

The Afterlife of Melodrama: Roger Michell's *Changing Lanes*



Written for the PWR course "The Rhetoric of Cultural Critique," this essay examines *Changing Lanes* to argue that Hollywood films can embody social tensions in unexpected ways. The essay situates *Lanes* in the historical tradition of the film melodrama, with an emphasis on the genre's incarnation in Douglas Sirk's popular spectacles of the 1950's. By historicizing *Lanes*' visual and narrative conventions, the author tries to read the film "against the grain" to discover how it exposes a "powerful, pervasive ambivalence in our nation" about white treatment of black culture and "ideological insecurity" about whether people's lives are really the product of their choices. The film comes close to achieving a subversive "Sirkian" undercurrent thought to be extinct in today's Hollywood entertainment, but it eventually reaches a level of ideological confusion that surpasses the ambivalence observed in Sirk's features. In its unusual political incoherence, the film ends up in a category by itself, a unique Hollywood post-melodrama that addresses complex questions about racism in a fragmented 21st-century society, an America less defined by the clear racial divisions that Sirk considered in his own time.

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In Roger Michell's frenetic road-rage melodrama *Changing Lanes* (2002), we find the hotshot Wall Street lawyer Gavin Banek (Ben Affleck) pitted against the "little guy" Doyle Gipson (Samuel L. Jackson) in all-out warfare: upper class versus working class, white versus black. After their fates suddenly collide in a highway fenderbender, ruining crucial court meetings for both of them, the two are soon vengefully sabotaging each other right and left. Each is prodded in this eye-for-an-eye rivalry by specific personal goals: Gavin needs a vital legal document he has accidentally exchanged with Doyle, and Doyle wants to somehow win back his kids and ex-wife in spite of his past behavioral and financial difficulties. Without any accepted moral standards to guide them within their corrupt, cutthroat, capitalist society, both characters find themselves pushed further and further to get what they want. Soon enough, not surprisingly, they end up teetering on the edge of utter moral dissolution.

The first time I saw the film, I was struck by this unusually bleak

and critical vision of our twenty-first century American society, what a *Cinéaste* critic referred to as an allegory of modern American race and class relations (Landau 41). But this vision only holds up compellingly until the film's last few minutes, at which point it is abruptly shattered by a disastrously incongruous denouement. Once Gavin and Doyle finally arrive at their remorseful reconciliation, the filmmakers mop up their narrative mess by having the repentant Gavin usurp his corrupt father-in-law's firm (via "justified" blackmail) and thereby restore the disadvantaged Jackson to his financial stability and his family. We can assume they all live happily ever after. The End. At the time, I strongly concurred with the general critical consensus that the film had been "marred by a too-convenient, feel-good ending that [...] make[s] moviegoers feel cheated [rather than] challenged" (Graham). The director, Roger Michell, helped confirm my opinion when he revealed in his DVD audio commentary that this tidy, optimistic epilogue was in fact not originally part of the script: "I'm still

agnostic about whether it's the right way to end the film or not" (*Changing Lanes*). So maybe the film's ending wasn't originally *intended* to be this pat and dissatisfying. "[P]robably the studio sales department sent it to a few focus groups whose members decided it was too much of a bummer" (Landau 41). What at first was essentially bothered me about this ending was simply that it felt like an artistic copout. I gave *Changing Lanes* a "thumbs-down" verdict solely because it failed to conform to my perceptions of what makes a successful film; in other words, it didn't "challenge" me. Of course, the film's failure to "challenge" me did not initially strike me as more than a disappointment for my Friday evening. But then I came across Ryan Gilbey's unique evaluation, and my eyes were opened to some significant and disconcerting social implications linked to this "merely disappointing" happy ending:

"[The film's] narrative actively upholds [the class and racial] divisions. At the end [...] power over black lives still resides in white hands [...] The film

says to its white viewers: [...] [P]lay Santa Claus to a black family in your neighbourhood today. [...] It's a choice that says more about white treatment of black culture [...] than the film-makers can possibly realize" (37).

Gilbey's assessment leads us to realize that the film's ending is not just a pat, lazy "artistic copout." In fact, the film's resolution seems to actively communicate a racist social message, encouraging white viewers to serve as condescending benefactors to powerless African Americans. Furthermore, it seems to me that this message naturally entails encouraging African Americans to contently acquiesce to this patronage, to rely on help from white people and thereby remain fixed in their repressed, powerless position within the societal status quo.

