Film Melodrama: Definitions, Origins, and History

Cheesy. Corny. Cheap. Such negative associations unfairly stigmatize the spectrum of films commonly labeled as melodramas. A particular animus crops up again and again. A popular website, Rotten Tomatoes, says of *I Am Sam* (2001): "Not only does the manipulative *I Am Sam* oversimplify a complex issue. It drowns it in treacle." The same site quotes a reviewer panning a similar film: *Martian Child* (2007) wants to make us cry. It nearly made me gag. This is an exercise in shameless and inept emotional manipulation." (As if other movies avoid emotional manipulation, or are more skilled at it, or at the very least, more ashamed.) Interestingly, on Rotten Tomatoes both films appear to be quite popular with average viewers.

Historically, popular melodramas addressed mass audiences, as opposed to educated social classes, and were linked with sentimentality and femininity. These lingering connotations account for the widespread disdain expressed by many scholars and critics for these films. Certainly, inept melodramas stoop to cheesiness. But the clumsy use of story materials threatens any film that relies more on mundane formulas and insincerity than creativity and heartfelt emotion. At their best, melodramas strive for the sublime (in the sense that the Romantic poets and painters used the word, as connected to the highest realms of human feeling or exaltation), and when they succeed, they provide an unparalleled experience of plentitude. Even when they fail overall, such movies often furnish audiences with memorable scenes and unforgettable moments. *The term "melodrama' refers to three overlapping but still distinct categories:* ***a mode of storytelling****,* ***a type of theatrical play****, and* ***a film genre****.*

Melodrama as mode of storytelling

First, melodrama may refer to a "mode," an overarching narrative approach on the same level as tragedy, comedy, and realism. "Modes" are larger and more amorphous than genres: they embody a generalized tone—perhaps a philosophical approach—about living in this world. Traditionally, comedies see everyone as loveable fools, and life as absurd; tragedies perceive kings and rulers as noble but flawed, their fates unchangeable. Melodramas, however, depict the world as sharply divided into good and evil, with the suffering virtuous people deserving of pathos and admiration. Whereas tragedies concentrate on the nobility and the kings or kingdoms, melodramas focus on the lower gentry of middle classes, and particularly on the destinies of families and lovers. Unlike realism, with its emphasis on plausibility amid the prosaic—on shoe polish and cabbage soup—the melodramatic mode features an exciting, sensational universe saturated with meaning, action, and coincidence. Here, every gesture, object, and sentence pulsates with significance: the ring you wear denotes your lineage and the aged servant turns out to be your father in disguise. Nothing is downplayed: storms rage; winds howl; waterfalls crash; hearts shatter; characters sink to their knees; women faint. Comparative literature scholar Peter Brooks characterizes melodrama as the mode "of excess." Novelists like Dickens, Balzac, and Hugo gravitate toward melodrama in *A Tale of Two Cities, La Père Goriot*, and *Les Misérables*—and so does Baz Luhrmann in movies such as *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001).

Melodrama as a type of theatrical play

Melodrama as a mode takes name and qualities from a type of French theater that began in the late eighteenth century. *Melo-drames*, plays with music (and without speech), were dramatic performances that appeared around the, time of the French Revolution in the 1870s. Soon incorporating dialogue and spreading from France throughout Europe and to the United States in the nineteenth century, these plays proved enormously popular with middle- and lower-class audiences living in urban centers. In particular, the plays focused on themes relevant to their audiences' anxieties about the rapidly modernizing social fabric: recognizing and coping with injustice, locating innocence, and balancing monetary and familial claims. Peter Brooks argues that beneath the often-crowded surface the plays staged a search for applicable moral codes in confusing and increasingly post-sacred societies.

