

On affect and criticality in Steve McQueen's *Widows*

by [William J. Simmons](#)



Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Solitary Pursuit*, 2017-18, charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper, 30 x 40 inches (sheet), 35 3/8 x 45 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches (framed). © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. [\[Click on picture to see large.\]](#)

Ojih Odutola, like Steve McQueen, uses realism and fantasy simultaneously, expanding thereby the interpretational options open to the Black figures she depicts. Drawing, for most of art history's life as an academic discipline, has always carried with it an assumption of truth that opposes the chromatic excesses inherent to painting. Still, Ojih Odutola uses drawing in a quasi-mythological way, creating worlds and narratives that embrace the spectacular and the mundane.

"Black stories can be ridiculous. Black stories can be silly. They can be problematic. They can be mediocre and remarkable. They can be boring. Can we have that privilege now? Instead of having to be exceptional all the time?"

— Toyin Ojih Odutola [1]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

In the concluding scene of Steve McQueen's *Widows* (2018), one protagonist and another, whose stories I will get to in a moment, meet unexpectedly after some time apart. These protagonists are both women. One of them is Black and one is white. The white woman leaves a lunch date and readies to get back into her car, but the camera swivels slowly and methodically backwards to reveal the Black woman standing there with an empathetic, but slightly apprehensive look on her face. After all, with the trauma they have both experienced, it may be harder to talk to someone from the past than spending the rest of their lives craving that camaraderie again. I originally misremembered that the Black woman waves, but instead she just says "Alice," and we hear no response. We imagine that one might have come, but the credits get in the way. Though the Black woman does not wave as I had thought, she nevertheless asserts herself, makes herself materially present in the life of her former (white) colleague. Describing this final moment, the script for *Widows* (co-written by McQueen and Gillian Flynn) reads:

"Veronica's expression is one of guarded recognition. She is reaching out."^[2]

She does not wave, but she reaches out. She knows perhaps that the genre she inhabits has relegated black women (in a way very different than white women or black men) to a state of unintelligibility that precludes her from being either a *femme fatale* we fear or a heroine with which we identify—indeed a woman at all. Instead, she will not fade away into history or narrative and instead maintains through a look and an implied gesture that she will persist in both the thrilling and action-packed past of the story and in the real sociopolitical arena outside of the darkened theatre.



Alice (Elizabeth Debicki) prepares to leave the café without acknowledging Veronica (Viola Davis), perhaps unwilling to revisit the traumatic experience of

the heist.



McQueen's camera swirls backward toward Veronica, indicating a vastness of time and space, and, in its dissolution of the image into abstraction, becomes a gesture akin to a brushstroke.



Veronica is cautious about “reaching out” to Alice, but any guardedness comes with a compelling empathy that is manifest in her facial expression.

That gesture of acknowledgment becomes the corporeal link between the film's past and present, which are both our own present, and we see time condense before our eyes. The knowing glance or wave is a filmic cliché endemic to melodrama, and yet each time those bodily expressions remain compelling as e/motions that both signal a return to order and remind us of all the transgressions and thrills that occurred prior to it. The “knowing” ending is also a call to action, to remember the possibilities afforded by the filmic narrative that could translate into “real” interventions or a realization of the pure fantasy of those longed-for interventions. We remember all that these characters accomplished together and the hardships that they overcame, even as we mourn the dailiness with which they must comport themselves now that the film has reached its falling action. Moreover, that knowing look accomplishes an empathetic muting of emotion in a narrative that, in the tradition of melodrama and *film noir* (which were originally synonyms, e.g. “crime melodrama”), has been marked by emotional extremes, by grand inquiries into morality and the ongoing discourse of the individual verses crushing social forces that are both external to and played out within the protagonists. It follows that a sobering glance is both melodramatically poignant and an indication of a (perhaps begrudging) commitment to realism inasmuch as it reminds us of the tension between melodrama and everyday life.

Perhaps most importantly in the context of *Widows*, the “reaching out” is an assertion by the Black protagonist that she is a part of the film's realist aspirations, its partial return to normalcy with all its drudgery and possibilities for newness, even as she is equally integral to the romance and car chases that mark a world of fantasy. She persists as both simultaneously—not liminal or oscillating, but rather fully both at the same time. She is moreover fully in control of that interspace, using her gesturality as a way of grounding herself and claiming filmic space.



The widows exist collectively, but their individual socioeconomic circumstances are central to McQueen's story. In some way, he makes clear that only the fantasy/narrative binds them, and when the heist ends, there is no reason for sustained contact in the "real world."

Indeed, persistence is perhaps the quintessential theme of *Widows*, as is the potential of occupying multiple racialized and gendered emotional/viewing positions. Melodrama and *film noir* tend to have persistence at their core generally, so one could say that *Widows* is an appropriation of the thematic conditions of these genres for the 21st century and in a non-white-male context. The film is itself an act of appropriation that centers on the persistence of McQueen's childhood fascination with the British TV drama of the same name from the mid-1980s.

The film follows four women in Chicago whose husbands are killed in a failed robbery and begins with a passionate kiss between Veronica (Viola Davis) and her husband Harry (Liam Neeson).[3] After Harry's death, she is threatened for the money he stole, so she teams up with Linda (Michelle Rodriguez), Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), and Belle (Cynthia Erivo) to steal \$5 million to clear their debts (and perhaps, for some of them, to sustain the legacy of their husbands, no matter how checkered that legacy might be). Imbricated within the widows' plan is a political power struggle between a white incumbent in a South Side election (Colin Farrell) and his Black challenger (Brian Tyree Henry). The film proceeds with a compelling combination of humor and pathos, and finally the satisfying completion of a successful heist.

