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SHOCK AND SPECTACLE ON THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY STAGE

The Pre-History of Cinematic Disaster

This paper looks at an aspect of the pre-history of the filmic imagination of technological disaster, specifically the spectacular "sensation melodramas" of the nineteenth-century stage. These plays (by Dion Boucicault, Augustin Daly, and others) used highly realistic sets to offer audiences the pleasures of fictional immersion in an on-stage world that was recognizably their own, as well as the more physical pleasures of spectacle, shock, and suspense. A recurring feature of these dramas is the scenario in which human agency triumphs over the machine, suggesting a fantasy of escape from technology, or the avoidance of technological disaster. But by deploying split-second timing and narrative suspense these plays replicated the speeded-up world of urban modernity rather than providing an escape from it. Thus in many ways they offer audiences a sort of "training" in the temporality of a technologically-mediated world, but make that training pleasurable. In this paper I want to look in particular at a sub-set of these "sensation melodramas" that projects the fantasy of human triumph into a pre-modern world, thus offering what we might term pastoral spectacle. But I will argue that for all that these pastoral plays seem to be a rejection of technologically-mediated modernity they are no less implicated in it.

In meinem Beitrag wende ich mich einem besonderen Kapitel aus der Vorgeschichte von Technikkatastrophen im Film zu, vor allem den spektakulären Sensationsstücken auf den Bühnen des 19. Jahrhunderts. Diese Stücke (etwa von Dion Boucicault, Augustin Daly und anderen) verwendeten äußerst realistische Bühnenbilder, um das Publikum im Theater mit einer fiktional verfremdeten Variante der eigenen Gegenwart, mit Schock, Spektakel und Spannung zu unterhalten. Ein häufig verwendetes Motiv in diesen melodramatischen Inszenierungen ist der Triumph menschlichen Handelns über die Maschine. Dieser Triumph erlaubt den Protagonisten auf der Bühne eine fiktionale Flucht aus der Technik oder die Abwendung drohender Katastro-

phen. In ihrem sekundengenauen Timing und ihrer inszenatorischen Spannung sind diese Stücke andererseits ein Spiegel der beschleunigten städtischen Lebenswelt dieser Zeit und stellen nicht etwa eine Gegenwelt dar. Insofern können sie als eine Art unterhaltsames Trainingsprogramm gesehen werden, das sich der Bühne als technisch-vermittelter temporärer Welt bedient und so ein kurzweiliges Lernen ermöglicht. In meinem Vortrag möchte ich eine besondere Gruppe dieser Sensations-Melodramen untersuchen, welche die Fiktion einer Rückkehr in eine vorindustrielle Welt zum Inhalt haben; es sind insofern ländlich-'pastorale' Schauspiele. Obwohl diese Stücke eine technisch bestimmte Moderne zurückweisen, sind sie gleichwohl in ihr verankert.

The 20th century had a number of icons of technological catastrophe. To name just a few: the Titanic became a heavily freighted symbol of technological hubris early in the century. Later in the 1930s the zeppelin Hindenburg played a similar role as the "Titanic of the sky". Fictional treatments helped to keep these images alive. The Titanic, for example, resurfaced in such films as the 1912 *Saved from the Titanic* and *Nacht und Eis*, or later in *A Night to Remember* (1958), and, of course, in James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), and indirectly in, say, *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972, based on a novel by Paul Gallico). The Hindenburg reappeared in cinema in *The Hindenburg* (1975) and played a number of cameo roles in adventure movies like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) or *Rocketeer* (1991).

But it was not just the disasters of the first half of the twentieth century that had a long-lasting influence on popular culture (and on the makers of movies). The 1970s were also for several reasons fertile years for 'disaster-films' – driven, however, by new special effects, by plane-hijackings in real life or by a frame of mind fostered by the oil crisis and a sense of global economic collapse. The fictional disaster narratives of the 1970s tapped powerful new images: the large passenger plane – perhaps especially the Boeing 747 – was a striking symbol of the conquest of time and space that also provided an image of the vulnerability of a high-tech society. It was not just the plane itself that worked in this way in the imagination, but the airport-plane ensemble in Arthur Hailey's novel *Airport* (1968), which

spawned the movie *Airport* (1970) and its three sequels, and triggered many similar films. In the second *Airport*-sequel, which had the inventive title *Airport '77* (1977), in fact, the new icon of disaster met the old: in the film the air disaster turns into a nautical Poseidon-adventure-type narrative when the hijacked luxury aircraft plunges beneath the sea. It was not only transport-technologies like ships and planes that provided the images for technical disaster in this period, as we see from the burning skyscraper of *Towering Inferno* (1974), based on the earlier novel *The Tower* by Richard Martin Stern.