The sensational plays of Pixérécourt in France, Holcroft in England, and countless imitators incorporated spectacles of impressive scenery and theatrical effects. Including blinding snowstorms, huge pirate ships, fierce battles, daring swordfights, baying hounds, and stomping horses, these plays didn't even need to be realistic or plausible—coincidences abound and impossible

things happen in every scene. Fundamentally, the stories were meant to overwhelm their audiences' emotions with giant ladlings of astonishing events. While these plays are rarely performed today, we see their like in librettos that form the basis for nineteenth-century operas (poor Butterfly! poor Mimi! poor Carmen!) and in the second-longest-running show or all time, *Les Misérables*, taken from Victor Hugo's melodramatic novel.

The nineteenth-century American stage gravitated toward theatrical melodrama like metal filings to a magnet. Sometimes it took Shakespeare's plays and bowdlerized them into melodramas, often it simply stole European works, but by the mid- to late 1800s American dramatists were creating their own native stories dealing with American themes. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, adapted for the stage by George Aiken from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, stressed the pathos of the separation of mother and child, the injustice of slavery, and the sadness of death, becoming the biggest blockbuster success in the history of American theater. *The Poor of New York* (1857), adapted and localized by the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault, stressed reversals of fortune in America's largest metropolis during the financial panics of 1837 and 1857, while David Belasco's *The Heart of Maryland* (1895) told a story of love and betrayal set during the Civil War, and his *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) celebrated the frontier. All American melodramas offered exciting stage effects, nationalist sentiments, lessons in democracy, and moral parables.

Melodrama as film genre

Third, melodrama has become the name of a film genre. The invention of silent film overlapped with the decline of American stage melodramas, and many film historians have ascribed silent-film narratives, themes, and acting from these stage models. During the era of early cinema, trade journals routinely referred to nearly all films as melodramas-with-a-hyphen, e.g., "western-melodramas," "crime-melodramas," "war-melodramas," "romantic-melodramas." These industry labels made sense because nearly all films employed the tropes and techniques of theatrical melodramas and, more broadly, the mindset of the melodramatic mode. Over the years, however, "Western" became a genre designation of its own, and "melodrama" was dropped from the name. Yet the magnetic force field of melodrama still pulls all American films in its direction. In "Melodrama Revised," film scholar Linda Williams convincingly argues, "Melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie."

Certain films were left behind, uncategorized, when Westerns, gangster films, combat films, and horror films (movies primarily addressed to male viewers) spun off into separately recognized genres. Many of the "leftover" films were adaptations of stage melodramas or melodramatic novels and/or stories featuring female protagonists. When genre theory advanced to become one of the dominant strains of film studies, feminist scholars recognized similarities among 1) silent melodramas; 2) those Hollywood producers literally named "women's films," e.g., films produced during the studio years featuring major women stars, designed to lure female audiences to the cheaters; and 3) a 1950s cluster of films centering on family and community. Over the decades, academics have debated whether yoking these disparate groups under one label actually crystallized a film genre or, as Russell Merritt vehemently argues, simply provided a catch-all term for discussing films hitherto left orphaned from our genre canons. In any opinion, the connections between the different cycles are strong enough to justify linking them under a single rubric, and the term "melodrama" (despite its unwieldy tripartite meaning) remains preferable to alternative designations such as "woman's films," "tearjerkers," and "weepies," all of which are too narrow and belittling, or "dramas" or "romances," which are too broad and fail to capture the films' emotional tenor.

Currently, when speaking of melodrama as a film genre, then, one refers to *films centering on personal relationships—whether friendship, romance, or family dynamics—that seek to elicit spectator sympathy for the films' protagonists and tell their stories in a heightened style that include spectacular effects, implausible coincidence, plot twists, and a clear dichotomy between good and evil.*

Melodramas privilege intimate connections imperiled in a changing, hostile world. Physical or emotional separation and death constantly threaten various characters within the narrative; melodramas activate and then assuage viewers' primal separation anxieties, which, say some theorists, underlie the basic emotional responses viewers have to film. Most of all, melodramas elicit intense emotions, particularly pathos. When you think melodrama, think *Titanic* (1997).

