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## Fiction, Theatre, and Early Cinema

It was widely averred in the nineteenth century that the novel was the century's dominant form; indeed, at the end of this period critics spoke of the "tyranny" of the novel. But this was only a partial truth, insofar as for much of this period the novel maintained complicated symbiotic relationships with other cultural forms, particularly drama: in this respect popular plots, characters, and settings were amphibious, gliding from novel to stage, and, more rarely, from stage to novel. The reading of novels aloud in the family home was an aspect of Victorian literary culture that already contained elements of theatricality, and this was still more the case with the commercially-run, public readings that swelled the finances of popular novelists, notably Dickens. But by the time audiences heard Dickens read from his favorite works (the death of Nancy from *Oliver Twist* [1837-1839] was his tour de force) many of them would have already seen full, sometimes unauthorized, dramatic adaptations of the same texts: *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) as *Smike*; *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) as *Dot*; other novels and shorter pieces under their original titles. The work of other novelists, from Bulwer-Lytton, to Elizabeth Gaskell, to M.E. Braddon, was also quickly revamped for the stage; the vogue of "sensation" in the 1860s coincides with an especially lively period of adaptation, as the reign of the Newgate Novel had in the 1830s and 1840s. While the Victorian appetite for dramatized novels is well documented, we know less about the novelization or "novellization" of successful plays: examples include Tom Taylor's 1863 *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, rewritten as *Bob Brierly; or, The Ticket-of-Leave Man, A Romance of the Present Day* (n.d), and Dion Bouicicault's *After Dark* (1868), both of which were rewritten by Henry Llewellyn Williams.<sup>1</sup> This cross-fertilization among contemporaneous popular modes was further complicated at the latter end of the long nineteenth century by what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin term "remediation", when a number of new entertainment apparatuses -- the kinetoscope, the cinematograph and the mutoscope, inter alia -- raided popular fiction and drama in search of both form and content.<sup>2</sup>

There is a further set of interchanges to be borne in mind: the narratives and images that circulated promiscuously among forms were part of a transatlantic popular culture as well a national one. Although often treated separately, the literary histories of Britain and America are tightly intertwined in this period, to the extent that one can speak of a transatlantic Anglophone market, notwithstanding the conflicts over copyright, or perhaps, indeed, because of the lack of copyright protection and the proliferation of pirated editions. There are some notable examples of works that enjoyed massive success on both sides of the Atlantic: Dickens provides, again, many instances, including *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1); Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was a trans-Atlantic success from the other direction.<sup>3</sup> In both cases dramatic adaptations were as popular, or more popular, than the fictional originals. But popular materials also jumped the language-barrier: the Anglophone novel and the Anglophone stage were heavily dependent on their French equivalents for material, and popular plots, situations,

and spectacles flitted among Paris, New York and London, as well as a host of smaller urban nodes. A similar internationalism would later characterize early cinema.

Interacting in complex ways with the novel/drama/film continuum were other forms of entertainment. The spectacles that dominated the Victorian stage, enlivened popular fiction, and became a staple of early film production were at least in part derived from such popular forms as the special-effects driven shows that amused the crowds at the Victorian pleasure gardens, the dioramas, and the minor theatres. I will conclude this chapter with an account of one important strand of this visual tradition, the imagination of disaster.

### **Tales of the City**

The heavy traffic between the stage and fiction, and among French, British, and American materials was already evident in the pre- and early-Victorian periods. Its international aspect was, of course, predicated on the shared metropolitan experiences of its audiences. The lived realities of the early nineteenth century city – overcrowding and immiseration; concentrations of wealth and the creation of urban pleasure grounds and shopping districts; sanitation problems and sanitary reform; the crowd and the scope for cross-class performance; anonymous crime and modern policing – were international phenomena, notwithstanding local differences. To this extent it is not surprising that a number of distinctly urban novels and plays enjoyed success in the cities of an emerging global cultural network. Thus we can trace the influence of Pierce Egan’s light-hearted novel of high and low society, *Life in London* (1821) and its many stage versions on the more melodramatic French play, d’Ennery’s *Édouard Brisebarre* and Eugène Nus’s *Les Bohémiens de Paris*; this in turn was reimported into Britain as William Moncrieff’s *The Scamps of London* (1843), which provided the basic armature for a number of later narratives about the low-life deeps of London, including Boucicault’s *After Dark* (1868) and its novelization.<sup>4</sup> In New York, *The Bohemians of Paris* appeared at the National Theatre in December, 1858, and the *Scamps of London* at the Old Bowery Theatre in February, 1863. It was not until 1873 that the play was fully “localized” (a contemporary term: see “Theatrical”, *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1868) by J.J. Wallace as *The Beats of New York*. As the reviewer put it,

Mr Wallace’s adaptation metamorphoses the vagrants of the French capital into rather freely-drawn specimens of the parasites of New York, while the language of the poor and populous quarters of Paris is exchanged for the slang of the hour in the Paris of America. The plot, however, is retained, and when we say it is of the order of plots supplied to all plays in which humanity is divided into two portions, with the most virtuous people in the world on one side and the most villainous on the further, we are satisfied the reader will care for no further enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneous internationalization and localization was also the fate of Brisebarre and Nus’s *Les Pauvres de Paris* (1856), which became Boucicault’s *Poor of New York* (1857), during the latter’s sojourn in that city; when he returned to Europe Boucicault re-localized it in such versions as *The Poor of Liverpool* (1864), and *The Streets of London* (1864), with appropriate touches of local colour.

