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The Colleen Bawn in Her Element: Sensation, Spectatorship, Meaning

Abstract:

This article considers the appeal of the water cave scene in Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* to nineteenth-century spectators by focusing on its iconography and visual address. The written archive is of limited value on this question since contemporary commentators struggled to account for its popularity. Recent scholarly accounts have approached this and other sensation scenes as vehicles for eliciting spectator 'affect', meaning involuntary somatic responses, prompted in this case by the spectacle of physical danger. While this approach has been useful in seeking readings beyond those embedded in language and text, it has tended to confine the discussion to a narrow range of extreme affective states associated with anxiety and terror. This article considers interpretations arising out of the 'affective turn' before proposing a new direction. Working across a range of images, I address the specifically visual nature of the water cave scene, drawing out a more subtle and multi-faceted set of ideas than those with which sensation drama is generally associated, and proposing an alternative reading to do with feminine power and transfiguration.

Keywords: Boucicault; sensation; spectacle; realization

The famous scene from Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* in which the heroine is almost drowned before being rescued by the hero is sometimes credited with having been the first ever 'sensation scene'. Adapted from Gerald Griffin's novel *The Collegians*, Boucicault's play was first performed at Laura Keane's theatre in New York in 1860, before an unprecedented run of 230 performances at the Adelphi

in London and a successful production at the Theatre Royal, Dublin.¹ It was perceived to owe its popularity largely to this particular scene, which was frequently represented on publicity and in merchandising, from sheet music covers to stereoscopic photographs and Staffordshire figurines (figures 1, 2). At this point in the play, Act 2, scene 5, Boucicault's heroine, Eily O'Connor, a Catholic peasant, has become an inconvenience to the Protestant husband to whom she is secretly married. His servant, Danny Mann, lures her on a false pretext to a deserted water cave where he pushes her into the water in an attempt to drown her. The stage design famously used layers of gauze to create the effect of a deep pool within a shadowy grotto, the whole scene lit by a full moon that appears through the rocky entrance to the cave. Eily sinks down through the gauze 'water' and rises to the surface three times before being saved by the hero, Myles-na-Coppaleen, played by Boucicault in the original production, who dives into the pool to save her. A series of watercolours by Egron Lundgren commissioned by Queen Victoria give a sense of how the action may have appeared on stage (figures 3, 4 and 5).² The scene prompted several imitations and satirical treatments. As Nicholas Daly relates, H. J. Byron's *Miss Eily O'Connor* (Drury Lane, 1861) burlesqued the rising and sinking motif in a sequence in which, as the stage directions indicate, an irrepressible Eily is seen 'rising – provokingly, in the manner of a clown' and shouting 'Here we are again!'³

This article considers the appeal of the water cave scene to nineteenth-century spectators by focusing on its iconography and visual address. The written archive is of limited value on this question since contemporary commentators struggled to account for its popularity. As Joanna Hofer-Robinson and Beth Palmer have noted, nineteenth-century critiques tended towards the view that sensation appealed to a 'lowest common denominator' of spectator, through suspenseful scenes that addressed

the ‘audiences’ instincts rather than their intellect’.⁴ Recent scholarly accounts have compounded the view of sensation as a vehicle for spectator ‘affect’, meaning involuntary somatic responses, prompted in this case by the spectacle of physical danger. While this approach has been useful in seeking readings beyond those embedded in language and text, it has tended to confine the discussion to a narrow range of extreme affective states associated with anxiety and terror. This article considers interpretations arising out of the ‘affective turn’ before proposing a new direction. Working across a range of images, I address the specifically visual nature of the water cave scene, drawing out a more subtle and multi-faceted set of ideas than those with which sensation drama is generally associated, and proposing an alternative reading to do with feminine power and transfiguration. In so doing, I also interrogate a still pervasive view of spectacle as inherently domineering and hegemonic, arguing instead for the visual as a vehicle for the exploration of unconscious feelings and counter narratives.

The identification of Boucicault’s ‘water cave’ scene as the first ‘sensation scene’ dates from its initial productions in New York, London and Dublin in 1860–1.⁵ The stage set consisted of a series of cut out pieces arranged to create the cave, with a rotating sea cloth in the forestage and another cut-out to represent the central rock. The boat was worked from a trap behind the sea cloth so that it appeared to be rowed through the water to the rock. The prompt copy held in the Harvard Theatre collection describes the rest of the scene as follows (note the reference to actor doubles to facilitate the near drowning and rescue):

Music, Boat floats on R. H. with Eily and Danny. Eily steps onto Rock C.

