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Below *My Life Without Me* (2003)

The Medium as the Messenger

Farewell notes, filmic motifs and the melodrama

By Julian Hanich

Keywords filmic motifs, melodrama, emotion, temporality, character engagement, farewell notes

Introduction: Farewell, My Lovely[1]

A young working-class mother sits in her parked car. In the middle of the night she records messages for her two lovely daughters on a voice recorder. The woman – called Ann and played by Sarah Polley – has recently learned that she suffers from cancer. The terminal illness destroying her body has spread so fast that she only has a few weeks to live. Ann wants to make the best of it. Deciding to live her remaining days to the fullest, she comes up with a list of things to do before she dies. One point on the list is 'Record birthday messages for the girls for every year until they're 18.' Addressing her older daughter, she speaks into the voice recorder:

> Hey, my buddy Penny. I'm not gonna be at your birthday party, but there's nothing I'd like more in the whooole wide world. […] Penny, I want you to know that the day that you were born I held you in my arms and that was the happiest day of my whooole life. I was so happy I couldn't even speak. I just stroked your tiny little feet and I cried with happiness. […] Mommy sends you millions and millions of kisses.

She kisses the recording device, changes the tape and moves on to three more messages.

Ever since I have watched this scene from Spanish director Isabel Coixet's melodrama *My Life Without Me* (2003), I was wondering about the emotional impact it had on me. In this article I therefore

Below *Milk* (2008)

want to take a closer look at this scene and similar instances of a tried-and-tested melodramatic motif that we know from numerous movies and television series: Let's call it the *farewell note motif*. In this melodramatic motif (or standard scene) a character bids farewell to a partner or his loved ones via a storage medium that does not allow for direct telecommunication, but opens up a spatial and temporal gap. The goodbye message – sometimes even a suicide note – is sent through a letter, left on an answering machine, recorded on a voice recorder or taped on a video camera. The presence of the storage medium delivering the farewell note is the core element that remains constant in all its variants throughout the history of the motif.

And the motif certainly has a long history. Farewell-via-medium scenes neither come into being with the Greta Garbo talkie *Inspiration* (1931), *Casablanca* (1942) or the Max Ophüls classic *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948); nor do they stop with more recent melodramas like *Reservation Road* (2007), *P.S. I Love You* (2007) or *Safe Haven* (2013). Their natural home may be in tearjerkers from Hollywood, like *My Life* (1993) and *Message in a Bottle* (1999), or South Korea, like *Nae Meorisogui Jiugae* (*A Moment to Remember*, 2004). However, we also find them in moving arthouse films like Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line* (*Antonia*, 1995) and Gus van Sant's *Milk* (2008), in quiet moments of action blockbusters like *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Grey* (2011), or in thrillers such as *The Town* (2010). We encounter it in animation films like *Up* (2009) and in documentaries like *Dear Zachary* (2008). Certainly, television series make use of the motif as well – think of *ER* (2001/2002), *Dawson's Creek* (2003), *CSI* (2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008) or *Top of the Lake* (2012).[2] With *From 1994* (2013) we even have a short film entirely revolving around the motif. And in Gary Fleder's 1995 film *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (1995) the motif becomes self-referentially foregrounded: the plot involves a company specialized in messages of dying persons to their loved ones.

The farewell-via-medium scene is a subcategory of the larger melodramatic *farewell motif*. However, scenes in which a medium functions as the messenger work differently – and, I will argue, in more complex ways – than farewell scenes of lovers parting on a train platform (think of *Brief Encounter* [1945]) or on an airport field (as in *Casablanca*). For one, communication changes from dialogical and symmetrical to unidirectional and asymmetrical, from balance and closeness to imbalance and distance, from a personal-dialogical model of communication to a postal-disseminating model of communication (see Krämer 2008: 14–15). In the farewell-via-medium scene the letters, answering machines and videotapes function much like messengers in classical drama: they deliver the content of a message for an absent sender whose voice they represent and whose body they stand in for. As media philosopher Sybille Krämer notes: 'Messengers are necessary precisely when an immediate interaction between com-

Below *The Grey* (2011)

municators is not given, when communication lacks reciprocity, when verbal exchange cannot be realized' (2008: 10, my translation).

I believe that we might justifiably pay closer attention to motifs, stereotypes and standard scenes like the one at hand, not least because investigating them can contribute to our understanding of the melodrama and cinematic emotions more generally (Walker 2005: 31; Schweinitz 2011: 30). My investigation into motifs and standard scenes is grounded in an implicit assumption: if particular scenes recur again and again, their motif must have proven successful – film-makers would not include these scenes so often, if they had not worked previously. These scenes thus follow an economy of means as they have already shown their effectiveness. But in what way were they effective?

