Vincente Minnelli’s *The Cobweb* (1955) begins with a circular movement at varying speeds. At a Second Empire estate, a young man, Stevie (John Kerr), suddenly accelerates his pace, leaving the estate through the gate. He runs through cornfields for a while until he reaches a bridge. A woman driving a station wagon, Karen (Gloria Grahame), stops and offers him a ride. They bond over a discussion about color and its absence of clear cut ends. She explains that the flowers she carries serve no specific purpose. “Isn’t it enough that they have color and form, and that they make you feel good?” she asks. Stevie provides a more painful example of the finality without end of color. Karen’s question reminds him of the recent death of the painter André Derain, who, surrounded by the whiteness of the clinic in which he died, asked to be shown some red and some green. The conversation suggests that a life without color—or, more generally, a life guided merely by ends—would not be worth living. Karen and Stevie eventually reach the estate, which we learn is a mental institution where Stevie, a troubled artist, is interned. We also learn that Karen is married to Stevie’s analyst, Stewart McIver (Richard Widmark), the de facto clinic director.

Like Karen’s flowers, Stevie’s excursion serves no specific end. Significantly, Stevie stops at a bridge, which is not a proper destination but a space suspended between two places. Stevie’s movement—a flight from a setting that oppresses him—is exhausted in itself. Stevie repeats this movement twice. In the first repetition, Stewart thwarts the movement before Stevie leaves the clinic. The second repetition has apparently led to Stevie’s death at the bottom of the river under the bridge. However, instead of returning to the clinic or drowning himself, Stevie finishes his journey at the McIver family home.

This essay examines the political import of these movements of flight in the film and, more generally, in melodrama. These flights forcefully move away from the set of drapes in the clinic that lies at the center of the political struggle in the film. Accordingly, these movements seem to run
contrary to the political center, an elusive center characterized by democratic dialogue and charged with the promise of equality. I argue that these movements are best understood as part of a leftist impulse toward the political center; their turn away from the political conversation implies a demand to rethink the terms of this conversation, that is, a demand to rethink the terms of equality. I situate these movements within a decorative mise-en-scène that turns the world into a series of tableaux. These tableaux arrest movement but not without implying an outside beyond their limits. Stevie’s flights exemplify these movements toward a form of equality yet to be imagined.

These flights instantiate the dynamic Jacques Rancière locates at the center of the cinematic fable: a series of games between narration and the passivity of the image. In this instance, The Cobweb plays a game between a political fable of equality and a movement that protests the rules governing how the game of equality is played. The plot of the film exemplifies—one could even say caricatures or trivializes—a political dispute centered on the replacement of the drapes at the clinic library. That the clinic sits in what used to be Indian Territory highlights the triviality of the dispute; in other words, the struggle over the drapes is laid over a forgotten struggle over the space itself.

Three different factions become invested in designing the new drapes. The clinic manager, Vicky Inch (Lillian Gish), whose ancestor drove the Indians out of the territory, wants to utilize the cheapest fabric—rep—without much consideration for the decor of the room. As a means to mend her estranged relationship with Stewart, Karen wishes to install chintz drapes. Karen solicits the help of Regina Mitchell (Mabel Albertson), the chairman of the clinic board, and Douglas Devanal (Charles Boyer), the clinic director, who aims at regaining control of the clinic by championing Karen’s drapes. Finally, Stewart and Meg Rinehart (Lauren Bacall), who is in charge of patient activities, view the situation as an opportunity for a group project in which the patients themselves would design their own stencils, print the cloth, and sew the drapes.

Stevie’s movements play a central role in the political struggle between these interests. His first escape from the clinic initiates the dispute: Karen learns about the drapes in her encounter with Stevie. His second escape—an escape thwarted by Stewart’s timely intervention—is a direct reaction to a memo from Dr. Devenal, in which Devenal directs that the chintz drapes be installed. Finally, the third movement responds to the chintz drapes themselves, which Karen hangs furtively in the middle of the night. These movements away from the clinic counter the movements for and against equality, all of which are directed toward the drapes. The narrative recuperates these counter-movements by writing directly on the image. When Karen stops to offer Stevie a ride, the words “The trouble began” appear on the screen, as if the narrative had not yet started until Stevie and Karen met. When Stevie completes his third movement, resting immobilized under the protection of Karen’s drapes, the words “The trouble ended” are written on the screen.