[Danny] stepping onto the Rock the Boat floats away unseen ... Music. Throws

her into the water L.C. She disappears for an instant then reappears clinging to the Rock C. .. Thrusts her down. She disappears. .. Myles sings without... Swings across by Rope to R.H., fastens it up, then fishes up Double of Eily— lets her fall. Strips, then dives after her. Eily appears for an instant in front. Then double for Myles appears at back and Dives over Drum. Myles and Eily then appear in front of Center Rock. Tableau. Curtain.⁶

John McCormick cites the prompt copy of the 1874 revival at Booth's theatre, New York, which reveals that the staging consisted of eight rows of gauze to create the effect of transparent water:

In front of C . Trap 3rd E. First water
12 inches high and three inches higher
each row as you go back stage –
waters set 12 inches apart – and hung
on battens to raise and lower from loft—
trap R.H. 4th E. – used – Trap C 3rd E. – used.
rope hanging from Loft to C of stage
4th E
(Cave borders to 4. Arch Sky in 5 --)⁷

The scene was considered most novel. H. Barton Baker compared it to Clarkson Stanfield's 'famous rolling wave' in the production of *Acis and Galatea* at the Princess's Theatre in 1842, but nevertheless admitted that 'transparent stage water had never before been seen, and a few yards of blue gauze did more than all the finest

acting in the world could accomplish'.⁸ Many accounts focus on Boucicault's thrilling 'header' into the water as the main feature of the scene, but I want to shift attention to the spectacle of Eily's submerged form.⁹ While we might imagine an attempted drowning as violent and brutal, the use of actor doubles enabled her body to be seen to turn upon itself gracefully within its gauzy element as she sank and then rose three times before being saved. According to the promptbook of the New York stage manager, John Moore, a calcium light was used to shine on Myles and Eily as they rose for the last time. This, one imagines, would have made visible their bodies through the gauze water, which would have appeared as if struck by a ray of moonlight.¹⁰ Interestingly, Barton Baker states that Boucicault was not, in fact, 'the inventor of the wonderful thing', but that it was, rather, the work of an 'old stage carpenter' at Keene's theatre.¹¹

Despite the unprecedented appeal of the scene, as Daly notes, the efforts of contemporary commentators to explain its popularity were oddly inarticulate. Their 'responses indicate a degree of puzzlement at the play's power', writes Daly, citing the following review in *Punch*:

the business of the cave scene is so cleverly contrived that I am not disposed to wonder at the plaudits it calls forth. Still I can't believe that the Strand would have ever been blocked up with Colleen cabs as it has been, or that by wish of the police the doors need have been opened sooner than their wont, merely on account of this one aquatic feat.¹²

'It is clear', continues Daly, that the reviewer is 'at a loss to explain the play's theatrical force. He is unwilling to see the special effects of the water cave spectacle

as the source of its peculiar magic, but his own explanation – that the audience was drawn by the degree of care with the details – scarcely convinces'.¹³ Nineteenth-century commentators often explained the sensation scene as a mere gimmick designed to attract attention that, while incorporating innovative stage technology, lacked any narrative or symbolic significance. As Daly remarks, 'it began to seem to some playgoers that the spectacle was the play. As in present-day action films, the storyline sometimes appeared to exist only to showcase the special effects'.¹⁴ Indeed, towards the end of the century, Barton Baker's history of *The London Stage* referred to the play as 'the first serious drama in which a mechanical effect was the principal attraction, and the first serious drama in which the actor became of secondary importance to the machinist and scene-painter'.¹⁵ Boucicault himself objected to the designation of *The Colleen Bawn* as a 'sensation drama' since it suggested that the success of the piece depended on the novelty of a single astonishing feat of technology. In a letter to the *Times*, he asserted that the water cave had in fact been an afterthought added to an already successful play (the newspaper reasonably countered that 'the image that presented itself to the public mind when the Colleen Bawn was mentioned—the *symbol* of the piece ... was the deliverance of Eily, with its scenic appurtenances').¹⁶ The idea that the appeal of the sensation scene lies mainly in its technical contrivance continues in modern scholarship. For instance, the historian of film Kevin Rockett comments that such plays anticipated the experience of early cinema in which the 'apparatus was of as much interest to the audience as the content of the motion pictures on screen'.¹⁷ In this sense, Rockett appears to be making an argument for the sensation scene as a theatrical antecedent to what Tom Gunning has designated the 'cinema of attractions'.¹⁸ I want to argue for a deeper significance of the water cave episode than is allowed by such accounts. The fact that several

imitations of Boucicault's play, though they played fast and loose with his script, nevertheless faithfully reproduced this scene, would suggest that it does somehow stand apart from the narrative thrust of the piece as a whole.¹⁹ However, this only serves to support my claim that the meanings embedded in the visual aspect of the scene operated independently of, or even against, those contained in the text.

