

The Melodramatic Mode Revisited. An Introduction

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1. Melodrama and the Modern Imagination

"Darwin, Freud and Marx were all products of the melodramatic imagination," writes Christine Gledhill in the introduction to her influential 1987 volume on melodrama and the 'woman's film' (20). In what follows she concentrates on the filmic varieties of the melodramatic mode, but the very fact that she sees no need to elaborate or reference her sweeping claim attests to the changed status of the melodramatic in our days. What used to be regarded as a low form of cultural expression, recently came to be reevaluated as a significant type of representation. In current scholarship, then, melodrama no longer figures as a derogatory concept, associated with cheap effects, quick entertainment, and distraction from weighty moral questions. Instead, melodrama is now increasingly invoked as a serious and central category to assess the modern cultural imagination in general. Gledhill was by no means the first critic to point at the indebtedness the melodramatic imagination.¹ But her volume, together with some other studies of melodrama in the late 1970s and 1980s, of entire traditions of nineteenth-century thought to

1 In 1987, Gledhill could already draw upon a series of critical studies to substantiate her claim. She explicitly refers to Wylie Sypher who maintained as early as 1948 that "melodrama is a characteristic mode of 19th century [sic] thought and art" (260). Gledhill could also have mentioned Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Tangled Bank*. Likewise Peter Brooks notes that the "talking cure" of Freudian psychoanalysis resonates with the "drama of articulation" ceaselessly enacted by the melodramatic imagination (201). Since then, several other scholars have followed up with close readings and analyses of nineteenth-century philosophy and science in terms of the melodramatic, primarily focusing on Karl Marx (cf. Lansbury; Kemple).

introduced a cross- and transgeneric approach to the subject that was indeed new.

This approach exploded the analytical framework of traditional genre theory and structuralist narratology, on which current media studies are relying to this day. While Northrop Frye could still identify four archetypal forms of narration and story-telling (tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire), which then ramified into various genres and subgenres, among them melodrama (displaying "the triumph of moral virtue over villainy, and the consequent idealizing of the moral views assumed to be held by the audience" [47]), Gledhill and others have come to see melodrama as a mode of narration and meaning-making that forcefully defies the very principle of categorization underlying Frye's approach. It is on these grounds that Gledhill identified melodrama as "an epistemological and imaginative paradigm across nineteenth century culture and thought" (20) informing, among others, the writings of Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

In one of the most radical extensions of this logic, film scholar Linda Williams has claimed that melodrama should not be understood as one generic cinematic mode among many but rather as "the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures" (1998, 42). Melodrama, she writes,

has been the norm, rather than the exception, of American cinema. [...] Film critics have often not seen the forest of melodrama—the sense in which all these genres, and many more, partake of a basic melodramatic mode—for the trees of these individual genres. They have not seen the way in which melodrama constitutes the larger cultural mode driving the articulation of specific genres. (2001, 16-17)

At a time when generic classification is becoming increasingly problematical, because genres are no longer associated with stable norms and features, but are seen "as processes," as Steve Neale writes with reference to Hans Robert Jauß (170, cf. also Altman 1998, 6-23), melodrama gains an especially prominent function, inevitably cutting across the field of generic identifications. While this line of reasoning has been developed most thoroughly in film criticism, it goes back to a piece of literary criticism: Peter Brooks's 1976 study *The Melodramatic Imagination*, which introduced the notion of melodrama as a "mode of excess" (xiii).

Since melodrama reinvests with moral urgency what is liable to appear random or insignificant in a secularized world, since it uses "the things and gestures of the real world, of social life, as kinds of metaphors that refer us to the realm of spiritual reality and latent moral meanings" (9), Brooks argued that it should be seen not as a distinct theatrical form, a theme, or a genre, but rather "as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force" (xvii). This melodramatic mode, Brooks elaborated, is a "mode of heightened dramatization inextricably bound up with the modern novel's effort to signify" (xiii).

Brooks himself was surprised at the success of his study. In the preface to its 1995 edition he recalled that his book "got off on a slow start" when it first appeared, but that it finally found an audience, if an unexpected one: "Most striking to me is my belated discovery that this book early on engaged a readership in a field I had merely alluded to, and of which I then knew practically nothing: film studies" (vii). Together with Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" (1972), which independently from Brooks described the symbolic universe of the 1950s Hollywood family melodrama in terms of "an intensified symbolization of every-day actions [and] the heightening of the ordinary gesture" (79), Brooks's book thus became a point of departure for various re-investigations of a cinematic mode.