I claim that these recurring scenes work like 'emotional building blocks' – or, to use a different metaphor, they are intended to function like 'affective injections' that stimulate what some media psychologists call 'tender affective states' (see, for instance, Oliver 2008). While the cinema may be a 'dream factory', films obviously also work like an 'emotion machine' (Ed Tan) whose goal is to enable strong affective experiences. To be sure, whether particular instances of the motif (like the one from *My Life Without Me*) are indeed successful with specific audiences or not is an empirical question that I cannot answer here: some viewers may not be affected, while others are deeply moved. But this is not my point. Presuming that their recurrence signals its *intended effect* – namely, to move the audience –, I want to look at *how* these scenes try to achieve this goal. Through reverse engineering we can find out what are the essential parts of the scene and how they contribute to the intended emotional effect. (Of course, my claim that these scenes function like 'emotional building blocks' does not imply that they cannot simultaneously fulfil other functions as well – be they narrative, dramaturgical or symbolic.)

Further support for the argument that this conventionalized motif has an emotionalizing function may be garnered when we take into account how psychologically *unrealistic* it usually is and how little it has to do with ordinary behaviour. While writing a farewell letter as such may not sound too outlandish, the content of these letters often strains credulity (further below I will discuss an over-the-top example from *Safe Haven*). The motif becomes fully unrealistic when we consider the cases of *recorded* messages on answering machines, voice recorders or video cameras. What father, before going to prison, would confess his love to his son via a recorded video message rather than tell him directly (*Reservation Road*)? What mother would remind her daughters of her own death every year via recorded messages – messages they have to hear on every single birthday until they are 18 (*My Life Without Me*)? The motif simply works within the conventionalized goals of the melodramatic mode of Hollywood cinema (as well as those films that emulate Hollywood's emotionalizing tendency).[3]

By singling out this particular motif my article tries to achieve two things. First, I want to explore some reasons for the emotional effectiveness of this

If particular scenes recur again and again, their motif must have proven successful…

motif, whose affective register can comprise a range of tender affective states like sadness, pathos, being moved, sentiment or elevation (on being moved: Hanich et al. 2014; Cova and Deonna 2014; on sentiment: Tan and Frijda 1999; on elevation: Algoe and Haidt 2009). The question will therefore be: what are recurrent 'ingredients' of this motif and in what way do they contribute to move the audience? Since letters, audiotapes or video recordings evidently play a crucial role, it will be no surprise that part of the emotional power of these scenes relies on the fact that the melodramatic motif involves *media* as messengers. But the answer will also have to take into account loss and love and farewell forever.

Second, I hope that this analysis may have exemplary value: it is meant to contribute to our understanding of the emotional workings of melodrama more generally (for a further attempt at understanding the emotional impact of melodrama, see Hanich and Menninghaus [forthcoming]). Working with a recurring motif (or standard scene) may allow us – in a *pars-pro-toto* fashion – to draw conclusions about the genre or mode. Here I will reach back to and elaborate on seminal studies by Steve Neale and Linda Williams (Neale 1986; Williams 2001). Following ideas of literary scholar Franco Moretti, Neale and Williams have argued that melodramas often move us when two things come together: first, the narrative initiates a *shift in perspective* that makes us assume multiple viewpoints granting a *surplus of knowledge* over the characters. Second, we realize that something comes *too late* for the characters. I argue that using a medium as messenger enables the film to entangle the viewer in a dense and complex temporal web: in a melodramatic too-late and never-again, but also a too-early and not-yet. The use of the medium in the farewell-via-medium scene sets off processes of *empathy* and *sympathy* and brings into play the viewer's *imagination*, which visually and aurally fills in what largely remains absent and is only hinted at. The farewell note motif thus foregrounds temporality, complicates character engagement, and plays with what remains *implicit* – that which must be inferred and imagined.

Why look for motifs? Some methodological notes

Before I start with my investigation, though, I want to address the general question how and why we should study motifs and pay attention to oft-repeated standard scenes in the first place. After all, it does not seem to be a very common practice in film studies. Michael Walker, whose study of motifs in Hitchcock films is an exception, claims: 'Actual discussions of motifs in the cinema are rare' (2005: 15). However, this might currently be changing. In recent years motifs have sparked interest in German film studies (see Wulff 2012; Wendler and Engell 2009; Engell and Wendler 2011; Frisch 2010). Along similar lines, German and American scholars have investigated *filmic stereotypes* (Schweinitz 2011) and melodramatic *standard scenes/situations* (see Jacobs 1993; Brewster and Jacobs 1997; Koebner 2007; Koebner 2008). While it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss the differences between these concepts, I believe that there is considerable overlap between motifs, stereotypes and standard scenes/situations: they all have to do with repetitions and conventions, with formulas and a reduction of complexity. One reason why I prefer to use the term 'motif' is that it seems the most neutral one, while the notions of 'stereotype' and 'standard scene' tend to connote the aesthetically banal, the overly formulaic, the cliché-like.