However, in a perfectly melodramatic twist that is characteristic of the *film noir* genre, it turns out that Veronica's husband was alive the whole time. He planned to kill her and steal the money back so that he could run off with his mistress. Veronica kills him in self-defense. We therefore understand her tentative assumption of the role of a *femme fatale* to be justified and not based in greed or aspiration, and the foregrounding of her sexuality at the beginning of the film does not become a prediction of a punishing sexuality in the tradition of the *femme fatale*.



Veronica does kill her husband in the tradition of the *femme fatale*, but we do not understand it as vengeance or castration. Instead, in a melodramatic fashion, we are swept up into an emotional space characterized by female virtue, which has often been denied to women of color. Interestingly, here Veronica and McQueen appeal to the white/Western art historical tradition of the *pietà*.

It is not clear that the other widows learn of Veronica's tragic choice, but, in any case with the heist completed, they each make new lives for themselves—traumatized certainly, but wiser, as often is the case with films offering some kind of sentimental return to order—and they go their separate ways, at least until the chance meeting between Veronica and Alice with which I began. Belle gives her money to a struggling friend who owns a black hair salon. Linda opens her own store in her own name. Alice finds self-fulfillment without the intervention of men. Veronica donates her money to the local public school in honor of her son who was murdered by the police.

Social commentary and anti-racist activism certainly are major components of McQueen's work, but what we need to remember about *Widows* and other films by and about non-white and/or non-male individuals is that social engagement should not equate their work with a documentary status or be a requirement for our enjoyment and engagement with those films. What characterizes *Widows* in

addition to its revolutionary attention to non-white-male stories is an interest in allowing those stories to be told through visual pleasure and through the at times irrational emotional configurations afforded by melodrama and *film noir*. Of course, associating people of color and/or women with irrationality is a tactic of the racist heteropatriarchy, but what I mean to suggest here is that *Widows* cannot be equated with a documentary-esque performance of racism and/or sexism in heist movies, melodrama, or *film noir*. While it does accomplish the critical task of making visible how melodrama and *film noir* focus on white bodies and white stories (often making people of color objectified accessories in the process), the film also sites visual pleasure and complex, problematic even, attachments at its foundation. After all, the film begins with a kiss that quickly cuts to a scene of violence, indicating the pleasure and danger of any erotic-filmic relationship.

Perhaps we could therefore also use the term narrative desire as formulated by the queer historian of literature Joseph Boone, who argues for a relationship to the text that exhibits both a desire for narrative and a desire to disidentify with the narratives imposed by deconstruction or critique.[4] To understand *Widows* as an enjoyable movie by an artist of color with fantastic visuals and acting would require the qualifiers of “merely” and “just” to imply that the seasoned critic or the properly deconstructive observer should be looking for the ways in which the film exceeds conventionality, visual pleasure, or the historically congealed markers of genre in order to find a meaning more sophisticated than enjoyment. I wonder if allowing McQueen to exist in a dialectic or even a provisionally non-oppositional space with regard to genre and problematic cultural tropes might be a useful exercise. This is not to say that we can reduce *Widows* purely to the essentialist pleasures afforded by these genres, but rather to explore the possibility of minoritarian artists existing in both pleasurable and critical ways to the conventions of genre and to the histories of art and film themselves.

Indeed, *Widows* seeks not to solve the racist history of film and its reception, and perhaps it does not even seek always to deconstruct those discourses, at least in the conventional academic sense. Deconstruction is often another burden we foist upon artists of color anyway, who, in addition to theorizing themselves, must also always bear the burden of theorizing difference [for the benefit of white people]. It is no mistake that Michele Wallace, via Stuart Hall, argues that postmodernism (and the deconstructive apparatus it implies) is itself an appropriation of marginalized temporalities and lives.[5] *Widows*, in its gendered and racialized appropriations, reminds us of this critical hegemony without fully detaching from the analytical pleasures and possibilities it provides.

In his recent book *Stolen Life*, Fred Moten takes the Black gesture, the Black “reaching out,” as the impetus for his critique of Linda Williams’s foundational text on melodrama *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Williams foregrounds her text with a consideration of how O.J. Simpson’s trial, itself drenched in melodramatic conventions, engendered a melodrama within her own mind centered on her racialized/racist discomfort with the trial’s outcome. Williams takes special note of visible gestures as exemplary of the corporeal legibility of melodrama in a racialized context:

“Viewers could thus observe the way Simpson exhaled and half smiled, the way Johnny Cochran, standing behind him, first slapped his shoulder and then rested the side of his head against it; the way, in another view, Kim Goldman, sister of Ron Goldman, let out a howl of pain, and finally, in a gesture of “raced demeanor” that was not seen by the television camera but was much commented on by the media, the way one black juror, upon exiting the courtroom, raised his fist in what some interpreted as a black power salute and others saw simply as the pleasure of being set free.”[6]

Williams thus understands this gesture performed by a Black body as something both illegible and self-explanatory, something akin to her own admitted ambivalence in response to the verdict handed down in the O.J. Simpson trial.



Belle secretly gives her money to a friend whose financial precarity threatens her hair salon. This gesture indicates a knowledge by Belle/McQueen of an intimate part of Black life (based on touch and gesturality) that, in some ways, cannot be translated across lines of racial and socioeconomic difference.



Linda reclaims the store that was liquidated to pay her husband's debts. Her children, now fatherless, begin to play, indicating the cautious hopefulness we might have via the melodramatic appeal to progeny. Of course, Veronica's child was murdered by the police, and his memory lives on in a different way. Structural racism makes it likely that Linda's store will again become financially precarious (I owe this last point to Felipe L. Núñez).