While Brooks and Elsaesser focused on specific periods and authors of melodrama (the late nineteenth century and the 1950s), their studies inspired other critics to widen the scope, and thus to reappraise eighteenth and nineteenth-century theater and fiction, as well as early twentieth-century classical Hollywood cinema. This wider historical scope inevitably triggered investigations in the socio-political work of the melodramatic imagination. After all, the melodramatic mode has always lent itself to stories of power struggles and to enactments of socio-cultural processes of marginalization or stratification. Where in the European context, for example, melodrama often revolved around conceptions of class and gender, many American novels, dramas, and films added the dramatic potential of race. It is on these grounds that not only literary but also philosophical and scientific texts can be read from the vantage point of melodrama studies—foregrounding, for instance, the Gothic

elements of *The Communist Manifesto* (Lansbury 6-7) or the melodramatic tendencies of nineteenth-century evolutionary and progressive thought (Postlewait 50-51).

2. Melodrama and Ideology

From the late nineteenth century onwards, literary critics tended to discuss melodrama in sharp counter-distinction to realism, as an outdated and embarrassingly crude approach to the problem of artistic mimesis which the realistic mode of writing supposedly had managed to overcome and leave behind. The very terms realism and melodrama have thus been used in highly evaluative ways, with realism signifying rationality, order, pragmatism, and clear-headedness, while melodrama stands for feeling, excess, sentimentality, and grandiose gestures. As Thomas Postlewait has pointed out, this dichotomy—"melodrama distorts, realism reports; melodrama offers escapism, realism offers life; melodrama is conservative, realism is radical; melodrama delivers ideologies (as false consciousness), realism deconstructs ideologies" (56)—has affected our very idea of literary history: "we read the history of American drama with a melodramatic imagination" (49, cf. also Hays). Indeed, all too often the very critique of such conceptualizations, as in revisionist feminist takes on the subject, does not question the overall evaluative grid, but ends up inverting it, with melodrama coming out on the good side and realism being discredited for a change. But according to Postlewait and other scholars in the field, one needs to see realism and melodrama as intricately interlinked categories:

We are confronted with a number of manifestations of realism and melodrama. More to the point, we are confronted with numerous joinings of melodramatic and realistic forms and functions. So, we make a categorical and historical mistake when we attempt to fix their identities (as if each had a controlling genetic code) or to create an evolutionary development (as if any formula, such as simple to complex or A replacing B, explained the matter). The changes are open ended, within and across boundaries. (54)

Again, this line of argument is prefigured in Brooks's study, which focuses, after all, on the works of two authors who were strongly associated with the aesthetics of realism: Honoré de Balzac and

Henry James. In the work of the latter, Brooks holds, melodrama goes mental, and becomes "melodrama of consciousness": "External melodrama has been used to lead into the melodrama of ethical choice" (157). For Brooks too, then, melodrama lives inside of realism—it is part and parcel of the realist project rather than its radical other, even if—or precisely because—the leading literary voices of the period (including Henry James) were anxious to distance themselves from the melodramatic tradition of the preceding period.

Of course, the history of differentiations between high and low art, between complex representations and cheap effects, extends from the late nineteenth well into the twentieth century and thus affects the screen no less than the stage. For one, the stage traditions of the late nineteenth century are closely linked with early cinematic traditions of representation, as Shane Denson argues in his contribution to this volume (cf. also Altman 1989; Singer; Williams 2001). Thus, the evaluative dichotomy of realism and melodrama is called up and variegated in the later contrastive fashioning of cinematic melodrama vs. the 'classical Hollywood' system. As Rick Altman has pointed out, the very differentiation between a melodramatic early "cinema of attraction" (Tom Gunning) and a realistic 'classical' Hollywood aesthetics from the 1930s onwards relied on the assumption that the classical Hollywood system (complex, though rule-bound) had somehow managed to discipline and restrain an early—anarchic and excessive—tradition of film making. Taking issue with this assumption, Altman showed that the melodramatic mode continued to influence the cinematic scene of the 1930s to 1950s, which to Altman displayed "an amalgam of deformed, embedded melodramatic material and carefully elaborated narrative classicism" (Altman 1989, 41).

