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‘*Enlightened* Melodrama: Excess, Care and Resistance in Contemporary Television’

Abstract:

This essay explores *Enlightened* (HBO, 2011-2013) in relation to recent scholarly developments in our understanding of melodrama and television, particularly in work by Linda Williams and Jason Mittell. It argues that the series offers an example of the kind of ‘politically efficacious’ drama that Williams finds in *The Wire* through attention to its use of excess. Dismissed in some part because of its association with soap operas, excess, as a feature within melodrama, is something that we need to better understand in terms of its function in contemporary television. In *Enlightened*, excess is used to highlight the contradiction between the care of the self and the care of others. Embodied by Amy in terms of her performance of care, her facial expressions, and clothes, excess works to map out the journey of self-transformation offered in the series. This essay also focuses particular attention on the trope of mothering, both in terms of the mother-daughter relationship and a broader understanding of mothering that Amy embraces in her quest to be an ‘agent of change.’

Keywords:

*Enlightened*, care, excess, melodrama, contemporary television

*Enlightened* (HBO, 2011-2013) tackles profound social and political issues such as the mistakes of parenthood, the limits of friendship, the desire for self-fulfilment, the need for love, and the power of the people. It can be understood as a response to series such as *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) in so far as Amy Jellicoe (Laura Dern) starts where the characters in those series left off: she has been married and is now divorced, she was pregnant, but miscarried, and she has worked her way to the top of the career ladder, only to be moved to the bottom. She also lives in an environment where the rise of neoliberalism and associated values has meant an increased demand for her to perform and prove herself as someone who cares. The series casts new light on academic discussions around *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal*<sup>1</sup> regarding ambivalence about ‘having it all’ by articulating the inherent conflict between

individualism and community—do you ‘have it all’ for yourself or do you help others?

*Enlightened* reflects the ‘trauma time’ that Kathleen Stewart identifies ‘[i]n the public-private culture and politics of the contemporary United States, [where] trauma has become the dominant idiom of subjectivity, citizenship, politics and publics.’<sup>2</sup> The series offers a ‘still’ of a woman whose life has not really worked out as she had hoped and who has suffered (her father’s suicide, her mother’s rejection, the loss of her husband and child, and finally, her job), and yet who strives to find meaning and happiness. The episodic structure of the programme as a television series fits with the movement of ‘trauma time’ which Stewart describes as ‘simultaneously leaping forward and falling back,’<sup>3</sup> as each episode involves Amy making progress and stumbling backwards.

According to Diane Negra, one narrative characteristic of the ‘trauma time’ that Stewart identifies is ‘retreatism.’ Negra draws on a number of romantic comedies and female-centred dramas where a move home is seen as providing a ‘counterpoint realism to the fantasy of such female-centred 1990s franchises as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and even the semi-fantastical *Ally McBeal*.’<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Enlightened*, a move home is framed as a necessary response to Amy’s changing circumstances as she has very little options given her financial circumstances. The series exposes the ‘business’ side to self-help—the way in which it preys on people who find themselves in a weak or vulnerable moment and yet allows them to pay more than they can for a sense of belonging.

The small bungalow where her mother, Helen (performed by Diane Ladd), lives is decorated with heavy furnishings, a plethora of cushions and kitsch and a garden dominated by roses which her mother tends to with more care, love and

devotion than she does her daughter. Not only is this mise en scene deeply melodramatic, reminiscent of set designs from television series such as *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) and *Knots Landing* (CBS, 1979-1993), but so too is the sense that Amy is trapped and must liberate herself from the suffocation of suburbia and mundanity. Unlike *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* which focus on female friendships, shopping, romance and individualized responses to societal problems, *Enlightened* presents us with a heroine who wants her life to have meaning but struggles to find this when marriage, motherhood and career have eluded her.

Amy's approach to the world and those she cares about (including herself), allows viewers a vantage point from which to see how her effusiveness can function as a resistance to the apathy that surrounds her. Her excessiveness, expressed through her dress sense, emotional outbursts and social awkwardness, is visually uncomfortable, something embarrassing and even distasteful at times, but it is also something that leads towards transformation, both in terms of her own self-development and systemic change. It is in the performance of care, which is visualised in excessive terms in the series that Amy finds the meaning she has been searching for. Unlike series, such as *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), which hides its use of melodrama in stylistic aesthetics, *Enlightened* illustrates the contradictory ways in which excess both empowers real action, but also excuses us from having to do anything. The need to perform caring through real action rather than self-pity or artificial display, as the series suggests, becomes a way to marry feminism with progressive politics.

In this essay, I consider the potential in this excess as something that can offer a form of resistance, particularly in terms of political apathy and self-transformation. I argue that *Enlightened* articulates a contradiction within

contemporary American culture between the demand to care for the self and the need to care for others, compounded by a sense that humanity has lost its way and the related anxiety about one's place in the world. What emerges within the series is a melodramatic journey illustrating how and why the performance of care can actually lead to action. Excess, I argue, works in *Enlightened* to highlight the inherent contradictions in caring. As life in neoliberal societies become more precarious (post-Brexit, post-Trump), and as both individual and collective voices speak out against injustice (#metoo and #timesup campaigns) there is an increasing awareness that jobs, governments, and lives are not predictable or reliable and that certain behaviours are not acceptable. *Enlightened*'s use of excess embodied in Amy's performance of care, Dern's acting, costuming and the episodic structure of the serial form provide examples of melodramatic television at its finest and most potent. Whereas Linda Williams sees *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) as delivering a powerful political critique of neoliberalism,<sup>5</sup> I argue that *Enlightened* offers viewers a moving and revealing critique of the contradictory pressures on women in contemporary Western society.