How do we establish that something can be labelled and categorized as a motif? It has been argued that it is part of the responsibility of a scholar *what* he or she identifies as a motif and *how* he or she names it. Moreover, the scholar has to make plausible what should be the scholarly result of the search for motifs and what research goals it serves (Mölk 2002: 232). Once these preconditions are fulfilled practically anything can be defined and labelled as a motif. However, this liberal and pragmatic attitude is in practice often constrained by the search for what is *recurrent*, *significant* and *functional* in order to be labelled a motif. A motif is a conventional filmic unit that has proven to be *effective* in more than one case. Certainly, a simple nitpicking list of films in which the viewer can glimpse letters, answering machines or video cameras would not be revealing. The corpus must be connected with a normative claim that these media have proven somehow effective in order to be grouped under the label of motif. As such, filmic motifs are *virtual entities*: they become viable only through acts of comparison and abstraction. To perceive and understand a motif *as a motif* is dependent on the mental effort of construction.[4]

If we look at the example of 'media in films' we can easily see that their status – just like the status of any other object – can vary a great deal in the 'filmic universe' (Souriau 1951). First, an answering machine or a video camera can simply be categorized as a *filmic prop*, which at the time of shooting belonged to the profilmic reality. Second, it can be a *filmic object* that exists in the diegesis, but has no function and thus plays no productive role in the plot. For instance, the filmic object of the answering machine – in the terminology of actor-network-theory (ANF) we might also call it *filmic actant* – may

The medium is the mediator that helps to forget loneliness and death, but it also creates a distance…

simply be glimpsed in the background of a living room scene (for the ANF terminology, see Latour 2005). Third, media can become what ANF would call a *filmic acteur* once they change a situation by making a difference. On the level of the plot this may be the case when an answering machine or a letter prompts a character to take action. However, this does not qualify the medium as a motif. Fourth, and most importantly, media become a *filmic motif* once they recur *repeatedly* as productive filmic *acteurs* that make a difference within the narrative. Significantly, as filmic motifs media can also have an effect on the viewer's reception and thus create *spectatorial* facts (to use another filmological term). As we shall see, the farewell note motif bears on the viewer's subjective response, because it brings into play his or her empathy, sympathy, sensual imagination – and emotion.

Where and how do we look for filmic motifs? First, we can look for motifs *intratextually*, i.e. within a given film. A precondition for this *synchronic* search for motifs on a microtextual level seems to be that the filmic element is repeated in a significant way. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, for instance, use the term 'motif' along these lines:

> We shall call *any significant repeated element in a film* a motif. A motif may be an object, a color, a place, a person, a sound, or even a character trait. We may call a pattern of lighting or camera position a motif if it is repeated through the course of a film. (Bordwell and Thompson 2008: 66, original emphasis)

Here the notion of motif seems close to the concept of 'leitmotif', as we know it from musicology.

Second, we can search for motifs *intertextually*, i.e. within a body of selected films or across established genres over a period of time. Again, a precondition for this search for motifs seems to be that the motif repeats a core element (such as a medium conveying a farewell message). In this case the farewell note would be elevated from the status of filmic prop, object and *acteur* in a given movie to the level of motif across a variety of movies. The intertextual search for motifs can go in two directions. On the one hand, the researcher can look at a large corpus of examples *a-historically* in order to determine what essentially remains the same in terms of content and function of the motif. On the other hand, the scholar can study the motif *diachronically* determining the historical differences and changes in theme and use. In the case of the farewell note motif one would expect, for instance, that letters are the dominant form for most of the history of the motif, but once voice recorders, answering machines and video cameras were invented they played an increasingly important role.

Final separation: Defining the farewell note motif

Farewell note scenes can roughly be separated into two subtypes. First, we find scenes in which we see a character reading, listening to or watching a farewell note of a person who has left or died. Here the emphasis lies on the *receiver* of the message. The scene is anchored in the *present*, which often shows us a character in sadness, on the brink of tears or even breaking down completely. Propelled by the content of the message the time vector also points to the *past* when sender and receiver were not yet separated (and, in weaker form, to the *future* which to the receiver implies a time of loss). A prototypical case can be found in Episode 5 of Jane Campion's miniseries *Top of the Lake* when Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss) listens to a farewell note from her mother, who shortly before died of cancer, on the voicemail of her phone at home and breaks down in tears.

In cases like these Michel Chion's concept of 'embedded listening' is pertinent. According to Chion, the term 'embedded listening' refers to

> those situations where a character in a film listens to a sound recording (with or without images) on a tape recorder, editing console, or other playback medium […]. This act of embedded listening reactivates a time and space that is other than the space-time inhabited by the character/s, and as such can prompt a flashback that's not a flashback. (Chion 2009: 476)

In the scene from *Top of the Lake* the words of the mother evoke mental imagery of her, without actually showing her on-screen. Although Chion restricts the concept to actual sound *recordings*, I would like to broaden the concept by including the widespread use of *voice-overs* of the sender that we hear while the receiving character is reading the *letter* of the lost loved one. Think of a highly emotional scene toward the end of *The Outsiders* (1983), when Ponyboy (C.

Below *Top of the Lake* (2012)

Thomas Howell) opens a book and finds a letter from his dead friend Johnny (Ralph Macchio). When Ponyboy starts reading the letter, Johnny can be seen in superimposition, speaking out loud what Ponyboy is reading, as if Johnny was Ponyboy's memory-image. It will hardly strain the concept if we agree that *listening to an imaginary voice of a lost person* – evoked through a letter – should also be considered 'embedded listening'.