The same sharp divisions of good and evil that the *New York Times* identified in *The Beats of New York* also characterized Eugène Sue's feuilleton, *Les mystères de Paris*, another seminal influence on the popular representation of the city. (Richard Maxwell argues that Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* [1831] is the first of the city-as-mystery narratives, but Sue innovates by setting his serial in the present, and by explicitly dwelling on the mystery element.)<sup>6</sup> Published serially in the *Journal des débats* from 1842 to 1843, the *Mysteries* represents the city as place in which civilized society thinly conceals a mirror-world of savagery. The narrator describes himself as another Fenimore Cooper ("le Walter Scott Américain"), but the savages he describes will be in our midst, not on the frontiers:

les barbares dont nous parlons sont au milieu de nous; nous pouvons les coudoyer en nous aventurant dans les repaires où ils vivent, où ils se rassemblent pour concerter le meurtre, le vol, pour se partager enfin les dépouilles de leurs victimes. ["the barbarians of which we speak are among us; we can rub shoulders with them by venturing into their dens, where they gather to plot murder and theft, and to divvy up the scalps of their victims"]

The hero of Sue's lurid narrative is Rodolphe, an aristocrat in disguise who does indeed venture into the haunts of the criminal tribes. There, like the urban explorer of Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, or an undercover cop in a twentieth-century police drama, he encounters a wide variety of exotic urban types, and battles against a race of criminals with unlikely nicknames. Strong on narrative, but weak on resolution, Sue's serial ends with Rodolphe giving up his crime-fighting career, and returning to his aristocratic role as the Grand Duke of Gerolstein. Sue's tale became, in the hands of G.W. M. Reynolds, the part-published, *Mysteries of London* (first series, 1844-6), which was also hugely popular, and existed in multiple stage versions. (In the early twentieth century it takes to the screen as the serial *Les Mystères de New York*.)

If France more than played its part in driving the international circulation of narratives of the poor, the bohemian, and the criminal, the role of England cannot be underestimated. Where Egan's *Life in London*, was preoccupied with the rakeish adventures and "sprees" of its genteel protagonists (Tom and Jerry) in the interclass regions of Bohemian London, the Newgate Novels that enjoyed enormous popular success in the 1830s and 1840s sought to show a layer below Bohemia, that of the career criminals so dear to the middle-class imagination, their own low-life doubles. This subgenre includes Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839), and, more arguably, Dicken's *Oliver Twist* (1837-9). All of these were quickly adapted for the stage (by George Dibdin Pitt, J.B. Buckstone, and Charles Barnett, inter alia), which greatly extended their cultural reach. The illustrations of George Cruikshank and his imitators facilitated the process of stage adaptation by creating ready-made mise-en-scènes. Indeed, it has been argued that authors and illustrators in this period consciously worked to make sure that their novels would be adapted for the stage. In this way the text, illustrations and stage adaptations of such novels as *Jack Sheppard* became multimedia phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Crime was made vivid enough in these novels and their spinoffs to generate something of a moral panic, especially after the 1840 murder of Lord William Russell by

his valet, Francois Courvoisier, when it was reported that Courvoisier had been inspired to homicide by *Jack Sheppard*. Analogous moral panics have reappeared, of course, in relation to subsequent representations of crime (or at least non-white-collar crime) in a variety of other media.

### **Melodrama and Sensation**

The rich territory that urban crime narrative takes for itself is the city as a place of vivid contrasts and unfathomable mysteries. Thus the London of Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* itself takes the form of a dramatic spectacle.

[C]ontrasts of a strange nature exist. The most unbounded wealth is the neighbour of the most hideous poverty; the most gorgeous pomp is placed in strong relief by the most deplorable squalor; the most seducing luxury is only separated by a narrow wall from the most appalling misery. [pp. 2-3]

