|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **About you** | **[Salutation]** | Luis | Miguel | García-Mainar |
| [Enter your biography] | | | |
| University of Zaragoze, Spain | | | |

|  |
| --- |
| **Your article** |
| **Melodrama** |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| [Enter an **abstract** for your article] |
| With origins in the novel and the theatre, melodrama appeared in late eighteenth-century Europe and further developed at the turn of the twentieth century. In the United States, the incipient film industry adopted it as a vehicle for suspense and action stories aimed at a mass audience. Melodrama featured a Manichaean world where unquestionably virtuous protagonists had to endure suffering and defend themselves from the advance of purely evil and utterly villainous antagonists. Narratively similar to the biblical parable, melodrama depicted moral struggles that pervaded most commercial cinemas across the world — whether in France, Italy, Mexico, the Middle East, or the various Indian industries. Melodrama, however, is most recognized through its Hollywood incarnation. Hollywood combined melodrama with various types of action films, but also developed a distinct version revolving around domestic conflict and sentimental plots. 1970s film criticism associated the term with films centred on women and family life, frequently containing a more or less open critique of dominant gender relations. Key examples of this type of melodrama are King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* (1937), Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956), or Vincente Minelli’s *Some Came Running* (1958). Emotional excessive and subtly critical of social mores, it combined popular appeal and modernist stylization, and attracted auteurs striving after cultural respectability and commercial success.  The term melodrama first referred to dramas where dialogue was emotionally enhanced through the use of music, resulting in a form of entertainment that combined music, dance, drama, and pantomime. Between 1880 and 1920 a more sensational, spectacularly staged, and extremely popular mode of melodrama from American and European popular theatre was adapted into film serials. Throughout this period, both stage and film serial melodramas were regarded as unsophisticated artistic forms that catered to the basic instincts of the masses by means of suspense and emotional excess. They were products of and reflections on aspects of modernity, including rapid urbanisation, new means of transport and communication, and emerging social structures and styles of intimacy. During the 1920s Melodrama then adopted its characteristic features: dramatic conflict between good and evil, stock characters (the hero, the heroine, the villain), a hyperbolic aesthetic, and an episodic, swiftly moving plot (Neale 2000, 196). Some studies have argued for melodrama as an allegorical form, and as an attempt to unearth a hidden world of moral meaning — or ‘moral occult’ — repressed by a society that had turned its back on religion after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In this view, melodrama was a fable about the inevitable conflict between good and evil; it offered guidance to navigate and cope with personal and social dilemmas in a world lacking ultimate moral certainty (Brooks 1985, 51-60). Its operating mechanisms have been interpreted as echoing Freudian psychology — melodrama functions through a process of displacing emotion and repressed meanings onto settings and costumes, reflecting the conflicts that beset characters (Elsaesser 1987, 58-60).  Melodrama has always been a diffuse, elusive concept that resists easy conceptualisation. This is, in part, because the term has been used to refer to different types of films and conventions at different times. To the mainstream American film industry, it meant stories that featured crime, violence, tension, moral Manichaeism, and suspense. This use reveals the connection between nineteenth-century melodrama and Hollywood’s genres of action and suspense — horror, thriller, Westerns war, and action-adventure films. In this strand of melodrama — often referred to as ‘action melodrama’ (Walker 1982, 16-18) — helpless women are often threatened by men who seduce and abandon them, while male heroes are subject to the uncertainties of a troubled world. The broad spread of the term melodrama across a variety of films and mediums suggests that melodrama may be seen more as a narrative mode whose conventions underpin many genres than as a genre itself. From this point of view, then, melodrama exists as one of the foundational cinematic modes of the United States, where films have traditionally exhibited morally charged conflicts with characters seeking to escape social constrictions. This notion of melodrama is illustrated in such classics as *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920), and in film noirs like John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), gangster films such as *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), horror films such as *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), or Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939).    Melodrama is also used to denote a heightened sense of emotion or sentimentality, usually in the context of familial relationships. The family melodrama deals with the process by which characters adjust their social and sexual profiles to the strict confines of the home, thus functioning as an outlet for tensions and contradictions arising from sex, gender roles, and familial relations (Mulvey 1987, 75). Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) or Vincente Minnelli’s *The Cobweb* (1955), *Some Came Running* (1958), and *Home from the Hill* (1960) are examples of this formula. Related to family melodrama are films centring on women and the home, whereupon women repeatedly struggle to reconcile their sexuality and social ambitions with their roles as wives and mothers. This conception of melodrama is perhaps the most popular understanding of the genre in the field of film studies, which has tended to associate melodrama with the realm of women. Classic woman’s films in melodrama include *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1947), and *The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophüls, 1949). Integral to this strand of the genre was Douglas Sirk, a German director who moved to Hollywood in the 1930s to make a series of highly regarded melodramas in the 1950s. *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1957), and *Imitation of Life* (1959) used *mise-en-scène* (setting, costume, and colour) in order to signal sexual or familial conflict, turning it into a trademark of the genre that would later be imitated by other filmmakers, such as German director Rainer W. Fassbinder during the 1970s. |
| Further reading:  Brooks, Peter. ‘The Melodramatic Imagination.’ *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Ed. Landy, Marcia. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1985.  Doane, Mary Anne., *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987.    Gledhill, Christine., ed. *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*. London: BFI, 1987.  Klinger, Barbara. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.  Mercer, John., and Martin Shingler. *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility*. London: Wallflower, 2004.  Mulvey, Laura. ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama.’ *Movie* 25 (Winter 1977-78): 53.  Neale, Stephen. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000. 179-204.  Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001.  Walker, Michael. ‘Melodrama and the American Cinema.’ *Movie* 19.30 (1982): 2-38.  Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. |