Alice has lunch with a girlfriend, and therefore seems, at least in this moment, outside the control of men, which has characterized most of her storyline in the film.



Linda Williams's discussion of O.J. Simpson and the Black power gesture is interesting in terms of the seriousness with which it takes melodramatic

Moten, however, takes the raised fist much more seriously as an indication of an inability on Williams's part to assign intentionality to the Black body in her theorization of racial melodrama. Moten argues:

“More specifically, part of what compels Williams to examine the history of racial melodrama is that a black male juror in the O. J. Simpson criminal trial raised his fist—in relief and/or triumph and/or thanks—when the jury was dismissed upon the reading of the verdict. As if the gesture were evident of something that is, in turn, so self-evident as not to require either mention or elucidation, as if its presumed bad taste were directly linked to a failure, or even absence, of moral reasoning, Williams recites but does not comment on it.”[7]

Moten's assignment of what might initially seem like an undue amount of emotional investment (as we have all experienced when our melodramatic connection to a certain character in a movie is questioned) in the fist (or the Black gesture generally) actually connects to what he sees as a more pervasive problem in Williams's text. She seems focused on an inherently conservative rights-based discourse (unlike Berlant and others who have critiqued citizenship itself) and is unable to theorize Blackness vis-à-vis melodrama beyond it being a metaphor for self-making through suffering. Moten also notes a blatant apolitical stance in Williams's book which he sees as coextensive with an inability or unwillingness to theorize what Black resistance might look like in the racist (not just “raced”) and melodramatic landscape outlined in the text.

So, Moten charts that path of resistance by returning to the text that germinated studies of melodrama, Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, quoting the moment wherein Brooks rehearses the liminal and spiritual possibilities of melodrama via a racist metaphor found in Denis Diderot's “Eloge de Richardson.” Diderot, in his melodramatic praise of the proto-melodramatist Samuel Richardson, describes Richardson as a kind of guide who leads us through the dark spaces of our emotional lives. According to Diderot, Richardson “spirits away the mighty phantom which guards the entrance to the cavern [so that] the hideous blackamoor which it masks stands revealed.”[8] Brooks quotes Diderot in his volume thusly:

“The desacralization and sentimentalization of ethics leads us—as Diderot discovered in reading Richardson—into ‘the recesses of the cavern,’ there to discover ‘the hideous Moor’ hidden in our motives and desires.”[9]

Brooks makes no mention of the racial implications of this passage, and one wonders why he includes the “the hideous blackamoor” at all. Moten, like Toni Morrison, argues that Blackness always represents always a metaphor of transgression for the white, racist imagination, which transforms Blackness into a vehicle for white meaning, rather than a material, affective, and discursive way of being in the world and relating to hegemonic and non-hegemonic culture.[10]

With this history in mind, Moten unseats the centering of whiteness exhibited by Diderot, Brooks, and Williams by allowing melodrama to exist in a state of both fantasy and realism, implying that there can be multiple ways of identifying or disidentifying with the problematics of the genre:

“Therefore, one way to think of blackness-as-abolitionism is as the site where madness and melos converge. It's the site of a kind of unruly music that moves in disruptive, improvisational excess—as opposed to a kind of absencing negation—of the very idea of the (art)work, and it is also the site of a certain lawless, fugitive theatricality, something on the order of that drama that Zora Neale Hurston argues is essential to black life.”[11]

spectacle, but it assumes too much about the interiority (or lack thereof) of the Black figures she discusses.



It is no mistake that the Black power fist has been melodramatized in the recent TV series *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*. Ryan Murphy, the creator of *American Crime Story*, has also revitalized a queer interest in the melodramatic, though, I think, to less progressive ends than McQueen.

Melodrama becomes a metaphor for thinking about the interiority that Moten argues has been excluded from the racial and filmic imaginary as theorized by Williams and Brooks, as well as a way of taking apart the sanctity of the art object, and by extension the essentialisms of Enlightenment rights-based discourses. The melodramatic gesture, embodied by the raised fist at O.J. Simpson's trial, becomes an agent of interruption that insists on the vast inner life of minoritarian subjects that resonates infinitely in the problematic, but useful, study of melodrama. We might thus be able to consider more deeply how individual and cultural affects are formed via spectacles of the moving image. All of this is accomplished exactly because of the prominence of racialized visual and narrative codes in melodrama and especially *film noir* with their foregrounding of class struggle and metaphors of darkness. Melodrama becomes emblematic of the range of feeling not afforded to people of color, whose representational outlets have often been confined to an either/or system of critique or complacency. And finally, racial melodrama is simultaneously not just a critical lens or rhetorical device, as Williams used it, but rather a fantastical emotional matrix that intersects equally with the lived experiences of people of color. Recall, in this vein, the centrality of the Black hair salon to the film's conclusion and McQueen's elevation of the mundane into a site of melodramatic identification, as Toni Morrison did before him in works like *Jazz* (1992).



Veronica allows herself to fall into melodramatic gesturality only once—a momentary burst of sorrow that she quickly buries.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Sissy (Carey Mulligan) performs “New York, New York” in McQueen’s *Shame*—a moment that remains inexplicably moving, even as it appeals to melodramatic conventions (e.g. the lounge singer, made interesting again by David Lynch). The melancholy here weighs down the air, and we begin to foresee the tragic fates of the protagonists.



The climax of *Shame* finds Brandon (Michael Fassbender) screaming into the rain. By itself, this scene might seem hackneyed, but the visual and narrative progression enacted by the scene engenders a profound sympathy—if not for Brandon, then certainly for his fragile sister. We must wonder, however, how much of our sympathy has to do with the whiteness of these characters?