Here we see the novel deploy at the level of rhetoric a form of antithesis and hyperbole that on stage lends itself to rapid and dramatic scene changes, and later becomes cinematic montage. (Such contrasts would also have lent themselves to other nineteenth-century visual “commodity-experiences”, full-scale entertainments, such as the diorama, or the hand-held *Spooner's Transformations* series of prints, which both used lighting effects to reveal dramatic changes of scene.) As Peter Brooks tells us in the *Melodramatic Imagination* (1984), antithesis and hyperbole – including the utilization of stark opposites and sudden reversals of fortune -- are the characteristic tropes of melodrama, and we cannot go much further in our exploration of the popular narratives of this period without some reckoning with that much-abused term. It may be difficult to establish at this point if the contrasts of the newly industrial cities generated melodrama as an appropriate mimetic mode, or whether our vision of the Victorian city has been so informed by the melodramatic imagination that we cannot see those cities except as sites of contrast. Brooks argues that melodrama emerges not so much in response to urbanization as to modernity in a more political sense, and that it evolved in post-revolutionary France as a dramatic language through which modernity could be lived and rendered meaningful, providing a weakly-spiritual code for a post-sacred world, shorn of Church and King. At the level of character, God and the devil might disappear, but heroes -- and perhaps more particularly heroines -- and villains remain. By mid-century, melodrama had become the dominant mode of popular fiction and drama, and was attuned more to the aleatory and anonymous nature of everyday urban life than to seismic changes at the level of the state. But it functioned just as much as a mode of antithesis and hyperbole: in terms of plot and action, seemingly minor decisions are charged with all the significance of the conflict of good and evil; in terms of mise en scène, truth is written on the surface of things -- heroines are fair; villains look villainous. In fiction and drama alike, it is a mode of showing: emotions are close to the surface, and frequently spill over in the form of tears; heroes evince their heroism by saving the vulnerable heroine, just in the nick of time. This is also to say, of course, that suspense and spectacle are close to the heart of melodrama. To this extent Romantic and Victorian melodrama looks forward to the filmic “weepy”, but also to the action film.

In the 1860s, spectacle, suspense, and melodrama converge under the sign “sensation”. Indeed, if melodrama is one keyword for any account of the nineteenth-century commodity-experiences that furnish form and content for later entertainment media, sensation is the other. The term seems to appear first in the 1860s in relation to the stage, in such phrases as “sensation scene”, “sensation drama”, but it appears at almost the same time in relation to other up-to-the-moment cultural phenomena, from the novel, to new music, to the trapeze and high-wire performances of Leotard and Blondin. Some accounts suggest that sensation was a plant of American growth, a “pois’nous exotic”, as *Punch* put it. In the theatres, it begins to accrete first around Dion Boucicault’s smash-hit of 1860, *The Colleen Bawn*. When *Punch* claimed that:

If a drama can boast of a run,  
By dint of a strong situation,  
The posters e’en now have begun  
To puff the thing up as ‘Sensation’<sup>8</sup>

many readers would have recognized that drama as Boucicault’s play, which ran for 230 nights at the Adelphi, and later at Drury Lane after Boucicault and his wife, Agnes Robertson, who played the Colleen Bawn of the title, had a falling out with the manager of the Adelphi. The *Colleen* was, on the face of it, an unlikely candidate for the title of first great sensation drama, as it is a costume drama rather than a tale of the modern city. Based on Gerald Griffin’s tragic novel of 1829, *The Collegians* (itself inspired by a murder of 1819), it is a “mortgage melodrama” set in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, in which the plot hinges on the financial crisis of the once-wealthy Cregan family, who have fallen into the clutches of the local money-lender. A suitable marriage by the son of the house, Hardress, would save the day, but he has been secretly married to Eily, the eponymous Colleen Bawn. Such mortgage melodramas were common enough on the mid-Victorian stage, Boucicault’s *Octoroon* being another well-known example.

The play worked hard to present a picturesque vision of pre-Famine Ireland, but colourful Irish peasants and impoverished gentry were not that much a novelty on the London stage. What set the Colleen Bawn apart was not its plot, but the “strong situation”, which occurs in scene 6 of Act 2, in which Hardress’s boatman, the hunchbacked Danny Mann, attempts to drown Eily in a water-cave, Pool a Dhiol [sc. poll an dhiabhail, the devil’s cave]. As Eily is sinking beneath the surface, Myles-na-Coppaleen, a local character and former admirer of hers, shoots her persecutor, swings across the cave onto a rock, like a trapeze-artist, dives into the water, and saves her. It is a rapid-action sequence that was copied, and often parodied, in countless reworkings of the same story: in burlesques like the anonymous *Oily Collins*, H.J. Byron’s *Miss Eily O’Connor*, Martin Dutnall’s *The Coolean Bawn*, and Andrew Halliday’s *The Colleen Bawn, Settled at Last*; in the anonymous *The Colleen Bawn: or The Collegians Wife*, and *Cushla Ma Chree*; and even in a French adaptation, *Le Lac du Glenaston*, by Adolphe D’Ennery. The *Colleen* even reached the heights of opera, in Julius Benedict’s *The Lily of Killarney* (Covent Garden, 1862). Other plays were devised, or altered, to include similar scenes in hopes of securing some fraction of the popularity of Boucicault’s original (Edmund Falconer’s *Peep O’ Day* is an obvious imitation, and became a

considerable hit in its own right). The water-rescue was also translated into other media, providing an arresting chromolithographic cover to popular illustrated sheet music -- *Colleen Bawn* galops, quadrilles, polka mazurkas and waltzes -- which tend to either freeze the action at the moment just before or just after Myles's famous dive. As with the Newgate Novels, we are dealing here with multimedia phenomena.