My argument concerns the specific nature of the beholder's response to images as opposed to text, in particular, the way in which viewers engage with representations perceived to be accurate. As the art historian David Freedberg has observed, unlike written descriptions, such images have the capacity to incite emotions akin to those one would experience if confronted with the absent thing itself.²⁰ However, before analysing the affective content of the water cave scene from a visual point of view, I want first to summarise the way in which the current discussion of sensation drama characterises the spectator's emotional response. In his book, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*, Ben Singer argues that sensation scenes responded to psychological and physiological alterations resulting from the experience of industrial modernity.²¹ According to the 'modernity thesis', as it is known, spectators were primed by the 'nervous stimulation, stress, and bodily peril' of the urban environment to crave entertainments that aroused feelings of thrill or anxiety. In these discussions, 'affect' is distinguished from the category of 'emotion', which denotes feelings once they have been looped through language and discourse.²² As E. Deirdre Pribram writes, citing Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, the affective turn

has moved beyond a previous focus on text and language and toward a 'vital re-centering of the body' that 'cannot be reduced to either 'discourse' or

‘emotion’, but exceeds these categories in favor of the ‘material intensity’ of ‘embodied encounters’.²³

Implicit in these discussions is a conception of affect as potentially liberating, a realm of experience as yet unsubordinated to ideology. This view is somewhat supported by contemporary accounts, for, as Hofer-Robinson and Palmer relate, sensation drama was often criticised for the potentially levelling effect of the audiences’ somatic response, which ‘cut across boundaries of class and education’.²⁴

Lynn Voskuil adds a twist to this line of inquiry, arguing for the ‘doubleness’ of spectator response to sensation. In her view, the individualised, involuntary somatic responses of audience members to thrilling situations paradoxically produced a community of feeling that stemmed from knowledge that one’s neighbours in the auditorium were also involved in the same experience.²⁵ Bodily sensations were thus experienced in tandem with the ‘shared expression of a commonly felt sentiment’; in other words, sensation produced both affect and emotion. As I discuss below, Voskuil’s conception of the spectators’ ‘doubleness’ seems intended to counter the association of nineteenth-century spectacle with audience passivity, but for now it is enough to state that the discussion defines two types of response, an individualised, involuntary somatic experience (affect) and communally experienced sentiments of a conventional, culturally constructed nature (emotions). Here I want to propose a third type of approach that takes into account the specifically visual nature of the sensation scene and the capacity of images to invite imaginative contemplation on the part of spectators.

Contemporaries certainly noted the appeal to the eye of the water cave scene. As Louis Blanc wrote in 1863, ‘[t]he British public is not exacting, and emotions

conveyed to it through the eyes send it into ecstasies'.²⁶ While Blanc is here keen to equate the play's visual address with the tastes of a supposedly indiscriminating audience, there is something in his allusion to the relationship between seeing and feeling that may repay further consideration. While difficult to articulate in words, the thoughts and feelings prompted by certain images can nevertheless be argued to exceed both the categories of 'affect' and 'emotion' as they are currently defined. As Pribram has recently argued,

Although affect theory has sidelined the study of emotions to limiting them to conscious, cognitive, articulated phenomena, emotions do not necessarily involve either conscious awareness or articulation [...] nonlinguistic systems of communication are meaningful in that they produce associations, representations, and narratives, even when they remain inarticulable.²⁷

Pribram posits a level of meaning that, while culturally constructed, operates below the level of language. Perhaps, then, the explanation for the strange power of the water cave scene does not lie in the written archive at all. In what follows, I argue for a set of meanings embedded in it, not by calling upon the written testimony of contemporary witnesses, but rather by tracing the circulation of its essential elements through a sequence of diverse images in different media. The recurrence of the motif of the submerged woman in different contexts reveals the degree to which it transcended the ostensible narrative of a given work.