One of the things that makes these images so powerful is the way in which they quickly transform themselves from enormous monuments of human knowledge and technical skill – perfected spaces for living or vehicles for travel – into prisons, or deadly mechanical traps: the subject is caught *within* the machine, while time runs out, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum". It may or may not be legitimate here to include within the concept of technological disaster deliberate acts of terrorist sabotage, but in passing one might note that the horrific spectacle of 9/11 combines two of these 20th-century icons of disaster: the passenger plane and the burning skyscraper – though some of the analyses of those fearful events seem to consider them more after the fashion of *King Kong*, that depression-era narrative that brings together the Empire State Building as image of American capitalism, and a primitive yet powerful force from another part of the world.

As devices of disaster towering hi-tech skyscrapers and large passenger jet-planes look very contemporary, but the nineteenth century also had its icon par excellence that simultaneously expressed human pride in technical achievement and fear of technological disaster: the railway. As the historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch has told us, the railway signified an environment transformed through human ingenuity, freedom from the constraints of time and space, but it could also suggest not only technological disaster, but a completely mechanized world, and a mechanized subject; an environment and a subject alike rendered powerless, or soulless. There are some famous examples of this dual significance in the literature of the nineteenth century. In the sonnets of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth,

for example, there is an early celebration of the powers of mind evident in the new technology – its sublime aspect – in "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways" (1833):

> In spite of all that beauty may disown
> In your harsh features, Nature doth embrace
> Her lawful offspring in Man's art [...]
> (*Poetical Works*, Vol. 4: 47)

In his later railway sonnets Wordsworth nevertheless lamented that the unstoppable spread of the railway network was destroying the few pieces of England that had not already been transformed by industrial capitalism – "Is then no nook of English ground secure/ From rash assault?", he asked in an 1844 sonnet,[1] as the railways began to stretch as far as his beloved Lake District. We see a similar tension within the work of Charles Dickens, as Raymond Williams showed many years ago (cf. Williams 30–34). In Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848) the railway is the transforming force that clears away detritus as it does with the stagnant district of Staggs's Gardens – Dickens quotes and mocks Wordsworth's words about the "rash assault" of the railway. But the railway in Dickens can also be a bloodthirsty monster, a dragon that licks up the blood of the novel's villain, Mr. Carker, without entirely seeming like a tool of divine justice. Dickens own experience of an actual railway accident in 1865 appears most clearly in his short ghost-story, "The Signal-Man", which expresses the disruption of normal time that comes with the railway.

Less well known in the nineteenth-century technological imaginary are the various "sensation melodramas" of the 1860s that put the railway to work. Melodrama is a vivid form of theatre in which absolutes of good and evil are pitted against each other. Sensation melodrama was a form of popular drama that depended largely on special effects for its success. Audiences would come to see a fairly conventional play – often some kind of "mortgage melodrama" where the villain has some kind of financial power over the good

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[1] "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway". *Poetical Works* Vol. 3: 61.

characters – but the real focus of attention would be a spectacular scene, where all the magic of the Victorian stage was brought to bear to produce a dramatic illusion. In one particular sub-type of these plays the spectacle features an on-stage railway.

In these popular plays it is not so much technological catastrophe that is imagined as catastrophe averted: at the centre of these plays is the railway rescue scene, in which disaster is prevented – just in time. In the typical scene, a man is lying on the railway tracks, and an express train is hurtling towards him. In the nick of time the hero, or sometimes heroine, dives onto the tracks and saves the victim from certain death under the wheels of the locomotive. Two of the best known specimens of this genre are Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) and Dion Boucicault's *After Dark* (1868).

