whole family that this boy still isn’t married at thirty-one!” Zaza’s uncle Simon says in exasperation, as if this were all that is at stake.)

When Zaza’s family enter Judith’s apartment, uninvited, Zaza’s uncle Simon grabs from the wall a sword that belonged to Judith’s ex-husband. Shoving her against the wall and holding the sword against her neck, he screams: All the cocks in the world, but not Zaza’s!” “I’m not afraid,” Judith replies coolly. “You’re not the first to wave that thing.” Whereupon, Simon becomes nearly hysterical, and, still pinning her to the wall, turns to Yasha in disbelief: “The bitch doesn’t care! She wants me to kill her!” Zaza leaps from the couch, where his father has pushed him and has been slapping his son’s face, while shouting: “You choose *her* over *us*? You’re going to leave this whore! Shitty bastard! A real man doesn’t break his mother’s heart like this! I’ll carry you out *dead*, if I have to! But I’ll separate you from that woman!”

Zaza grabs the sword from Simon and hands it to his father: “Here! Go on! Cut off my head!” he shouts. Kneeling before Yasha, as Isaac did before Abraham, and guiding the sword in his father’s hand towards his neck, he repeats: “Go on, do it for me! Go on, do it, so I’ll be rid of her!”

Eventually, after Zaza agrees to give Judith up (he turns to her and says, simply: “Sorry, we’re over”), the family leaves. When he returns to his own apartment, he finds his mother and father waiting for him there (they have their own key!). Yasha ventures a final, sententious remark: “Now you can’t see. You’re blind. Believe me, you’ll thank me one day.” Although Zaza has conceded defeat, he retorts sarcastically: “As long as you’re happy. You should have cut my head off.” This sets Yasha off again, shouting angrily: “What’s wrong

with you? What do you want with another man's kid and a divorcée?" Zaza makes a final, half-hearted attempt to defend Judith: "Your woman is better, having raised only your children?" At this, Yasha becomes nearly uncontrollable, and moves to strike his son: "You're a disgrace! I thought you were a man! You're as worthless as a dead dog! I'll kill her first. She'll never be your wife. I'll let no one take advantage of my son!"

After Lili persuades Yasha to leave the room ("Don't hurt yourself," she says to her agitated husband, "he'll bury the both of us"), one of the film's most darkly comic scenes follows. Lili gives Zaza a card with a telephone number on it: "Her name is Lea," she explains. "Her father is a goldsmith. She works with him. She's twenty-three. Naziko says she's pretty. She hasn't married yet because she's been studying. She wants to see you first, before her parents get involved. I promised her mother you'd call. You might like her. Don't let yourself forget, I promised her mother you'd call. Don't shame me."

The coercive logic of the family melodrama is thus revealed to be a labyrinth from which there is no escape. Melodrama is trapped in its own myth, the myth of Oedipus—it cannot see or understand any other logic. As Deleuze and Guattari put it in their seminal work, *Anti-Oedipus*, the oedipal myth informs us that, "if you don't follow the lines of differentiation daddy-mommy-me, and the exclusive alternatives that delineate them, you will fall back into the black night of the undifferentiated."<sup>16</sup> The psychoanalytical myth in which *Late Marriage* is inscribed is presented as having life-or-death stakes. We see how Zaza's family bully and intimidate him, and just in case those techniques of coercion prove to be

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<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 78.

inadequate, they resort to emotional blackmail as well. They are hell-bent on making him “admit”—as his mother so sweetly puts it to him at the beginning of the movie—that “[his] life is a mess.” The darker implication of her remark is that anything that lies outside of the binary logic of *difference* is unimaginable, horrible. Oedipal logic, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, is circular: it “creates both *the differentiations that it orders and the undifferentiated with which it threatens us.*”<sup>17</sup> As they see it, Oedipus (their shorthand for the whole account Freudian psychoanalysis gives of the formation of the subject), “forces desire to take as its object the differentiated parental persons,” but then prohibits the satisfaction of that desire by brandishing the threat of the undifferentiated. We are told to “resolve” Oedipus by internalizing it (or we will “fall into the neurotic night of imaginary identifications”), which, Deleuze and Guattari remark, is like telling us that we can only get out of the labyrinth by reentering it.