What was it about this scene that made it so powerful? Rescue scenes were, after all, a staple of melodrama -- Boucicault himself had used a number of them, including the burning-building rescue of *The Streets of New York*. But somehow the athleticism, and the split-second timing of the scene (which depended on trapdoors to allow Eily and Myles to disappear and reappear), together with the careful presentation of the moonlit water cave (the appearance of moonlit water was achieved using gauze) seems to have held audiences spellbound. There are aspects of the scene that are particular to this play, not least that it turns grisly tragedy into comedy and melodrama: the murder of the real Ellen Hanly on the Shannon in 1819 had been reported in the London newspapers, and the Collegians had kept its memory alive; in this respect the water cave, in which Myles distills illegal spirits, is a sort of portal to the spirit world, or a memory chamber. But the timing of the scene reminds us that for all its faux pastoralism, this is a piece of industrial entertainment, one that brings the temporal patterns of the factory floor into the theatre. That this was the case became all the clearer when some years later Boucicault devised (and partly borrowed) another famous rescue scene, that in *After Dark* (Princess's Theatre, 1868), which replaced the eerie setting of the water cave with a section of the London underground. This time the hero, Old Tom, a bit of a scapegrace like Myles, must rescue his old army companion, Captain Chumley, not from drowning but from being crushed beneath the wheels of a train. While Chumley lies unconscious on the tracks, we hear the train approaching and see its lights pierce the gloom. Just in the nick of time Old Tom runs from stage right, and plucks his old friend to safety as the train hurtles past. Audiences were thrilled by this elaborate scene, which not only gave them a last-second rescue, but also put the new underground railway, a smoky piece of the modern metropolis, on stage before them. It is not difficult to read the action as a sort of industrial allegory, or rather an anti-industrial one, in which human beats machine on its own territory, an inorganic space of bricks and steel tracks. But this is only part of the story, since the audience that rejoices in the defeat of, or at least escape from, the machine, is itself having its attention focused by an industrialized entertainment.

It can be argued that such scenes provide a sort of "temporal training", in the guise of leisure, for the members of an industrializing society: to enjoy the scene the audience must imaginatively enter the time/space world of the railway. But it also worth considering the extent to which such spectacles of suspense are used to fix the attention of the crowd in a vice-like grip at a time when two different but occasionally overlapping modern discourses are emerging: a discourse of attention, concerned with the limits of human attention in a machine age; and a discourse of the crowd, concerned by the susceptibility of mass subjects to manipulation and control. We tend to associate the latter discourse with the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the appearance of such studies as Gustave Le Bon's *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895), Gabriel Tarde's *L'Opinion et la Foule* (1901), and Gerald Stanley Lee's *Crowds: A Moving Picture of Democracy* (1913). (Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* [1911] might be thought to belong to the discourse of the crowd and the

discourse of attention.)<sup>9</sup> However, there was also a mid nineteenth-century, discourse of the crowd, that might be taken to encompass works as different as Edgar Allan Poe's "Man of the Crowd" (1840), Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1868). In the 1860s, the discourse of the crowd was given focus by the push for political reform that eventually led to the 1867 Reform Act. The discourse of attention, as described by Jonathan Crary, was also related to fears and anxieties about the subjects of an industrial and urban society, but was more physiological in its interests. The "sensation scene" when it arrives, then, in the 1860s, clearly derives from the history of melodrama as a form of drama with strong visual impact, but it is also a cultural form that is rooted in the off-stage history of modernity, and the attempt by writers and artists to place themselves in an age of crowds: while some writers sought to evade the crowd by pitching their wares at a small, elite audience (the line that goes from the aesthetic movement to high modernism), others sought to hold the crowd in thrall, to hit them right between the eyes.

It is not easy, of course, to know to what extent the latter group succeeded. Certainly, contemporary commentary on the vogue of sensation attributes to it either a numbing or a dangerously exciting. The audience for mid-Victorian melodrama was an active, heterogeneous, and talkative one by later standards, and its attention was not exclusively focused on the stage – house lights, for example, were not fully dimmed during performance until later in the century, and the gentrification of the West-End theatres through the removal of the pit was also a later development. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how debates over the deleterious effects of sensation anticipate twentieth-century controversies around the pernicious effects of cinema, television and other visual entertainment platforms, which have also been seen as having either a numbing or over-exciting effect on putatively passive audiences. The consistency in such accounts across the historical range suggests that it is the mass audience shaped by modernity rather than the various entertainment apparatuses that is the real target.