Melodrama as Category E Film

By focusing on these movements, I attempt to examine the imbrication of melodrama and politics from a somewhat oblique perspective. A brief overview of the framework that has shaped the discussion of melodrama and politics is in order. Critics recuperated melodrama by theorizing it as a particular kind of what Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni famously called the category E film, which at first sight appears to belong within the ideology of bourgeois realism but is riddled with cracks that ultimately render the ideology visible as such. The notion of the category E film is most clear in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s understanding of melodrama as a hysterical text. According to Nowell-Smith, the cracks in the melodrama appear because of the demands of the happy ending,
which can only be achieved through repression. In melodrama, the repressed returns (that is, the cracks become legible) through an excessive mise-en-scène and music.\(^3\)

The specificity of the melodramatic category E film resides in the emotional register of ideology. In “Tales of Sound and Fury,” Thomas Elsaesser notes in melodrama “a radical ambiguity” that follows from the displacement of explicit political or social problems onto the private realm.\(^4\) As a result of this displacement, melodrama oscillates between a “healthy distrust of intellectualization and abstract social theory” and “ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions” of conflict.\(^5\) In his Marxist approach to melodrama, Chuck Kleinhans privileges the awareness of this displacement primarily as a means to move beyond the distraction from the political. Kleinhans is interested in melodrama’s status as a symptom of the split between the personal and the public, a split effected by capitalism: “The personal is political, but that awareness can produce a strategy for change only if we see that capitalism has produced the split between the personal and the productive and that capitalism must be overcome to transcend that dichotomy.”\(^6\)

Feminist critics have cautioned against this subordination of emotion to politics. In her discussion of Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937), Christine Gledhill proposes that feminists should “take the world of melodrama at face value, rather than as offering absurd, overblown plots or blatant ideology to be undermined by the transgressions of mise-en-scène.”\(^7\) Melodramatic pathos—the aesthetic activity of assessing suffering from our privileged position—plays a central role in Gledhill’s argument. Through pathos, the female viewer examines the contradictions of bourgeois ideology from within: “Melodrama is not about revolutionary change but about struggles within the status quo.”\(^8\)

In her discussion about the role of tears in melodrama, Linda Williams makes a similar point. Williams views tears as a source of future power because they offer us the hope that “virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than, as Eisenstein wanted, in revolution and change.”\(^9\) More recently, Lauren Berlant has theorized this recuperation of affect “as something other than a failure to be politics” through the notion of intimate publics.\(^10\) These intimate publics engage in sentimental bargaining, an expression of both compromise and latency: “a sense that there is always a tomorrow whose different outcomes can be confirmed affectively and experienced aesthetically before they are realized.”\(^11\)

As this brief overview should make clear, the discussion about the political import of melodrama has emphasized the displacement of politics onto the personal, weighing the extent to which the personal is political and assessing which political aspirations may be expressed in emotional terms. I suggest that displacement does not aptly describe the relation between politics and the personal. No politics exists outside its dramatization; politics only becomes visible in its exemplifications. In this sense, the personal and emotional don’t obfuscate the proper dimension of politics; more exactly, they make visible both politics and its obfuscations. The movements of flight I analyze—which apparently refuse democratic dialogue—involve not the negation or limit of politics in general but the limitations of a specific political configuration. Instead of exhibiting the symptoms of the ideology under which they appear, these movements ask that we imagine a political configuration in which they become legible.

**A Problem of the Theater... and of Politics**

I take as a point of departure Rancière’s brief discussion of melodrama in “Arts gratia artis,” an article on Minnelli’s poetics. The melodramas, Rancière suggests, are antithetical to the musicals, in which the imperative of the fiction is a good performance. The meeting of dream and reality in the
musical comedies refers to the possibilities and pleasures of the theater itself, that is, “role changes, double meanings, and sudden reversals of fortune.” Melodrama begins when social positions inhibit performance. Melodrama, Rancière writes, “describes a situation in which performance is hindered, in which the exchange of social positions is impossible.” Whereas bodies in the musical comedies shift away from fiction into pure performance, melodrama attempts to stop “bodies from metamorphosing or positions from being overturned, hampering the movement into pure performance.”

This succinct discussion indicates that melodrama requires more than a struggle among bodies. For melodrama to appear, a body must struggle against a social function that oppresses the body and hinders its movements. In melodrama, social functions refer not to roles through which the body passes or expresses itself but to ideas in which the body has become trapped. The melodramatic body is fundamentally inexpressive or, more precisely, the body can only express the social role that has captured it.

We can clearly see how melodrama becomes a problem not only of the theater but also of politics, particularly in the terms by which Rancière conceives of politics. According to Rancière, politics is the art of redistributing the sensible, which he understands as the system of self-evident facts that determine what can be seen, said, and done, as well as the parts and positions each occupy within the social whole. For this reason, politics is concerned with equality not as a “fantasy of the well-ordered One”; instead, politics is an unending process of declassifying “the supposed naturalness of orders,” replacing their unitary claims to order “with the controversial figures of division.”