Second, there are scenes in which the farewell note is being written or recorded by a character at this very moment: we see the character, who is about to die or leave for good, formulating a message to a loved one who will only be able to read, listen to or watch what has been written or recorded after the sender has left or passed away. In this case the scene focuses on the *sender* who formulates the farewell note sombre, sad or sobbing. While rooted in the present, the temporal vector also points to the *future* when the addressee will receive the message (but, as we shall see, it also strongly implicates the common *past* evoked by the content of the message). Examples for this category can be found in *My Life Without Me*, *Reservation Road* or the series finale of *Dawson's Creek*. With reference to Chion's 'embedded listening', we could speak of embedded *recording*. The act of embedded recording does not primarily *re*-activate the past, but first and foremost *activates* the future: besides potentially prompting a 'flashback that's not a flashback' it might also function as a flashforward-that's-not-a-flashforward.[5]

Melodramatic impact: The final goodbye

There is a reason why melodramatic movies abound with farewell scenes. At the deathbed, the airport or the train station characters often utter final words to a loved one or their families. As I have mentioned earlier, the farewell note motif is a variant or subcategory of the farewell scene more generally. Moreover, the farewell scene is a counterpart of the reunion scene, another important melodramatic building block. Both standard situations regularly feature in melodramas due to their potential to move us deeply.[6] One reason is that on a thematic level they deal with basic attachment concerns and our need for meaningful social connection as a defining human characteristic (see Cacioppo and Patrick 2009; Tan and Frijda 1999: 56; Neale 1986: 17). Farewell scenes with separating or even dying characters may remind us of the feeling of loneliness – a feeling that one could also describe as a form of *social pain* (Cacioppo and Patrick 2009: 7).

But even if farewell note scenes on a thematic level share the focus on attachment concerns with farewell scenes more generally, they function differently and in a more complex fashion. One important difference is the fact that loneliness *already* dominates the moment, as the partner is not present. While in a separation scene on a train platform or an airport field the characters are both present and hence *still* close to each other, in a farewell-via-medium scene the characters cannot reach out for each other due to a *spatial* distance. In fact, the partners are often thousands of miles apart. Except for a few instances

Below *The Outsiders* (1983)

the letters are written and read alone, and the messages are recorded and received in solitude. Here it is important to remember that a 'sense of loss' is central for the melodrama and suffuses it as a form (Williams 2001: 31).

However, we are dealing here not only with a *spatial* gap (which could potentially be closed in the future), but a *temporal* distance that cannot be bridged, not now anyway, sometimes not at all. What will happen in the near future or what has already happened in the past – the departure or death of the sender – seems irreversible. In a variation on McLuhan's famous dictum of media as extensions of men, we might say that in the farewell note motif the character uses a medium to extend her reach to bridge an unbridgeable temporal gap – namely a long separation, an ultimate divide, even death. The medium is the mediator that helps to forget loneliness and death, but it also creates a distance: whoever mediates, simultaneously separates. After all, 'mediating' means to put a middle piece between unmediated things (Fischer 2004: 84).

The medium thus turns what is absent into something absent-present. Through the medium one part of the sender is present as a *trace* of the real: a trace of the hand (in the handwritten letter), the voice (on the answering machine and the voice recorder) or the whole body (in the video camera images). This is why the media as messengers often become cherished and even fetishized objects: characters press the letter against their heart; they smile or even stroke a photograph; they kiss the voice recorder. While the absent one is within a hand's reach, the hand cannot grasp him or her. The medium might be an extension of the body of the sender – but a physical contact is impossible (see Krämer 2008: 114). If we define 'aura' with Benjamin as 'the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be', we may argue that the sender becomes auratic. While the sender seems to be near, he or she cannot be taken hold of and therefore remains at a spatial and temporal distance (Krämer 2008: 270).

A dense temporal web: Present, past and future

The emotional impact of the motif relies on its power to entangle the viewer in a dense temporal web. In the following I try to disentangle this web analytically.

The present

As viewers of *My Life Without Me*, we know that the young mother *at this moment* lives in a state of *definitive finitude* as the end of her moribund life approaches relentlessly. From the moment the doctor has informed her about the terminal illness we cannot ignore the fact that her life has been fixed in a state between – between her attempt to live life at its fullest and life's ultimate arch-enemy: death. Her life dangles between 'she is living' (the present progressive) and 'she will have lived' (the future II). Her future death is thus implied in every moment of the film. In the words of Laura Mulvey: *death 24× a second*. Melodrama's 'too late' often also implies a 'too early' and a 'not yet': Ann will die *too early* to have experienced life as she should have; there are too many things one wants her to enjoy which she has *not yet* experienced.

But at the same time the film is precisely about Ann's attempt to live her remaining *life 24× a second* by working on her list of ten things to do before she dies. A mother who spends part of her precious remaining time recording intimate farewell notes for her daughters – one might think of these mes-

sages as beautiful, prosocial acts.[7] In the present Ann thinks about the future: she tries to bridge the abyss of death, aiming to reunite imaginarily, creating personal intimacy. In her messages she talks to her daughters, praises them, kisses them in words but also mimics the act by kissing the voice recorder, and repeatedly refers to the family ritual of the birthday party. She even imagines a new mother for them, ignoring the painful fact that one day she will be replaced by someone else.