The realism of *12 Years a Slave*, as Erica L. Ball argues, takes the film out of the realm of melodramatic spectacle, as with this scene, wherein McQueen’s insistence on materiality allows no sentimentality to enter into his presentation of lynching.

If, following Moten, a Black engagement with melodrama can act as an expansive force that uses the genre as an indication of a multifaceted imaginary despite or because of its limitations, it is important to consider how *Widows* operated for many critics as a metric for how well a Black filmmaker did or did not exceed the conventions of genre. Indeed, the language surrounding *Widows* was often one of a transcendence of or adherence to genre, which is not insignificant given Brooks’s spiritual examination of the “beyond” afforded by melodrama, and, as we will see later, the same language used by Roland Barthes. In a preview for the film, a journalist comments:

“*Widows* is the *12 Years a Slave* filmmaker’s first heist movie, but he hopes the film’s exploration of race relations, class disparities, and police shootings in Chicago transcends the tropes of the genre.”[12] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Still, some felt that the film actually inhabited the tropes of white feminism that become useless clichés to women of color (this essay is wonderfully and coincidentally paranoid with its title “Widows’ Isn’t the Feminist Triumph You Think It Is,” implying that McQueen is, at least genre-wise, pulling one over on us):

“But as the women talk themselves into pulling off a \$5 million heist, their dialogue starts to read like promotional materials for the newest brand of Feminism Lite.”[13]

The author is in many ways entirely correct, and it is no mistake that scholars like Manthia Diawara have also critiqued the reception of *film noir* as a whole for its privileging of (likewise paranoid) white feminist methodologies.[14]

In another negative review, a critic writes:

“It’s not clear exactly what kind of movie(s) *Widows* wants to be: feminist heist thriller? Sprawling political saga? Bare-knuckled gangster noir?”[15]

The willingness of McQueen and *Widows* to occupy each of these spaces has been seen as either revolutionary or clichéd, and critics seem invested in policing the degree to which a film (by a Black artist) can be said to reinforce or disrupt the time/space of genre. It is no mistake, then, that, as Williams argues, transcendence of genre is often central to the reception of melodrama:

“Typically, when an emotionally powerful work is deemed good it is seen to ‘transcend’ melodrama; when not, it is inevitably the melodrama that prevents it from being so. According to this system it is rarely possible to invoke melodrama as the source of a work’s power unless this melodrama is judged ironic or what film scholars like to call ‘Sirkian.’”[16]

It is therefore in line with melodrama’s reception history that critics and reviewers often express a desire for McQueen’s films to exist simultaneously within and beyond the confines of clichéd genres or to critique the film exactly for that reluctance to choose. The repeated evaluation of *Widows* based on genre conventions is especially interesting given Moten’s critique of Williams’s characterization of the illegibility of the raised fist. In a sense, Blackness must always deal forcefully and dangerously with the legibility that characterizes genre, which leads to an even more complicated relationship between Black artists and filmic conventions that might go unnoticed for white artists.



Likewise, in this scene, Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor) must stand on his tiptoes in order to avoid dying by hanging. The scene's durationality is brutal, adding to Ball's argument for McQueen's unsentimental realism.



Veronica's son Marcus is murdered by the police during a traffic stop. He reaches out for something in his car, and he is subsequently shot.



At the film's conclusion, Veronica "reaches out" once again by giving her share of the stolen money to Marcus's school in his honor. She thus desires to turn a gesture into a concrete memorial, something permanent that will outlive her own story.



Here, McQueen refers to the forbidden Black gesturality exposed by the Black Lives Matter movement. We might also recall also the racialized violence of touch enacted in *12 Years a Slave*.

Now, all genre films imply or intimate an assessment of whether or not they conform to or trouble the conventions with which they are associated, which is the basis of critique. This fact is especially germane to the study of melodramatic genres, which Brooks understands as necessarily intertwined with critique:

"The only way in which I find myself able to make sense of melodrama as a sense-making system is through the act of interpretation itself, through the discovery of meaning and its particular coordinates, which means that melodrama is recaptured and understood only insofar as it can be touched by my own critical gesture." [17]

In some ways, therefore, melodrama requires for its very existence a relationship to criticality and interpretation. Brooks argues that, as with many manifestations of genre, any form only exists by virtue of the critical scrutiny that outlines its shape (that outline, as Diawara, Morrison, and others have argued, is often the metaphor of blackness). Yet in the context of melodrama, that willingness takes on a particular tenor, since it is ruled by metaphor and indeed a paranoia wherein, according to Brooks,

"everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it." [18]

Melodrama therefore bears the invitation to critique and deconstruction despite (or because of) its promulgation of certain essentialist narratives and visual cues that would themselves be unacceptable to a student of deconstruction. That critique, to use Brooks's turn-of-phrase, can be expressly marked on the body, implying a violence that resonates differently for subjects of color. In a way, therefore, McQueen's non-white and/or non-male gesturality could be seen as a way of dislodging that stamp, or returning affective agency to his characters to accept that mark of meaning, or to reject it.

Melodrama thus becomes a genre (albeit a contested and provisional one) not only of belief, but also of the paranoia associated with the practice of critique. Of course, as Moten shows in his reading of Brooks and Williams, a racialized Other is central to that paranoia in the discourse on melodrama—the inscrutable, frightening figure who guards the entrance to our most beautiful and terrifying emotions. In the paranoid mode, we anxiously and incessantly request that art proves itself not only pleasurable but also worthy of our critical attention. Paranoia represents a chance to stave off embarrassment, disappointment, or danger by mining objects of culture until every possible meaning is exhausted—there can be nothing surprising that has not already been theorized *ad nauseum* or something problematic whose connections to oppressive power structures have yet to be denuded. To disengage with the academic conventions of critique is to appear un-woke or uninformed, since, according to Sedgwick,

"In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent." [19]

Indeed, naivety, piety, and complacency are all terms that have been used to describe melodrama, and scholars have responded by lending a degree of seriousness to it by considering how it exceeds the limits of genre.