Railway-rescue scenes as used in sensational melodramas have, of course, come to be familiar to us since the early days of cinema, where they were given a new lease of life in the *Hazards of Helen* series,[2] for example, and in the subsequent films made by the same Helen Holmes such as *A Lass of the Lumberlands* (1916).[3] But what did "sensation scenes" mean to audiences in the 1860s when they were quite new inventions on stage? I have argued that they operate on at least two levels: most obviously they seem to provide a comforting fantasy of a triumph over or a mastery of technology for a Victorian middle class that was sometimes ambivalent about its own achievements (Daly 19–33). These dramas have not been disaster-plays as such: in fact, the hero or heroine was usually able to beat the machine on its own ground – to outrun the locomotive. At first glance they also did not provide the experience of being enclosed by the machine.[4] Their final rescue scenes might be imagined as a lit-

[2] An American silent-film adventure-serial centred around its heroine, Helen Holmes. The serial had 119 twelve-minute-episodes released between November 1914 and February 1917.

[3] These films have been discussed in two excellent books by Ben Singer and Lynne Kirby – *Melodrama and Modernity* and *Parallel Tracks*, offering various thoughtful negotiations on self, gender, and modernity.

[4] There is, however, a significant exception in Dion Boucicault's drama *After Dark* (1868): here the spectacular rescue scene takes place in an underground tunnel where

eral escape from machines, and from actual industrial accidents. But I think we might interpret the image of a human-train-collision more freely. The crash envisaged might be imagined as standing for a human subject transformed by industrial capitalism – human blood and tissue reshaped by new industrial rhythms and processes. Thus to avoid that crash is to a fantasize about an escape from modernity itself, from clock-time, and from an administered world. But to avoid the crash may also show how to *manage* industrial modernity rather than how to escape it – to live within it while escaping from its adverse consequences.

There is another side to these scenes, and their spellbinding effects on audiences. To enjoy the fantasy of the rescue the audience had to enter into the time-space world of the scene, and thus one might argue that whether or not these dramas provided a fantasy of escape from some bad modernity the elaborately staged scenes acclimatized audiences to it: the audiences were trained in the specific temporality of modernity. The pleasures of suspense then were also a form of acclimatization to a speeded up and mechanized world – and one might even see such acclimatization as a mode of mastery. Contemporary commentary seems to have partly realized the effect these plays had – the very term "sensation drama" is used by critics to stress the physical effect stimulated by these plays.

There is a further paradox to these "sensation dramas": for the very first really successful play of this kind had not been a play of modern life at all, but of an 18th-century pastoral plot, and there is no railway in sight. The first of the great "sensation melodramas" is Dion Boucicault's play, *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), a romantic mortgage melodrama adapted from Gerald Griffin's novel, *The Collegians* (1829). Action takes place in rural Ireland towards the end of the eighteenth century and centers on the financially beleaguered Cregan family, a country gentry who face ruin and the loss of their Killarney estate to the counter-jumping moneylender, Corrigan. The

the railway provides a completely human-made environment that is coterminous with the rule of the train itself.

villain also hopes to obtain the hand of the extremely reluctant Mrs. Cregan, who sees a chance of saving herself and the estate by marrying off her son, Hardress, to Anne Chute, a rich heiress. Unfortunately there are impediments to this marriage: a minor one, in the shape of Anne's attraction to Hardress's friend, Kyrle Daly, and a major one in the form of Hardress's existing clandestine marriage to a local rope-maker's daughter, Eily O'Connor, the Colleen Bawn herself (translated in the play by Anne Chute as 'the pretty girl' (Act 2.iii) – a more literal translation of the Irish *cailín bán* would be the white, or fair, or fair-haired girl).[5] Hardress secretly visits Eily every night, rowed across the lake to her cottage by Danny Mann, a hunchbacked servant, who is fiercely loyal to his master and foster-brother, although it was he who was responsible years earlier for the injury to his back.