From this vantage, melodrama seems antithetical to politics: by dramatizing how social roles seize bodies, melodrama stages the difficulty or impossibility of social declassification. I will be suggesting that melodrama involves less a problem for politics than a drama essential to politics; the capture of bodies by social roles already poses a question about how to exorcise bodies of the social roles that oppress them. More clearly, melodramatic movements such as Stevie’s flights dramatize such an exorcism. Melodrama should be understood not as an emotional distraction or deflection from the properly political but as a dramatic move toward reconfiguring a particular political debate. These melodramatic movements dramatize social declassification as necessary rather than enacting its impossibility.
Before analyzing Stevie’s movements in more detail, we should understand the precise sense in which the struggle over the drapes is political. Toward the beginning of the film, the issue of the drapes appears almost as a backdrop for the real drama happening elsewhere. In his conversation with Karen, Stevie mentions the drapes almost in passing. Almost immediately afterward, Vicky is selecting the drapes and negotiating the price with the vendor while Mr. Holcomb (Edgar Stehli), a patient, has shut himself in his room and has hurt himself. Basing her decision on economic grounds, Vicky selects rep without any consideration for the decor. She explains to the vendor that the Board has made a decision to change the drapes and that her job consists in “getting things done as economically as possible.” Significantly, Vicky does not look at the windows; for the most part, she directs her sight at the ceiling, calculating the cost of the finished drapes. For Vicky, the drapes have no meaning beyond their cost.

Meanwhile, in the background, Meg is looking at the sample fabrics more attentively. When Vicky leaves the library, Meg turns toward the drapes. At this point, we do not know why she is looking toward them with such intent. We soon infer that she is conceiving the idea of a group project. Although Meg is in actuality looking at the old drapes and at the garden visible through the windows, she is also looking beyond them, reimagining the community and reconfiguring the places each person occupies within the community. Instead of inhabiting a room thoughtlessly decorated by the clinic manager, the patients would work together in imprinting their vision on a room they occupy. I characterize Meg’s look as a vision of equality aimed beyond the immediate objects surrounding her, that is, as a movement toward the political center.
The triviality of the struggle over the drapes—an unprecedented subject in a melodrama, as Rancière writes—should not divert us from the political character of the struggle. The point might be precisely that the most trivial issue offers an opportunity to disturb the clear partition of activities and spaces. As we will see below, this apparently frivolous issue involves not only the places doctors, patients, and staff occupy at the clinic but also the function and determination of spaces.

Another turn toward the political center follows when Karen visits the clinic. While the patients are reading, Karen enters the library, takes a look at the drapes, finds the samples, and turns toward the windows again, pondering the possibilities. Karen’s desire to select the drapes herself doesn’t directly disrupt the distribution of the sensible at the clinic. By intervening in the decor of the clinic, Karen aims at disrupting the clear division of activities and spaces to which her marriage has led; she is trying to fulfill marriage’s promise of equality. As she reveals in her conversation with Devenal, becoming involved at the clinic is a way of getting closer to Stewart.

That Karen’s desire for marital equality comes at odds with the desire for equality at the clinic—or that equality at the clinic can apparently occur only at the expense of Karen—is precisely one of the political questions the film addresses. For equality to take place at the clinic, Karen’s activity must remain restricted to the space designated for her, the family home. The film suggests that no redistribution of the sensible is absolute, that is, that any redistribution toward equality renders other movements toward equality invisible, abstract, or even trivial. *The Cobweb* makes this point at the expense not only of Karen but also of Vicky, from whom Stewart expects “unconditional surrender” as the only way to mend their professional relationship. Stewart does not extend the equality he champions among the patients either to his wife or to the staff at the clinic.
In regarding both Meg’s and Karen’s looks toward the window as turns toward the center, I am altering to a certain extent the most widespread understanding of the triad center, left, and right. This dominant view identifies the triad on two corresponding levels: on the one hand, center, left, and right refer to fields of identification across the political spectrum; on the other, they refer to positions in relation to specific issues. Left is understood as an impulse toward social and political redistribution, whereas right refers to the impulse aimed at maintaining or hardening social hierarchy and political power, or at least at explaining such a hierarchy as natural, inevitable, or desirable. In this model, center refers to a worldview or position that attempts to find a common ground between redistribution and tradition.