An important illustration of an approach that counters these binary models of melodramatic reception that is both oppositional and empathetic to the multiple ways of inhabiting a non-white-male visual pleasure is an essay by Wanda Coleman from 1993. In it, she expresses a simultaneous love for and revulsion toward *film noir*. She begins her essay with an evocative process of taking stock of the thrilling (but clichéd) conventions of *film noir*: "Our hero/anti-hero is a private eye, ex-Marine or flyboy, transient good-Joe-gone-bad, prizefighter on the skids, gigolo in vicuna, a mug with a heart of goo" and so on. [20] The nature of list-making does not detract from the thrill that we understand Coleman to take in



In *Hunger*, we see a literal diminishing of the body—a material and “real” wasting away (perhaps even an end to gesturality) that has one foot in a documentary status. Yet, McQueen remains committed to the fantastical, as with his protagonist’s surreal demise.



The conversation between Bobby (Michael Fassbender) and Father Dominic (Liam Cunningham) frames the shot and does not deviate from it, creating a durational scene not unlike the hanging in *12 Years a Slave*. There is a sense that the stasis is both “real” and somehow too still and placid. This creates a disjoint wherein one experiences reality and surreality simultaneously.

these stereotypes. Their magic does not lose their luster until Coleman writes: “‘Uh oh,’ I say, ‘here comes one of us.’”[21] She goes on:

“Someone black has suddenly appeared onscreen. My stomach tightens and I feel the rage start to rise. My psyche is caught behind the metaphorical door, slammed on my temporary exit from reality. It hurts. At such jarring moments it takes all my strength to resist zapping the TV set. Instead, I reach down into my ‘willing suspension of disbelief.’ It’s only make-believe, my mantra. To enjoy that sentimental journey back to yesteryear, I have to pretend I live in a perfect world. I have to accept the isms that go with film noir turf. I have to force myself back through the door, back into the movie.”[22]

Coleman’s poetic analysis of this dialectic situation strangely evokes the language of cave-guarding found in Brooks and Diderot. Coleman narrates a feeling of a forced division between pleasure and the knowledge of the cruel optimism of that pleasure—a space that is not binary, but rather moving within and among an earnest and critical relationship to *film noir* stereotypes. Here, Blackness does not guard that interior space of fantasy as in Brooks and Diderot, but is instead forced out of it—a constant reminder of the white imaginary’s inability to allow for a non-white visual pleasure. Yet Coleman does not detach from this racist spectacle, as some might expect her to. We might recall here Sedgwick on the possibility of loving compromised or problematic objects of culture as a survival tactic:

“I think that for many of us [queer people] in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.”[23]

In a queer fashion, Coleman likewise insists on loving a racist genre without discounting its racist nature. We might also remember that *Widows* emerged from McQueen’s own childhood love for a popular television show that has since become mysterious indeed since it is rather difficult to watch and not available for streaming.

It is no mistake, moreover, that *Widows* deals with an identification with the oft-degraded arena of women’s culture, which, as Lauren Berlant has argued, represents a constellation of regressive and progressive desires that is specifically attuned to the problematics of attachment:

“Thus to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them.”[24]

Of course, this is not to say that there is liberating potential in all conventional forms, since, as Berlant makes clear, women’s culture and the creation of intimate publics had and has everything to do with promulgating a white and hetero-patriarchal universalism that erases the necessary differences that exist among women. Berlant instead utilizes language centered on degrees of nearness and distance, rather than a binary evocation of conventional/unconventional, complicit/avant-garde, leading ultimately to her wondering what counterpublics that cannot be purely interpolated as institutional critique would look like, allowing thereby for at least a curiosity about what happens when non-hegemonic individuals detach from the political and find respite in the personal or sentimental.[25] It could be that the widows’ heist is, paradoxically, exactly that respite, because it pleurably (at least for the viewer) suspends the sociopolitical circumstances of the women for a moment, even though the heist becomes

retroactively political when the stolen money is used to memorialize a Black teen murdered by the police and to help a Black woman pay off the debts on her salon, for example.

Coleman's and Berlant's poetic ambivalences are generative ways to consider *Widows* as both within and beyond the fantasies of *film noir* and melodrama, but also within and beyond conventions of critique and aesthetic activism that imply a statement about collective politics. It is indeed true that McQueen takes the conventional thriller and addresses Coleman's ambivalent representational concerns, not the least because of his centering of non-white-male protagonists, and he holds up the genre film as a useful and problematic site for both pleasure and critique. Still, there is something uncomfortable in the fact that the gendered and racial newness of *Widows* has been understood in a paranoid fashion as *proof* of its quality, which is an uneasy position. As Mary Ann Doane has argued, that sociological impulse can represent a desire to displace the burden of realism or documentary onto non-white bodies:

“White theorists have historically monopolized the operation of abstraction, displacing the characteristics of discreteness, particularity, and concreteness onto racial others.”[26]

There is thus a paradoxical expectation of *Widows* being particular in one sense and transcendent in another. If it is true, as we have seen, that the melodramatic mode can be understood as both an inherently critical and an inherently complicit way of organizing the filmic imaginary, it might be useful to allow *Widows* to derive its importance not only from its quasi-spiritual transcendence of genre, but also from its longing to reconfigure the imaginary (yet semi-structured) worlds that genre allows for inhabitation by non-white, non-male protagonists and fantasies.