Doing good things for a good cause: this prosocial element recurs in many farewell notes. In their written or recorded words characters show virtuous behaviour by sacrificing their own advantages and advancements for someone else or a cause that transcends the intimate confines of the love of two persons. Inversing the *My Life Without Me* scenario, in *Safe Haven* we find a young woman reading a letter written years in the past and addressed to her by the long-deceased wife of the man she loves. In this letter, 'To the Woman My Husband Loves', the dead wife writes to her unfamiliar successor: 'I wanted you to know one *very*, *very* important thing: I am so glad he's found you. I only wish I could be there, somehow to meet you.' A scenario like this – as deeply unrealistic as it is – may spark the emotion of *being moved*.[8] In a groundbreaking article, Florian Cova and Julien A. Deonna (2014) argue that the recurring theme of the emotion of being moved is an instance in which a particularly important *positive core value* manifests itself in a salient way – a core value that a moral community treats as possessing 'transcendental significance' and stands above mundane values. This foregrounding of positive core values becomes particularly salient when taking place against the backdrop of *negative* values. A dying wife who formulates a letter to the unknown woman her husband will eventually love in the future may be moving precisely because the positive values of altruism, generosity and care 'defeat' the negative values of illness and death.

I say 'it *may* be moving' because it obviously depends on how a particular viewer judges the scenario. With regard to the scene from *My Life Without Me* some viewers have expressed their doubts to me: for them the scene did not show the prosocial act of a caring, loving mother, but rather a selfish, even cruel sign that she is unable to let go. Paraphrasing the famous beginning of André Bazin's essay on the ontology of the photographic image, we could claim that if Ann's farewell note was put under psychoanalysis, the practice of *keeping herself alive after death* might be a fundamental factor in its creation. As Bazin could have written in response to the scene,

> by providing a defense against the passage of time [Ann's message] satisfies a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, [her] bodily appearance [i.e. her voice] is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. (Bazin 1960: 4–5)

Using the words Slavoj Žižek directed against a melodramatic scene from Veit Harlan's *Opfergang* (1944), we might even call Ann's insistence to keep herself alive after death (and thus to remain absent-present in the lives of her daughters) a 'pathological' subterfuge – the opposite of a 'disinterested' ethical act (Žižek 2001: 45). Obviously, we would not feel moved or elevated at all, were we to judge Ann's farewell message in this light.

Be that as it may, in almost all scenes with a farewell note we witness a deeply private moment: the motif usually implies quietude and intimacy, concentration and emotionality. In most cases the sender records the message alone just as the addressee receives the message in a solitary, even lonely situation.[9] We can easily imagine that the scene would work less emotionally were the characters surrounded by numerous happy bystanders who contradict the overall mood. The characters themselves become quiet and still: they sit down, stand immobile, hardly dare to move and thus reduce any bodily agitation on the viewer's part that might come from kinesthetic empathy (for this notion, see Reynolds and Reason 2012). Likewise, the camera either remains completely static or moves only slowly, tracking or zooming very cautiously toward the sender or receiver. Moreover, the soundtrack enhances the intimacy: sound is reduced and atmospheric noises make way for silence or quiet moving music. The main source of sound is the *voice*, often a soft, intimate, tender one.

It is as if the film wants us to listen up and closely pay attention, while creating a concentrated and focused atmosphere. At the same time, the scene mimics the experience of the sender or the receiver for whom the message implies a deeply absorbing act. The farewell note motifs in *ER* (episode 'The Letter') or *Memphis Belle* (1990) lend support to these arguments: in both cases a contrasting tone – lighthearted in the first case, aggressive and sarcastic in the second – makes way for a quiet and intimate atmosphere once the seriousness of the farewell note becomes apparent.

What is more, the intimacy of the farewell note motif manifests itself in the way the characters treat the mediating messenger. They often delib-

Below *Safe Haven* (2013)

erately search for a quiet spot in order to confront the medium all by themselves. Often we can perceive a close and intimate bodily involvement with the medium – after all, we are not dealing with mass communication media here, but with one-to-one interactions via individual storage media. This intimacy with the messenger can reach a degree that may even allow us to speak of 'medium eroticism'.[10] The *receiver* gently touches and carefully opens the envelope, takes out the letter cautiously. After reading it the character folds it, sometimes presses the paper against the heart or even kisses the medium (as in *A Moment to Remember*). There are cases in which teardrops wet the letter, most famously in the 'weeping letter' from *Casablanca*, in which the rain washing away Ilsa's words symbolizes Rick's tears. The letter is particularly conducive to this personal intimacy, because it signals from the outside that the message is private, sealed as it is by an envelope that hides and protects it from unintended views. The *sender*, on the other hand, writes the letter gently, the camera closing in on the act of writing, the soundtrack allowing us to hear the pen scratching the paper or the arms of the typewriter clicking. At the end the character carefully seals the envelope, thus touching it with his or her lips. The most intimate interactions with media take place with letters, the least technological of all the farewell media. However, occasionally one also finds a character like Ann in *My Life Without Me* kissing a voice recorder.