I am suggesting that center may also be understood as the possibility of a conversation rather than as an intermediate position between redistribution and tradition, however fair or equidistant this position might be. The elusive center indicates not a position but a look that attempts to create the possibility for what Rancière calls a community of equals. This community of equals has no material substance: “It occurs, but it has no place.” The practice of this principle involves the presupposition of a common language, “the assumption of a pre-existing equality between a wish to speak and a wish to hear.” The center, then, indicates not a location within the political spectrum but this presupposition of a common language, an asymptotic movement toward equality. From this vantage, right refers to the contrary tendency toward immobility and left to an impulse leading toward the center, that is, an impulse toward equality. Crucially, this leftist impulse only operates by reimagining equality—and consequently, the center. For this reason, this leftist impulse may easily be confused with a movement that misses the mark and passes beyond the center; however, this criticism figures the center as a certain position in the political spectrum and not as a moving target. To be more precise, we can say that the left aims not at the center but at its constant refiguration.

It should be instructive to distinguish this asymptotic movement toward the center from the centrist utopia Rancière identifies in Aristotle. This centrist utopia, Rancière explains, is characterized by the desire to find a middle term or a mean between those who have no means—the poor—and those who have them—the rich. The problem, Rancière explains, is that “the mean never suffices to occupy the centre.” The art of politics consists in putting this gap into play. He writes, “the demos is the union of a centripetal force and a centrifugal force, the living paradox of a political collectivity.
formed from apolitical individuals.” We can figure these centripetal and centrifugal forces in a slightly different way: right designates the lack of movement, that is, the defense of the image of the social whole in which each occupies its specified role; center refers to the centripetal movement toward equality; and left—indistinguishable from the center—names the threat of social illegibility generated by the movement toward equality. From this perspective, the paradox of the demos appears not as a pull between a political collectivity and apolitical individuals but as a pull between a centripetal movement toward equality and an accompanying centrifugal movement toward the illegibility of social roles.

This refiguration should clarify the point at which I part ways with Rancière. According to him, politics emerges when the political community is divided “based on a wrong that escapes the arithmetic of exchange and reparation.” This political setup is limited, on both sides, “by the order of domination or the disorder of revolt.” I argue that the dramatic gesture toward dissolution or revolt—even when this gesture appears to be self-destructive—inheres in the impulse toward equality. Paradoxically, what makes these movements political is their gesturing toward the outside of the political community. To appreciate these movements, we should situate them within the coordinates of decoration.

To Decorate, to Move
One of the most entrenched notions of melodrama theory is that the decor reveals meaning suppressed by the plot, that is, meaning unavailable to the characters. The blind spots of this theorization become apparent once we consider the early sense of decoration as the place of dramatic action, a sense highlighted in the Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (1751–80). Prior to revealing hidden meaning, decoration must carve a space out of the world to create a stage—a space dedicated to the performance of theatrical movements. Decoration introduces the theater into the world. This introduction of the theater into the (political) world is highly ambiguous, restricting movement by configuring spaces but also allowing for movements beyond the political world. Melodrama is concerned with meaning to the extent that these movements point to the possibility of a different political configuration.

In her analysis of the film Stella Bruzzi argues that The Cobweb’s emphasis on design and decor as generators of meaning is exemplary of Minnelli’s melodramas. She follows the central idea of Nowell-Smith’s essay “Minnelli and Melodrama,” namely, that these films obey the logic of conversion hysteria, in which the repressed does not return in discourse; instead, the repressed is displaced onto the body of the hysteric. Analogously, in melodrama, “where there is always material which cannot be expressed in discourse or in the actions of the characters furthering the designs of the plot, a conversion can take place into the body of the text.”

Bruzzi suggests that The Cobweb exemplifies this hysteric operation in the transposition of the characters’ troubles onto the drapes: “The drapes in The Cobweb swiftly become the motif through which psychology, emotions, and individual traumas are identified and elucidated.” However, such an explicit transposition of the characters’ problems onto the drapes complicates rather than confirms Nowell-Smith’s thesis of melodrama as a hysteric text. This transposition is unexplained by the characters’ ostensible inability to articulate their problems within discourse. The characters are able to articulate their issues; what they have lost is the ability to listen to one another, frequently interrupting and misunderstanding each other. The characters in The Cobweb transpose their problems onto the drapes to make themselves heard. Consequently, the displacement is not a
hysteric symptom but a mechanism through which the characters constitute a site where they remap their position in the world.

The scene in which Karen hangs the drapes at the clinic library—a sequence Rancière rightly describes as extraordinary—best exemplifies this conscious libidinal investment in the drapes. 27 Immediately after realizing that Stewart is having an affair with Meg, Karen does not head to Meg’s apartment to confront them. Instead, she takes the drapes out of the closet, drags them to her car, and stealthily hangs them at the clinic library.