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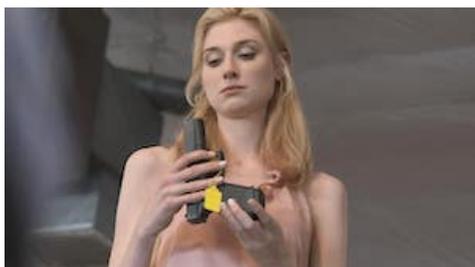
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Alice's (Elizabeth Debicki) trip to the gun show is a disarmingly funny moment that brings together class difference, race, feminism, and gun violence together. All of these sociopolitical elements are subsumed at first into Debicki's

Yet an insistence on a deconstructive intent pervades the discourse on McQueen's work, and it is coupled with a focus on realism. In a more squarely art historical context, Jean Fisher writes:

"To date, McQueen's strategy has been to disclose an often-concealed documentary fact through the medium of aesthetic affect with the aim of prising open a space of discussion between mediated fiction and experienced reality."^[27] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In effect, this is a very wordy way of saying that McQueen's work is deconstructive, that it seeks to expose (recalling the racist metaphor of the blackamoor guarding the cave) some sort of truth in the inherently fantastical medium of cinema. That documentary fact in McQueen's work has often been read as a raced or gendered one. Consider another review by a film critic:

"If *Widows* is pulp, it's pulp made with intelligence and craft and an urgent social conscience...the story also feels attuned to a very contemporary anger, aimed at powerful men and the corrupt systems that sanction their abuses."^[28]

Reducing the film to a commentary on #MeToo is boringly presentist, but, in combination with other writings, we can see a skeptical insistence that *Widows* must be *about* race or gender in order to be worthy of note, or at least about some sort of social realism that cuts through the conventions of fantasy, sentimentality, and action. In considering the discourse surrounding *Widows*, it appears that the valuation of non-white and/or non-male imaginaries becomes dependent on their ability to deliver an unexpected plot or to allow us to unearth social commentary that critiques the conventions of genre or histories of representation. Put another way, identity is only legible in the reception of *Widows* as a disruptive, oppositional force. Following Moten, we might instead see the disruptive force, the Black gesture, as something to take seriously as a generative operation, and not just a foil to the normalcy of white storytelling so that race and gender do not once again become mere tools for the displaced labor of proving good taste. Veronica's "reaching out," both concrete and imaginary, becomes a touchstone for connectivity, earnestness, and imagination *in addition to* skepticism and displacement.

In fact, some of the most compelling moments of *Widows* operate (in the tradition of melodrama and *film noir* or even exploitation films) in the excessive realm that would indeed seem in bad taste, to use Moten's words. For instance, two back-to-back scenes in the middle of the film use humor and pathos as yet another instance of the raised fist or reaching out that exceed the confines of legibility exactly because of their overwrought simplicity. Veronica sends Alice and Linda to run some pre-heist errands. Alice has been tasked with buying guns, so she arrives at a gun show with no idea how to actually make a purchase. She poses as an abused Russian wife trying to defend herself from her husband and asks a stereotypically country-bumpkin-esque woman to buy some guns for her. The woman's child earnestly implores that they help:

"Mom, you always say a gun is a girl's best friend!"

It is hard to not break out in some welcome laughter that lightens the otherwise heavy film, and there is a sense of a real, unapologetic desire to give the audience a fun respite from the ongoing discussions of loss and trauma—perhaps the only such scene in the film. However, pathos lies in the fact that Alice was indeed abused by her husband (her motives are therefore different than those of the

precise and biting performance, but they begin to reemerge upon subsequent viewings, especially in relation to the murder of Veronica's son by the police and the persistent, racist mythology of the armed Black child.

other widows) and yet needs to perform some other character for a stranger in order to actually ask for help.



Alice's storyline is haunted by the fact of her own abuse, marking her as a widow who is decidedly not interested in honoring or furthering her husband's memory.



Alice's husband pokes her black eye—a bruising gesture that is perhaps the opposite of Veronica's "reaching out."



Moreover, it is impossible to not consider current discussions about guns and non-white bodies, with a startling number of white men using white privilege to acquire guns with little oversight in order to enact violence on black and brown folks. Or one could recall the white female Trump voters who remain silent on gun violence against people of color so that they can maintain their "right to bear arms." These possible sociopolitical commentaries are central to *Widows*, but they resonate additionally alongside the sheer pleasure that the scene engenders in its disarming foray into the comical.



The affective/comical shift in the middle of *Widows* enacted by Alice reaches its climax in a different way when Linda shows up at the house of an architect to get the blueprints of the building the widows plan to rob. The architect's husband answers the door, and Linda poses as an assistant at the architect's firm. She quickly shows her hand, however, when she speaks of the architect in the present tense only to learn that she is actually dead. The husband promptly asks her to leave, to which Linda replies: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry" and sits back down on the couch. She goes on: "I lost my husband two weeks ago" and the husband alights beside her to offer comfort as she breaks into tears. Quite inexplicably and unexpectedly, they embrace and begin to passionately kiss. Linda exclaims "Oh my god, I'm so sorry" and promptly leaves while the camera lingers on the bereaved widower.



The blithe but doubtless compelling conventionality of this scene, which recalls countless weepy movies with unexpected romantic connections wrought by grief, feels out of place, like a mistake. Yet as a moment of homage and self-referentiality it makes perfect sense, and, even more importantly, it is a moment of sheer, unabashed abandonment of the strictures of cool detachment or irony—an excessive outburst within the chic blankness/whiteness of the architect's home. This moment feels so unexpected exactly because it is so expected, but it nevertheless is entirely affecting in some way, opening up space thereby to allow for irrationality or excessiveness or anti-realism in non-white-male stories.