Matthew S. Buckley argues that 'at the moment, interest in melodrama is more diverse, more intensive and more urgent than ever before.'<sup>6</sup> Buckley notes a substantial shift in the scholarly understanding of melodrama over the last two decades, where attention was 'rising but sparse' and 'limited to [...] victims tied to the tracks [...] and American popular film and television studies (where the term applied to early cinematic adaptations of stage melodrama and, later, dramas produced to make women cry).'<sup>7</sup> From 2002, Buckley marks a change in the understanding of melodrama as playing a 'central role in modern narrative of all

sorts' along with, and following Peter Brook's seminal work, a 'recognition that melodrama was not simply a genre or a mode but a "central poetry" of modern life.'<sup>8</sup> This shift in scholarly work allows us to recognise melodrama as something not at odds with 'dominant modern impulses' but rather 'profoundly aligned with them and even constitutive of modern consciousness.'<sup>9</sup> The urgency that Buckley notes is that we, as scholars, need to better understand melodrama's 'fundamental features,' 'to recognise patterns that inform the whole' and 'to discern more clearly how and why melodrama moves so seamlessly between and among different forms, discursive contexts, and symbolic levels.'<sup>10</sup> This essay is, in large part, a response to this call and, more specifically, it is an attempt to better understand the utilisation of excess, often understood as a central feature of melodrama, in contemporary television.

Before moving on to look more closely at excess and how it functions, I want to consider more recent arguments regarding melodrama and television. Particular attention to the presence and function of melodrama in contemporary television drama has been offered by Linda Williams in her reading of *The Wire* (2012) and Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* (2015). In addition, and most recently, Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill have produced a substantial collection on melodrama titled *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media and National Cultures* (2018) which continues the case for melodrama's adaptability and ubiquity across narrative forms.

Williams presents a persuasive and well-argued rationale for re-valuing melodrama through her focus on *The Wire*, and in particular, in understanding melodrama's ability to deliver 'politically efficacious drama' which is important in terms of our re-conceptualisation of melodrama but also of television itself: too

often, television and melodrama are only linked in terms of soap operas and consequently de-valued. As Williams reminds us, if we look for ‘contemporary melodrama only in its most familiar and cliched aspects [...] then we mistake its contemporary forms and its protean attributes.’<sup>11</sup> Her argument is compelling and yet her singular focus on *The Wire* and its attendant components (its length, beat structure, genius and genesis and themes) creates a blindspot in which she overlooks other powerful examples of melodrama on television, including, as this essay offers, *Enlightened*. Indeed, *Enlightened* is best read through the lens of the melodramatic with its emphasis on a woman’s struggle, the psychoanalytic journey, and on caring as an answer to societal ills and as a primary site for female agency.

Although Williams’s work on melodrama is theoretically rich and diverse, it misses out some key work within melodrama and television from television studies, such as work by Jane Feuer, Christine Geraghty, Mimi White, Lynne Joyrich and Charlotte Brunsdon.<sup>12</sup> I want to spend a little time outlining some of the insights in this work as it is crucial to understanding the importance of melodrama in female-led television dramas such as *Enlightened* and also helps to lay the foundation for thinking about the role of excess in melodrama which this essay will move on to explore. Much of the work cited addresses the issue of melodrama and soap operas but extends to thinking about both the aesthetics and features of melodrama (Geraghty), including the use of excess, and in thinking about women, both as actors within the melodrama and as audiences of melodrama (Brunsdon). Jane Feuer draws similarities between the soap opera and the prime-time serial, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, in her analysis of melodrama and television as well as offering a comprehensive overview of the scholarly work on melodrama in film and television

in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>13</sup> In her review of this work, Feuer brings critical attention to the role excess plays in melodrama:

‘Central to all the theoretical positions I have just enumerated is the concept of melodrama as creating an *excess*, whether that excess be defined as a split between the level of narrative and that of *mise-en-scene* or as a form of “hysteria,” the visually articulated return of the ideologically repressed. Despite the changing theoretical stances, all see the excess not merely as aesthetic but as *ideological*, opening up a textual space which may be read against the seemingly hegemonic surface.’<sup>14</sup>

Feuer views excess not only as an aesthetic feature in melodrama, visualised by *mise en scene*, but also as an *ideological* feature which opens up a space for resistance, as I will go on to explore. In considering how excess could be read in prime-time serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, Feuer suggests that ‘excess cannot easily centre upon *mise en scene*, for television’s limited visual scale places its representational emphasis elsewhere.’<sup>15</sup> Instead, Feuer focuses on aspects such as television acting, and in particular, the use of confrontation between characters. Here she notes the way in which prime-time serials, following shooting conventions often found in soap operas (such as medium close-up shots, the use of the zoom lens, and holding the scene for at least a ‘beat’ after the dialogue has ended) mark out this excess. Lynne Joyrich also notes the way in which particular stylistic elements deliver melodrama’s full potential:

‘In its attempt to render meaning visible and recapture the ineffable, melodrama emphasizes gestures, postures, frozen moments and expressions. Television strengthens these conventions as it clearly directs attention to the revelations of facial expression, providing close-ups that disclose “what before...only a lover or a mother ever saw.”’<sup>16</sup>

Excess therefore punctuates moments and renders meaning visible. It allows us a glimpse at the ineffable and offers a palpable feeling that there is something more to be discovered which, in television, creates an affective pull towards the narrative and characters.



Feuer is also keen to point out that these conventions are just part of the way in which melodrama functions in television.<sup>17</sup> In Douglas Sirk's melodramas excess was understood to disrupt the ending, thereby forbidding closure, and allowed the viewer a position from which to question the very world view the film painted. Following work on the romance genre from Tania Modleski and Ellen Seiter, Feuer sees excess in serial narratives as similarly disruptive, offering the potential for 'multiple and aberrant readings' which leads her to argue that 'the emergence of the melodramatic serial in the 1980s represents a *radical* response to and expression of cultural contradictions.'<sup>18</sup> Excess functions in each example as something that marks out and emphasises contradictions. However, unlike Sirk's distanciation, which puts viewers at a critical distance from the text, excess in the melodramatic serial invites viewers to emotionally engage and therefore be moved to think differently by what they watch.