The triumph of this logic is staged in the film’s final scene of Zaza’s wedding to Lea, the goldsmith’s daughter. A very drunk Zaza grabs the microphone and announces: “If anyone thinks that he has a woman more beautiful than mine, let him come up here, and we’ll compare ...” One of the brothers of the bride tries to force Zaza to leave the stage, but he continues: “If one of you has a wife more beautiful than mine ... and I know that’s not possible ... well, *I have a woman even more beautiful than my wife!*” He drags his uncle Simon to the stage, and to the extreme discomfiture of the wedding guests, continues his maudlin rant: “I don’t see her here. But he will tell you about her—Simon, don’t I have a

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 78-79.



woman more beautiful than my wife? Yes or no?” “Of course,” says Simon, in a sudden moment of inspiration. “Didn’t you find her? She’s actually here.”

Zaza now looks confused. “Do you want me to get her?” Simon persists. As his uncle walks off the stage, the camera cuts to a close-up of Zaza’s worried face. In long-shot, we see Simon leading Zaza’s mother Lili to the stage. When she arrives at the spot where Zaza is standing, mother and son embrace, as Simon says jokingly, “Easy does it! She’s not exactly yours.”

The paradoxes of oedipal logic (principally that, because of the taboo on incest, the son cannot marry his mother; but that he will, therefore, marry a woman *like* his mother, whose image he has internalized), are made even more explicit in *Two Lovers*, which, as we have said, is a kind of remake of *Late Marriage*.

David Lane’s brief synopsis of *Two Lovers* is one of the more accurate of the many that circulate on the Internet:

Joaquin Phoenix plays Leonard, a charismatic but troubled young man who moves back into his childhood home following a recent heartbreak. While recovering under the watchful eye of his parents (Isabella Rossellini and Moni Monoshov), Leonard meets two women in quick succession: Michelle (Gwyneth Paltrow), a mysterious and beautiful neighbor who is exotic and out-of-place in Leonard’s staid world, and Sandra (Vinessa Shaw), the lovely and

caring daughter of a businessman who is buying out his family's dry-cleaning business.

Leonard becomes deeply infatuated by Michelle, who seems poised to fall for him, but is having a self-destructive affair with a married man. At the same time, mounting pressure from his family pushes him towards committing to Sandra. Leonard is forced to make an impossible decision—between the impetuosity of desire and the comfort of love—or risk falling back into the darkness that nearly killed him.<sup>18</sup>

As always, however, a synopsis cannot tell us what a film is really “about.” This one cannot tell us why the young man is “troubled,” or explain the nature of “the darkness that nearly killed him.” As in *Late Marriage*, the woman with whom the young man is in love (or with whom he is infatuated) is clearly coded as not-Jewish.<sup>19</sup> Leonard's parents are alert to his every movement, especially his mother, who, despite Leonard's habitual secrecy, figures out very quickly that he has fallen in love with Michelle. Their pressure on him to conform to the Jewish tradition of cultural

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<sup>18</sup> David Lane, “5 Movie Clips from *Two Lovers*.” (2/8/2009)  
<http://www.collider.com/entertainment/news/article.asp/aid/10838/tcid/1>

<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, like all art that seeks to avoid being didactic or overly schematic, *Two Lovers* gives Gwyneth Paltrow's character an ambiguous quality: a surname (Rausch) that is German/potentially Jewish. But “Rausch” is also related to the German word “Rauschgift” meaning a drug or narcotic. Director James Gray piles up evidence to suggest that Leonard never stood a chance: his infatuation with Michelle is just that—when the effects of the drug wear off, he will return to his senses and his destiny, and marry the Jewish girl, Sandra.