From its stage origins, "sensation" soon came to be more closely associated with the novel. The "sensation novels" of the 1860s carried over the fascination with crime of the pre- and early-Victorian Newgate Novel, but transposed it upwards in the social register, and gave it a contemporary setting: murder and theft feature, but so too do bigamy, adultery, and illegitimacy among the middle and upper classes. It can be argued that the sensation novels are actually quite a diverse group of narratives, lumped together by contemporary critics with more of an eye to their supposedly dubious moral effects rather than aesthetic qualities. But in a handful of the most popular novels, beginning with Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* (1859-60) and M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), we do see some new narrative features: not so much the foregrounding of spectacle and suspense, though there are certainly the verbal equivalent of "sensation scenes" in these novels, as the absolute centrality of mystery, or what Roland Barthes called the "hermeneutic code". Collins's earlier novel, *Basil* (1859), for example, is very much a sensational novel of modern life, but it lacks the element of mystery that made the *Woman in White* addictive to its first readers. In the former novel the initial mystery – who is the mysterious woman in white who accosts Walter Hartright on his moonlit walk from Hampstead to London – is replaced by another: what is the Secret she mentions, and which Sir Percival Glyde is so anxious to conceal? In his subsequent hit, the *Moonstone* (1868), Collins devises the first country-house mystery, with a small cast



of characters, one of whom has stolen the gem which gives the novel its title, a large diamond stolen from the treasury of Tippu Sultan during the 1799 sack of Seringapatam (sc. Srirangapatna). In both novels one of the characters must turn detective: Walter does so to restore the name and fortune of his beloved, Laura; in the *Moonstone* the finger of guilt seems to point to Franklin Blake, who must find the real thief to clear his name. These are not, of course, the first mystery narratives in English, and descend from, among other sources, the Gothic novel, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), and Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin stories; they also owe something to the earlier *Mysteries* serials of the 1840s and 1850s, though there is very little "low" urban life here. And, of course, Collins is drawing on the recent appearance of the actual detective police, created to deal with urban crime.

We have, perhaps, become so used to narratives that foreground the hermeneutic code that it is necessary to remember that to the readers of the 1860s these were something novel. Indeed, to some critics, the concealment of some narrative information for hundreds of pages in order to reveal it later seemed like rather a shabby trick. *Punch* in 1863 particular made fun of the Secret of the *Woman in White* and its imitators by creating its own serialized sensation novel, F.C. Burnand's *Mokeanna, or The White Witness*, illustrated by the young George Du Maurier, which features a plethora of Secrets: Lady Bettina reveals to her daughters that she has been married before to a man of low station, Barlow, who also seems to have killed her brother, for which he is executed (brother and Barlow both show up later); her husband, Sir Lionel, has for his part confessed that he was still married to someone else when he married her; the children reveal to Lady Bettina that they are not really her daughters; Mokeanna, a horse/donkey, finds a Secret Truss of hay, and so on.<sup>10</sup>, [quote from Critical Heritage]

*Punch* also aimed its barbs at two other aspects of Sensation culture: its tendency to re-mediation, and its litigiousness. In *Mokeanna* the writer assures us that he has protected his intellectual property by

having caused several versions of the same [story] to be made for Farces, Burlesques, Melodramas, and Operas respectively. A reduction on taking a quantity. Managers treated with liberally. No Irish need apply. He has also lately entered himself personally at Stationers' Hall. " Mokeanna," besides having been translated into all the modern European and most of the Semitic languages for future publication, forms the subject of a New Pantomime, in which the Author has lately invented and registered all the Comic Scenes. Parties attended.<sup>11</sup>

We have already seen how readily certain narratives migrated across generic boundaries, but it is also worth noting how this amphibiousness also meant a greater scope for extracting profits from literary and dramatic properties, and this tended towards greater vigilance about infringements of copyright. The "no Irish need apply" is presumably a gibe at Boucicault in particular, but Boucicault is not the only target of this passage. In part, perhaps, because the success of a "sensation" often depended on some striking scene or special effect rather than the work as a whole, authors had become increasingly jealous

of any attempt by others to reproduce these selling points, and both Collins and Bouicault took to the courts to defend their imaginative property.

As with the Newgate Novels, the most successful sensation novels were quickly reworked for the stage; in some cases, as with M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), the stage versions coming to be as popular, or more popular, than the novels. Inspired by the runaway success of *The Woman in White*, and playing with similar narrative surprises (the reappearance of the supposedly dead George Talboys echoes the sensational reappearance of the supposedly dead Laura Glyde, née Fairlie), Braddon's novel originally appeared as a serial in *Robin Goodfellow*, and, after that periodical folded, was continued in the *Sixpenny Magazine*, before being issued as a 3-volume novel before the serial finished. (This complex path to publication is a useful reminder that one of the things sensation novels did was provide content for the mid-market magazines that were enjoying something of a boom in the 1860s.) A former actress, Braddon wrote narrative fiction that was informed by the pacing and visual appeal of the stage, so it was not surprising that *Lady Audley's Secret* was soon adapted by a number of other authors for the theatre, among the most successful being versions by George Roberts [sc. Robert Walters] and William E. Suter. In Suter's version, *Lady Audley's Secret!* (first performed at the Queen's Theatre, February 21, 1863), although the basic plot is largely followed, comic relief is provided by the Butler and Footman, Bibbles and Bubbles; sensation scenes are provided by the scene in which Lady Audley pushes her first husband down a well (having stabbed him first for good measure, detail absent from the novel), and by the fire at the inn; a third highlight is provided by the final scene, in which Lady Audley dies, having poisoned herself rather than face incarceration in an asylum for the insane (another of Suter's changes).