Moving away from focus on excess that Feuer identifies in the 1980s, Williams makes a case for re-conceptualising melodrama as something that moves across a more diverse range of narratives and storytelling. In her essay titled 'Mega-Melodrama,' Linda Williams argues that excess should no longer be presented as a '*sine qua non*' of the mode. She understands excess as something measured in degrees of emotion, of aesthetic ornamentation, of intensity and of spectacle, and believes that these are rarely 'pure' in form, particularly in more modern examples of melodrama.<sup>19</sup> This leads her to argue that:

'melodrama has become so basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment that it is futile to continue to define it as "excess," since these apparent excesses are not necessary for melodrama to do its work nor are they of the essence of the form. The real issue, however, is what we presume to compare this "excess" to.'<sup>20</sup>

Williams's final point is also the real thrust of her essay—to encourage film scholars, in particular, to stop opposing melodrama with a “classical” norm. However, while Williams's point regarding this unproductive opposition is well made, it is important for this essay and for our study of melodrama in television not to discount excess and its significance in film and television. For although Williams may be right that excess is not *necessary* to the form (though previous work as cited disagrees with this), it is certainly a defining and integral feature. Williams's aim, I would argue, is to convince both film and television scholars to appreciate the power and ubiquity of melodrama in contemporary storytelling, which she does exceptionally well in *On the Wire*. And, in addition, she recuperates the mode from its negative connotations with daytime soap operas and overly feminine texts. The fact that these connotations are negative is something that urgently needs addressing in television studies, particularly given the complexity of writing and producing soap operas.

Mittell's and hopefully other television scholars acceptance of melodrama's potential in contemporary television is a praiseworthy consequence of Williams's contribution to the study of melodrama, yet it seems to have come at the expense of removing excess from the critical landscape. Indeed, Mittell explains that he was persuaded by Williams's ‘call to redefine melodrama away from the terrain of excess’ not to differentiate between prime time soaps such as *Revenge* and ‘more unconventional series’ such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*.<sup>22</sup> The problem here, as mentioned, is that excess *does* ideological work within television. I would argue that the forward gain of seeing melodrama as both a more expansive mode of storytelling and something that is capable of delivering political and culturally

significant readings does not need to be made by sacrificing the role of excess or of de-valuing soap opera.

Thinking through *The Wire* as melodrama and appreciating Williams's new understanding of melodrama leads Mittell to posit that it is 'difficult to view any other complex serial without seeing its own map of moral legibility, narrative drive and emotionally resonant characterization all working to create a shared "felt good."<sup>23</sup> The shared 'felt good' of *Enlightened* raises questions over both the care we might give ourselves and the care we offer others. That is, the 'felt good' in *Enlightened* does not sit easily with viewers and therefore raises more questions than it answers and reminds us that there is no easy solution to the transformation or change we may desire. One can only be an 'agent of change,' -Amy's persistent goal - if you keep caring and keep trying different ways of getting there. This struggle is highlighted by Amy's failed attempts to make a difference which form the content of each episode: whether caring for her mother, trying to get her ex-husband off drugs or rallying to keep an immigrant in the country. Amy eventually becomes an agent of change, finds meaning and feels good about herself, but we, as viewers, recognise that she only achieves this sense of self-love through her continual efforts to care for others.

If, as Williams and Gledhill note in their impressive collection *Melodrama Unbound* (2018) melodrama, as a mode of storytelling, is constantly evolving, adapting and changing, then so too are its fundamental features. In her work on melodrama and the aesthetics of emotion, for example, E. Deidre Pribram positions emotionality as central to melodrama's ability to 'express forces, desire, and fears that operate beyond cognitive or ideological explanation.'<sup>25</sup> She underpins her claim of emotionality's centrality to the construction of a 'felt good' as described above:

‘Melodramatic modes of storytelling, grounded in emotions and felt recognition— involving us in perceptions of how we do, might, or ought to feel things—enable us to connect with and understand the narrative and social worlds we occupy.’<sup>27</sup> This notion of emotions and the way they move across and weave themselves around culture reveals melodrama’s roots in post-French Revolution but are also very resonant with contemporary political movements witnessed recently such as #metoo and #timesup.

Pribham’s emphasis on emotionality within the aesthetic structure and cultural value of melodrama is very useful in terms of re-thinking excess particularly as television increasingly uses emotion as a means of drawing in its viewers and engaging them.<sup>28</sup> Pribham’s re-framing means that emotion is given the importance it merits in enabling the kind of political critique Williams sees in *The Wire*. It also allows us to map how the emotion travels within the series and what punctuates it. Most importantly, however, if excess was previously considered an ironic object, then it is precisely the shift in terms of thinking and valuing emotion’s role within television that allows us to think of excess as a feature which underpins the emotion in melodrama.

The feeling and emotion elicited in *Enlightened* invite, and to a certain degree insist on, reading the series in terms of its melodramatic elements specifically performance style, costume and temporality. In her work on *The Wire*, Williams settles on a simple definition: ‘melodrama always offers the contrast between how things are and how they could be, or should be.’<sup>29</sup> This distinction is a plot device that is used throughout the series as Amy’s self-help approaches inevitably work out quite differently than anticipated. Contradictions are key to melodrama’s mode and

storytelling structure and the central contrast continually demonstrated in *Enlightened* is between care of the self and care of others. Amy tries to care for her ex-husband, her mother, her colleagues, her best friend, an immigrant woman, the environment and the world. Each episode focuses on some aspect of her caring and its impact on her sense of self. For instance, season one, episode three ‘Someone Else’s Life,’ she decides to quit her job and work at a homeless shelter until she realises that she won’t be able to pay off her debt from the wellness centre if she does. As in other episodes, this realisation offers a critique of how self-help functions as a business and may entrap the very subjects it proposes to liberate.