endogamy is every bit as intense as the pressure on Zaza in *Late Marriage*, but it is accomplished less confrontationally (they want him to marry Sandra, the daughter of the couple who is buying their dry-cleaning business; and they pressure him into accepting a dreary job working for Sandra's father, despite Leonard's stated wish to pursue a career as an artist/photographer). The "darkness that nearly killed him" is explained as the mental depression that followed Leonard's discovery that both he and his (former) fiancée possess the Tay-Sachs gene, which would have resulted in any children they might have had together being born with the gruesome, infantile variant of Tay-Sachs disease. Leonard was forced to give up his fiancée, who promptly disappeared completely from his life (her parents called off the marriage), and has been "troubled" ever since.

The disease, of course, is the film's central metaphor (just as the taboo on incest is central to the logic of Oedipus). There is a sense in which Leonard's parents—effectively his tribe, with its traditions and taboos—are making him sick. Their "watchful eye" is the very cause of Leonard's illness; he must not be allowed to "relapse"—which, on the story level, means he must be prevented from trying (again) to kill himself; and on the metaphorical level, means he must be prevented from falling in love with a woman outside the tribe (i.e., who is not Jewish).

The majority of reviews of *Two Lovers* that seek keys to the film's meanings by referring to the purported inspiration for the script, refer to Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*

(or to the 1957 Visconti film of the same title, based on the novella);<sup>20</sup> but in one interview, worth quoting from at length, Gray reveals an explicitly autobiographical source that is, and precisely is not, a red herring:

I get a part of an idea here and a little bit of an idea there, and then finally it accumulates into a movie. It got its foundation really [when] I got my wife pregnant, intentionally, and we had to go get genetic testing. My wife is not Jewish. I am an Ashkenazi Jew and there are a whole host of genetic disorders that only Ashkenazi Jews have. I don't know if you know this, but [there are] 16 or 17 disorders that we carry the gene for. This is a pretty interesting thing because Ashkenazi Jews are essentially descended from the same four women, apparently, so we have essentially inbreeding diseases or disorders. I was tested positive as a carrier for three diseases. My wife was negative for all of them ... I asked the genetic counselor, "What happens if both couples are [positive] to carry the gene?" and she said, "Well, I have some Jewish couples that come in here and let's say they both have the Tay-Sachs gene, then their children have a very good chance of not making it past

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<sup>20</sup> The sense that Leonard's world is an enclosed one, from which there is no escape—because it is a world “written” by the director of the film—is reinforced by details such as the intertextual fact that Isabella Rossellini's first American film had been called *White Nights* (Taylor Hackford, 1985), though bearing no relation to Dostoyevsky's story.

the age of four." I thought, "My God, what a tragedy that is," and she said, "Yes, it has destroyed relationships."<sup>21</sup>

Gray goes on to explain that he then read Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*, which he thinks is "a beautiful novella of great tenderness about a person who tried to deal with love, but was ill-equipped and didn't have all the tools to live really," adding the remark that Dostoyevsky wrote at a time before it was discovered that depression could be treated pharmaceutically. Gray combined the two stories: "I used the back story of Tay-Sachs to form a kind of heartbreak for the character, then I used the Dostoyevsky as a kind of a springboard."<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that a gene—that genetics—constitutes a kind of destiny. It is most interesting, then, in light of his choice to make *Two Lovers* as a melodrama, that Gray acknowledges a particular genetic destiny of Ashkenazi Jews (the "host of genetic disorders that only Ashkenazi Jews have"), but in his own life chose to defy the Jewish cultural prohibition on Jews marrying non-Jews. In a paradox that would seem to confirm his point in *Two Lovers*, the Jewish insistence on endogamy (results in) "tragedy"—Leonard loses his fiancée; and at the end of the film, when he presents Sandra with the ring he had bought for Michelle, we understand that he has been unable to escape or defeat the "destiny" wrought for him by his parents and the Jewish tradition into which he was born.