But I believe Gilbey's assessment takes our understanding of this film's ideological significance only so far. If we turn back to the rest of the film and consider *Changing Lanes* as a whole in view of the resolution's disturbing implications, we can in fact find that the story and visual design operate together with the ending to produce meanings that seem to contradict the racist message Gilbey points out.

In order to sufficiently resolve this complicated concern, I want to more deeply explore *Changing Lanes*' relationship with a genre that has always held a very dynamic and problematic relationship with societal ideologies: the melodrama. According to the conventional understanding of the word "melodrama," *Changing Lanes* would certainly fit the category, with all its overheated emotions and manipulative plot contrivances. Historically, too, the film shares many rhetorical parallels with melodramas made in the 1950's and even with some extending as far back as the Silent Era. Comparing *Changing Lanes* to these specific melodramas can help us more fully understand the film's difficult relationship with our present status quo. By examining, from a historical perspec-

tive, *Changing Lanes*' melodramatic rhetorical methods of producing meaning for an audience through its narrative, style, and resolution, I believe we can discover in the film, despite and because of its happy ending, a much more complex variety of possible meanings than Gilbey gives it credit for. The film's unusual multiplicity of social meanings may mark it as a kind of post-melodrama: its ultimate incoherence mirrors the social complexities of a 21st century America, in which the racial divisions that an artist like Sirk had to address are not nearly so concrete and distinct.

To discover these hidden levels in *Changing Lanes*, it is important to first consider melodrama's historical tradition as a characteristically *conservative* genre, a genre normally *affirmative* of the societal status quo. We must firmly recognize the film's conservative roots before we can understand the way it doesn't necessarily conform to them.

Changing Lanes can best be grasped on this most basic, conservative level as following in the footsteps of one of the silver screen's first incarnations of melodramatic form: the Silent-Era social-problem film. Although they were often produced by progressive labor unions, most of these films, even while calling attention to social problems, actually "chose narrative structures that were conservative pleas for authority or passivity" (Sloan 34). By comparing story structures between *Changing Lanes* and one of these melodramas, we can recognize more precisely how *Changing Lanes*' narrative at least *seems* to bolster a racist social message.

A particularly fitting melodrama for comparison would be the National Association of Manufacturers' picture *The Crime of Carelessness* (1912), a melodrama set in a factory being poorly maintained by its owners for fire-safety regulations. The film of course presents us with a vision of imminent disaster, but this disaster only erupts when a worker carelessly

tosses his cigarette into a pile of trash: the factory burns down because of a particular *individual's* mistake. The narrative concern then shifts from the grim reality of factory conditions to the irresponsible worker's sudden ostracism from his community; the film concentrates exclusively on this one worker eventually reconciling with his boss and helping to rebuild the factory. In this way, the original *social* conflict plays out on a uniquely *personal* level. This focus on the individual helps make "inequality or labor exploitation appear to be a universal product of the human condition, an eternal dilemma of life, rather than a problem artificially made by the specific economic or social conditions of industrial capitalism and the Progressive Era" (Sloan 36). Moreover, the film assures viewers that this "eternal dilemma" can in fact be resolved on a personal scale without altering the social system that technically produced the dilemma in the first place. Hence, by "ironically tapping the [audience's] desire for change," *The Crime of Carelessness* diffuses the need for social reform onto appeals for individual responsibility within an "open" society, in which tensions and conflicts can supposedly be resolved through people's noble devotion to moral principles (Sloan 34).