Interestingly, in McQueen's and Flynn's script, we see Linda's melodramatic *dénouement* both expanded and toned down. A focus on the script could seem unduly invested in the artist's intention (which perhaps we ought to be), but what interests me here is the archival quality of the script, which can either affirm or complicate what we experience affectively in the movie theater. So, Linda's "I lost my husband two weeks ago" becomes in the script:



"I lost my husband a few weeks ago. I have two young kids I have to be strong for. I haven't really let myself miss him yet."[29]



One wonders if the extended monologue would have pushed the scene into the bathetic, or if that was even a worry. While Linda is herself cut short, the dramaturgy is extended:

"Linda lifts her head out of the clench, to meet Roger's eyes. There is an odd moment of limbo where wallowing in death becomes all about



Linda's interaction with the architect's widower is not only a gendered reversal, but also a rare moment of an uninhibited, unexpected outpouring of emotion that disrupts the film's sobriety. Here, we see a woman of color's emotions made legible, affectively resonant, and understandable instead of being written off as hysterical or manipulative — stereotypes that often haunt women of color. The scene halts the forward action of the narrative in order to linger for a moment on the "disruptive" emotionality of McQueen's non-white-male protagonists. Even so, McQueen foregrounds the white male gesture of the widower placing his hand on Veronica, which suggests yet again a moment of empathy-in-difference rather than and in addition to oppositionality. This interracial eroticism also characterizes the kiss with which the film begins. This opening was seen by some as bold and subversive, while others did not think it was revolutionary enough. Issues of interracial romance in *Widows* deserve a more substantive discussion than I can provide here, but suffice it to say that, as Linda Williams shows, the melodramatic stage was a place wherein fears about miscegenation played out.



William Casby, born in slavery, Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963. Photograph by

life. They both choose to live. Lips pressed against each other. Nostrils sucking in air. It's a deep passionate kiss.”[30]

Of course an undue focus on a script smacks of insider baseball, but what is interesting here are the ways we can track the production of affect in moments that seem excessive or contrary to the onward progression of narrative or good, deconstructive taste. Looking to the melodramatic production of affect is central to McQueen and to Moten, since Moten calls Williams to task for assuming to know the complexity of the Black women involved in exonerating O.J. Simpson. [31] The contexts of Black and Latinx women are different, but what I mean to suggest here is that, following Moten, melodrama becomes an interesting case study because of the presumptions of interiority inherent in it for some subjects, or the withholding of that presumption and allowing certain characters, who are predominantly non-white and/or non-male, to exist as non-agentic reflexes (rather than knowing gestures) set in motion by cliché. The study of melodrama can be productive because of its partial and polemical enunciation of how meaning is made, both as an aesthetic and an activist operation. In McQueen's work, meaning expands and congeals in a way that retains a structure, and rather than jumping immediately to deconstruction, he instead offers a point of identification that could be simultaneously, both, or neither critical and affirmative.

Concluding with Veronica's gesture of acknowledgement, her "reaching out," we might recontextualize it as a kind of *punctum*—one of many theorizations of that point of identification. Race is, after all, fundamental to Roland Barthes's theorization of the term, and so is melodrama. *Camera Lucida* is laden with a mournful (and queer) desire to make the everyday matter, indeed to make his own dead mother matter, in a fashion that has all the wonderful clichés of the weepiest films. Yet Barthes, himself a widower of sorts, insists again and again that despite the emotional legibility of his own writing, photography is outside meaning—and this is exactly his point. The *punctum* is a point in the image that unexpectedly touches the viewer and takes the photograph out of discourse and into the inscrutability of personal attachment. That beyond meaning, that "reaching out," is couched, at least in one section, on the Black body:

“Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask...As in the portrait of William Casby, photographed by Avedon: the essence of slavery is here laid bare: the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theatre).”[32]

A portrait of a formerly enslaved person by Avedon becomes, for Barthes, representative of a coextensive impossibility and profusion of meaning. It encapsulates slavery completely, but also only partially, since it can only capture the mask, the skin (immobilized, unlike the gesture). As a result of what Barthes considers to be the radical contingency of the photograph exemplified by the portrait of a Black man, the photograph becomes an apolitical document:

“Hence the photograph whose meaning (I am not saying its effect, but its meaning) is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically.”[33]

Following Moten, however, the gesture, the *punctum* of the O.J. Simpson trial and Williams's text, is both aesthetically and politically consumed. Perhaps Moten's ultimate disagreement with Williams is that she, like Barthes, neglects the latter for the former.

It is no mistake that Barthes later describes the *punctum* as a sort of beyond, akin to Veronica's "reaching out," her desire to be both contingent and to signify. He theorizes the beyond via his discussion of pornography and the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, who had his own problematic relationship to Black bodies:

Richard Avedon. Copyright © The Richard Avedon Foundation. Used by permission. Click on photo to see large.

Barthes mobilizes Richard Avedon's portrait of a formerly enslaved man as a metaphor for the photograph's inscrutability, as well as its confining particularity. The Black body as a metaphor, as we have seen in the discourse on melodrama, is a problematic one, and it is therefore essential to see how McQueen both attaches to and disidentifies with this phenomenon.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1975, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Click on photo to see large.

Barthes fetishizes Mapplethorpe's gesture in this image in order to discuss the difference between erotic photography and pornography. Barthes, it seems, does not afford the same agency to the Black subject of Avedon's portrait.