My argument turns on the capacity of images to incite emotional response, but also on their openness to interpretation, a form of creative engagement that emerges through individual contemplation on the part of the fascinated spectator. This goes

against a school of thought that associates a hegemonic modern visuality with the idea of passive spectatorship and coercive control. While the ‘affective turn’, discussed above, has tended to privilege individually experienced bodily sensation as the authentic, irreducible counterpoint to discourse, the perceived problem with spectacle has been its very tendency to isolate the spectator.²⁸ This is the view taken by Maurice Samuels in his book *The Spectacular Past*, in which he argues that nineteenth-century spectacle robbed the viewer of agency, creating in them a state of ‘paralysing passivity’.²⁹ Brian Hand explicitly associates the ‘increasingly fantastic stagecraft and illusionistic theatrical design’ of Boucicault’s sensation drama to Marx’s conception of the “phantasmagoric” character of emerging commodity culture, where the phantasmagoric is less about the supernatural than the mysterious concealment of the means of production’.³⁰

In her account of sensation drama, Voskuil takes an interesting approach to the problem, arguing that while ‘spectators experienced the hair-raising thrills as spontaneous somatic events, they courted such thrills knowingly’.³¹ Through her notion of the spectator’s ‘doubleness’, she makes a case for a type of theatre routinely associated with a trance-like passivity as a facet of the public sphere. As she writes:

In their shared somatic responses to sensation plays, Victorians envisaged a kind of affective adhesive that massed them to each other in an inchoate but tenacious nineteenth-century incarnation of the English public sphere.³²

However, despite this, Voskuil, like Samuels, tacitly accepts the premise that the emotionally engaged viewer is rendered passive. In her view, it is only during those moments when the spell of the stage illusion is broken that the individual may be

cognisant of their place in a community of spectatorship, a state of awareness which Voskuil regards as the prerequisite for active participation.

I want to explore an alternative strand of thought that addresses the open-ended nature of images and the potential of immersive spectacles to invite an individual and personal, but also active and creative, form of engagement. In his famous essay *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argues that the fascination of photography stems from the sense in which it presents the ‘absolute Particular’, the unique occasion, in other words, that which is ‘outside of meaning’, as opposed to the general, the type, or the symbol.³³ In his account, the *studium* represents the part of any photograph in which we may detect the photographer’s intentions, be they ‘to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire’.³⁴ The *punctum* on the other hand is Barthes’ term for the striking detail that punctures the *studium*, which appears incidental and unintentional, but which triggers associations on the part of the spectator. In Barthes’ analysis the *studium* is the realm of *idées reçues*, while the *punctum* refers to that detail or quality of an image that opens the way for a more ‘authentic’, because more free and individual, type of engagement.

Barthes defines the *punctum* as that aspect of a given image which is without a code and which we find it difficult to name.³⁵ In his account, this quality is attributable to photography alone; however, his discussion calls to mind a more general nineteenth-century interest in visual immediacy evidenced in new technologies such as the Panorama and Diorama, as well as in traditional easel painting. Indeed, Freedberg argues that Barthes’ statement about photography is ‘full of implication for all imagery in the modern world’.³⁶ In this view, the spectator’s private contemplation is presented not as a dangerous distraction from political action, but, rather, as the necessary condition for creative engagement.³⁷ While the counter

narrative that I argue is embedded in Boucicault's water cave scene may not correspond exactly to Barthes' highly personalised conception of the 'punctum', the essential idea – that inherent to all pictures is a certain semantic excess that opens the way for creative interpretations – provides a useful counterpoint to the dominant view of spectacle as creating a trance-like passivity in the viewer. Similarly in his seminal essay on theatrical performance, 'The Emancipated Spectator', Jacques Rancière's argues for all spectatorship as inherently active as each individual brings to the spectacle their own dreams, desires, and experiences.³⁸

The 'wild card' aspect inherent to all images allows, then, for an openness to imaginative engagement, enabling the practice that Elizabeth Prettejohn refers to as reading 'against the grain'. For instance, in her discussion of portrayals of 'fallen women', which have been designated as misogynist or as conduits of patriarchal values by a previous generation of feminist art historians, Prettejohn asks why such images continue to fascinate and suggests that 'their interpretations cannot be frozen at the moment of their production'.³⁹ What, then, emerges if we read Boucicault's water cave scene 'against the grain'? The *studium* of the image involves an innocent female victim, a villain, a dashing rescue, a picturesque landscape, and moonlight. But I want to argue for a subtext that might help to explain the compelling power of this scene. Daly comes closest to the kind of analysis I am proposing. As he notes, the name of the water cave in the play is 'Poul a Dhoil', meaning 'Devil's pool', and he argues convincingly that it might be understood as a mythical underworld space. He relates that in Killarney legend, the ancient warrior hero O'Donoghue was said to continue to dwell beneath the lake and on occasion rise again to 'revisit the pleasant places among which he lived'. Citing Daniel Maclise's *Origins of the Harp* as a plausible visual source for the water cave scene (figure 6), Daly argues that the image

of Eily's rescue from the lake plays into 'a mode of imaginative resistance to the colonial project, conjuring up the re-emergence of a pre-colonial order'.⁴⁰ He also sees in the image of Eily's repeated sinking and rising to the surface an image suggestive of the return of the repressed memory of the real victim whose murder had inspired Griffin's novel, fifteen-year-old Ellen Hanley.⁴¹ However, in drawing out the relationship of the scene to other contemporary images, I hope to reveal a subtext that is only loosely connected to the ostensible action and setting of Boucicault's play.