It is certainly reasonable to assume that this trend has survived within the genre up to the present day, and *Changing Lanes* seems to adhere to it, especially in the way it presents Doyle's suffering within the fast-paced, dehumanizing nature of his society. Doyle, too, enacts his own form of revolt, not just against Gavin, but also against the social system that seems to be walling him in. One high point of his revolt is vividly symbolized by his violent desecration of one of the bank's computer monitors: he destroys a metonymic representation of the control his technology-driven society seems to have over his life. Significantly, the motivation for this rejection seems to be deeply rooted in a sense of racial oppression,

as is indicated in a bar scene where Doyle fiercely insults two racist white men. However, *Doyle* is the one, rather than the seemingly racist outside world, who ultimately shoulders the blame for his problems when he's scornfully diagnosed as being "addicted to chaos." The film reminds us, as co-writer Michael Tolkin explains in his DVD interview, that *he* is the one with the alcohol addiction and the volatile temper (*Changing Lanes*). The film holds *him* responsible for maintaining his own dignity and composure, regardless of whatever nerve-wracking (and perhaps racially discriminatory) social circumstances he's up against. Rex Reed highlights this dimension when he asserts, "*Changing Lanes* opens your eyes both to the terrible things ordinary people can do to each other [...] and the ethics with which men reduced to monsters can still find redemption" (par. 4). Indeed, as its Christian imagery emphasizes, the film does seem to position its conflict on a plane of universal human morality. In doing so, it draws attention *away* from how much the social system itself may have contributed to Doyle's predicament. Finally, the film employs what could be aptly labeled a *deus ex machina*, or "narrative rupture" (Heung 319), when it *magically* resolves Doyle's problems through the work of "higher forces" Doyle is never made aware of in the story. In the end, although Doyle remains in his *passive* position within a fundamentally unchanged society, he finally does attain his redemption and contentment even within the confines of his "rightful (race- and class-defined) place in the world." So *Changing Lanes*, like any old-fashioned, affirmative melodrama, "reconcil[e]s the suffering individual to his or her social position by affirming an 'open' society where everything [is] possible" (Elsaesser 515). Such a reading supports Gilbey's claim that the film prejudicially upholds the social divisions it depicts: the resolution encourages the individual to passively *endure* the present social reality, as

Doyle eventually does, rather than actively *challenge* it.

This reading grows more complicated, however, when we consider *Changing Lanes* next to what Thomas Elsaesser has dubbed the "sophisticated family melodramas" of the 1950's (qtd. in Klinger 15). These films, best exemplified by those of melodrama maestro Douglas Sirk, have been classified by Paul Willeman in a unique category originally defined by J. L. Comolli and J. Narboni: "films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within an ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so in an ambiguous manner" (qtd. in Willeman, "Distanciation" 272). Although often limited by the "narrative rupture" of a happy ending these films employed various methods of narrative and stylistic irony in order to subtly "work against" their superficial conservative messages. One could in fact discover scathing cultural criticisms buried beneath the surface simply by interpreting the films' storytelling techniques "against the grain." By examining *Changing Lanes* in conjunction with these specific melodramas, we can discover how the film does indeed operate subversively in spite of its affirmative surface meanings.

Sirk's last film, *Imitation of Life* (1959), would be the most appropriate to compare with *Changing Lanes* for this purpose, as much of its story focuses on an African-American girl named Sarah Jane trying to break out of her disadvantaged social position. In trying to "pass" for white and escape her racial roots, Sarah Jane conducts her own revolt against her conservative mother Annie, who consistently confines Sarah Jane to her racial identity by publicly acknowledging the light-skinned girl as her daughter. Wherever Sarah Jane flees in order to assimilate herself in white society, Annie protectively pursues her there, pleads for her to "come home," and un masks her true self before the world. Consequently, Sarah Jane is continuously rejected and

repressed by the white culture she so desperately wants to fit into.

Imitation of Life represents a bold departure for Sirk because it addresses more explicitly than his other works the horrific reality of social prejudice in 1950's America. In its "remarkable candor about [...] racial double-standards" (McKegney 72), the film's "representation of social contradictions [...] leads [it] far beyond the individual focus of the melodramatic mode" (Flitterman-Lewis 328). However, the picture was not considered subversive upon its initial release: the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, for example, panned the film with the claim that "its attitude toward its racial problem [was] debased and compromised" (qtd. in Klinger 78). The conservative implications of its final scene would certainly account for this reception: as in Doyle's case, Sarah Jane's rebellion is at last *contained* when, at Annie's funeral, she penitently confesses her rejection of her mother, accepts her racial identity, and implicitly resumes her servant position in the white family unit that had employed her mother. "[T]he last shots of the film [...] reinforce [Sarah Jane's] acceptance of the symbolic position of the black woman" (Flitterman-Lewis 329). The film resolves Sarah Jane's racial identity conflict through personal moral repentance, and it implies that her situation will somehow be alleviated when she enduringly resigns to her ascribed servant status. At first sight, then, *Imitation of Life* seems to fail as a forthright indictment of a prejudicial society.