The future

While witnessing Ann's elevating act of social beauty in the *present*, we cannot help but imagine the *future* at the same time. Ann's scene of embedded recording transports us simultaneously via our own imagination into a distant future that is not shown and remains implicit, a future which we are forced to mentally visualize without her: the birthdays of her daughters. What we see *here and now* will not be anymore *then and there*. The mother, alive and struggling with her tears on the screen, is a future blank: she is – and she is not; she is present – and absent. When Michelle Williams's character records a video message for her young daughter in *Dawson's Creek* she explicitly foregrounds her absence: 'Hi Amy, it's mom. Well, by the time you see this, I won't be here anymore.'

As we have seen, Ann in *My Life Without Me* also emphasizes her absence when she says: 'Hey, my buddy Penny. I'm not gonna be at your birthday party, but there's nothing I'd like more in the whooole wide world…' Instead it is not unlikely that we *visually and aurally imagine* – in the future – an episode of sadness when the daughters will listen to the recorded messages and will miss their mother deeply. Because the film does not illustrate these scenes, the viewer prospectively *imagines* rather than perceives the future – a flashforward-that's-not-a-flashforward, indeed.

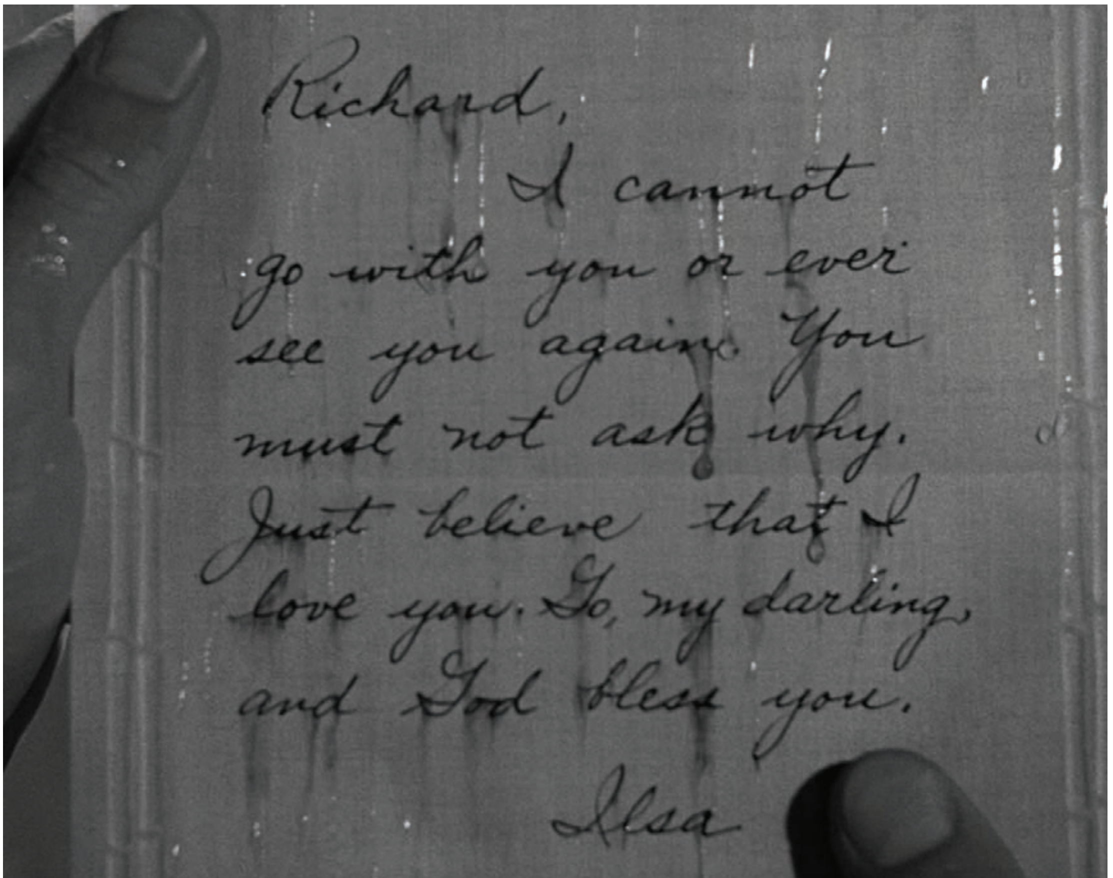
By slowing down the tempo and silencing the scene, the film makes it easier for the viewer to devote parts of his or her cognitive capacities to flashforwarding him- or herself imaginarily into the narrative future. Moreover, in a farewell note scene from *Reservation Road*, in which a father videotapes a message for his son before going to prison, the film uses various strategies to facilitate the perspectival shift from the father to the son's future viewpoint. A slow camera movement shows the LCD screen of the recording camera and thus the very images the son will see once he has received the farewell message. The almost constantly visible red diode on the backside of the camera reminds us that the recording of the message *for the son* is still going on. And the

long intervals between the father's sentences and the slow camera movements (a pan, a tracking shot) make grasping the scene undemanding enough for the viewer to easily swing back and forth between two temporalities: perceiving the father's *present* and imagining the son's *future*.