Specifically, I want to look at the water cave scene in relation to a particular recurring image of which there are many examples in this period, that of the submerged woman. It is possible that Paul Delaroche's *Young Christian Martyr* of 1855, which shows a drowned young woman floating in the Tiber, may have been a direct source for Boucicault (figure 7). While the subject matter of Delaroche's painting may seem worlds away from that of Boucicault's sensation scene, one account of a version of the picture exhibited at the Pantheon in 1864 acknowledges their similarities. The brief notice recounts an overheard conversation among a 'party of swells' who 'were seen to halt before Delaroche's "Floating Martyr", when the foremost of them, a lady, said, "Here it is again! Oh, dear, how sick I am of this Colleen Bawn!"'⁴² Moreover, as Janice Norwood has noted, the painting was realised in Colin Hazlewood's melodrama, *The Mother's Dying Child*, performed at the Britannia Theatre in 1864. Hazlewood's villain, having lured his wife to a lonely boathouse in the middle of a moonlit lake, stabs her and throws her into the lake. As he makes his escape by boat, the effect of the painting is achieved when the body of his wife resurfaces as if to accuse him. The staging instructions indicate 'the form of STELLA floats on the L., illuminated by the lime-light, which also makes the waters appear transparent'.

Ah! See—see! The form of my victim rises before my eyes, as if to track me to justice and retribution! Oh! Horror! Horror!

*(as he is endeavouring to steer the boat, the form of STELLA follows it—
Tableau.*⁴³

The hallucinatory quality of Delaroche's painting would seem to have suggested to Hazlewood the idea of an image haunting the guilty imagination of a murderer. While the Lacy's acting edition of the play does not specify that the scene is a realisation of Delaroche's picture, a review in the *Age* described it as follows:

As he is leaving the spot in the boat the dead body rises – or he imagines that it does – to the surface of the water, and the lime-light playing upon the upturned face of the white robed figure constitutes a very powerful effect, and reminds one of that picture of the Christian martyr, which is so prevalent, and which once seen is not likely to be forgotten.⁴⁴

While it cannot be definitively proven that Delaroche's painting was a source for Boucicault, Hazlewood's *Mother's Dying Child* provides a clear link between them. The stage machinery for this play is likely to have been the same used by Hazlewood in his version of *The Colleen Bawn, Eily O'Connor*, staged at the Britannia in 1860, and also the later *Poul a Dhoil*, another Irish play of 1865.

To this trio of scenes, I would like to add paintings of other subjects treating the theme of the drowned or submerged woman. The similarity of *Young Christian Martyr* to John Millais' *Ophelia* of 1853 has long been noted, but scholars generally

play down the relationship between the two paintings, arguing that Delaroche is documented as having already begun work on his composition before he could possibly have known about Millais' picture and that the latter's precise touch and saturated colours create a quite different effect to that of Delaroche's hazy forms (figure 8).⁴⁵ I would argue, however, that despite these differences both images tap into a set of associations to do with femininity, nature, and water or liquidity. In Millais' painting, as in *Young Christian Martyr*, the female body seems to merge into the natural setting, her dress as well as her left wrist appear flattened and insubstantial, as if refracted through the water's surface, an image that in both works is suggestive either of the transformation of solid matter into spirit or of a discrete individual body merging with the natural element. In Delaroche's picture, the idea of transfiguration is further conveyed by the celestial light and by the rippling effect of the martyr's drapery, almost indistinguishable from the water in which she floats. Common to both paintings is the arch shaped setting, suggestive of an altarpiece.

The theme of the drowned or submerged woman is, of course, a recurring feature of the 'fallen woman' trope.⁴⁶ This subject enjoyed a particular vogue in Britain: many paintings on the theme were inspired by Thomas Hood's 1844 poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs', which describes the fate of a woman who, driven mad following seduction, abandonment, and prostitution, commits suicide by jumping from Waterloo Bridge. While Hood's poem is sympathetic to the outcast woman, it was the pictorial responses to it which introduced the idea of the fallen woman as martyr. For instance, George Watts' *Found Drowned*, painted in 1848–50, shows Hood's heroine partly submerged in the Thames, her arms outstretched in a crucifixion-like pose, the whole framed within an altarpiece like arch created by the bridge (figure 9). Although ostensibly treating three different subjects, all of these

paintings visualise the transfiguration of the female victim as a return to nature or, more specifically, to water, the traditionally feminine element.