Throughout the decades: film melodramas morphed into whatever best responded to changing social conditions and varying cultural mores. Melodramas appeared at the founding of the cinema. The British short *Rescued by Rover* (1905), in which a baby is stolen from a nurse by a gypsy and rescued by the loyal family dog, who finds the baby and then goes back to fetch the father still charms today. Edwin S. Porter, a pioneer in American silent cinema, directed *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908), in which the soon-to-be famous D. W. Griffith plays a father who rescues his child from a (very fake-looking) bird of prey.

When Griffith started directing later that year for the Biograph Company, he imbued his short films with the tropes of stage melodrama in which he had been trained. For instance, in *Villa* (1909), burglars threaten a mother and her young daughters successively breaking through locked doors into their home as the father rushes back to save them. (Such breathtaking last-minute rescues became the hallmark of a cycle of immensely popular melodrama serials, Including *The Perils of Pauline, The Exploits of Elaine*, and *The Hazards of Helen*, all of which started In 1914.) Some of Griffiths' features such as *Way Down East* (1920), about a young girl who is tricked into a fake marriage and bears an illegitimate child before finding her true love, were adapted from previously successful stage melodramas. Nevertheless, whatever source material he used, all of Griffith's features serve as classic examples of the melodramatic genre.

Yet Griffith's movies were hardly unique. The world-famous silent-film star Mary Pickford excelled in melodrama. In *Stella Maris* (1918), for example, she plays dual roles, a disabled rich girl and a forlorn abused orphan. A decade later, in *Sparrows* (1926), she again plays an orphan, Molly, the eldest child of a group held prisoner by a magnificently evil orphanage director, Mr. Grimes (Gustav von Seyferritz), who not only mistreats and starves his charges bur also kidnaps babies from rich families for ransom. To rescue the darling toddler Mr. Grimes is going to murder, Molly leads the children on a daring nighttime escape through a swamp that threatens them with both quicksand and hungry alligators. Whereas Pickford generally responded to her persecution with spunky defiance, the ocher leading lady of the silent era, Lillian Gish, often played more pitiful maidens. In *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *The End* (1928), Gish's tribulations drive her to hysterics and madness.

By the Roaring Twenties—the Jazz Age—adaptations of nineteenth-century melodramas seemed passé. The 1927 Broadway musical play *Show* includes an affectionate parody of old-fashioned melodrama; a parody emphasized in the 1951 film version when Gaylord Ravenal (Howard Keel) first overhears Magnolia (Kathryn Grayson) rehearsing these absurd lines from the parodic *Tempest and Sunshine*:

> Oh sir! Is there no mercy in your evil soul? No kindness in your ugly heart? Oh sir, what manner of foul jackal are you? Coming into our humble home, rich as you are, yet reeking of the carrion of the flesh-pots. Oh sir, I plead with you on bended knee, from the torn and wretched heart of a mother, stop giving my little daughter diamonds and go home to your wife!

In *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film of the 1920s*, Lea Jacobs traces the increasing impatience with and condescension toward melodrama manifested in reviews and the rise in popularity of naturalism/realism and sophisticated comedy. But the disdain of the elites did not hamper millions from adoring Charlie Chaplin's films, in which heart-wrenching melodrama is leavened by comedy. The narrative skeleton of *The Kid* (1921) is classic melodrama, as Chaplin is well aware; he starts the film with an intertitle: "A picture with a smile—*and perhaps, a tear*" (my emphasis). Chaplin, in his usual role, plays the Tramp, who discovers a baby boy abandoned by his unwed mother. He raises the child as his own and the two live happily on meager earnings, derived mostly from the boy's breaking windows with rocks, after which the Tramp coincidentally saunters by with glazing materials. However, when meddling child welfare agencies discover this unconventional household, they remove the child, leading to climactic last-minute rescue as the Tramp runs over rooftops to reunite with his adopted son. Such tugging at the heartstrings also occurs in *The Gold Rush* (1925) and, especially, in *City Lights* (1931), in which the reunion between the now-sighted flower seller and the Tramp, who paid for her operation with years in prison, has entranced generations of filmgoers.