Through a series of misunderstandings Danny comes to believe that his master wants him to murder Eily. He takes her out on the lake in his boat and attempts to drown her in a water cave, known variously as "Pool a Dhiol"[6] and "O'Donoghue's Stables",[7] but is prevented in the nick of time by Myles-na-Coppaleen,[8] a local poacher, poteen-maker, and general scapegrace, who is also in love with Eily and who has come to visit the illicit distillery he maintains in the same cave. In one of the play's more ludicrous contrivances, Myles mistakes Danny for an otter, and shoots him, but not before

[5] In the operatic adaptation of *The Colleen Bawn*, *The Lily of Killarney*, the heroine's hair is described as brown, and all of the coloured images of the play that I have seen represent Eily as having dark hair, which suggests that Boucicault interpreted the phrase Colleen Bawn as meaning fair-skinned or simply 'fair' (these two meanings are condensed in the term 'Lily of Killarney'). In Irish as in English fair colouring is often synonymous with attractiveness or goodness (and cf. the term white-headed). Gerald Griffin's 1829 novel, *The Collegians*, the major source for Boucicault's play, features a fair-haired Eily.

[6] Sc. Ir. "Poll an Dhiabhail" – the devil's cave or hole.

[7] The playbill for the first London performances of the play seem to suggest that 'O'Donoghue's Stables' and the Water Cave are two distinct settings, but the action of Act 2.vi and Father Tom's comments in Act 3.i indicate that they are the same place.

[8] Sc. Ir. Myles na gcapaillín – Myles of the ponies.

the hunchback has pushed Eily into the water, having already persuaded her out of the boat and onto a rock. Myles then swings across to the rock, and, seeing "something white" in the water (presumably her dress, rather than her lily-white skin), saves the drowning girl by making a daring dive, or 'header', into the lake in the play's famous sensation scene:

> Danny: [...] Take your marriage lines wid ye to the bottom of the lake. (He throws her from rock backwards into the water with a cry; she reappears, clinging to rock.)
> Eily: No! save me. Don't kill me. Don't Danny, I'll do anything, only let me live.
> Danny: He wants ye dead. (Pushes her off.)
> Eily: Oh! Heaven help me. Danny – Danny – Dan – (Sinks.)
> Danny: (looking down). I've done it. She's gone. (Shot is fired; he falls – rolls from the rock into the water.)
> (Myles appears with gun on rock.)
> Myles: I hit one of them bastes that time. I could see well, though it was so dark. But there was somethin' moving on that stone. (Swings across.) Divil a sign of him. Stop! (Looks down.) What's this? It's a woman – there's something white there. (Figure rises near rock – kneels down; tries to take the hand of figure.) Ah! That dress; it's Eily. My own darlin' Eily. (Pulls off waistcoat – jumps off rock. Eily rises – then Myles and Eily rise up – he turns, and seizes rock – Eily across left arm.) (Act 2.vi)[9]

Night after night, these special effects were greeted by enthusiastic applause,[10] and the moonlit tableau of Myles supporting Eily comes

[9] Acting editions of *The Colleen Bawn* were produced by Lacy, French and Dicks in the nineteenth century. Here I have used the version of the play edited by Parkin (Boucicault 191–251).

[10] The term 'Adelphi effects' is used by Henry Morley in his review of the play for the Examiner, reproduced in his *Journal of a London Playgoer* (Morley 213–214; here: 214).

to be one of the play's most famous images, appearing in a number of the illustrations to dance music inspired by *The Colleen Bawn*: e. g., T. Browne's *Colleen Bawn Galop* (1861) and Willam Forde's *Colleen Bawn Quadrille* (1861).[11] A chromolithograph used for the former piece of music strongly resembles a contemporary *Illustrated London News*'s picture of the performance, which suggests that both images were closely based on the staging of the sensation scene. In it one can see how elaborate the water-cave set actually was, with its detailed recreation of the Killarney picturesque. Lighting was cleverly used to create the effect of moonlight, with gauze to suggest the reflective waters of the lake.

Among the play's most fervent admirers was Queen Victoria, who watched it three times in February and March of 1861 and recorded in her journal that

> D. Boucicault and his wife (former Miss Robertson whom I remember some years ago at the Princess's) acted admirably as the ragged Irish peasant and the Colleen Bawn. The scenery was very pretty and the whole piece characteristic and thrilling. (Quoted in Fawkes 122–3)[12]

She enjoyed the play enough to commission a number of paintings based on it.[13] The more general popularity of the play was at the time seen as almost unprecedented: it ran for 230 performances, or a total

[11] The circulation of illustrated Colleen Bawn sheet music, clearly intended for domestic rather than professional use, indicates the popularity of the play, but also reminds us that the piano was now firmly ensconced in the middle-class home, making "carpet-dancing" a popular amusement.