I have proposed a French history painting as an inspiration for Boucicault's sensation scene: the French adaptation of *The Colleen Bawn*, Adolphe d'Ennery's *Le Lac de Glenaston* (Ambigu-Comique, 1861), completes the circuit. This production completely alters the plot of Boucicault's drama, which now takes place for the most part in California, but the crucial aspect of this adaptation was clearly the water cave scene, which alone was retained from *The Colleen Bawn* (figure 10). Reviews of d'Ennery's play focus on this scene, with one critic (punning on 'eau'/water) referring to it as a '*Méliméle-eau-drame*'.⁴⁷ A contemporary caricature that shows seated spectators attempting to fish in the water speaks to the immediacy of the scene (figure 11). The persistence of this image in an otherwise radically altered play could be taken as evidence that its appeal resided in the technical facility with which the reality effect of the gauze waters was achieved, rather than in its narrative or semiotic function. Reviewers were certainly taken with the effect of the scene. As Louis Ulbach wrote:

The poor innocent [...] stays under the water as long as it takes to admire the perfect transparency of the element; she turns and turns, she rises, she descends, with a docility that must delight the machinist [...] By a wonder of scenery, and with the help of skilfully placed gauzes, the painted waters are given a limpidity that allows us to see several times the body of the poor young girl rolling under the waves; never has the science of illusion gone so far.⁴⁸

Another reviewer commented that ‘it is always a delicate enterprise to write a drama around a trick (*truc*). It is rare that the preoccupation with the trick does not destroy the simplicity and the fluidity of the action. Most often, it spoils it for the spectators who wait through the rest of the piece for the lac de Glenaston’.⁴⁹

There was certainly some anxiety about whether British stage technologies were more technically advanced than those in France. While praising the effect of the scene, Ulbach expressed relief that there was, in fact, nothing new about it after all and claimed that it (or something similar) had been achieved many times before on the stage of Parisian melodrama theatres. ‘I recognise this drama’, he wrote, ‘it’s an old nightmare’.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, his review acknowledges the strange power of the scene:

Under the sombre arches, the moon illuminates the tranquil waters; inviting gentle reveries. The orchestra plays a melody by Niedermayer; one whispers the harmonious verse of Lamartine. It is the dream of a night of prayer and love!⁵¹

The facility with which the water cave scene was transposed into an almost entirely different story may appear to suggest that it was merely a novel trick and not embedded in the narrative and meaning of the piece as a whole. However, the merging of the female body with water that is a feature of all of them carries a subtext that counters the ‘victim’ narrative with an image more redolent of feminine power than of victimhood. As Susan Fagence Cooper has written, the ‘topsy-turvy underwater world of the mermaid’ presented an image of undisciplined female sexuality, later crystallised in Freud’s theory of the libido in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of 1905.⁵² Delaroche’s claim that the idea for *Young Christian*

Martyr came to him in a fever dream would seem to support just such a psychoanalytic interpretation of that work, while the currency of this image in our own time attests to the continuing association of the motif of the submerged woman with the idea of feminine power.⁵³ Nadav Kander's photograph *Ophelia* channels not only Millais' composition, but also the ethereal effects of Delaroche's *Young Christian Martyr*, while in Hollywood films such as director Robert Zemeckis' *What Lies Beneath* of 2000, the villain's murdered mistress haunts the lake in scenes reminiscent of Hazlewood's *The Mother's Dying Child* (figure 12).

The immediacy of sensation scenes certainly prompted involuntary affective responses of the type discussed by Voskuil and Singer, but, as Freedberg observes, pictures possess a special quality in that, unlike words, which 'pass on' before we have time to fix them in our mind's eye, an image such as this invites an almost obsessive contemplation on the part of the viewer, who is able to return to it again and again, lingering on its details. As Freedberg writes, 'it is always there for us to engage with in whatever way we like'.⁵⁴ The water cave scene was part of a temporal drama fraught with tension and suspense, but its pictorial fascination is evidenced not only in the enthusiasm of those spectators who returned to see it again and again, but also in the merchandise such as the Staffordshire figurine mentioned above, which allowed them to revisit it at their leisure. In the circulation between very different narratives of the image of the submerged woman, we see evidence of a 'third thing', which is neither the lesson intended by the playwright nor the somatic response of the audience member to the spectacle of danger, but rather a realisation of the spectators' creative imaginative engagement, which, as Rancière has written, 'is owned by no one'.⁵⁵