It is on these grounds that Linda Williams raised her provocative claim that melodrama indeed functions as the cinematic mode of our days, superseding and informing all kinds of other traditions and genres of film-making, "a perpetually modernizing form that is neither opposed to the norms of the 'classical' nor to the norms of 'realism' but which adapts both," as she writes in her contribution to this volume. But even if the melodramatic imagination affects artistic productions from the eighteenth century to the present, it does so in strikingly different ways and with strikingly different results. There is, after all, a clear difference between the style and mood of the early 'cinema of attractions' and later phases of cine-

matic representation, even though continuities should not be overlooked or ignored. In the same vein, Rick Altman has reminded us of the continuous resemanticization of the term melodrama in twentieth-century film criticism and film studies (Altman 1998; Singer)—and the same logic holds true for literary and cultural history (cf. Mason; Postlewait). The very mode that lent itself to teleological and evolutionary narratives in the nineteenth century thus came to figure as the epitome of expressivity and disruption in the early twentieth century—exhibiting a versatility and malleability that can be found in few other narrative modes.

As a result, melodrama is always open to strongly divergent readings and historical appropriations. Thus, Winfried Herget's contribution in this volume demonstrates that the patterns of identification laid out in melodramatic texts are much more ambivalent than their often stereotypically constructed binary structures of evaluation would seem to suggest: the villain might easily become a figure of identification, even if the explicit reasoning or official moral message of a text run counter to such implied readings (cf. also Gledhill; Postlewait). By extension of this logic, melodramas are useful for all kinds of political purposes. It may well be true, as Martha Vicinus wrote, that melodrama "always sides with the powerless" (130), but one writer's victim might easily be another writer's bad guy. What can be witnessed in these constellations is the close affinity, almost to the point of synonymy, between the melodramatic mode and the rhetoric of sentimentalism. Melodrama's emphasis on sensation and excess seems to be the mode of representation par excellence for the sentimentalist equation of victimhood with virtue. Where sentimentalism holds that suffering is an unmistakable sign of moral righteousness, melodrama supplies the most effective tools of enacting this assumption on stage, on screen, and in fiction. It may well be asked here if the supposed omnipresence of melodrama in the modern imagination does not point to the much more tangible presence of sentimental ideologies in Western modernity. In any case it seems fair to say that many current positions in the field of melodrama studies are driven by a latent sentimentalism of their own, implying for instance, as Martha Vicinus or David Grimsted do, that to take the side of the powerless is by definition to take the side of morality and truth. Several contributions in this volume bear on these questions by investigating the volatile ideological thrust of melodrama and its openness to all

kinds of instrumentalizations and appropriations (cf. Nadja Gemalzick's, Uwe Juras's, Daniel Stein's, Christof Decker's, Barbara Krah's, Vanessa Künnemann's, Margit Peterfy's, and Wolfgang Hochbruck's texts).

What can be seen in these contributions is that whenever melodrama takes on ideological issues, it tends to interiorize, personalize, and excessively 'stylize' its subject matter. Thus, social and political issues are almost invariably transferred onto a level of representation where their enactment does not obviously threaten the existing social order, as Linda Williams argued:

One of the key features of melodrama [...] is its compulsion to 'reconcile the irreconcilable'—that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return. (Williams 2001,37)

Expanding on this idea, Christof Decker has shown that melodramatic structures are subject to "a fundamental ambivalence of feeling," constantly oscillating between "a stimulation and a control of affect" (Decker 14, our translation). Melodrama, Decker continues, does not so much aim at a fulfillment of desires but rather at their creation, it epitomizes "the fundamental insight that a return to the state of innocence" is impossible (42). Here, Decker goes beyond Williams, in showing that the wish to return to an original state of perfection need not go along with a regressive logic or an atavistic fixation on the past: "The search for the moral residual thrives on the nostalgic return ('Rückbindung') and the simultaneous insight that this return is only possible under changed conditions" (42). Indeed, the specific achievement of literary and filmic melodrama might well be to symbolically enact conflicts and problems that seem irresolvable at the time of enactment, thus not so much mapping a way out of a cultural predicament than rather staging it in the manner of a tableau. This might be one reason for the prominence of melodramatic performances in times of cultural transition and paradigm shifts (as discussed in the contributions of Martin Klepper, MaryAnn Snyder-Korber and Sabine Sielke in this volume).