[12] Morley also notes that "upon the scenery [...] pains have been spent" (234). Henry Crabb Robinson, apparently commenting on the Drury Lane version rather than that of the Adelphi, remarks on the pretty scenery, and compares it to the Neapolitan Blue Lake, but felt that the chief scene had been "mutilated, and had not the primitive attraction" [presumably of the Adelphi production]. See Brown 208–209.

[13] There are copies of these in the Calthrop Collection at the Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury. The Queen had earlier commissioned a portrait of Boucicault as the vampire in *The Vampire* (1852).

of some 10 months in its original run at the Adelphi theatre, one of the longest ever runs at the time. Over the next few years it clocked up many more nights at Drury Lane and elsewhere, while also inspiring an array of imitations and spin-offs.[14] These included such burlesques as the anonymous *Oily Collins*, H. J. Byron's *Miss Eily O'Connor*, Martin Dutnall's *The Coolean Bawn* and Andrew Halliday's *The Colleen Bawn, Settled at Last*. There also were non-parodic versions presumably intended to evade copyright like the anonymous *The Colleen Bawn: or The Collegians Wife*, and *Cushla Ma Chree*. There is even a French translation, *Le Lac du Glenaston*, by Adolphe D'Ennery (some small recompense for the number of theatrical properties that Boucicault had borrowed from France over the years).[15] There was an equestrian spectacle based on it, and in 1862 an opera version was staged at Covent Garden, Julius Benedict's *Lily of Killarney*.

And these were only the most directly theatrical manifestations of the *The Colleen*'s success, which also impacted in more concrete ways upon the practice of everyday London life: the public rushed to buy sheet music – Colleen Bawn galops, quadrilles, polkas and waltzes – that they could play at home on the piano, they wore red 'Colleen-Bawn cloaks' inspired by Eily's costume and they faced traffic jams generated by hundreds of 'Colleen cabs' lined up in the Strand.[16]

Why was this play such a huge success, and why should the first of the sensation dramas be a historical and pastoral drama? These two things are linked, I believe.

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[14] Writing in December 1862 Henry Morley laments that "at the minor houses, including, alas! Drury Lane, *The Colleen Bawn*, in licensed reproduction or unlicensed burlesque, is to be seen in all directions" (234).

[15] *The Colleen Bawn, or The Collegian's Wife, A Popular Melodrama in 3 Acts as Performed at the London Theatres* appeared in Purkess's *Penny Pictorial Plays* (London, n. d.). *Cushla Ma Chree* was a rewrite of the *Colleen* obtained by the manager of the Theatre Royal, Preston. Boucicault sued. See 'Boucicault versus Delafield', *Times* May 25, 1864. Calthrop clippings file. On the burlesque versions see Schoch 3–8. Morley gives the title of the Dutnall piece as *The Coolean Drawn* (234).

[16] On the vogue of the cloaks see Walsh 79–80.

The immediate source of its success lies, I want to suggest, in the particular kind of 'sensation play' that the *Colleen* is. It is not that Boucicault had not thought of the possibility of a modern urban melodrama – in his 1857 success, *The Poor of New York*, sensational incident and topical content are married to a more-or-less contemporary and urban setting. But the *Colleen Bawn* combines the sensational ingredients of his contemporary-setting sensation plays (*The Poor of New York* 1857, *The Octoroon* 1859) and his great costume successes like *The Corsican Brothers* (1852, set in the 1840s, but contrasting contemporary Paris with the colourful – and 'primitive' – life of Corsica) and *The Vampire* (1852, featuring a variety of historical periods, including the near future). In other words: a "structure of feeling" that was very much of the present was projected by Boucicault onto the past – and to an exotic past. (In Victorian London even contemporary Ireland was seen as somehow belonging to the past.)