But in spite of its affirmative resolution, the essential whole of the film still operates as an effective cultural critique, primarily because its *form* calls sharp attention to a social reality that's strongly influencing this intense "personal" drama. Through several narrative and visual details, *Imitation of Life* actively works against its conservative surface message to highlight racist social conditions and to lead the viewer to consciously perceive and

question those conditions, regardless of how the plot resolutions may superficially oversimplify them.

The most immediately obvious elements of this progressive dimension involve the film's narrative. Although the film seems to morally blame Sarah Jane for coldheartedly rejecting her mother (and the conservative values her mother represents), certain features of the story clearly present the social forces that push her to that rejection: "The fact remains that Sarah Jane [...] is beaten up by her boyfriend and fired from at least one job simply because of her race, and America is shown to make room for her black citizens most readily in kitchens and dressing rooms, her high life only glimpsed from back doors and back alleys" (McKegney 72).

The evidence of Sarah Jane's social confinement speaks quite powerfully for itself. Clearly, the racist structure of her community has irrevocably limited her options and made it essentially impossible for her to actualize herself in any meaningful way. When Sarah Jane's personal "liberation" only leads her to prostitute her image as a dancer in a white nightclub, the film itself does not really blame her for this "ignoble," "irresponsible" outcome of her revolt. In illustrating how she merely debases herself in her rebellion, the film is not necessarily repudiating her revolt as a moral error, but is instead revealing that Sarah Jane truly has "no exit," as Sirk puts it, from this cycle of social oppression no matter what she does (Sirk 119). Because "[t]he social pressures are such [...] that the range of 'strong' actions is limited," Sarah Jane is unable "to act in a way that could shape the events [of her scenario], let alone change [her] stifling social milieu" (Elsaesser 524). Consequently, this narrative indication of her impotence subtly "reproduc[es] the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in [American] society, [...] emphasizing [...] an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of

external forces directed oppressingly inward" (Elsaesser 532).

In *Changing Lanes*, Doyle seems to be in a very similar position. For one matter, the demanding, fast-paced dynamics of his urban community seem to relentlessly push him into a corner: frenzied traffic and strict, institutionally imposed time constraints are technically what deprive Jackson of the chance to win visitation rights over his kids. More important, however, is the film's potent suggestion that Doyle, like Sarah Jane, is individually at a unique social disadvantage because of his *race*. This implication arrives most forcefully in the aforementioned bar scene, in which Doyle's prolific and heated insult toward the two men ends up igniting a brief violent conflict. Although Doyle can be held responsible for initiating this conflict, the riled men are the ones who first approach Doyle and threaten him. Tolkin may describe this scene simply as another illustration of Doyle's explosive personality (*Changing Lanes*), but the fact remains that Doyle is unwillingly *placed* by these men in an antagonized position, giving him little choice but to react. The scene doesn't call attention to Doyle's unstable temper as much as it reveals Doyle's subjection to an outside racist threat. Moreover, the harsh, calculated intensity with which Doyle delivers his insult in the first place indicates that he must have very deep-seated frustrations over racial prejudice on a much broader level. It is reasonable to infer from the emphasis placed on this scene that this is far from his first encounter with racism in his social milieu.

Indeed, this scene is *dwelt* on so deliberately that it leads us to seriously consider how large a role race actually plays in Doyle's predicaments and other social interactions within the story. One of the first and most obvious examples of this racist undercurrent can be detected in the scene with the white divorce-court judge, who's blatantly unsympathetic to Doyle's pleas and explanations for his delay. After Doyle

and his family leave the courtroom at the end of the scene, the camera tellingly lingers over a final shot as the next client, an elderly white woman, is politely welcomed by the same judge. Doyle might possibly be receiving a much lower order of treatment from his society simply because of his race. This possibility is corroborated by a significant pattern sustained throughout the story: the oppressive figures in power over Doyle are always white. Gavin, the hacker, the bank clerk, the elementary-school guards, and even Doyle's rather preachy, denunciatory Alcoholics-Anonymous counselor—all are white. As much as the narrative explicitly blames Doyle for his volatile personality, all these hints of racism indicate that the film is also implicitly justifying his revolt, revealing that there are indeed harsh and constricting social injustices he has to contend with. Like *Imitation of Life*, *Changing Lanes*' narrative reveals through the *failure* of the protagonist's revolt the limitations his society imposes on his ability to take "strong action," to confidently take control over his life.