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<sup>21</sup> James Gray, in Edward Douglas, "Exclusive: James Gray Talks about *Two Lovers*," 13 February 2009 (<http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=52642>).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Lane at first seems correct when he writes that “Leonard is forced to make an impossible decision—between the impetuosity of desire and the comfort of love—or risk falling back into the darkness that nearly killed him.” But the film is not about a *choice*. It is about the pressure Leonard and Sandra’s parents bring to bear on their children. If Leonard’s feelings for Michelle can indeed be described in terms of the impetuosity of desire; and if we can say that we understand what is meant by “the comfort of love,” then, surely, Leonard’s decision is not so “impossible” after all—the question, merely, becomes one about Leonard’s maturity (i.e., one in which the mature individual understands the necessity of compromise).

Melodrama, we know, refuses the tragic vision; it challenges the necessity of human suffering. But the endings of the best melodramas—for all the efforts of the form to render the moral stakes with absolute clarity—are never without irony or ambiguity. For all its yearning, melodrama cannot think “outside-the-box” of familial logic. Melodrama, as we have noted, remains trapped in the myth of Oedipus. In Mark Poster’s phrase, “Oedipus reduces and shrinks the individual to the family”:

The internalization of the father as super-ego prevents the individual from participating in collective myth. Oedipus privatizes myth, emotion, fantasy and the unconscious, centering the psyche forever on Mama/Papa ... Far from a general law, Oedipus is the special law of the modern psyche. It is bound up with the nuclear family, not with kinship, and it goes far in revealing the psychic dynamics of modern families. The neuroses analyzed by Freud are

private myths, individual religions; they are the fetishism, the magic of the nuclear family, the myth of people without collective fetishes to relieve guilt. As long as Freud maintains the universality of Oedipus there can be no real history of the family since this requires above all an account of the change from kinship to private families.<sup>23</sup>

Gray represents Leonard's dilemma—his *bind*—in the terms of melodrama, which is to say, the terms of familial logic, which are the same as those in which Jewish identity is inscribed. The choice is this: the son must marry a woman like his mother (in this case, quite specifically and crucially, she must therefore be Jewish), *or* he will fall back into the “darkness” that earlier “nearly killed him.” (Never mind that he is now permanently depressed; or that—married or not to Sandra—his bipolar affective disorder will never go away; or that Zaza in *Late Marriage* will never know true happiness married to Lea—his marriage will resemble that of his aunt and uncle, as we see it in the opening shots of the film.) The choice in both films is a false one, because its premise—Jewish identity—goes unexamined: it is presented as his fate, i.e., as something about which he has no choice. His “destiny” follows his fate to be a Jew.

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 25-26. One is also reminded of Hannah Arendt's remark in her “Introduction” to a collection of writings by Walter Benjamin that, “if Freud had lived and carried on his inquiries in a country and language other than the German-Jewish milieu which supplied his patients, we might never have heard of an Oedipus complex.” Hannah Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940,” in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 26.

In the reviews of *Two Lovers* and in the many interviews about the film given by its director, only one that I have read makes mention of *Late Marriage*. Susan Kandell of [www.popsyndicate.com](http://www.popsyndicate.com) tells Gray in her interview with him that she recognizes Moni Moshonov as the actor who plays the father of the protagonist in both films. She then immediately says: “Let’s talk about the concept of ‘bashert’—destiny. Isn’t this what this film is all about? Lenny thought he found his beloved once but it wasn’t meant to be ... [W]hat were you trying to say here?”<sup>24</sup> Early in the interview, Kandell establishes that she “spent [her] formative years” in a Jewish neighborhood much like the one in which Leonard lives with his parents in *Two Lovers*; and when she urges Gray: “Let’s get the Jewish geography going!” he offers: “I’m a Queens boy myself. I grew up in Flushing.” Kandell seems to be only half aware that she identifies Leonard as having a specifically Jewish destiny. According to *Wikipedia*, *bashert* is a Yiddish word that means “destiny”: “It is often used in the context of one’s divinely foreordained spouse or soulmate, and thus has romantic overtones. Jewish singles will say that they are looking for their bashert, meaning they are looking for that person who will complement them perfectly. However the opinion has been given that whomever one marries, whether the marriage is perfect or not, is by definition one’s bashert because the marriage was foreordained by God, who controls the universe by default.”<sup>25</sup>