The play's very title is the first hint that this is a story from an exotic place – as an commentator of the *Punch*'s of that period suggested, few who were unfamiliar with *The Collegians* would know what the play's title meant. This linguistic gap is reproduced in miniature within the play, where there is a divide between the peasant characters, including the Colleen herself, who use Irish-language phrases, and the more anglicized characters, who largely do not. Thus Eily's letter to Hardress is a patchwork of English and Irish:

> *Come to your own Eily, that has not seen you for two long days. Come, acushla, agrah machree* [Ir. a chuisle, a ghrá mo chroí: pulse, love of my heart]. *I have forgotten how much you love me – Shule, shule, agrah* [Ir. Siúl, siúl, a ghrá: walk, walk, my love].
> (Act 1.i)

This linguistic exoticism was not the play's only tactic for conjuring up an Ireland that is picturesquely different to the life of the metropolis, a romantic heterotopia. In visual terms the play de-

ployed elaborately-constructed sets to represent "picturesque" Killarney (already a cliché in the travelogues of this period), and colourful historical costumes – the vogue of the Colleen-Bawn cloak suggests that even the peasant garb of the heroine possessed an exotic appeal. The everyday codes of this pastoral world were also different to those of metropolitan London: it pictured a society of priests, poteen and poaching, but also one of almost feudal, or even tribal, loyalty, as displayed by Danny Mann's actions on behalf of the man who is not just his employer, but also his foster-brother – a sort of blood-brother. This is not, in other words, a society dominated by the cash-nexus of modern industrial capitalism. The villain, Corrigan, as is often the case with Victorian melodrama, is perhaps the only one in the play who is clearly marked as a modern type, a man for whom custom, kin and caste mean far less than pounds, shillings and pence.

But into this exotic, non-modern world, Boucicault projected a distinctively modern form of suspenseful effect – not a railway rescue, but something very like it. The greatest change that Boucicault made to Griffin's novel, after all, was to turn a tragic tale of violent death into one of romantic reconciliation, and to effect this transformation he placed not a murder, but a rescue at the heart of the play. The play's signature scene is the water-cave, and the great heroic act of the play, which riveted the audience's attention night after night, was Myles's great 'header' to save the drowning heroine. This is the scene that was most often singled out for commentary or parody, but it was also the scene that most illustrations of the play featured, whether they were in newspapers, illustrated sheet-music covers, paintings, or editions of the play; this central scene came to act as an epitome of the *Colleen* as a whole. If Myles dives a moment too late, Eily will be dragged down into the cold waters of the lake. And this of course means that into the pastoral world of the play enters the same kind of split-second timing that characterizes not just other rescue-dramas, but also industrial modernity.

Peter Brooks has showed some years ago that melodrama is a theatrical mode that arises alongside the advent of the political modernity of the French revolution, and subsequent critics have refined

and adapted that theory in a number of ways, suggesting, for example, that it is the social modernity of the city that melodrama captures and perhaps even assimilates, or that it provides a form of public sphere for an emergent consumer culture.[17]

In rescue melodramas it is clearly also the spatio-temporal world of industrial modernity that is important, the modernized time and space described by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Railway Journey*. That the suspense of the last-minute rescue is about an entry into and an overcoming of industrial modernity is made much clearer in such urban human versus locomotive spectaculars as Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) or Boucicault's London-set adaptation of it, *After Dark* (1868).[18] There we can see more directly that the enjoyment of theatrical spectacle aligns the audience with industrial time: the machine is defeated, though in the process the audience is trained in a new kind of temporal consciousness.

But the split-second events of the water-cave rescue depend on just the same sense of industrialized time, for all that the action is displaced into the pastoral realm: this is a thoroughly modern rescue, depending not just on timing, but also on all of the illusive resources of the stage: lighting to imitate moonlight, trapdoors to allow the dive to happen, and a small army of stage-hands to facilitate the disappearance and reappearance of Myles and Eily from beneath the gauzy "waves". In effect, the special-effects and the temporal framework here is no different from the more obviously urban and industrial-age rescues of *The Poor of New York* or *After Dark*, though it is being presented as something quite different. Far from coming to enjoy an escapist evening in the 'timeless' Irish landscape,

[17] Cf. Brooks. On the relationship of melodrama to the social modernity of the city, see, for example, Singer, who also argues that Brooks is drawing on an older tradition of interpretation of melodrama. Discussing Boucicault's Walter Scott adaptation, *The Trial of Effie Deans* (1863), Lynn M. Voskuil has argued that what sensation melodrama offers is a consumer-culture version of the modern public sphere. She does not suggest why this should take the form it does in *Effie Deans*, which like *The Colleen Bawn*, seems to live the present through the past. See also Buckley.