Williams explains the construction of ‘world and time’ in *The Wire* through an attention to the ‘importance of the part.’ That is to say, that she focuses on the structure of the serial itself and its use of beats and story arcs. She refers to the convention of the fifty-minute to sixty-minute “hour” as the ‘basic unit of viewing time’ and argues that audiences feel the ‘temporal rhythm’ even when there are no commercial interruptions.<sup>30</sup> For Williams, the hour episode garners more serious attention than the half-hour show which she sees as catering more for the ‘occasional viewer.’<sup>31</sup> While Williams’s point is well made, I would argue that there are exceptions to this rule, such as *Enlightened*, and *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009-2015). As I have previously argued: ‘Jackie’s character negotiates moral boundaries in a way that allows for a reconsideration of both the complexity of care practices in contemporary society and the gendered nature of these practices.’<sup>32</sup> In both these series, then, the half-hour is not there to cater to the occasional viewer, rather it reflects a *poetic* sensibility inherent to the series form. The shorter form still maintains the ‘temporal rhythm’ that Williams identifies, and creates a sense of urgency and pull towards the end of each episode, but it also constructs a different

kind of 'unit' to the hour-length episode. In his work on poetry and serial television, Sean O'Sullivan refers to the rhyming that can be produced by the opening and closing of an episode.<sup>33</sup> Most episodes within *Enlightened* begin with a voice-over in which Amy muses over an aspect of her life and then concludes with a reflection on this problem or issue. This framing device reflects the therapeutic discourse that has become more commonplace to contemporary television from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) onwards. The use of personal address reminds viewers that Amy's thoughts, feelings, and emotions are not only given privilege but structure the events in the episode. The rhyming of the ending and closing creates a kind of poetics around self-care and care for others and demonstrates through its very structure how circular and solipsistic the act of caring for the self and others can be. The shorter length of the episode also works better in terms of thinking of each episode as a 'still' of a woman's life. To return to Stewart's work, it can be seen as constructing a televisual 'trauma time' in the sense that an emotional wound is open, exposed, and then partly healed. The episodes never offer a sense of complete resolution, rather a sense that things are a little better for having given them some attention.

Central to the way in which these poetics of care operate is Laura Dern's performance as Amy. In the opening episode Amy is alone in a bathroom cubicle, crying loudly, mascara streaming down her face. Two co-workers come into the toilet busily laughing and chatting about the fact that she has been fired for having an affair with her boss, Damon:

Sheryl: 'You just don't have sex with the boss'

Co-worker: 'She does'

Sheryl: 'You don't shit where you eat, you know what I'm saying?' [...] It's for the best, she's always creating drama, the whole department will be better off without her...'

The camera moves between shots of the two women enjoying their gossip and Amy's enraged expressions, until finally she bolts out the cubicle and says: 'Fuck off Sherryl, back-stabbing cunt' while giving the women the finger. As she charges down the corridor, her colleague Krista tries to stop her telling her that she looks 'insane'. Amy replies: 'Krista, go back to your sad, fucking little desk, ok, I don't care anymore, I'm done, I'm going to kill him'.

At this point Amy confronts Damon and the two suited men with him. They all look increasingly nervous and uncomfortable as she follows them towards the main elevator. They are visibly relieved that the doors are closing when the elevator abruptly halts and Amy starts to pry the doors apart. The camera closes in on Amy whose enraged expression is reminiscent of Jack Nicholson's in *The Shining* (dr. Stanley Kubrick, 1980). The screen goes black and the next scene opens in the calm, naturalistic environment of the well-being centre.

Dern performs Amy as an overly dramatic, excessive woman through exaggerated facial expressions, body posture, and tone of voice, all of which sits at odds with the various forms of self-help calm that she tries to take on. The contrast between the person she wants to be and the person we as viewers and those around her see creates a conflict brimming with excess. As Williams argues in her reading of *Stella Dallas* (dr. King Vidor, 1937), one of the fundamental conflicts revolves around the '*excessive presence* of Stella's body and dress.'<sup>34</sup> As she explains: '[Stella] increasingly flaunts an exaggeratedly feminine presence that the offended community prefers not to see.'<sup>35</sup> She adds reference to the way in which Barbara

Stanwyck's 'own excessive performance contributes to this effect': 'But the more ruffles, feathers, furs and clanking jewellery that Stella dons, the more she emphasizes her pathetic inadequacy.'<sup>36</sup> As mentioned, Dern performs Amy as an excessively demanding and over-bearing woman through her physicality, facial expressions and tone of voice. When she returns from the well-being centre, she tries to exude being 'chilled' and relaxed and yet we, as viewers, know the 'old' Amy has not changed as is evident through her excessive and impetuous actions (reversing angrily into Damon's car) or her palpable disgust at things she finds unjust through her dramatic facial expressions.

Throughout the series we see Amy addressing the world with an open face, with an exaggerated expression of eagerness and honesty, only to be disappointed or hurt by the rejection she encounters. And yet she is never deterred by these disappointments and continues forward in her quest to find meaning. The excessiveness of Amy's presence means that she cannot be ignored or forgotten; she refuses to shrink quietly into a corner despite her dramatic and public display of anger at her boss, Damon, for firing her after their affair. While some women might avoid confrontation, especially in the wake of a sexual 'scandal,' Amy refuses to be ignored or to blame herself for his actions. She holds him and the company accountable. Her excessiveness is constantly felt and displayed: her co-workers, particularly Krista (the woman who is given Amy's job when she leaves), roll their eyes, avert their gaze and refuse to give her lifts in an effort to avoid her. But clearly what they are also avoiding is what she stands for: a woman scorned, discarded and unloved. The series never offers any back story for the affair or the reasons Amy is fired, and although one could be tempted to read the series as a 'revenge narrative,' the focus is always on Amy's desire to find meaning and to be 'an agent of change.'