Karen’s drapes are, of course, overdetermined. For Rancière, the drapes represent “both her good taste and her appeal for love.” 28 Bruzzi analyzes the scene in more detail, explaining that Karen “proclaims both her own presence (excessive, even crass, display often connotes in cinema a woman’s attempt to stamp her own personality on a scene that otherwise threatens to engulf her) and the total displacement onto the drapes of her feelings of need, loss and desperation.” 29 This displacement is fully rational rather than unconscious: by hanging the chintz drapes, she is thwarting the formation of the new family composed by Stewart, Meg, and Stevie. Stewart’s earlier remark that Stevie should see both Stewart and Meg as “good parents” supports this interpretation. That Stevie sounds much like Stewie, the diminutive of Stewart, also buttresses this point.

An earlier sequence in which the patients deliberate whether to become involved in the drapes project bespeaks that the patients’ investment in the drapes is also conscious. In explaining why he has chosen to represent the lives of the patients at the clinic, Stevie says, “It’ll look like our own living room and not Miss Inch’s.” By representing life at the clinic from the patients’ perspective, the drapes invert, or at least respond to, the dominant vector of representation at the clinic. The patients are consistently subjected to the doctors’ and the staff’s scrutiny rather than regarded as subjects capable of self-representation. In a strictly political sense, this act of self-representation attempts at rendering visible the perspective of the patients, a perspective that remains illegible within the debate about their proper treatment at the clinic. Their drapes aim at counting those who remain uncounted at the clinic.
Stevie’s comments thematize the premise of mise-en-scène criticism in melodrama, namely, that the mise-en-scène illuminates or comments on the conflicts that remain irresolvable at the level of the plot. The drapes visualize the conflict between the patients and the staff at the clinic. More generally, David Bordwell describes the critical procedure of mise-en-scène criticism as a bull’s eye schema in which the critic places the characters at the center, their surroundings immediately outside, and the film’s representational techniques at the outer circle. The Cobweb does not make explicit the critical procedure without displacing it: the fundamental question is no longer what the decor says about the characters but who is located at the center of the bull’s eye schema, that is, who becomes visible and who remains invisible (that is, part of the decor).

Prior to commenting on the plot, decoration lays out a platform that specifies spaces and controls movement. Rancière suggests that the spaces in the film regulate two distinct vectors of stimulation: “the one that externalizes itself in work and the one that ‘flows inward’ in the form of illness.” Accordingly, the clinic includes three different kinds of spaces: “the consulting room where the patient lies on the couch and talks: the rooms where they take sleeping pills; and the workshop, where work’s beneficial effect can be felt.” Each space distributes bodies differently: in the rooms in which patients take their pills, the inward flow of stimulation is curbed both by tranquilizing baths and pills; in the consulting room, externalization is mainly discursive; and, at the workshop, the inward flow of illness is reversed through labor.

The Cobweb keenly registers how decoration introduces the problem of labor and the legibility of social roles. During the patients’ meeting at the library, Mr. Capp (Oscar Levant)—a thinly veiled homosexual patient—claims that the idea that the patients make the drapes themselves confuses occupational therapy with common labor. Mr. Capp’s objection assumes that occupational therapy should exhaust itself in the salubrious effects of activity, that is, that occupational therapy should not be preoccupied with the end results of activity; these end results should be the concern of common labor. The project of the library drapes reverses to a certain extent this assumption: occupational therapy becomes beneficial only when conceived as labor, that is, when activity ceases to be considered a distraction from illness to become instead a disturbance of the distribution of the sensible. More importantly, in regarding occupational therapy as common labor, the patients become workers not unlike the doctors and the staff at the clinic.

This distinction between occupational therapy and labor recalls the difference between art and decoration: an element of each pair is connected to practical purposes (labor and decoration), whereas the other element is considered an end in itself (occupational therapy and art). Élizabeth Lavezzi argues that the emergence of the decorative arts as a legible concept in the nineteenth century followed “the surfacing of a particular sphere of activity and a particular order of knowledge, and
ultimately registered a shift of attention from objects to processes and to labour.” Étienne Souriau explains that two reasons are usually evoked to explain the inferiority of decoration in relation to art: first, an artisan is considered a manual worker and, therefore, inferior to an artist, a practitioner of the liberal arts; second, the utilitarian and subordinate qualities of decoration place it beneath art, whose nobility derives from its absence of specific ends.