*East Lynne* is the most successful of all the sensation novels in terms of the longevity of its spinoffs. Lacking the mystery element favoured by Collins and Braddon, instead it relies on a form of slow-burning suspense, and strong emotional appeal, and tells the story of an aristocratic woman, Lady Isabel Vane, who is seduced away from her middle-class husband, only to be disfigured in the train crash in which her lover perishes; presumed dead, she returns in disguise to look after her own children in the home of her now remarried husband; there she witnesses the fatal illness of one of her children, and eventually dies herself. It is a novel of two halves, as it were: Isabel sins, and spends a long time being punished for it. Long after its initial appearance in 1861, stage versions of the novel continued to appear on the provincial stage, and there were at least 10 film versions from the silent period alone, the first in 1902. (There were 4 of *Lady Audley's Secret* in the same period – Theda Bara, the great silent-screen vamp, played both Isabel Vane [1916] and Helen Talboys/Lady Audley [1915]).

Early cinema drew directly on well-known titles from the literary and dramatic repertoire of the sensation era: besides *Lady Audley* and *East Lynne* there were versions of, for example, Bouicault's *Colleen Bawn* (3 separate versions in 1911), *Octoroon* (1913), *Streets of New York* (1913) and *After Dark* (1915), and of Collins's *Woman in White* (1912) and *Moonstone* (1914, 1915). But early screen practice was also deeply informed by melodrama more generally. There have been various attempts to trace the connections between melodrama and early cinema, one of the earliest of which is A. Nicholas Vardac's *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (1949). More recently, Ben Singer has provided a detailed and persuasive narrative of the way in

which nineteenth-century melodrama fed into early cinema through such action-driven serials as *What Happened to Mary* (1912), with Mary Fuller, the 1913 *Adventures of Kathlyn* (the first to feature “hold-over” suspense at the end of each episode), *The Hazards of Helen* (1914-17), featuring Helen Holmes and later Helen Gibson, the *Perils of Pauline* (1914), featuring Pearl White, and the *Mysteries of Myra* (1916), with Jean Sothorn.<sup>12</sup> In these serials, or chapter plays, such sensation scenes as the “railway rescue” were used to create recurring cliff-hanging suspense, and the serial format allowed for this suspense to be held over to the next installment, as it had with the nineteenth-century novel. But where the “virtue in distress” formula of much nineteenth-century melodrama, in drama and fiction alike, tended to centre on vulnerable and rather passive heroines, the heroines of the early serials were often active and resourceful.<sup>13</sup> For Singer, the persecuted yet resilient and resourceful heroines of these serials refract in complex ways social ambivalence regarding the changes in the status of women in this period. In this way, early cinema, like Victorian popular fiction and drama, used spectacle, suspense and mystery to present a popular reflection on the effects of modernization.

### **Spectacle**

I want to conclude by discussing a mode that, while it overlaps with melodrama, is not contained by it, and that also provides an important link between nineteenth-century popular culture and what follows: spectacle, which like melodrama provided a way of mediating historical change, and that featured in a variety of cultural forms. In particular, I want to consider here the imagination of disaster as an important strain within the popular modes of modernity. Where melodrama seems to offer a way of living through modernity, or even, in the form of sensation fiction and drama, temporal training for it, spectacle seems to return to a more popular Romantic, or dark sublime vision of the annihilation of the self in the face of a modernization that is quite literally imagined as a cataclysm.

One of the most powerful strands of the imagination of modernity-as-disaster projects the modern into the remote past, and the destructive power of modernity onto the natural world. Volcanic eruptions enjoyed particular popularity. As Isobel Armstrong has noted, powerful families mounted such firework-spectaculars in the Renaissance period as emblems of their own might. But as part of a modern diet of commercial entertainment they come into their own in the eighteenth century, in the wake of the rediscovery of the ruins of Pompeii in 1748. Entertainments of this sort were enormously popular from the 1770s through to the middle of the nineteenth century, and seem to have first appeared in the Georgian pleasure gardens rather than on stage, or in the novel. Richard Altick traces them to the Marylebone Gardens, which featured fireworks and cascades of fire from the 1770s, and by 1772 offered “The Forge of Vulcan”, in which a “mountain ... appeared in eruption, with lava rushing down the precipices”. Ranelagh Gardens followed suit, in a purpose-built auditorium. Audiences watched the Cyclops forge the armour of Mars while listening to suitably dramatic music by Gluck, Haydn, Giardini and Handel. At the climax Mount Etna spewed out smoke and flames before lava came pouring down its sides. As Altick puts it, “these eruptions were destined to reverberate throughout the London scene, indoor as well as outdoor, for the next half-century and beyond.”<sup>14</sup> (In this, their only rivals, Altick suggests were storm scenes.)