It is the emphasis on change drives the narrative forward and insists that we see Amy as a driving force in her life and others, instead of a victim.

In addition to Dern's performance, the clothes that Amy wears 'announce a presence, a direction.'<sup>37</sup> As viewers we note a stark contrast between the Amy at the start of the first episode, the one forcing her mascara stained faced through the elevator doors, and the one that returns from the well-being centre: from a very 'corporate' look, sleek, pencil skirt, tailored clothes and heels to Amy with her hair down and lightly permed, wearing flowing clothes and sandals. Upon her return to work, her mother remarks 'Are you going to work dressed like that? You look like a Hippie.' As the series progresses, Amy's clothes become more flamboyant, colourful and 'hippyish' along with her facial expressions and affectations, described earlier. In his work on 'costumes as melodrama,' Drake Stutesman argues that: 'As melodramatic stagings or enactments, the costumes announce a presence, a direction. They claim a life style and a triumph...'<sup>38</sup> Stutesman constructs a compelling argument around the clothes in *Super Fly* arguing that: 'This fight for self, the core of *Super Fly*'s story line, can be traced through Priest's costume changes.'<sup>39</sup> At the core of *Enlightened*'s storyline is not only the fight for self, but the reconciliation of caring for the self and others, and her clothes offer a reflection of Amy's transformation. On the one hand, they are part of the life style she has acquired through her time at the well-being centre, but on the other hand, they are also armour for a new direction she is taking in life. The flowing lines, soft patterns and bright colours which evoke liberation and an ease of movement reveal the way in which she is embracing the new change she desires but also function as a signal to others that a change has taken place within her, even before it has.

As a means of further illustrating the use of excess in *Enlightened*, I want to focus in particular on episode 5, series one, 'Not Good Enough Mothers.' Through a careful analysis of this episode I want to pay particular attention to three functions of excess within the series: excess in the episodic structure of the programme, Dern's excessive acting and costume, and Amy's excessive performance of care. Unlike most episodes which begin with Amy's voice and reflections, episode 5 begins with a news report about a Mexican woman, Rosa Muñoz, who is being deported and who must therefore leave her two young daughters behind. The woman's defence attorney asks: 'Who is going to care for these children?' while Muñoz makes a desperate plea for help. The camera moves between images of Muñoz with her children, the reporter, and Amy who is standing in the kitchen eating her cereal. Amy looks at the screen with horror, mouth wide open, and is visibly outraged by what she is hearing. She shouts 'Fuck you, idiot' at the screen after the immigration expert blames the parents. Amy asks her mother if she can drive her car so that she attend a rally in support of Rosa, but her mother refuses because Amy is not listed on her insurance. Amy's response is to look hurt and horrified at her mother's rejection, as though not being allowed to drive her car is symbolic of many other disappointments and rejections. She stands in the doorway imploring her mother to let her take her car as her mother stands immovable in the middle of the room. The physical difference between them becomes obvious: Amy, gangly, long-limbed and full of unbridled movement versus her mother, who is still, controlled and closed, this contrast emphasises the differences between them as well as the loss of any connection and communication.

Alongside rhyming openings and endings, most episodes in the series use a self-help technique as a structuring device in the narrative. In episode 5, Amy's

voice over comes after she has left the house, instead of at the start of the episode, she says: 'Some days you feel like the world is against you. And everyone around you seems so mean, and ugly. There are times I just burn with hate [...] I don't want to hate. I want to be kind. And awaken the kindness in others.' Her desire to find kindness punctures the rejection that she feels from her mother. After getting on the bus, she draws on a meditation from a self-help book where you are asked to look at every person as though they are your mother. Amy slowly looks at the other passengers imagining that each one could be her mother. As if to allow us to see what this would really look like we suddenly see Amy's mother instead of the woman who was sitting across and next to her. Instead of looking at her mother with love, Amy's face is riddled with disgust, pain and disappointment. Her face crumples as she averts her gaze from her mother's disappointed look. Instead of reciprocal warmth and love, their disappointment is mirrored between them.

By making this visualisation technique literal, forcing us to see Amy's real mother instead of an imagined one, the programme allows us to recognise one of the problems with the meditation. Indeed, the difficulty with the exercise is that it presupposes that 'your' mother is a benevolent, caring individual, a person one would want to see because of the kind and loving feelings she evokes. However, in Amy's case, her mother is a cold, absent and confused person. Amy's mother constantly undermines her, questions why she wants to take risks, worries about her and regrets her presence. We learn through the series that Amy's father committed suicide and his death haunts the family and disrupts any real sense of intimacy or closeness. Envisioning other people as her mother means that Amy feels compassion for them, but does not provide a sense that they will care for her.

One of the central issues that Williams' raises within her work on *Stella Dallas* is the mirroring that happens between mother and daughter and the way in which the 'look' between them radically alters both.<sup>40</sup> In the case of *Stella Dallas*, it is only through her daughter's eyes that Stella is able to see that she is not the woman she so desperately tries to be and that the only way she can actually give her daughter the life she wanted for herself is to give her daughter up. Her sacrifice is bound up in the rejection of her daughter and the admission that she wants to be 'something else besides a mother' when actually it is in that moment of recognition that she takes on the mothering role she has avoided in fear that she will be nothing else besides a mother. Although she has performed her mothering up until this point, it is not until she sees herself through the eyes of her daughter that she actually acts as her mother, that is, as someone who puts her child's needs before her own.