_The Cobweb_ implicitly challenges this rationale on both fronts. First, the film questions the distinction between the decorator and the artist. Not unlike _The Band Wagon_ (1953), in which Minnelli confronts the artists with the entertainer, _The Cobweb_ confronts the artist (Stevie) with the decorator (Karen). _The Band Wagon_ dramatizes the difficulties involved in attempting to dissolve entertainment into art, a confusion leading to a failed spectacle that is neither art nor entertainment. In _The Cobweb_, the decorator and the artist work in tandem. The decorator embodies the Baroque impulse to occupy the world with a set of tableaus in which the troubled artist enacts both how social roles capture bodies and how bodies attempt to escape social roles. Furthermore, as I have been arguing, both Karen’s and Stevie’s drapes are concerned with equality. Like Karen’s chintz drapes, Stevie’s drawings are ultimately decorative: rather than objects of contemplation in themselves, the drawing exist to decorate the library. That the artist who created the drawing, David Stone Martin, was best known for his covers of jazz albums and magazines, also stresses the decorative nature of the drawings. Only Stewart finds a clear difference between Stevie’s and Karen’s drapes (and between Stevie and Karen), missing the political gesture of Karen’s drapes.

Stewart regards Karen’s interest in decoration as a sign of emptiness. In one of their discussions, he explains to Karen that he would come home more often if there were “more to come home to.” Decoration fails as a therapy for Karen because decoration is not understood as proper labor but as an acting-out of her preoccupation with surfaces. This coupling of decoration and emptiness leads Stewart to misread Karen’s desire to select the drapes as a mere interference with his “real” work at the clinic, rather than as a claim to equality in their marriage. Paradoxically, decoration fails to express any of Karen’s inner feelings or thoughts; instead, decoration indicates precisely the opposite, that is, a lack of any meaningful inner experience. For Stewart, the decor only makes apparent Karen’s lack of any substance, that is, her shallowness or obsession with surfaces.

The film makes the point that Stewart misdiagnoses both Karen and the practice of decoration as shallow. The conversation between Karen and Stevie at the beginning of the film already suggests that the difference between the artist and the decorator in _The Cobweb_ amounts to a snare: both art and decoration lack a specific purpose. That Stewart never learns about Stevie’s and Karen’s conversation about flowers, art, and color—concentrating instead on their mutual flirtation—bespeaks both their complicity and Stewart’s misdiagnosis of the decorator.

Stewart’s misdiagnosis follows a deep-seated prejudice against decoration in aesthetics. Allan Hepburn summarizes the case against decoration: “Ornamentation generates more ornamentation, which demonstrates the imagination of the artist, not the truth of an object.” Kant finds decoration unsuited for the aesthetic judgment characterized by finality without end. For Kant, decoration detracts from genuine beauty to the extent that it recommends approval through charm: “Even what one calls ornaments (parerga), i.e., that which is not internal to the entire representation of the object as a constituent, but only belongs to it externally as an addendum and augments the satisfaction of taste, still does this only through its form.” Kant proposes a further distinction between _ornament_ and _decoration_: when an ornament is attached to an artwork merely to charm and seek approval, it becomes decoration. Implicitly, Kant allows for the autonomy of ornaments, whose beautiful form
may be regarded independently of their decorative function. As Lavezzi explains, decoration’s
dependence on architecture ultimately devolved into autonomy, mainly because decoration is the
least useful of the elements or architecture. Decoration institutes a game of dependence and
detachment.

The externality that threatens decoration is perhaps not unrelated to impropriety. Both decoration and
decorum derive from the Latin term decus, which refers to anything that honors or adorns: buildings
honoring cities, children honoring parents, and even physical or moral qualities honoring an
individual. Whereas decorum emphasizes an honor that is proper and seemly, decoration intimates
the possibility of an ornament that is no longer proper; instead of recognizing an existing quality, the
ornament becomes an unnecessary or undeserved embellishment. Decoration is always in danger of
becoming improper because of the gap between an ornament and the object it honors.

Rancière transposes this externality of the decor to the figure of the filmmaker. As is well known,
the charge of embellishment—the accusation of failing to move beyond surfaces—has been directed
at Minnelli as a filmmaker obsessed with details and decor. Perhaps the most famous of these
charges is Andrew Sarris’s succinct assessment that “Minnelli believes more in beauty than in art.” In an argument reminiscent of Bazin, Sarris claims that Minnelli’s fatal flaw consists in naively
believing “that style can invariably transcend substance and that our way of looking at the world is
more important than the world itself.” Joe McElhaney explains the decline of Minnelli’s reputation
in France and in the United States partly as a result of the critical method of auteurism, which
championed “films that alternated between convention and innovation, classicism and modernism,
fiction and documentary.” In short, Minnelli’s polished and decorative style was not conducive to
the revelations characteristic of Bazinian realism.