Gray’s response to Kandell’s suggestion that the film is about Leonard’s “bashert” is interesting, in that he at once demystifies the notion of “destiny” as an unfathomable force

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Kandell, “Torn Between Two Lovers in Sheepshead Bay: Interview with writer-director James Gray,” February 27, 2009 ([http://www.popsyndicate.com/site/story/torn\\_between\\_two\\_lovers\\_in\\_sheepshead\\_bay\\_interview\\_with\\_writer-director\\_j](http://www.popsyndicate.com/site/story/torn_between_two_lovers_in_sheepshead_bay_interview_with_writer-director_j)).

<sup>25</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bashert> (retrieved 5 April 2009).



(that often goes by the name of “God”), and decisively confirms its nonetheless sometimes overwhelming power:

I was just trying to say that the world is a complicated place and sometimes we don't have complete control of what we say or do. Sometimes we have no control over the circumstances. I think too much is made of free will in our country. The idea that you pull yourself up by your bootstraps and that stuff is so nonsensical in a way. So much of who we are is based on our surroundings, our culture, our ideology—who our parents are, and what they said to us when we were young. So many things are out of our control.<sup>26</sup>

Gray goes on to mention the popular book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, by Malcolm Gladwell, which he says confirms his experience that “the degree to which we can achieve success is ... due to factors that are not considered on a daily basis.” He finds Gladwell's observations “very disquieting because it makes you realize that you are not the master of your own destiny, but rather there is a universe out there that, to a certain extent, controls our fate.”<sup>27</sup> That “universe out there,” Gray suggests rather vaguely, contains “certain

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<sup>26</sup> In Kandell, “Torn Between Two Lovers.”

<sup>27</sup> Michiko Kakutani, in his *New York Times* review of Gladwell's book, remarks that “Mr. Gladwell's emphasis on class and accidents of historical timing plays down the role of individual grit and talent to the point where he seems to be sketching a kind of theory of social predestination, determining who gets ahead and who does not.” Kakutani adds that: “Much of what Mr. Gladwell has to say about superstars is little more than common sense: that talent alone is not enough to ensure success, that opportunity, hard work, timing and luck

elements of social class and our behavior,” and includes “our parents and their traditions.” These traditions, he adds, “can divide or unite us.” But if we see them for what they are, he says—in other words, if we can be more analytical about what we mean when we refer to “destiny”—“the healthier, as a culture, we’ll be.”<sup>28</sup>

The “superficial realism” of the American film, *Two Lovers*, unlike its Israeli counterpart, *Late Marriage*, which is not so much a melodrama as a very dark comedy, has the effect of occulting the question of the extent to which, in Gray’s phrase, its main character is master of his own destiny. In the United States today, where Gray’s characters live, 72 per cent of non-Orthodox Jews intermarry.<sup>29</sup> And yet “Jewish identity” remains a largely unexamined category in American film melodramas in which Jewish characters figure.<sup>30</sup> *Two Lovers’* invitation to feel sympathy for the virtues of its hero, one of melodrama’s “beset victims,” and its concern with “a retrieval and staging of [his] innocence,” speaks to the trauma—most especially in the United States, a society committed to a plural identity—that continues to surround the question of a Jewish identity that—at least in theory—is based on an ethnic determinism.

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play important roles as well.” “It’s True: Success Succeeds, and Advantages Can Help,” *The New York Times*, 17 November 2008.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/18/books/18kaku.html>)

<sup>28</sup> In Kandell, “Torn Between Two Lovers.”

<sup>29</sup> “Intermarriage... Why Not?”

(<http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/IntermarriageWhyNot/>). This statistic is available from many other sources.

<sup>30</sup> *Prime* (Ben Younger, 2005) is an exception; but the film is a comedy, which allows its melodrama to dissolve into laughter.

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