Like Stella, Amy is unable to see the person she is because she is so desperate to be someone else. She tries on political causes as if they are clothes, and joins movements to be part of something whether or not she agrees with the ideological underpinnings. In a very similar way to Stella, Amy's excessive performance of care means that no one really believes her intentions or wants to follow along with her plans. After deciding not to go to the rally to support Munoz because it is raining, Amy decides to organize a women's group at the company and gives it the acronym WAA (Women at Abaddonn – Abaddonn is the name of the company she work for) which sounds more like a whine than a rallying cry. She champions her new group while at a baby shower for her colleague Krista, telling the women, who look embarrassed and confused by what she has to say, that there are less fortunate women in the world whom they should care about. Later, as they

leave, Krista explodes and tells Amy: 'This wasn't the time to make some big political speech. You know? Today was supposed to be about me, not about you.'

The scene demonstrates the circulation of care between friends and those close to them and the resistance to extend care beyond those boundaries. The women look at Amy with a mixture of confusion, disappointment and anger, which reiterate Krista's complaint later that the event should have been about her, not Amy. Viewers can appreciate Krista's annoyance and the inappropriate nature of Amy's interjection into the space of the baby shower. Nevertheless, the episode also demonstrates the selfishness of others, the reluctance to really care beyond our own safe boundaries and the resistance to care for those who are not known to us. This is visualised through Amy's excessive performance and again through her costume. Standing in the middle of the room, wearing a jumper with sunflowers on it, Amy implores the women to do something. The scene is awkward and uncomfortable not only for the women, all dressed in quiet pastel shades, who have come to drink champagne and congratulate their friend, but also for the viewer who feels the tension and frustration the women have with Amy who has changed the mood and 'made it about herself.'

In the final scene from the episode, Amy is on the bus again, but this time some of the other passengers smile back at her. She decides to actually do something to help and takes a bag of presents to Rosa's children, who has just been deported. She hands over the presents, waves at the children hiding in the background and leaves feeling happy that she has helped in some way. As she walks away, Paul Simon's 'Mother and Child Reunion' plays in the background and the rain finally stops. The episode moves from the opening in which Amy wants to 'awaken the kindness in others' to a final voice-over in which she reflects on what it

means to mother: 'I've lived in a world full of not good enough mothers, imperfect, bad mothers, but the mother is a child too. She's a child. I will stop waiting for you to be the perfect mother. I will be patient with you. I will be tender. I will be the mother I wanted you to be.'

The opening and closing therefore establishes a rhyme about mothering the self, mothering others and how care circulates from random acts of kindness to the intimate relationship between mother and child. In the short duration of the half hour, we are offered a poetic meditation on what it means to mother each other and ourselves in contemporary Western society. Amy, as a contemporary iteration of the maternal melodramatic heroine finally understands that the only way that she can have a good mother is by mothering herself. She stops looking for her mother to be that source of care and love and finds the compassion within herself and in her actions towards others.

To return to the shared 'felt good', *Enlightened* constructs a map of the ways in which we care for other people, ourselves and the world and the inherent problems, contradictions and limitations this kind of caring creates. The episode discussed raises several issues: the limitations individuals have to enact change, the gendered nature of care, the apathy and self-interest others express about the world around them, the desire therefore to think only of the self—which ultimately Amy returns to in thinking about her relationship with her mother or of being mothered. The emphasis on the mother as the ultimate harbinger of caring and salvation is, of course, a melodramatic trope, and here it is explored in a way that problematizes this figuration, particularly given that Amy is not a mother and that her mother is anything but caring.

The political point is that apathy seems to make sense when there seems to be no point fighting. Although injustice might be recognisable, if there is a feeling that nothing can be done, then people veer towards doing nothing. In this context, Amy becomes the moralist that no one wants to listen to or acknowledge. She is an irritant and yet her excessive qualities creates a demand that she is acknowledged and therefore change becomes possible. As Amy tells her mother: 'If we can change, the whole world can change for the better.'

Whereas the first season of *Enlightened* focuses on Amy's return to work and the limitations of self-help, the second season explores her attempts to expose and reveal the hidden injustices of the corporate world and to become 'an agent of change.' Part of this change is exemplified through Amy's resistance to do as she is told (by her manager, Dougie) and in her actions to gather evidence against Abaddon. She knows that she is putting herself at risk but she is willing to do so because she believes that it will give her life meaning. In the penultimate episode of the second season, her attempts to expose the wrongdoings of the company finally fall into place at the same moment that she is finally offered the job she has wanted. She arranges to meet with the CEO of Abaddon, Charles Szidon, at his Golf club to talk to him about her community outreach idea when he asks her: 'Do you really want to do something good or are you just tired of feeling powerless?'

In this moment, Amy is offered a choice to return to her 'old' life and accept the job that Szidon offers her or to continue on her new path and blow the whistle on Abaddon's illegal activities. In other words, she is offered a chance not to move forward, not to take a risk, and to return to the 'safety' of what she knows. As viewers we see that this is a considerable dilemma for Amy to make and the façade of her performance as solely excessive or solipsistic begins to recede. She is laid

bare as someone who genuinely wants to find meaning in life and not to continue as someone defined by others.

Excess, embodied in Amy's performance, facial expressions, gestures and in her clothes, begin from this point to be replaced by more measured and considered actions. The shift highlights the performative nature of the self. As Stephen Ball and Antonio Olmedo explain in their work on care and neoliberalism:

The apparatuses of neoliberalism are seductive, enthralling and overbearingly necessary. It is a 'new' moral system that sub-verts and re-orientates us to its truths and ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible.<sup>41</sup>

As Ball and Olmedo argue, neoliberalism 'does us' – speaks and acts through our language, purposes, decisions and social relations.<sup>42</sup> Performance reviews, employee of the month schemes and other metrics illustrate an increasing demand to 'be the best you can be.' But what if you act 'irresponsibly'? What if your best goes against the expectations an institution has of you?