Rancière no longer views Minnelli’s style as a shortfall of realism. For Rancière, Minnelli’s art is not
unlike Karen’s dream of choosing fabrics: “there are only forms of stimulation and different
possibilities of performance.” Moreover, Rancière suggests that Stewart McIver and not Jonathan
Shields from The Bad and the Beautiful (1950) best illustrates Minnelli’s style: the filmmaker as a
vanishing observer. McIver’s supreme power is to disappear, “the better to allow chaos to sort itself
out.”

To better understand the filmmaker-decorator, we should situate it in relation to the figure of the
victim or the suffering body. The film highlights Stevie, a troubled artist, among the suffering bodies
in the film. The artist is a recurring victim in Minnelli’s melodramas, such as The Bad and the Beautiful
(1952), Lust for Life (1956), Some Came Running (1958), and Two Weeks in Another Town (1962). I have
elsewhere argued that the melodramatic subject is divided between two figures: a suffering body and
a consciousness that observes and evaluates this suffering. The Cobweb suggests that the observer in
the melodrama is not inactive: in fact, as Rancière indicates, the decorator disappears after laying out
tableaus that entrap bodies, always making sure to introduce gateways through which the body may
enact its exorcism of social roles.

Victimization brings us back to the question of melodrama and politics. Melodrama does not
propose an unqualified identification with the victim for two reasons. First, melodrama offers the
role of the decorator as a position external to victimization; this role consists in laying out tableaus
and arresting movement in images. Second, victimization is less a point of full identification than a
figure of arrest in these tableaus—a role through which one passes in the theater—even if what is
staged is precisely that one has been seized by a social role.
For this reason, melodrama stages the urgency of politics rather than its limit. Rancière cautions against the lure of victimization. For him, politics ceases when the eligible party becomes “the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible.” In this context, Rancière suggests, politics becomes impossible because the facetiousness of political dispute is construed as “an insult to the victims of absolute wrong.” Rancière explains that politics can only function through a process of subjectification, which he considers the opposite of identification. Subjectification consists in the “removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part.” From this perspective, melodrama appears as the limit of politics: in melodrama, this process of subjectification seems to move beyond the democratic center, articulating a wrong from the position of a victim and not of a fellow speaking subject.

However, melodrama’s concern with the wordless victim should be understood as theater, that is, as a role one passes through to rearticulate the terms in which equality is sought. The disarming effects of wordless victimization are part of the process by means of which naked suffering becomes visible as a wrong. If politics consists in disturbing the sensible to provide legibility to the invisible and the inaudible, then the universal victim is not a permanent limit of politics but a theatrical role through which melodrama attempts to incorporate the invisible and inaudible to the distribution of the sensible.

Rancière himself offers the theoretical space to understand the wordless victim as an essential component of politics rather than as its limit or excess. Disagreement begins with a discussion of the Aristotelian distinction between voice and speech. Voice, shared by animals and humans alike, indicates pleasure or pain; speech, exclusive to humans, expresses the useful and the harmful and, as a result, the just and the unjust. For Rancière, this distinction between logical (human) animals and phonic animals serves as “one of the stakes of the very dispute that institutes politics,” that is, politics names the process by which pain or noise makes its claim as speech. Politics translates the groan characteristic of voice into the grievance characteristic of speech. In the process, politics brings the incommensurable into the field of speaking bodies. Politics usurps the privileges of speech by shaping the unintelligible demands of voice.

One can easily recognize here the rhetoric of melodrama, situated between muteness and verbosity. This connection has not been stressed because melodrama critics have theorized muteness—incorrectly, in my opinion—in relation to the inability to express the ineffable or as the return of the repressed. Muteness in melodrama, as in Rancière’s model of politics, refers more generally to the impossibility or difficulty of expressing a wrong, that is, the unintelligible cry of melodrama attempts to break through the distribution of the sensible, to make itself heard as a wrong in a context that doesn’t recognize it as such. In its intensity, a melodramatic cry asks that its pain be regarded as worthy of being articulated as a grievance; the verbosity characteristic of melodrama complements this muteness by situating this cry, however inadequately, within the realm of the visible and the sayable.

Stevie’s movement strictly parallels these cries in melodrama, asking of us that we regard it as a political grievance and not only as a demand for a family. Stevie’s flight responds to Karen’s own movement of hanging the drapes at the clinic. What happens toward the end of the film can be
described as a melodramatic diversion. Whereas Karen’s act of hanging the drapes is a political movement of asserting her presence at the site of conflict, Stevie’s movement entails an ostensible withdrawal from the political, an assumption of victimhood that aims at making apparent the inanity of the political games played at the clinic, effectively disarming all of the parties involved. We are led to believe that Stevie has committed suicide by throwing himself to the river; instead, he has sought refuge at the McIver home.