But how can we be further convinced that the film is actively encouraging this progressive reading? To more solidly confirm the progressive dimension as a strong element in the text, it is useful also to examine how the film's melodramatic visual design emphasizes these subversive narrative implications.

A consideration of *Imitation of Life*'s style can lead us to recognize this progressive aspect of *Changing Lanes*' style, as *Changing Lanes* can be interpreted to draw at least indirectly from Sirk's uniquely expressive use of cinematography and melodramatic *mise-en-scène*. Because Sirk's protagonists often cannot vent their pent up emotions through "strong action," his melodramas employ "a sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, color, gesture, and composition of frame, thematized in terms of the characters' emotional and psychological predica-

ments” (Elsaesser 521). By dramatizing the characters’ repressed subjectivities this way, Sirk’s films vividly articulate how cultural pressures and expectations take a profound toll on the individual psyche. *Imitation of Life* exemplifies this technique perfectly, as it uses “off-kilter angles, unnaturalistic lighting, character (and camera) movement and dynamic set design [as] visual equivalents of the repressed cultural tensions of the 1950’s” (Butler 299). For its specific focus on the race issue, the film also uses style to illustrate the firm social divisions contributing to Sarah Jane’s predicament:

“Sirk designs a color system in the film which articulates [the] social [reality] in a subtle yet pervasive way. For, while the film enjoys a wide and vibrant spectrum throughout [...] this is all utterly reduced by the [...] end to the irreconcilable blacks and whites of Annie’s funeral, spectacular in their silent testimony to the real tragedy of Annie” (Flitterman-Lewis 329).

As is the case with many of Sirk’s other films, the spectator can consciously *read* the social statement contained within the film’s visual construction. *Changing Lanes* employs a different, but certainly comparable form of subjective stylistic expression in which viewers can detect a very similar implicit social indictment. Most obviously, the cinematography reveals the emotional pressures being imposed on Doyle by mimicking his subjectivity in the jittery handheld camerawork, often intensified by swing pans and fast, jarring cuts. Also, the constant facial close-ups constrict Doyle in the frame to suggest the psychological constriction he’s often struggling with, and this sense of claustrophobia is further heightened by the deliberately crowded mise-en-scène in settings like the courtroom lobby. Within this cramped, claustrophobic environment, however, there still remain many physical *divisions* between people, as is seen in the freeway scenes, where people are isolated in their own separate “pris-

ons,” their cars, absorbed in their own thoughts and activities. As a whole, the film’s mise-en-scène limits human contact even while it often presses people so close together. The modern world Doyle’s experiences is depicted as an ant farm drained of human intimacy, an emotional wasteland somberly characterized by the film’s generally cold, metallic color palette of washed-out blues and grays.

All these techniques demonstrate that the filmmakers clearly want to position the spectators in Doyle’s confined and alienated frame of mind within his social surroundings. In other words, the film persuades us to *visually identify* with Doyle, as is signified even more clearly when we receive a literal point-of-view shot from Doyle’s visual field while he’s being arrested. Michell himself remarks in his commentary at this point, “Imagine what it would be like if it happened to you” (*Changing Lanes*). The film encourages viewers to intensely *feel* Doyle’s sense of social imprisonment. His confinement is even more overtly symbolized when he’s framed in two successive shots behind rail posts metaphorically resembling prison bars just as he’s dashing into his sons’ school and headlong into *literal* imprisonment. The shots are reminiscent of a poignant image in *Imitation of Life*, in which Annie collapses weeping and helpless behind an oppressive iron railing.

Indeed, both *Changing Lanes*’ and *Imitation of Life*’s myriad visual techniques, especially when examined together like this, help secure the subversive implications of the narrative, providing a remarkably strong case *against* both films’ facile endings and final conservative appeals for “endurance” and “individual responsibility.” And now that we can sharply perceive these films’ subversive undercurrents in their style and narrative, we can also recognize how even the happy ending in each film’s case can contribute to this subversion and “take on a socially critical edge” in and of itself (Bordwell

7).