In the first episode of the second season, Amy tries to enlist Tyler's help in collecting information that can be used against Abaddon on the moral grounds that he would should feel an 'obligation' to help people:

'Amy: Don't you feel an obligation? People are living under the illusion that the American dream is working for them. And it's rigged by the guys at the tippy top.

Tyler: Well I may not be at the top but I'm happy.

Amy: No, you're not. You're miserable. You're a mole. You're paralyzed.

Tyler: Well, I'm changing. I just joined the company gym and I got a discount because of my employee badge, and I'm going to work out more. And my aunt died and I just found out I got her timeshare, so I'm going to go to the Bahamas for two weeks a year. So maybe I'm a mole, but I'm a happy mole and I don't want to lose what little I have, Ok?'



Despite recognising that things might be unfair, Tyler is content with his own minor transformation—he is going to the gym, he has a timeshare, *et al.* Here we have an example of the way in which the individual (Tyler) is meant to individualise the problems of the social (the failure of the American dream) through self-transformation (he aspires to become a more tanned, physically fit self). Tyler is very reluctant to lose any personal gains, however precarious and short-lived they may be, in order to participate in social action. As Ball and Olmeda argue, neoliberal values create a new moral system which re-orientates the self towards its truths and ends which allows Tyler to feel that being a ‘happy mole’ is better than losing what ‘little’ he has. And yet, because of Amy’s insistence that he does more and becomes more, he finds real happiness. In the final montage of the second season (??), we see Tyler finding the love he has so desperately been searching for. Amy not only exposes the corporate’s wrong doings but she creates a new moral map which orients her and those around her towards a concrete sense of happiness and meaning, towards a new understanding of ‘felt good.’

In the finale of season two, appropriately titled ‘Agent of Change,’ viewers see the completion of Amy’s emotional journey—the final sequence is melodramatic in what Linda Williams refers to as ‘spaces of innocence, utopia and nostalgia.’<sup>43</sup> In the closing montage, which is reminiscent of series such as *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005) and *The Wire*, viewers are entreated to look back over the central relationships in the series: those between Amy and her mother and Amy and her ex-husband and see how they have been ‘healed’—her mother is proud of her achievements, her ex-husband appreciative of her ‘hope.’ We are also presented with a utopian ending: Amy has taken on the corporate world and won.

Whereas the end of the first season relies on an imagined revenge (Amy burning down the building), in the second series, Amy successfully blows the whistle on the corporation's wrongdoings by giving classified information to a journalist. Following the exposure, Amy is called into a meeting with Szidon who is visibly undone by her actions and in knowing that he underestimated her. Szidon implores: 'Who are you?' to which Amy replies: 'I'm just a woman who is over it. I'm tired of watching the world fall apart because of guys like you.' Szidon tells her that she is a 'mental patient,' 'you feel but you don't think, you cry about the planet, you weep for the oceans, you bitch and you moan, but you don't understand anything...you are an hysteric.' Amy forcefully refuses the sexist implications of his accusation and tells him: 'If caring about something other than money is dopey, I'm a fucking moron. And the only thing I feel right now, is satisfaction.' As she delivers the final line, she stands up and leaves the office. Szidon angrily follows her, and the final sequence constructs a rhyme between the opening episode of season one and the finale of season two: from Amy hysterically shouting through the elevator doors at her ex-boss and former lover to the corporation's boss doing the same as Amy leaves the building.

Peter Brooks reminds us that the hysterical body, 'from Hippocrates through Freud, a woman's body [is...] a story of desire in an impasse'<sup>44</sup> and here, I argue, the hysterical excess exposes the uncontained, the frustration, the impossibility of both Amy's desire for self-fulfilment and community and the Head of Abaddon's recognition that Amy will not perform the self in the way he wants her to. It is her unwillingness to do as she is told and her insistence on a socialized concept of caring that drives him to act hysterically. When Amy acts hysterically (according to her boss) through her 'excessive' caring what she demonstrates is a

bringing to consciousness of her needs as a member of society. By this point in the series, the need to express caring through action rather than just ‘performing’ care for herself or others becomes a way to marry feminism with progressive politics. As series writer Mike White explains in an interview: ‘women are seen as coming into these kinds of political things from a place of emotion. Somehow the emotional part of it, which to me is where compassion lies, is often devalued or diminished as a goofy way to come into these complicated political situations.’<sup>45</sup>

Instead of devaluing emotion, the series highlights it as a powerful source of change and action. To return to Pribham’s work, the series evokes emotion as ‘key to its aesthetic structure and cultural value’ but also as key to political change and self-transformation. The concluding dialogue between Szidon and Amy articulates the assumption that women who care or who ‘feel’ are just being self-indulgent and are therefore not capable of enacting any real change. And as viewers, we do know that Amy has acted in her own self-interests and has been someone who just performs care and yet does not really feel it. However, the scene offers a turning point, not only for Amy but also for Szidon who is forced to recognise himself as the hysteric.

*Enlightened* offers a meditation on a woman’s attempt to find her own joy through adding to and participating in collective joy. She exposes the corporate ills she set out to reveal and in so doing, she also heals her own sense of loss and displacement. She finally belongs while simultaneously having no affiliation. And this state of limbo or resignation can be seen as empowering.

The final sequence of the last episode in season two uses Amy’s familiar voice-over to reiterate the central themes of the series:

‘There is only one life. There is so much I don’t understand. But this I know. You can wake up to your higher self. You can be patient, and you can be kind. You can

be wise and almost whole. You can walk out of hell and into the light. You don't have to run away from life, your whole life. You can really live. And you can change. And you can be an agent of change.'