In the case of *My Life Without Me* the future is not merely bleak, but simultaneously brought into play in a positive way. Ann describes it as a time of solidarity and strife overcome. Although she will be gone and things will be difficult, Ann envisions a new community of mutual help and understanding. We are invited to imagine a future in which the problems of the past are solved: a little family utopia, innocence regained.

To add another temporal layer, we are not only asked to imagine the *future present* when the addressees receive the message – but we may also imagine them *remembering* the past in the future. For instance, we can imagine Ann's daughters listening to the tape and remembering happy family scenes we, as viewers, followed earlier in the film. Or we can imagine the son in *Reservation Road* recollect the beautiful time spent together, mentioned in his father's message.

In their observer positions the spectators, oscillating between viewpoints, are put in an advantageous situation in terms of narrative information. As indicated, the power of melodrama often hinges on a shift in perspective and a surplus of knowledge. According to Steve Neale, melodrama installs 'discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and point of view of the characters, such that the spectator often *knows more*' (1986: 7, original emphasis). Likewise, Christine Gledhill argues: 'Pathos involves us in assessing suffering in terms of our privileged knowledge of its nature and causes' (1986: 46). For Gledhill, the moving potential of melodrama intensifies once we are confronted with multiple viewpoints that make *everyone* a victim (1986: 47). This is clearly the case in *My Life Without Me*. The farewell note motif complicates our engagement with the characters and lets us jump between at least three victim viewpoints – the mother who will die and the two daughters who will have lost their mother. While we *empathize*


Richard,
I cannot
go with you or ever
see you again. You
must not ask why.
Just believe that I
love you. Go, my darling,
and God bless you.
Ilsa

Below *Casablanca* (1942)

Below *Dawson's Creek* (2003)

with Ann and thus feel *with* her, we also *sympathize* with the two daughters who do not know about the impending death of their mother and who we consequently feel *for*. Sympathizing with the two daughters left behind is particularly poignant, because of the inability of the receivers to react properly: the asymmetrical communication via medium does not allow them to talk back and excludes them forever from what should be a dialogue.

For the suffering characters – and us as viewers positively aligned with them – the separation is (or, at least, *looks*) final and thus the state of affairs seems irreversible. This irreversibility stands in radical opposition to the direction we want the story to take, thus foregrounding time (Moretti 1983: 162). With the help of the medium the viewer's experience is suspended and oscillates between two temporal reference points, both present in the scene simultaneously – the present and the future. This allows us to realize that something will be doubly *too late* for the characters. It is *already* too late at this moment for Ann to follow her daughters' life until they are 18, because it will be over prematurely. But it is also *too late* in the future when the receivers listen to the recorded message: at this point the sender will already be dead. If it is true that the temporal order of the 'too late' is (at least partly) responsible for the evocation of the emotion of being-moved, then these scenes must be particularly moving due to their double too-lateness.

This entangled temporal web may remind us of Roland Barthes's discussion of the temporal (not formal!) *punctum*. Discussing the paradoxical and complex simultaneity in Alexander Gardner's photograph of assassin Lewis Payne, a man sentenced to death for trying to kill the US secretary of state in 1865, Barthes writes: 'the *punctum* is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake' (Barthes 1981: 96, original emphasis). The farewell note motif in *My Life Without Me* functions similarly: the viewer may experience these emotionally charged moments suspended between present and future as punctums – as emo-

tional cuts or little wounds. Of course, when watching a fiction film there is no trace-like connection between the referent and the image, as in Barthes's case. The character in the film dies, but we certainly do not lose a real person. We may therefore always remind ourselves of the fictional distance and thus attenuate our emotion about the loss of the character. This is one of the reasons why scenes like this one have to be considered first and foremost as *moving* rather than *sad*.

The past

When we watch Ann recording her messages we may be oscillating between the present and the future. But once we look at the *content* of her messages, we realize that the past as the third temporal order, also involves us a great deal. In farewell note scenes the sender almost always remembers the common past the characters have spent together, scenes to which the viewer was often present. By referencing the past the characters point out what should always be remembered as cherished moments. For instance, in *The Notebook* (2004) Noah (Ryan Gosling), who was forced to separate from his great love Allie (Rachel McAdams) because of his inferior social status, writes to her:

> I am not bitter anymore, because I know
> that what we had was real. And if in some
> distant place in the future we see each
> other in our new lives I'll smile at you
> with joy and remember how we spent
> the summer beneath the trees, learning from each other and growing in love.

The sender evokes an innocent, happy past. The scene is suffused with what Linda Williams calls 'nostalgia for a virtuous place' and therefore falls squarely into 'melodrama's larger impulse to reverse time, to return to the time of origins and the space of innocence' (Williams 2001: 28 and 35). At the same time, evoking the beautiful and utopian past spent together means alluding poignantly to what will never come back; it is a commemoration of what cannot be repeated and is irretrievably gone. Because the characters will separate or die too early, the past stands in contrast to the present and the future, which represent loneliness, being apart and ultimate separation. Scenes like these give us glimpses of utopia only to destroy it relentlessly at

Below *Reservation Road* (2007)

These scenes bring together characters that are sad and happy, overwhelmed and composed at the same time.