According to the predominant academic reading, most of Sirk’s films’ happy endings employ a form of Euripidean irony, as Sirk himself termed it in an interview (Sirk 132). The narrative rupture of the happy ending can be seen as a conscious, “creative use of discontinuity” meant to dissatisfy the viewers enough to make them question the condescending simplicity of the film’s proposed solution (“Sirkian System” 131). As Laura Mulvey writes, “the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes” (qtd. in Heung 319). Hence, the fake resolution can be *meaningfully* insufficient. Elsaesser notes that the *deus ex machina* creates a “conflict between the intense inscription of neuroses at the stylistic level and any ending which would facilely suggest that the problems of the film had been resolved” (paraphrased in Klinger 17). *Imitation of Life*’s conclusion follows this trend, using Sarah Jane’s return to her accepted position not to affirmatively support her social imprisonment, but rather to *underscore* the irrevocability and “unavoidability of racial difference” in American society (Flitterman-Lewis 329). Sirk explains in reference to this film, “[Y]ou’re not really supposed to [believe the happy end] [...]. You sense it’s hopeless, even though in a very bare and brief little scene afterwards the happy turn is being indicated. Everything seems to be OK, but you well know it isn’t” (Sirk 132).

Changing Lanes, too, can be seen to “flaunt” the disparity between what we ask of art and what we know of social life (Bordwell 7). As brief, sudden, and perfunctory as it seems, the film’s happy ending, whether intentional or not, remains so plainly, frustratingly inharmonious that it prompts astute viewers (like Gilbey) to see beyond the optimistic message, to see that, despite

what the ending overtly communicates, Doyle truly has “no exit” from passivity and powerlessness within his racist social structure. He has no choice but to remain “acquiescent to the ways of world” (Elsaesser 524).

In light of what this ending can suggest, Gipson’s *Alcoholics Anonymous* slogan takes on a subversive new resonance: “God, grant me the strength to accept what I cannot change!” His words vividly recall Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s reaction to *Imitation of Life*: “[N]o one will be able to help [Sarah Jane] [u]nless we change the world [...]. [A]ll of us in the cinema wept because changing the world is so difficult” (qtd. in Taubin 26).

But if the world is indeed so difficult to change, should we still regard *Changing Lanes* strictly as an adamant (and therefore blatantly unrealistic) appeal for social transformation and purification? Now that the film’s subversive dimension has been firmly established, perhaps it would be wise to ask if this subversive dimension should remain the “best” or “most legitimate” side of the text, the dimension we should regard exclusively as the text’s final “true meaning.” Simply put, should the progressive reading remain the last word on the issue?

To answer this question for *Changing Lanes*, we must first take into account why the progressive reading didn’t turn out historically to be the last word for Sirk. Of course, Marxist and other academic critics have been imposing these “against-the-grain” readings on Sirk’s films for decades, but these attempts to establish his films as “unassailably progressive” have only “remove[d] [them] from the variations in meaning [they were] subject to throughout [their] history” (Klinger 33-34). For example, before Sirk was finally taken seriously as an *auteur*, mass audiences and critics alike actually regarded his films as culturally affirmative pop trash, as the films were often marketed and received as sensationalistic debauches

centered around the sexual objectification of their female stars (Klinger 3). After critics in the ‘60’s rehabilitated Sirk’s reputation by hailing him as a progressive social critic (based on the narrative and stylistic elements I’ve described), they soon began to dismiss any conservative or even non-political readings of his films as naïve (Klinger 3). Today, however, academic criticism more often acknowledges the *equal* validity of these texts’ original conservative dimensions (Bukatman). A Sirk melodrama is no longer considered to contain one fixed meaning determined by a single (perhaps subversive) individual, but instead is seen to operate to a large degree as a “cultural collaboration,” in which meaning is produced by *multiple* artists as well as by the audiences who interpret the texts with certain ingrained, contextually determined cultural assumptions (Saxton 20). The fact remains that “the end product [has] absorbed as many interpretations as there [were] contributors, and the production [has been] fashioned with audience comprehension and taste in mind” (Saxton 22). So a progressive reading of these films should not be considered absolute; conservative readings can often bear an equal credibility in the critical understanding of a given melodrama.