During the silent era, cultural elites' attitudes toward melodramas were inconsistent. Although they sneered at American melodramas, when émigré directors F. W. Murnau and Victor Sjöström adapted melodramatic material with European artistic sensitivity, critics changed their tune. *Sunrise* (1927) and *The Wind* (1928) were critical successes, and history textbooks still see them as the apogee of silent cinema. Even today, critics more readily accept melodrama in foreign films. Foreign, exotic, and

historic settings somehow seem more hospitable to high romance and exalted feelings than prosaic, contemporary American environments, which we know too well. When sound emerged at the end of the 1920s, film actors had to leave behind the broad, rather histrionic melodramatic postures perfected during the silent era and adopt more understated and realistic tropes of performance. Characters became more individualized—it would no longer do to call the heroine "The Girl" or "The Little Dear One" or "The Kid." Moreover, as the country fell into the trough of the Depression, melodramas tackled more contemporaneous cultural issues that menaced America's stability; the threats, therefore, stemmed not from dastardly villains, capricious weather, urbanization, or in machines, but from harsh social conditions and poverty.

In the 1930s and 1940s, two prevalent subgenres of melodrama emerged. In the "fallen woman" subgenre, a woman suffers because she has succumbed to out-of-wedlock sex. *Back Street* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), Anna *Karenina* (1935), *Camille* (1936), and countless less-famous titles focus on the pathos of a woman's fall. These films highlight the delirious pleasures of forbidden sexual liaisons, including the consuming passion and the material benefits. Audiences relish the beautiful gowns Marguerite (Greta Garbo) wears as a courtesan in Camille and the world-weary sophistication, outrageous furs, and bold independence that mark Shanghai Lilly (Marlene Dietrich) in *Shanghai Express*. Yet industry regulations insisted on showing that sexual dalliance led to misery; loose women always paid the ultimate price of sin: unhappiness and disgrace, if not death. The moral strictures of the era were so tight that in William Wyler's *Jezebel* (1938), Julie (Bette Davis) must suffer just because she flaunted her sexuality (by wearing a red dress) and disobeyed her fiancé. She endures bitter humiliation, years of abandonment, and ultimately goes off to her death.

The second prevalent subgenre, the maternal melodrama, rehearses the pain of losing a child. This subgenre flourished as America moved toward smaller families but still faced a high infant mortality rate. Typically in these stories, child is ripped from the female protagonist has slipped from the moral high ground due to socially unacceptable behavior. She may lose her child because she cheats on her husband (in *Madame X,* filmed three times—1929, 1937, and 1966), because she prostitutes herself to earn the money to afford life-saving medical intervention for her husband (in *Blonde Venus,* 1932), or because she had a one-night stand with a soldier off to war and cannot raise the child as an unwed mother (*Old Maid*, 1939 and *To Each Her Own*, 1941). In *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Mildred (Joan Crawford) loses her younger daughter to illness because she has been inattentive and self-absorbed in her career and her love life.

In *Stella Dallas* (1937), the title character suffers the loss of her beloved daughter simply because she is too lower class and uncouth. Stella (Barbara Stanwyck), a laboring man's daughter, manages to snag an upper-class husband, Stephen Dallas (John Boles). Shortly after the birth of their daughter, Laurel, the marriage founders, and they divorce, with Stephen moving to New York City. Though Stella and Laurel are very close, the girl suffers from her mother's déclassé behavior and tasteless dress. Ultimately, Stella realizes that the teenage Laurel (Anne Shirley) would have more opportunities if she lived with her remarried father and his refined second wife. To send Laurel away, Stella pretends that she doesn't want her anymore. Years later, on the night of Laurel's wedding—the film's climax—the kind and wise stepmother deliberately opens the mansion's curtains to let onlookers peer in; Stella stands crying in the rain, a literal outsider watching her daughter get married. Stella is finally chased away by a policeman. Newspaper reviews of 1937 term the movie "a rousing weep festival," and note "a good cry may be had by all." Seven decades later, it is still impossible to watch with completely dry eyes.