"The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward 'the rest' of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together." [34]

Therefore, a portrait of a formerly enslaved person and a self-portrait by Mapplethorpe differ in their presumed cohesion and depth. For Barthes, the subject of Avedon's portrait becomes a superficial layer, albeit an evocative one, that recalls Oliver Wendell Holmes's racist comparison of photography to "primitive" peoples skinning an animal. In the case of the Black subject, Barthes substitutes the individual for the collective despite or because of the specificity of the photographic document, while Mapplethorpe's self-portrait achieves a level of transcendence. [35] I use the word transcendence (which is a godlike theoretical equivocation that avoid the limits of critique) advisedly here to recall my discussion of McQueen and genre.

One could say that McQueen affords that transcendence to his non-white characters, especially Veronica, but I do not mean to argue that McQueen is apolitical, or that Veronica's "reaching out" has no collective meaning. What is at issue here is the requirement of a certain kind of political engagement or realism in the work of non-white-male creatives as well as the expectation that these creatives cannot engage with problematic products of culture in any way that is affirmative instead of deconstructive or critical. Still more interesting is the perceived impossibility of imagining a film that is "about" Black Lives Matter or "about" feminism in film as much as it is "about" narrative pleasure and a sincere interest in cultural forms that might seem excessive or complicit.

The "She is reaching out" with which *Widows* concludes is an almost too obvious (melodramatic, even) metaphor I am using for potentiality, a chance to consider a non-white and/or non-male engagement with the confines and opportunities of genre, but I will use that metaphor anyway. It is also a chance to consider the limits of critique, which has become even more forcefully a part of how we discuss popular culture, with endless thinkpieces and tweets that combine high theory with mass media. By no means should we demean those arenas of popular critique, but we should, I argue, allow room in a queer fashion for non-white and/or non-male aesthetic processes to be problematic or sentimental or revolutionary, perhaps all at the same time.

After all, it is also entirely true that McQueen simultaneously rejects melodrama at certain moments, as outlined by Erica L. Ball in her beautiful and essential essay on *12 Years a Slave*. [36] I want to think through a space where a film could be everything at once without falling into nihilist dispersion or regressive universalisms, but I do not yet know what that space looks like, nor should I, as a white academic, necessarily purport to be able to theorize it. *Widows* is an important first step in this project.

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Notes

1. Dodie Kazanjian, "Reimagining Black Experience in the Radical Drawings of Toyin Ojih Odutola," *Vogue* (July 17, 2018), <<https://www.vogue.com/article/toyin-ojih-odutola-interview-vogue-august-2018>>. I would like to thank Felipe L. Núñez, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Rebecca Peabody for all the generative conversations we have had about race, representation, and affect. Many thanks also to Chuck Kleinhans, Julia Lesage, Linda Badley, Maria San Filippo, Youngmin Choe, and Ronald E. Gregg for helping me feel that I could actually write about film in the first place. [[return to p. 1](#)]
2. Steve McQueen and Gillian Flynn, "Widows," screenplay, 2018, 135.
3. Since Steve McQueen is British, it might be interesting to consider his engagement with a U.S. context. Perhaps perversely, in an effort to illuminate the tradition of non-U.S. auteurs making movies about the United States one could (I do not know that one should) connect *Widows* to Lars von Trier's *Manderlay*, though of course von Trier has never visited the United States at all, or even Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*. My frivolous speculation on these connections aside, what should be noted here are the intersections McQueen sees between the Black British and African American contexts in his interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Steve McQueen, "12 Years a Slave," *Transition* no. 114: 185-196, 189.
4. See Joseph Boone. "Policing and Depolicing the Theory of the Novel" in *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
5. Michele Wallace, "The Politics of Location: Cinema/Theory/Literature/Ethnicity/ Sexuality/Me." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 53.
6. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 283.
7. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 96.
8. Denis Diderot quoted in Moten 107. Other translations of the text in Brooks and elsewhere differ slightly, but I use Moten's version for continuity.
9. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 19.
10. See also Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
11. Moten 111.
12. Piya Sinha-Roy, "WIDOWS," *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1524/1525, 17 August 2018. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2110221979/>. [[return to page 2](#)]

13. Amirah Mercer, "Widows Isn't the Feminist Triumph You Think It Is," *Vice* (December 7, 2018), https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mby57y/widows-isnt-the-feminist-triumph-you-think-it-is.
14. Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," *African American Review* 50(4): 899-911.
15. Leah Greenblatt, "Widows is an all-star bonanza that never quite finds its tone," *Entertainment Weekly*, 16 November 2018, < <https://ew.com/movies/2018/11/16/widows-movie-review/>>.
16. Williams 11.
17. Brooks xiii.
18. Brooks 10.
19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 125-6. Italics in the original.
20. Wanda Coleman, "Guys, Dolls & Bit Players," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Oct 17, 1993, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pp. SM6.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
24. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
25. Berlant 8.
26. Doane 232.
27. Jean Fisher, "On Space and Place in the Recent Work of Steve McQueen," in *Steve McQueen: Works*, (Basel: Laurenz Foundation, 2012), 19. [[return to page 3](#)]
28. A.A. Dowd, "Steve McQueen's thrilling heist movie *Widows* has more on its mind than a big score," *AV Club*, 14 November 2018, < <https://film.avclub.com/steve-mcqueen-s-thrilling-heist-movie-widows-has-more-o-1830445919>>.
29. McQueen and Flynn 81.
30. *Ibid.* 82.
31. Moten 104-5.
32. Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, trans., *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 34.
33. Barthes 36.
34. *Ibid.* 59. For more on Mapplethorpe and race, see Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge, 1994).
35. "Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth." Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *The Atlantic* (June 1859), < <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>>

36. Erica L. Ball, "The Unbearable Liminality of Blackness: Reconsidering Violence in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*," *Transition* no. 119: 175-86.

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