

2017

# Goldberg Variations

Ned Schantz

*McGill University*, [ned.schantz@mcgill.ca](mailto:ned.schantz@mcgill.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

---

## Recommended Citation

Schantz, Ned (2017) "Goldberg Variations," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss4/9>

## GOLDBERG VARIATIONS Ned Schantz

---

*Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* by Jonathan Goldberg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 224. \$84.95 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

Students of melodrama have long been drilled in the term's literal meaning: music + drama. But before Jonathan Goldberg's *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility*, few have had the chance to take the music seriously. With a rare combination of musical expertise and critical acumen, Goldberg puts the pieces together in this book. Objects of musical analysis include a repetitive piano piece in a Hitchcock film, the theme of a "life in music" among Cather's musician characters, and the ceaseless invention of Beethoven's sole opera, and in every case, Goldberg challenges "the limits of an analysis of the music as simply underscoring some singular point of reference" (147, 7). "Literally elusive," music models an aesthetic of overflowing categories (97). Thus to follow the music of melodrama is to transform the drama as well. No longer a matter of the "moral occult," as in Peter Brooks's landmark study, in which the story line achieves the recognition of virtue, melodrama actually makes such categorical thinking impossible.<sup>1</sup> A problem of desire more than logic, this impossibility arises from the fiction of singular identity. We want many things because we are many things, and these desires include wanting to be alone as much as in relationships. To that end, *Melodrama* tracks the desire to be social and antisocial at the same time. Its many insights flow from that special attunement.

*Melodrama* is a book in which the artists' names alone invite you, but these names never stand alone. Sirk-Fassbinder-Haynes, Hitchcock and Highsmith, Wilde and Cather, and, most surprisingly, Beethoven-Sirk-Euripides (eyeing the impossible situation of *Alceste*) cluster in "aesthetic network[s] of authorial transport," networks in which no agony of influence can contain the ecstasy of identification (163). But identification would not be "along the lines of identity" (31). It is rather "confusion," "something impersonal, relational, nonverbal" (98, 35) that goes by many names in this book, including telepathy and coincidence, but its most prominent name is, again, music. Both literal and a metaphor for the way art exceeds us, music is melodrama's—and *Melodrama*'s—organizing principle. As such, it sticks in our heads, as do Goldberg's own stylistic refrains, pulled from his melodramas' evocative song titles such as "I'm Not There" and "The Band Played On." And the point comes no more from the lyrics than from the transfer itself: "if melodrama has a message, it is about this other life that persists as aesthetic connection," a connection at once impersonal and deeply intimate (151). Indeed, the most seductive register of *Melodrama*, and one of its favorite words, is intimation. Beneath the louder proclamations of academic argument, Goldberg whispers secrets of aesthetic life.

It is therefore all the more bracing when Goldberg boldly opens fire on academic adversaries. Less restrained in tone than his recent (and also excellent) book on Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, *Melodrama* makes short work of critics attached to rigid political and historical categories, particularly those who approach melodrama "on the lookout for didactic instruction in political desire" (40).<sup>2</sup> If we try to situate the book intellectually, a roster emerges of confederates variously at war with conventional criticism: D. A. Miller, Eve Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, and Lauren Berlant are among the most prominent in the book and in the profession. Other potential allies remain unmentioned. Film scholars, for instance, might hear an echo of Eugenie Brinkema's challenging concept of *mise-n'en-scène* in Goldberg's ideas about cinematic understatement: "Alongside what we hear or see [in films] there is something unheard and unseen. The relationship between what is there and what isn't is far from evident" (83).<sup>3</sup> Unlike Brinkema, Goldberg never comes across as obfuscating, but he does not shy away from "being difficult" in the social sense, even as he so passionately and cogently seeks to persuade. There is ultimately in this intellectual stance something more of the impossible, a wish to be antisocial and loved for it.

Goldberg's most provocative name for this wish is "getting away with murder," a trope that brings him to Tom Ripley, Patricia Highsmith's recurring (and talented) character, and to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, which he reads as an incitement to naïve credulity:

Hitchcock gets away with murder to the degree we believe there is a corpse in the chest, or that Philip's hands are responsible for it—or for the tune he murders—or to the degree we are roped into seeing the film as one long perpetual movement (93).

Let us read this sentence in reverse, for it illuminates the book's complex approach. After the second "or," the idea of getting away with murder reverts to a familiar metaphor for fooling the audience—fooling us, moreover, with familiar means, with the old film tricks of stunt doubling and continuity editing. But Goldberg himself gets away with murder if we think the second half of the sentence works the same way as the first. To be sure, in the first half of the sentence, we can say that Goldberg refers to the ultimate film trick, that of fiction itself. (Tom Cohen has taken this antimimetic reading of Hitchcock the furthest, reminding us that his "stories" are nothing but light and darkness with a soundtrack.)<sup>4</sup> And yet notice that the idea of getting

away with murder begins as a metaphor for fooling us into believing a murder has occurred. Hitchcock gets away with it by getting caught! Goldberg's paradox arises from a problem with the literal, which is its tendency to *stick*, like gum on a shoe. Before departing into metaphor, the word *murder* suffuses any sentence with the ultimate anti-social charge. The perfect crime would be to convince people that our words, like our murders, were mere metaphors. I am convinced by the book's claim that we love the likes of Hitchcock and Highsmith for the ways they get away with murder, but I question the phrasing of the call for "an understanding that takes us . . . past or more deeply into the literal," insofar as it treats the literal as optional (131). There is no getting past before going more deeply.

Indeed, this idea may already be implied in one of the book's main points: "the literal is not univocal"—such a capacious thought, it inspires me to try to sing along for a moment as I conclude this review (10). In Goldberg's virtuoso reading of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, he notes how the character of Leonore only achieves agency disguised as a man: "it is *as* Fidelio that she has been able to act" (9). I wonder if that insight might be brought to *Rope*, where Goldberg's frustration with James Stewart's character repeats a common view that I have long shared: "Rupert, the figure in the film for

the desire to know the literal truth, is an instigator unwilling to recognize his own desire in the mystery he is so intent on solving” (93). But is there a way to take Rupert’s literalism less literally? What if it is Rupert who has committed the perfect crime in the *Fidelio*-like disguise of the upright male citizen? What if he has framed the film’s killers for murder—for the murder *he* wanted—by the ingenious technique of actually getting them to do it? Such questions do not kill so much as extend the life of Goldberg’s exceptional book, which has spurred me to ask them and will spur other readers to ask many more. I do not expect the tune of *Melodrama* to leave our heads anytime soon.

*Ned Schantz is an associate professor of English at McGill University. He is the author of Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature as well as recent essays in Hitchcock Annual, Senses of Cinema, Camera Obscura, and Criticism.*

#### NOTES

1. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
2. Jonathan Goldberg, *Strangers on a Train* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2012).
3. Eugenie Brinkema coins the term *mise-n’en-scène* in *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
4. See Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock’s Cryptonymies*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).