Such scenes also animated the high art of the period, e.g. Joseph Wright of Derby's *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* [c.1776-80]. Volcano scenes received a boost in the early 1800s, when the excavation of Pompeii fostered considerable interest in the historical disaster that had destroyed that town. This apocalyptic topos was treated in high Romantic style by John Martin in *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1821), which was turned into a diorama at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in 1822. London audiences could see Pacini's Opera, *L'Ultimo Giorno di Pompeii* in 1831, and by 1835 they could see at least three rival Vesuvian spectacles, including a fireworks spectacular at Vauxhall Gardens, as well as representations of the eruptions of Mounts Etna and Hecla.<sup>15</sup> Such spectacular scenes eventually found their way into fiction. In 1834, the prolific Edward Bulwer-Lytton penned one of the most popular novels of the nineteenth century, the *Last Days of Pompeii*, which uses the eruption to embellish a melodramatic tale of ancient Roman life, featuring star-crossed lovers and the clash of rival faiths (that of the Egyptian magician and voluptuary, Arbaces, that of the Athenian, Glaucus, and the newly-popular Christian faith of Olinthus). In the novel's most famous scene, Glaucus faces death in the Amphitheatre for the murder of Apaecides, brother of his beloved Ione, but he is saved in a timely fashion: the hungry lion he must fight decides to retire to his cage when he senses that something is wrong, and a witness appears who clears Glaucus and reveals Arbaces as the true murderer. Just as the bloodthirsty crowd turn on Arbaces, the volcano that has been smouldering ominously in the background since chapter 5 of Book 1 finally erupts:

At that moment they felt the earth shake  
beneath their feet; the walls of the theatre trembled: and, beyond in  
the distance, they heard the crash of falling roofs; an instant more and  
the mountain-cloud seemed to roll towards them, dark and rapid, like a  
torrent; at the same time, it cast forth from its bosom a shower of  
ashes mixed with vast fragments of burning stone! Over the crushing  
vines--over the desolate streets--over the amphitheatre itself--far and  
wide--with many a mighty splash in the agitated sea--fell that awful  
shower! ... Each turned to fly--each dashing,  
pressing, crushing, against the other. Trampling recklessly over the  
fallen--amidst groans, and oaths, and prayers, and sudden shrieks, the  
enormous crowd vomited itself forth through the numerous passages. (vol. 3, chapter 4).

Bulwer-Lytton's novel was quickly and successfully adapted for the theatre, in such versions as J.B. Buckstone's *The Last Days of Pompeii; or, Seventeen Hundred Years Ago*, which ran at the Adelphi for 64 nights in 1834. The *Times* claimed that "the eruption of Vesuvius in the last scene conveyed to the spectator a good idea of the terrors of that awful, natural phenomenon" (14 December 1834).<sup>16</sup> Other adaptations followed, including Louisa H. Medina's *The Last Days of Pompeii: A Dramatic Spectacle, Taken from Bulwer's Celebrated Novel of the Same Name* [1858], and the novel and its stage avatars remained popular throughout the rest of the century.

With the coming of the cinematograph, the volcanic spectacular was given a new lease of life. Before the reign of Hollywood, one of the most influential of the Italian

“super-films” (the multi-reel narrative feature films that would displace short features to become the mainstay of the film industry) was *Cabiria* (1914), a historical drama of the third century, B.C., with intertitles by poet, novelist, and ardent nationalist, Gabriele D’Annunzio. This “Historical Vision,” set against the backdrop of the Second Punic War, opens with an earthquake, the dramatic eruption of Mount Etna in Sicily, and the destruction of the town of Catana. *Cabiria*, the daughter of a rich Roman landowner, is lost in the confusion, and with her nurse, Croessa, begins a long series of adventures that takes her from Sicily to Carthage, to Cirta, capital of Numidia (part of modern Algeria), and finally to Rome. (*Cabiria*, in turn, inspired the Babylonian sequences in D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* [1916], which was billed as “A Colossal Spectacle”.) The adventures of a vulnerable orphan, including last-minute rescues, would have been familiar to Victorian readers and theatre-goers, as we have seen, but so too would have been the representation of natural disaster as entertainment, in the form of the vividly realized earthquake and volcanic eruption that launches *Cabiria* on her dramatic course. Bulwer-Lytton’s *Last Days of Pompeii* also received more direct homage from film-makers: between 1900 and 1950 no less than 9 films appeared under that title, or under the Italian title *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii*.<sup>17</sup> None of these was, perhaps, very faithful to the original story, though some names and plot details recur, and the volcano always puts in an appearance. (The 1935 version, for example, produced by Merian C. Cooper, fresh from the success of *King Kong*, changes the storyline completely, though gladiators, emergent Christianity, and Vesuvius all feature.)