During the 1940s, when men were overseas fighting World War I, Hollywood put great emphasis on major female stars such as Bette Davis, Joan Fontaine, Greer Garson, Joan Crawford, and Ingrid Bergman. Their films, directed by such premier exponents as Alfred Hitchcock, George Cukor, and William Wyler, became prestige properties, commanding high budgets, beautiful cinematography, and less formulaic narratives. The romantic longings typical of the woman's film reach their culmination in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), directed by the émigré Max Ophüls and starring Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan. As a young teenager in turn-of-the-century Vienna, Lisa falls in love with her neighbor, Stefan, a concert pianist. She unrequitedly adores him all her life. An inveterate, callous womanizer, Stefan does not recognize the eighteen-year-old Lisa as his neighbor during the short, dreamlike affair he has with her, leaving her pregnant. Worse yet, ten years later, when she goes to him to confess her life-long obsession, he doesn't know her at all: Stefan slips into his practiced seduction routine—now revealed to Lisa as prosaic and insincere as if this were their very first meeting. Only when she writes him from her tubercular deathbed does he fully understand

their story and realize the complete and enduring love he threw away. Sobered by reading Lisa's letter, Stefan commits suicide by fighting a duel with her husband that he knows he will lose.

If an American director had made *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Lisa's glorious dying *amour fou* might have been ascribed to a father fixation an unloving mother. Throughout the twentieth century and intensifying after World War Il, Hollywood—following American society as a whole—became fascinated with Freudian models of individual psychology. Popular Freudianism saturated mass culture with advice columns, books, and magazine articles. Whereas melodrama had previously employed stock characters with little psychological depth, the genre now rushed to embrace this new and seemingly more scientific and nuanced understanding of psyches. Presaged by *Now ! Voyager* (1942), in which Bette Davis plays a loveless, dowdy, shy spinster set free by her psychiatrist, the late 1940s saw a series of films focused on women beset by psychological demons.

The screens of the 1950s—those years of supposed domestic contentment but actual quiet desperation—were dominated by what critics now call "family melodramas," films tracing the trials of various family members and friends in a small town or community. While the problems on display have significant social components, the major strains are psychosexual neuroses: accordingly, character types include fathers who don't love their sons, or mothers who love their sons too much; mothers whose frigidity or sexuality disturbs their daughters, or daughters whose sexuality disturbs their parents; daughters with crushes on their mother's beau, or (step)fathers who desire their daughters; husbands who are impotent or closet homosexuals, or wives who are nymphomaniacs. Insecurities, compulsions, and alcoholism abound, while dark pasts or devastating secrets haunt everyone. Although the acting is more subtle and individualized, ultimately, the mechanical repetitions of pseudo-Freudian psychology reduce these characters to formulaic patterns, basically creating stock figures who do not show that much more depth or plausibility than the traditional figures in silent film melodramas. (This same shallow Freudianism appears in other genres during this time. See Hitchcock's 1945 *Spellbound* and 1960's *Psycho*.)

The majority of 1950s family melodramas offer vibrant color and widescreen productions because the studios hoped that these visual pleasures and "racy" topics would lure viewers away from their new televisions with free programming. These movies tend to be long and epic in scope, cluttered with numerous subplots. In addition to Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1958) and *Home from the Hill* (1960) specialized in family melodrama. *Picnic* (1955), *Peyton Place* (1957), *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) demonstrate that the cycle spread to other directors and studios as well.