3. Melodramatic Media: Prose, Drama, Film

Since reflections on the ideological work of melodrama abound in contemporary criticism, melodrama has not only lost its pejorative connotations, but its evaluation has flipped over all the way, so that melodrama is frequently seen now as the epitome of an alternative social discourse. Thus, in her influential reading of the cultural work of Dallas in terms of a melodramatic imagination, Ien Ang has come to the conclusion that the series “makes visible areas of internal psychological disturbance” (483) precisely because it is part and parcel of a larger popular cultural system of signification. Although Ang makes reference to Thomas Elsaesser’s work on the Sirkian family melodrama to legitimate her approach, she takes Elsaesser’s argument to new extremes. Elsaesser focused on what he took to be a highly sophisticated subgenre of popular entertainment, sharply set off from the melodramatic mainstream by its “open, conscious irony” (89). But whereas Elsaesser claimed that some melodramas carry subversive messages to the initiate and attentive, Ang argues that the consumption of melodramatic products is subversive per se, or at the very least lends itself to the subversive yearnings of its target audiences. The upshot of Ang’s reading is that subversion originates in the act of reception and emotional appropriation, not in the formal features of the melodramatic product (which even in Ang’s reading may well continue to figure as a cheap commodity, as long as it is not made meaningful by its readers or viewers). This strong emphasis on acts of innovative reception is obviously borrowed from the critical predilections of the Cultural Studies movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Such emphasis, however, begs the question if there are specific modes of representation—or a specific aesthetic contract between product and audience—that invite and encourage such acts of melodramatic consumption.

It is on the grounds of methodological issues such as these that Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, the editors of another study on the melodramatic imagination, cast doubt on the feasibility or use value of melodrama studies in general.

[T]here has been little systematic effort to demonstrate that there are firm historical, cultural, and ideological continuities linking, for example, the melodramas performed in nineteenth-century working-class

theatres with recent bestsellers nor the series that dominate daytime television. [...] Such generalizations have frequently depended on claiming for the melodrama a subversive essence, a 'melodramatic' core that dehistoricizes the melodrama and allows it to be transformed into something more contemporary: the transhistorical marker of a disruptive, modern mode of consciousness and representation, (vii)

By consequence, Hays and Nikolopoulou decide to focus on the theatrical traditions of melodrama in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to bracket off its filmic and televisual forms in the twentieth century. Yet while we agree that melodrama needs to be carefully historicized and should not be associated with a general and unchanging pattern of (subversive) popular expression or reception, we do think that the continuities between the theatrical and prose traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the filmic and televisual enactments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are too obvious and too interesting to render such a restriction necessary.² With this volume, we hope to demonstrate that there are many reciprocities and correspondences in the differently mediated enactments of the melodramatic mode, stretching from the eighteenth century to our days, even while there are just as many breaks and discontinuities that require explanation.

We start from the assumption—rather than arguing the point—that melodrama needs to be taken seriously. There is no need any longer to 'rescue' the status of melodrama against the charge of triviality or shallowness—these battles have been fought and they were won long ago. Instead, we mean to look closer at particular features and aspects of the melodramatic imagination over time. The readings collected in this volume, focusing on different mani-

- 2 In claiming this lineage—from the stage to the screen—we certainly risk repeating the simplification criticized by Ralph Poole when he pointed out that melodrama critics assume that "melodrama is the theatrical mode most obviously linked to the 19th century, and that, if anyone was to study American melodrama in the 20th century, he or she had better take a look at Hollywood cinematography or television soap opera productions" (514). Yet we fully endorse Poole's call for a reassessment of "the historical valence of other forms of (visual) representation that have been essential in shaping the American imaginary" (515). Cf. also Ralph Poole's contribution to this volume, and Nassim Balestrini's text, in which she traces the extensions of one literary theme through theatrical and operatic traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

festations of melodrama from the eighteenth-century novel to documentary television programs, should bring to the fore the multifaceted and heterogeneous quality of our object of research.

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