From their pleasure-garden origins, cataclysmic scenes have enjoyed considerable longevity, aided by their ability to mutate to accommodate new political content. *Cabiria* is a celebration of the glory days of Rome, written by an ardent Italian nationalist, but through its disaster scenes it registers the impact of the second industrial revolution and the approaching world war. As the century unfolded, a more capacious subgenre emerges, the special-effects driven disaster film, which utilizes a variety of forces to effect the annihilation of a carefully-realized world. Where Bulwer-Lytton uses the distant past, film-makers have more often used distant or near-future scenarios to refract a variety of subsequent threats, from atomic-age annihilation during the Cold War (*The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951, 2008]; *The War of the Worlds* [1953, 2005]), to ecological catastrophe (*The Day after Tomorrow* [2004]), though natural disasters, including volcanoes, have also found favour (*Deluge* [1933], *Earthquake* [1974], *Krakatoa: East of Java* [1969], *Volcano* [1997]). While a recurring feature of such narratives is the focus on the society that emerges from the ruins, destruction itself remains a major component of their appeal.

A chapter such as this can provide only a partial account of the web of connections among popular modes in the nineteenth century, and their subsequent remediation. I have focused here on some strands of this web – tales of the city, melodrama, sensation, and spectacle – at the expense of others that were equally significant: burlesque, slapstick, and other comic modes, minstrelsy, and empire narratives, to name only a few. It would also be possible to trace the way in which individual careers (e.g. those of William Le Queux, Elinor Glyn) straddle the late Victorian literary world and that of the cinema. Moreover, an account such as this foregrounds text (or play, or film), at the expense of performance. Victorian music hall, and in the U.S., vaudeville, provided alternative, working-class dominated public spheres

in which evolved routines, characters, and physical styles that migrated to Hollywood through the careers of such figures as Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Buster Keaton. But I hope that even an account as partial as this suggests the high levels of continuity between nineteenth-century popular culture and that of the early twentieth century, while also signaling some of the breaks.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor's play is in fact a French adaptation, from Brisebarre and Nus's *Le Retour de Melun* (1863). The prolific Williams also adapted numerous French novels and plays, and wrote popular biographies of Buffalo Bill, P.T. Barnum and others.

<sup>2</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> In the absence of an international copyright agreement, overseas sales did not necessarily mean profits for the writers. Indeed, American publishers did not always feel under any compunction to pay for reprinting material by their fellow Americans. See Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Some British publishers did pay Stowe for their editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but she received nothing like the amount that would have been generated by the estimated sales of 1 million copies of her book in Britain and its colonies. See Claire Parfait, *The Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852-2002* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007) 108.

<sup>4</sup> See Gregory Dart, "'Flash Style': Pierce Egan and Literary London, 1820-28", *History Workshop Journal* 2001 (51): 180-205. See also Kate Newey on city plays

<sup>5</sup> "Amusements", *New York Times*, July 1, 1873.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlotte: University of Virginia Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew Buckley, "Sensations of Celebrity: 'Jack Sheppard' and the Mass Audience", *Victorian Studies* 44.3 (Spring 2002): 423-463. For the classic account of the interplay of fiction and its visual recreation, see Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> *Punch* 41 July 20, 1861, 31.

<sup>9</sup> On Lee, see Gregory W. Bush, *Lord of Attention: Gerald Stanley Lee and the Crowd Metaphor in Industrializing America* (Amherst: U. Massachusetts P, 1991). For the crowd in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, see John Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Moke is archaic slang for a donkey, as well as a dialect word for mist or fog.

<sup>11</sup> F.C. Burnand, *Mokeanna, A Treble Temptation, etc.* (London, 1873), pp 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> For a more complete list, see Kalton C. Lahue, *Bound and Gagged: The Story of the Silent Serials* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> There are, of course, plenty of exceptions to this pattern in the sensation novel, including active heroines like Marian Halcombe and Magdalen Vanstone (in Collins's *No Name* [1862]), and active villains like Lady Audley. On stage, the first "railway rescue" hit, Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) features the heroine rescuing a man from the oncoming train.

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<sup>14</sup> Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1978) 96

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Sheppard Skaerved, with Janet Snowman and Frances Palmer, *John Orlando Parry: The Poster Man, A Snapshot of London's Musical Life in 1835* (London: Royal Academy of Music, 2007) 22.

<sup>16</sup> See the overview of the 1834 season at the Adelphi Theatre Project, [http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi\\_calendar/hst1834.htm](http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi_calendar/hst1834.htm), accessed on May 15, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> One of these, the 1913 version, is in fact a pirated version of the 1908 film, with additional footage borrowed from Giovanni Pastrone's 1911 film, *La Caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*). See the BFI Film and Television Database, <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/260780>, accessed May 16, 2009.