However, many critics consider Douglas Sirk, who directed a series of films for Universal in the late 1950s, the master of family melodrama, for his works *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1959). These texts fascinate scholars because their tone is so ambiguous. Sirk had been involved in Marxist theater movements in Germany in the 1930s; in interviews he has stated that he deliberately designed these Universal melodramas to be ironic. Certainly, his films remain a puzzle. Universal marketed them "straight," as touching melodramas: the tag line for *Magnificent Obsession* is "The story of a woman's need for a man that will become one of the great emotional thrills of your lifetime!" Yet Rock Hudson, Jane Wyman, and Lana Turner—who were the biggest stars under contract at Universal at the time—give stilted performances; they have little of the passion and star charisma of the great melodrama stars of the 1940s. Is their stiltedness due to a lack of skill or a deliberate ploy on the part of the director? The overwhelming music, the carefully composed mise-en-scene, and the overheated, byzantine plots cause such disorientation and even bewilderment that viewers rarely know whether to laugh or cry.

In *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) the complications ensue when Cary (Jane Wyman), an upper-class middle-aged widow, falls in love with her younger gardener Ron (Rock Hudson). The deer that appears on cue, smack in the middle of the window at the film's end serves as a metaphor for the more natural life Cary will have if she breaks with her social set and follows her heart to marry Ron, who recently has been injured in an accident, but the deer's appearance is so silly and blatant: should the viewer laugh? And if you do, are you laughing at the deer's appearance in the movie, the conventions of excess melodrama, or the conceit that one can or would want to live like Thoreau in 1950s America? Sirk's reputation as left-wing Marxist allied with Brechtian theater creates contradictions that place the spectator on uneasier footing than is typical with traditional melodramas.

Although many viewers now see Sirk's films as camp, other present-day viewers still respond empathetically. Witness the blogger who wrote on IMDB about *Imitation of Life*.

> I have seen this movie a countless number of times and know the dialogue by heart. Each time I watch it, I say, "I'm not going to cry this time." Sometimes I almost make it, but then Mahalia Jackson starts to sing and I lose it.... To me the most heart-wrenching scene is where Annie visits Sarah Jane in her hotel room. She says, "I want to hold you my arms one more time. Just like you were my baby." I puddle up just writing about it.

Is this viewer a naive dupe of Hollywood conventions, or is the film genuinely emotional and ambiguously critical?

By the mid-1960s, melodrama per se was practically exiled from American screens. College students and teenagers dominated audience demographics rather than the women moviegoers of earlier decades, and these groups were less open to the genre's themes and sentimentality. The years of youth rebellion from 1965 to 1975 were particularly inhospitable. In *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974), Molly Haskell points out that the films appearing around her were mostly buddy movies about men, exhibiting a virulent misogyny. Women stars, family issues, love stories, or tears were so rare that thoroughly mediocre melodramas such as *Love Story* (1970), about a young couple who meet as students at Harvard and are deeply in love until the wife dies of brain cancer, and the TV movie *Brian's Song* (1971), about the rare interracial friendship of professional football players Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo, who dies of cancer, garnered wide attention and large audiences.

Contemporary melodrama has not received nearly the attention it deserves. The genre has not died; it is hidden in plain sight.…

Editor's note: *We can only assume that the author, Dr. Sadie Kozloff, a retired professor of film studies whose lifelong scholarly ambition was to complete this very history of melodrama, was soon to conclude her work with a discussion of melodrama since the 1970s. Professor Kozloff's estranged daughter—having experienced a change of heart after the sudden, unprecipitated loss of her own daughter to pneumonia—had arrived unannounced and unexpected at the isolated lakeside cabin where the professor had retired to write. Professor Kozloff, elated to see her daughter after years of estrangement, rushed out to greet her but lost her footing on the icy path that led to the cabin, was concussed by the fall, and as a consequence now suffers a rare type of retrograde amnesia. She remembers neither her daughter, their estrangement from one another, nor her life's work, which, sadly, remains unfinished to this day.*