Below *The Notebook* (2004)

the same time. They turn the future 'This will be possible' into the past conditional 'This could have been possible', and make us exclaim 'If only…!' and ask us 'What if…?' Thus they work fully in the melodramatic mode (Neale 1986: 12). By evoking *various temporalities all at once* the motif of the farewell note often contrasts the happy past, the sad present and the bleak future. Again, something takes place too early. Again, some events have not yet happened. Again, we are too late.

The belatedness becomes even more moving once we take into account that the messages are often formulated as a *testimonial* that is at the same time a kind of *testament*. The message contains words that come as belated *confessions*: confessions of love or guilt or both. Here are the words of the father in *Reservation Road* who will be imprisoned for being involved in a lethal hit-and-run accident:

> It was an accident, but what I did was terribly wrong. I left that night, because I was afraid of losing *you*. And… that's no excuse. I'm gonna go to prison, and I deserve to go to prison. […] And I just wanna say I'm sorry. I'm sorry, and I love you so much. And I hope that one day when this is all over that we'll be able to get back together where we are today. I love you.

The confessional farewell messages come, again, doubly belated. Not only will the sender no longer be around once the addressee has received it; but the sender has also failed (or was unable to) utter these words during his or her lifetime: the receivers – all those daughters, sons, wives, husbands and lovers – will never be able to hear the message from the sender directly, only via the medium as the messenger. If only… things had gone well.

Conclusion: Distant voices, bleak lives

In this analysis I certainly have not explored the whole range of reasons why this tried-and-tested melodramatic motif works so well emotionally. But I hope that some reasons have become apparent why the motif functions as an 'emotional building block'. On a more abstract level we might say that farewell-via-medium scenes are emotionally moving, because they harbour a number of conflicting internal tendencies. Far from unambiguous, the motif lures – or even urges – us in various directions at the same time, thus creating a cognitive and emotional turmoil that might be particularly conducive to move the viewers and even push them to the brink of tears. These scenes bring together characters that are sad and happy, overwhelmed and composed at the same time. They are connected to each other but also distanced from each other through a medium that brings them together while separating them. In their farewell notes the characters evoke a utopian past that contrasts with the bleak present and the lonely future. Since the farewell motif grants us a *surplus* of knowledge, we are in the position to recall the *past*, to observe the *present* and to imagine the *future*: we, as viewers, know what happened to the characters before; we see them recording her message at this moment; and we can project how the addressee will receive the messages to which they are obviously completely oblivious at this moment. The shifts in perspective and the surplus in narra-

tive information make us empathize (feel with), but also sympathize (feel for) the characters. Through flashbacks-that-are-not-flashbacks and flashforwards-that-are-not-flashforwards we imagine and remember the absent characters, while simultaneously perceiving the present ones, thus being suspended between various temporalities. While farewell scenes *in general* are often moving because they speak to our basic attachment concerns, the farewell note motif complicates matters and thus ups the ante. It is so emotionally evocative because, after all, it introduces the medium as the messenger.

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Endnotes

1. For helpful suggestions to this article I would like to thank Marieke Zwarter, Winfried Menninghaus, Tanja Prokic und Jörg von Brincken.

2 *ER*: Season 8, Episode 20 ('The Letter'). *Dawson's Creek*: Season 6, Episode 24 ('Must Come to an End'). *CSI*: Season 8, Episode 7 ('Goodbye and Good Luck'). *Breaking Bad*, Season 1, Episode 1 ('Pilot'). *Top of the Lake*, Season 1, Episode 4 ('A Rainbow Above Us').

3. As Jörg Schweinitz argues with regard to stereotypical plot elements: '[They] tend to emancipate themselves from reality and provide a structure for the imaginary in conventionalized fictional worlds' (2011: 64).

4. This is precisely what Jörg Schweinitz claims for stereotypes (2011: 28).

5. To be sure, this distinction between a focus on the receiver and an emphasis on the sender is fairly broad. Several variations and in-between cases exist.

6. However, the phenomenology of the mixed emotion of being moved is obviously not identical in both cases. In the case of separation the component of sadness prevails, while in moments of reunion the component of joy dominates the mixed emotion. For some preliminary remarks on the mixed emotion of being moved, see Hanich, et al. (2014).

7. As we have seen at the beginning, they are also extremely unrealistic and could even be considered cruel.

8. Alternatively, we might say that the motif elicits the emotion of *elevation* as described by social psychologist

Jonathan Haidt and adopted to the melodrama by Plantinga (2009: 183). Unfortunately, discussing the similarities of and differences between being moved and elevation lies beyond the scope of this article.

9. In less convincing instances of the motif we sometimes find another person intercut and thus distracting from the mediated communication between the sender and the one left behind – as in *Dawson's Creek* where a friend helps the terminally-ill Jen (Michelle Williams) to record her message.

10. The term 'media eros' alludes to Claudia Springer's terms 'electronic eros' and 'techno-eroticism' (Springer 1996).

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