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- ¹ Nicholas Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn: Pastoral Suspense', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12:1 (2007), 1–25, 3.
- ² These watercolours are mounted in Queen Victoria's theatrical album, held by the Royal Collection Trust.
- ³ Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn', 8.
- ⁴ Joanna Hofer-Robinson and Beth Palmer, *Sensation Drama, 1860–1880: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. xiii.
- ⁵ Nicholas Daly, 'Blood on the Tracks: Sensation Drama, the Railway, and the Dark Face of Modernity', *Victorian Studies*, 42:1 (1998–9), 47–76, 55.
- ⁶ Cited in A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen, Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D. W. Griffith* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1949), p. 42.
- ⁷ John McCormick, *Theatre in Focus: Dion Boucicault, 1820–1890* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healy, 1987), p. 33.
- ⁸ H. Barton Baker, *The London Stage: Its History and Traditions from 1576 to 1888*, 2 vols (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1889), II, p. 97. A sketch model of Clarkson Stanfield's 'rolling wave' effect incorporating isinglass and painted silk is in the V&A Theatre Collection, accession number S.72-2000.
- ⁹ The whole scene was (and continues to be) often referred to as the 'header'. See, for instance, 'Our Dramatic Correspondent', *Punch*, 40, 4 May 1861, p. 186, in which the author refers to the 'tremendous header' which 'has been to some eyes the attraction'.
- ¹⁰ John Moore promptcopy, cited in Gladys May Rohrig, 'An Analysis of Certain Acting Editions and Promptbooks of Plays by Dion Boucicault', Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1956, p. 84.
- ¹¹ Baker, *The London Stage*, II, pp. 97–8.
- ¹² Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn', 6.
- ¹³ Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn', 6.
- ¹⁴ Daly, 'Blood on the Tracks', 56.
- ¹⁵ Baker, *The London Stage*, II, p. 97.
- ¹⁶ Dion Boucicault, "'Sensation' Dramas' and response, *Times*, 14 March 1862, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Kevin Rockett, 'Dion Boucicault, Staging, and Early Cinema', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 68:1–2 (2007), 33–59, 49.
- ¹⁸ Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-garde', *Wide Angle*, 8 (1986), 63–70.
- ¹⁹ Colin Hazlewood's version of the play, *Eily O'Connor*, was performed at the East End Britannia theatre in 1860. The author made significant changes to Boucicault's text, but retained this key scene, which also appeared in his *Poul a Dhoil*, another Irish play by the same author, Britannia Theatre, 1865. See Joanna Hofer-Robinson, 'Adaptable Near and Far: C. H. Hazlewood's Double Adaptations', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 48:1 (2021), 6–29, 26. See also Jim Davis, 'Introduction', in Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries 1863–1875: Selections from the Diaries of Frederick C. Wilton* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1992), pp. 1–47, p. 22.
- ²⁰ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- ²¹ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 62.
- ²² E. Deirdre Pribram, 'Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion', in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 237–51, p. 238.

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- ²³ Pribram, 'Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion', p. 238 (citing the special issue of *Feminist Theory* edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead: 'Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory', *Feminist Theory*, 13:2 [2012]).
- ²⁴ Hofer-Robinson and Palmer, *Sensation Drama*, p. xiii.
- ²⁵ Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Feeling Public: Sensation Theatre, Commodity Culture, and the Victorian Public Sphere', *Victorian Studies*, 44:2 (2002), 245–74, 245.
- ²⁶ Louis Blanc, 'Letter CLVI, A Strange Sentence, May 15th 1863', *Letters on England*, 2 vols, trans. by J. Hutton and Louis Blanc (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, 1867), 1, p. 143.
- ²⁷ Pribram, 'Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion', p. 240.
- ²⁸ As Voskuil writes, for Guy Debord, whose *The Society of the Spectacle* of 1967 has been influential in the way that of all types of nineteenth-century spectacle are approached, 'spectacle is the "opposite of dialogue" [...] it is a hierarchical, homogenizing force that isolates people from each other in the all-consuming marketplace'. Voskuil, 'Feeling Public', 251.
- ²⁹ Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 219.
- ³⁰ Brian Hand, 'Looking for Attention', *Circa*, 93 (2000), 26–31, 31.
- ³¹ Voskuil, 'Feeling Public', 250.
- ³² Voskuil, 'Feeling Public', 245.
- ³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (1980; London: Vintage Books, 2000), pp. 4, 34.
- ³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 28.
- ³⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 51.
- ³⁶ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, p. 439.
- ³⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 55.
- ³⁸ Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009).
- ³⁹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 210. Kate Flint takes a similar approach in her reading of John Millais' *The Blind Girl* of 1856 in which she seeks to move beyond the conscious intentions of the artist. By situating the work within broader discussions in the period, she argues that, while contemporary accounts attest to feelings of pity for the blind itinerant child seated in a sunlit landscape but unable to perceive either the glorious rainbow or the butterfly that lights on her shawl, the picture could also be understood as a meditation on the limitations of the eye and the superiority of inner vision. Flint posits that even if we have no direct testimony to such a reading, this interpretation would nevertheless have been 'potentially available to a spectator at the time the work was first exhibited'. Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 67.
- ⁴⁰ Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn', 16.
- ⁴¹ Daly, 'Many Lives of the Colleen Bawn', 5.
- ⁴² 'Fashion and Varieties. The Court', *Dublin Evening Mail*, 21 June 1864, p. 3.
- ⁴³ Colin Hazlewood, *The Mother's Dying Child* (1864), II. 2, pp. 33–34, available on the Victorian Plays Project (<http://victorian.nuigalway.ie/modx/index.php?id=54&play=345>).
- ⁴⁴ Janice Norwood, 'Colin Hazlewood: Or, Back in the Limelight', unpublished conference paper, Victorian Dramas, conference at the University of Worcester, 27 January 2007.
- ⁴⁵ Stephen Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London: Reaktion, 1997).
- ⁴⁶ To these subjects, one might add others that associate female victims with water, such as Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', another favourite subject of artists, and the Arthurian heroine, Elaine of Astolet, suggesting a common root for all such pictures in traditional associations between women and water.
- ⁴⁷ Review of *Le Lac de Glenaston*, *Le Monde Dramatique*, 24 October 1861, p. 4.