As Amy's words are spoken we see Krista with her new baby, Amy's mother reading the newspaper article and smiling at the thought of her daughter achieving something, Dougie walking out of Abaddon, Tyler opening the door to love and Amy getting a coffee. As she walks towards the exit of the café, she looks down at a stack of papers and we see the headline: 'How one woman took on a giant: amidst emerging allegations of malfeasance and bribery, Amy Jellicoe stands up against Abaddon.' Amy smiles and leaves the café. The camera follows her out as she heads down the street. She is dressed casually in khaki trousers, sandals and a worn out long-sleeved t-shirt with 'USA' and the Olympics logo on the front. Far from a corporate look but simpler and more authentic than the flowy 'hippie' look, Amy finally appears comfortable with herself and those around her. The camera slowly pans as she moves down the street which emphasises a calmer and happier Amy. Her final walking away from the camera is reminiscent, again, of *Stella Dallas* but instead of seeing her face, we watch her walk triumphantly into the crowd—a nameless, faceless person in a crowd of nameless people, like the audience.

As Williams concludes from her analysis of *Stella Dallas*: 'the maternal melodrama presents a recognizable picture of a woman's ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women's lives.'<sup>46</sup> And *Enlightened* is both a response to earlier series such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in that it articulates the ambivalent position women find themselves in negotiating the spaces of work, motherhood and female friendships; but it is also a contemporary maternal melodrama that considers the contradictions in the mothering we do of ourselves and others. Like *Stella Dallas*, Amy finds her

true self through the performance of another self. But instead of sacrificing herself for her daughter's life, she sacrifices her old self for a new sense of self-worth. In addition, she becomes the mother she has always needed which gives her space to accept and heal the relationship with her actual mother.

Excess therefore functions throughout the series as something that allows viewers a vantage point to see the both the contradictions inherent in the act of caring for the self and others, but also reflects the emotional excess that Amy is left with when children, marriage and a successful career do not work out. She has love that is literally spilling over and not able to find a container. She tries to help those around her, tries to get involved with the community, tries to join union fights, tries to heal her mother's wounds and yet ultimately finds that the best way for her to help is to become the whistleblower and expose the ethical wrongdoings of the company she has spent her life working for. Ultimately this act of bravery gives her the meaning that she is searching for but also allows the excess a focus through which she can express her ideas. It also helps to relieve her feelings of worthlessness. In this sense, the series exposes the contradiction central to neoliberal values- the demand to care and the impossibility of so doing --whilst also providing viewers with a melodramatic ending that positions Amy as the heroine of her own quest for self-fulfilment.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read, "'Having it *Ally*': Popular Television and (Post) Feminism,' *Feminist Media Studies*, vol.2, no.2 (2002), pp. 231-249; Laurie Ouelette, 'Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television and *Ally McBeal*', *The Communication Review*, vol. 5 (2002), pp. 315-337; Kristyn Gorton, '(Un)Fashionable Feminists: The Media and *Ally McBeal* in *Third Wave Feminism*:

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*A Critical Exploration*, (eds) Stacy Gillis, Rebecca Munford and Gill Howie, second edition, Palgrave (2007), pp. 212-223.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Stewart, 'Trauma Time: A Still Life,' in *Histories of the Future*, (eds) Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 338.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantazing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Williams, *On the Wire*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew S. Buckley, 'Introduction,' *Modern Drama*, Vol. 55, Number 1(2012), p. 431.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew S. Buckley, 'Introduction,' *Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Williams, *On the Wire*, *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> See Jane Feuer, 'Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today,' *Screen*, Vol. 25, Issue 1 (1984); Christine Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 1(2003); Mimi White, 'Women, Memory and Serial Melodrama,' *Screen*, Vol. 35, Issue 4 (1994); Lynne Joyrich, 'All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture,' *Camera Obscura*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1988); Charlotte Brunson, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Feuer references work by Paul Willeman, Laura Mulvey, Peter Brooks, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Charlotte Brunson and Chuck Kleinhans.

<sup>14</sup> Feuer, *Ibid.*, 8, author's italics.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Joyrich, *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> Feuer, *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Williams, 'Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the "classical,"' *Modern Drama*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2012), p. 525.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, 'Mega- Melodrama!,' *ibid.*, p. 526.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> See Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Linda Williams, *On the Wire*, *Ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Kristyn Gorton, 'Walking the line between saint and sinner: care and *Nurse Jackie*,' *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2016), pp. 151.

<sup>33</sup> Sean O'Sullivan, 'Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season,' *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, Vol. 2 (2010).

<sup>34</sup> Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': "Stella Dallas" and the Maternal Melodrama,' *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1984), p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother,'" *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Drake Stutesman, 'Costumes as Melodrama: Super Fly, Male Costume and the Larger-Than-Life,' in *Melodrama Unbound*, Ibid., (2018), p. 307.

<sup>38</sup> Drake Stutesman, Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother," Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen J. Ball and Antonio Olmedo, 'Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities,' *Critical Studies in Education*, vol. 54, no.1, 2013, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen J. Ball, 2012, cited in Ball and Olmedo, Ibid., p.88.

<sup>43</sup> Linda Williams, 'Melodrama Revised', in N. Browne (ed), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 65 cited in Michael Stewart, 'Falling, Looking, Caring: *Red Road* as Melodrama,' *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2012), p.553.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and The Mode of Excess*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>45</sup> Mike White, 'Mike White talks us through all of *Enlightened*'s second season', <http://www.avclub.com/article/mike-white-walks-us-through-all-of-enlightenedis-95414>, Todd VanDerWerff, March 26, 2013

<sup>46</sup> Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother," Ibid, p. 23.