[18] I have discussed *After Dark* in relation to the industrialization of time and space in my article "Blood on the Tracks".

then, audiences were coming to be thrilled by what we might think of as a pastoral-modern hybrid.

The question to ask, I think, is why did London audiences find this anachronism so engaging? At some level they appear to have preferred to experience the time-space of the sensational industrial rescue in a pastoral disguise rather than face it head on. Several years before they were willing to be thrilled by the railway rescues of the later 1860s, they were able to derive very similar thrills from emotional investment in the drowning peasant girl, Eily, and her equally markedly non-modern rescuer, Myles-na-Coppaleen. But of course such disguises were a crucial part of Victorian industrialism, which elsewhere created Gothic railway stations, and factories. Walter Benjamin long ago pointed to this curious process by which modernity decks itself in the trappings of other eras, and the 'thirst for the past' that characterizes the nineteenth century (cited in Buck-Morss 110). As Susan Buck-Morss describes, the new technologies themselves provide the clearest examples of this pattern, which Benjamin began to trace in his incomplete Arcades project:

> Early photography mimicked painting. The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames. Newly processed iron was used for ornament rather than structural supports, shaped into leaves, or made to resemble wood. Industrially produced utensils were decorated to resemble flowers, fauna, seashells, and Greek and Renaissance antiques. (Cited in Buck-Morss 111).

The water-rescue, then, joins a whole series of such "dialectic images". In this case modernity arrives cloaked in a version of pastoral; the suspense of sensation drama arrives as costume drama. For Benjamin such disguises are not a form of mystification of historical change, but rather capture, as through a form of dream-work, the utopian longing unleashed by new forces of production. But in this case we also see the fears and anxieties unleashed by the new forces of production. *The Colleen Bawn*, appearances to the con-

trary notwithstanding, is then a play that captures the anxieties as well as the utopian desires of the Victorian present, not a simple evocation of the Irish past. What the play offers is not a purely escapist fantasy, or a piece of nostalgia, but a way of living a transformed modernity through a fantasy of the pre-modern.[19] It is very unlikely that the middle-class women who wore red Colleen-Bawn cloaks, or the couples who danced the *Colleen Bawn Waltz*, wished to *be* Irish peasants, but they may have wanted to inhabit a speeded-up, yet manageable modernity that retained the colour, intensity, and passion of Boucicault's imaginary *Gemeinschaft*.[20]

We might end by thinking about what persists between 19th-century "rescue dramas" and 20th-century "disaster movies". What persists, I think, is the fantasy of rescue or escape: the "crash" may get bigger and bigger – a railway crash averted, or a drowning prevented, becomes a ship, or a plane, or a skyscraper destroyed – but some characters are usually saved from the wreckage; the fantasy that we will survive modernity is as strong as ever – even in the end-of-history global warming film *The Day After Tomorrow* (perhaps species-annihilation makes for bad box office). And of course, a very obvious point, these are pleasurable fantasies at some level – somehow to see characters in the very jaws of the machine and then saved is still a pleasurable fantasy for us – industrial suspense, now more than a hundred years old, still seems to work.[21]

[19] For a rather different reading of Boucicault's staging of Ireland in relation to modernity see Luke Gibbons 165–69 ("Modernism, Montage, and the City"). Gibbons suggests that Ireland's colonial status brings about the same "disintegration of experience" (168) in the countryside that elsewhere registers in the city. As I hope is clear, I see the play's sensational aspect as relating to metropolitan experience, though its origins do lie in the violent events of the Irish countryside.

[20] The wearing of Colleen-Bawn cloaks is not a unique incident of such cross-cultural identification, of course. There was a vogue for "Gipsy parties" in the 1850s and 1860s, a form of excursion-cum-camping which may have offered similar pleasures. See, for example, the Harry Clifton song "Charity Crow" (1865).

[21] Scale should not be discounted, though – there is kind of industrial sublime at work in films like Cameron's *Titanic* that is not really there on the 19th-century stage – a phenomenon that might be understood by a return to Wordsworth's sonnet, perhaps.

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