⁴⁸ ‘La pauvre innocente se prête avec une bonne volonté candide a cette noyade; elle reste sous l’eau aussi longtemps qu’il le faut pour faire admirer la transparence parfaite de l’élément; elle tourne, elle vire, elle monte, elle descend, avec une docilité dont le machiniste doit être ravi [...] Par un prodige de décors, et à l’aide de gazes habilement disposées, on a su donner aux eaux peintes une limpidité que nous laisse voir à plusieurs reprises le corps de la pauvre jeune fille roulant sous les vagues; jamais la science de l’illusion n’alla plus loin’, *Le Temps*, 21 October 1861, n.p.

⁴⁹ ‘C’est toujours une entreprise délicate que d’écrire un drame en vue d’un truc. Il est rare que la préoccupation de ce truc ne nuise pas à la simplicité et à la rapidité de l’action. Le plus souvent, il gêne aux spectateurs qui l’attendent tout le reste de la pièce, comme il arriva au Lac de Glenaston’, ‘Chronique Theatrale’, *Le Temps*, 8 June 1868, n.p.

⁵⁰ ‘Le Lac de Glenaston est un échantillon assez curieux de la fabrication d’outre Manche. Ce n’est pas neuf, mais c’est consolant! Nous n’avons rien à redouter de la libre concurrence ouverte par le traite de commerce. [...] Toutefois, le drame de l’Ambigu est imité de l’anglais. Imité alors d’une imitation! car, je le reconnais ce drame; c’est un vieux cauchemar. Nous l’avons tous vu vingt fois, cent fois à l’Ambigu, à la Gaîté; et je ne m’explique que par une pénurie, dont notre disette est encore bien loin, la fureur avec laquelle le Lac de Glenaston est accueilli à Londres. M. D’Ennery a été bien scrupuleux, bien consciencieux de se reconnaître comme l’imitateur d’une pièce qui a emprunte a son école ses plus beaux et ses plus nombreux effets’, *Le Temps*, 21 October 1861, n.p.

⁵¹ ‘Le décor du Lac de Glenaston est un chef d’œuvre que tout le monde voudra voir et applaudir. Sous des arches sombres, la lune éclaire des eaux tranquilles; invitant aux molles rêveries. L’orchestre joue la mélodie de Niedermayer; on murmure les vers harmonieux de Lamartine. C’est le songe d’une nuit de prière et d’amour! Mais voilà que Jackmoor, le Caliban, le monstre, glisse dans sa barque entraînant Jane; voilà que sous le regard de cette nuit charmante, il demande à Jane de mourir, et qu’il va la jeter dans les flots!’, *Le Temps*, 21 October 1861, n.p.

⁵² Susanne Fagence Cooper, ‘The Liquefaction of Desire: Music, Water and Femininity in Victorian Aestheticism’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20:2 (2009), 186–201, 196, 189.

⁵³ Stephen Bann, *Painting History: Delaroche and Lady Jane Grey* (London: National Gallery, 2010), p. 124.

⁵⁴ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, p. 373.

⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 15.