The ideological point might be that Stevie’s flight diverts us from politics: after all, the patients’ drapes have not been hung at the library. In other words, the melodramatic movement has distracted us from the issue of equality and forced us to focus on the apparently underlying issue, the abandonment of the father and the formation of a new family unit. The diversion is doubly troubling since Karen’s drapes have also been removed from the library. The proper place for her drapes is the family home. Nowell-Smith’s argument about castration and the happy ending seems applicable to *The Cobweb*. Karen renounces her quest for a more egalitarian marriage; Stewart renounces Meg, a relationship that also promises to be more egalitarian than his marriage; and Stevie renounces a more egalitarian community at the clinic. In return to renouncing their egalitarian desires, the happy ending provides them with the comfort of family.

I wouldn’t dispute that Stevie’s dramatic movement involves a certain degree of distraction, particularly in its suggestion that beneath the quest of equality lie more important concerns such as the betrayal of his father and Stevie’s subsequent search for a substitute family. However, this interpretation is complicated by the movement itself, which collapses the difference between the space of the clinic and the space of the family home, effectively turning the McIver’s living room into a consultation room. Throughout the film, Stewart is the only character who moves with ease across public and private spaces. That Sue (Susan Strasberg), one of the patients at the clinic, suffers of panic attacks in crowded, public spaces stresses how space restricts the action of bodies to the point that ill bodies turn against themselves. In this sense, Stevie’s flight from the clinic to the family home reverses the direction of Karen’s flight from the family home to the clinic.

Therefore, as I have been arguing, Stevie’s movement should be interpreted not only as a sentimentalization of the properly political but also as the libidinal motor of politics. His movement gives a different sense to the externality of decoration. Melodrama does not adorn to distract from the properly political but to point toward an outside yet to be decorated, an outside ignored by a specific political configuration. In other words, the diversion does not lead to what is inessential but to what remains illegible in an inessential system, that is, a system that is not necessary despite its apparent inescapability.

**Unfinished Labor**

I conclude by comparing two shots in the film. Toward the beginning of the film, Karen is looking for Stewart at the clinic. She enters his office and tries to listen through the door that leads to his consulting room, presumably to determine whether Stewart is conducting a session. Believing that he is by himself, Karen opens the door. We see Stevie lying on the couch and Stewart sitting behind him in his chair. Karen’s salmon dress contrasts with Stevie’s blue shirt and Stewart’s blue suit. Stewart gets up and turns his head away, in all likelihood, in shame. Stewart walks toward Karen and closes the door behind him. After a brief conversation, he returns to the consulting room and shuts Karen out of the scene.
In the last shot of the film, Stevie is lying on the couch of the McIver home. Karen is sitting next to him, facing against the camera, while Stewart hands her a cup of hot milk that she attempts to chill before Stevie falls asleep. Stewart sits in a chair facing them. The blue clothes of the three members of the newly formed family create a striking diagonal line directed toward an opening behind Stewart. The line is decorated on the right side by a predominantly orange flower arrangement that matches the color of the pillow where Stevie’s head lies.

In this repetition, a door no longer separates Karen from the therapeutic session; instead, the front door is faintly visible behind Stewart. Karen is now an important part of the therapy and not its interruption. The camera follows Karen as she swathes Stevie with the chintz drapes under Stewart’s approving eye. The camera frames Stevie as he wakes up, smiles at Karen, looks at the drapes, and says, “I seem to keep running into these things.” The camera finally pans to frame only the drapes, as the words “The trouble was over” appear on the screen. A fade leads to the end credits, adorned by one of Stevie’s sketches in which red and orange hues struggle to flee away from the forms that threaten to confine them. The sketch accomplishes two things: first, it illustrates the work of the
decorative melodrama, which sets a stage for the entrapment and flight of bodies; and second, it reminds us that no drapes hang at the library. The work of the decorator is yet to be finished.

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Notes

I would like to thank Aarón Lacayo and Paula Halperin for their valuable comments on previous versions of this essay.

5 Ibid.  
8 Ibid., 45.  

11 Ibid., 401.

13 Ibid., 401.
14 Ibid., 400.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 402.
32 Ibid., 401.
33 Lavezzi, “The Encyclopédie,” 177-78.
37 Ibid., 111.
38 Lavezzi, “The Encyclopédie,” 175.
39 I am grateful to Francisco Barrerechea for this observation.
41 Ibid.
43 Rancière, “Ars gratia artis,” 403.
44 Ibid.
46 Rancière, Disagreement, 126.
47 Ibid., 127.
48 Ibid., 36.
49 Ibid., 22.