For example, regardless of “whatever ironic subtext Sirk might have intended” with *Imitation of Life*, Marina Heung, a critic who certainly isn’t oblivious to Sirk’s subversive reputation, counterargues in one article that “the sheer emotional power of its final scene [...] finally operates to lay to rest the subversive energy of Sarah Jane and to reinstate Annie, in her death, as the emotional and ideological center of the film” (319-320). Indeed, with *any* film like this, as prominent as the director’s possible subversive intentions may be, these intentions often cannot simply *negate* the conservative meanings built into the production, even though the progressive dimensions are not necessarily overshadowed by the

conservative messages, either. Because the films often are not dominated by one or the other ideological extreme, these melodramatic texts can’t be considered either “fully affirmative or fully subversive” (Rodowick 246).

Considering *Changing Lanes*, too, we cannot deny that “contradictions arise in all texts, including ‘radical’ ones, [and] that all texts are limited by ideological [...] constraints” (Selig 14). We cannot make the mistake many critics did with Sirk by considering *Changing Lanes* as ultimately “transcending” its conservative dimensions. To an extent, the film *still* operates somewhat like those affirmative social-problem melodramas from the Silent Era. One could even employ Heung’s argument on *Imitation of Life* for our examination of *Changing Lanes*: even considering *Changing Lanes*’ subversive qualities, the scene in which Gavin blackmails and humiliates his boss is presented with so much crowd-pleasing vigor that it lends significant weight to the genuineness of the happy ending. As oversimplified and false as this last-second resolution may appear to *us*, the filmmakers do not present it completely perfunctorily; the film even actively encourages us to cheer for Gavin, although he is acting as the purveyor of Doyle’s affirmative *deus ex machina*. As with *Imitation of Life*, we can detect enough emotional sincerity in *Changing Lanes*’ conservative resolution to treat it as a legitimate, meaningful portion of the picture.

So no matter how much we try to emphasize *Changing Lanes*’ subversive dimensions, we can still read the film just as validly as a conservative, moralistic criticism of Doyle as we can a progressive criticism of Doyle’s society. The question of where the film is ultimately leading us to place the blame for Doyle’s problems—on the individual or the culture—remains unresolved either way we read it. We must simply conclude that the film’s two ideological currents coexist in a state of inextricable opposition.

In its final illegibility, *Changing Lanes* may remain a something of a disappointment as a film, but that does not mean we cannot learn from observing its confusion. In fact, the true “importance of [this kind of] melodrama lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems [...] but lays them open in their shameless contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off” (Nowell-Smith 273). Though we can easily dismiss the film as an unresolved mess, we can still find it interesting for the richness of its contradictions and for what these contradictions can reveal about ourselves and our society. In much the way *Imitation of Life*’s political ambiguousness can certainly reflect the climate of ideological ambivalence regarding race relations in the late

1950’s (Bukatman), *Changing Lanes*’ representational contradictions can illuminate our own contradictory perceptions of our present-day American society. We might even say that *Lanes* reaches a level of political uncertainty so far beyond that of *Imitation of Life* that it verges into a new category of melodrama. It is in fact more of a post-melodrama: its extreme illegibility reflects the state of a society in which racism and racially defined social hierarchies remain present but become more difficult to identify concretely. The film operates in an environment that has progressed beyond the clearly prejudicial structures of ’50s America but has not left its problems behind. The same social problems exist but in less obvious forms. The specter of prejudice lingers, but seems to emanate from everywhere and no where

at once.

Returning to Gilbey’s point now, we can still consider his observation valid, yet his insight has led us to discover not so much about “white treatment of black culture,” but rather more about this powerful, pervasive ambivalence in our nation, ambivalence perhaps concerning, among many other things, what white treatment of black culture, even in a context far beyond the 1950’s, can imply about the nature and structure of our society as a whole. Because of the ambiguity regarding what the film ultimately communicates to its audience, *Changing Lanes* successfully taps into our contemporary collective psychology, and it thereby manages to say more about the ideological perspective of our own culture than the filmmakers (and Gilbey) might necessarily realize.

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