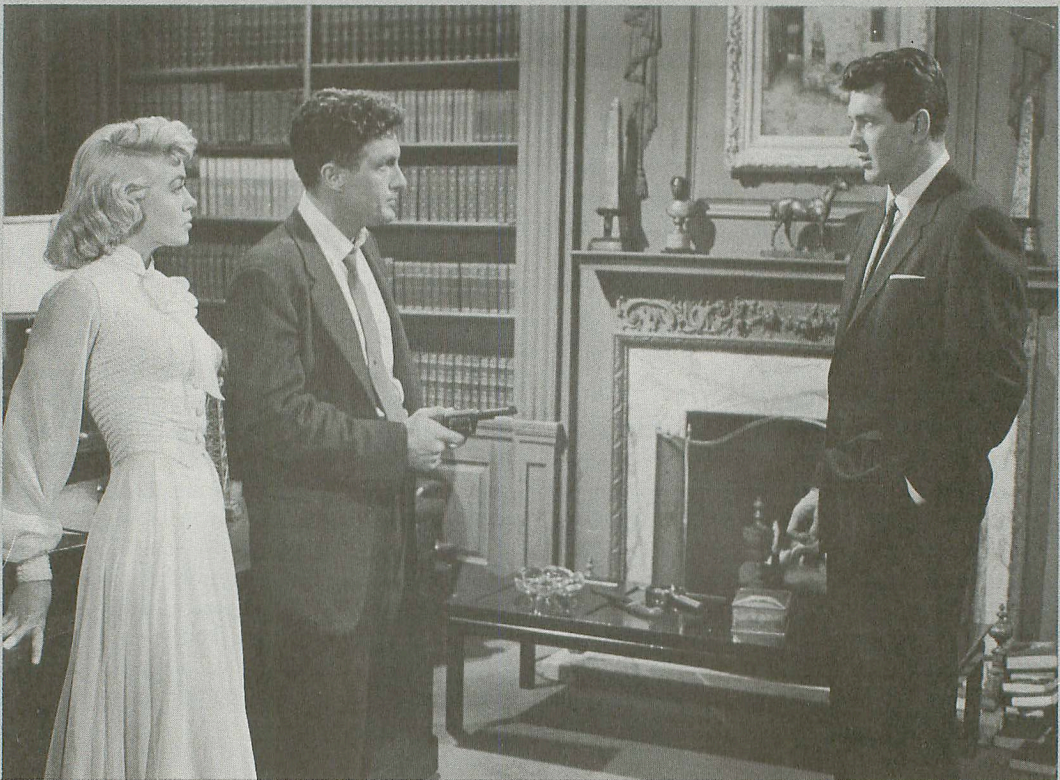

“TALES OF SOUND AND FURY”
RECONSIDERED
Melodrama as a System of Punctuation



Dorothy Malone, Robert Stack, and Rock Hudson in Written on the Wind (1956)

Cynthia Baron

In her introduction to *Home is Where the Heart Is*, Christine Gledhill proposes that in spite of the invaluable contributions made in the last several years, "melodrama's point of entry into film studies gave it a particular slant which... current analysis is struggling to supersede."¹ This slant has been unable to address the issue that "in a certain sense every Hollywood movie might be described as 'melodramatic'."² More specifically, it has not fostered understanding of the relationship between melodrama in the American cinema and nineteenth-century melodramatic theatre and literature. Nor has it made possible a view of connections between (family) melodrama and the American melodramatic tradition—which includes films thought of as women's pictures and film noir. Further, melodrama's point of entry has caused "the most useful definition" of melodrama, one which "allows melodramatic elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuation" to be passed by.³

Larger movements within film theory caused Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of family melodramas' cultural and psychological context to be of primary interest, with the consequence that his observations on narrative strategies were overlooked. These larger movements obscured his analysis of classical and melodramatic narration in "Tales of Sound and Fury," as well as his observations on the formal devices, structural parallels/oppositions and dramatic acceleration. Thus, while Elsaesser's essay has served as a touchstone for discussing melodrama in terms of ideological failure, his insight that "melodramatic elements [are]...constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline" has been ignored.⁴

More recently, Elsaesser's analysis of aesthetic issues in "Tales of Sound and Fury" has been acknowledged. Christine Gledhill observes that the essay's "emphasis is formal, posing melodrama as a 'problem in style and articulation.'"⁵ She finds that the essay is "a transitional piece, poised between the auteurist and 'mise en scene' approaches of the 60s and the ideological concerns of the 70s."⁶ The essay has served as a

transition, more accurately a watershed, in the way melodrama is discussed. Yet more to the point, "Tales of Sound and Fury" is a transitional piece in the sense that it applies formal analysis, traditionally reserved for high art, to artifacts of popular culture. As such, it marks a transition from modernist to postmodernist criticism, and in very practical terms, counters the view of Classical Hollywood Cinema as monolithic.

I will argue that the central concern in "Tales of Sound and Fury" is cinematic narration, in particular a melodramatic variation of classical narration in the American cinema, which punctuates narrative progression by throttling audience expectations, and uses structural parallels to complicate identification. In addition, I will propose that there is a fundamental distinction between the effect of melodramatic narration in films of the American cinema, namely that it creates the "desire to make up for...emotional deficiency," and the thematic 'core of truth' found in family melodramas.⁷ Because family melodramas' representation of "the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society," has been the focus in film studies, to address the distinction between the effect of narrative strategies and thematic concerns, I will focus, as Elsaesser does, on formal techniques that family melodramas share with the (European) dramatic and literary tradition, and other films of the American melodramatic tradition.⁸

Classical Versus Melodramatic Narration

While it is usually read in isolation, "Tales of Sound and Fury" is in fact the second of a three part series in *Monogram* on the American cinema. Elsaesser's first essay, "The American Cinema: Why Hollywood," addresses classical narration; the second, "Tales of Sound and Fury," examines the melodramatic variation as it is found in family melodramas of the 50's; and the third segment, "Pathos of Failure," explores a modernist variation found in road movies of the 70's.⁹ In the opening essay, Elsaesser observes that the American cinema (whether using classical, melodramatic, or modernist narrative strategies) can be described in terms of "its

structural constants [which] are dramatic conflict and narrative progression."¹⁰ He proposes that "secondly, it is a psychological cinema," activating "certain psychological processes—of identification, of emotive participation or imaginative projection."¹¹ He finds, in addition, that films of the American cinema obsessively insist on "the irremediable contradiction between desire and fulfillment."¹²

Throughout the essays, Elsaesser describes classical narration (the norm) in the American cinema as being "essentially based on a dramaturgy of intrigue and strongly accentuated plot, which manage[s] to transform spatial and temporal sequence into consequence, a continuum of cause and effect."¹³ He observes that "one of the typical features of the classical Hollywood movie has been that the hero [is] defined dynamically, as the centre of continuous movement."¹⁴ In other words, classical narration provides the audience with a place in the fiction through "conflict, complication and resolution which proceeds from cause and effect via the central characters."¹⁵ These features of classical narration contrast with those belonging to the melodramatic or modernist variations.

In "Tales of Sound and Fury," Elsaesser discusses the variation created by "the aesthetic problem of how to depict a character who is not constantly externalising himself into action without thereby trapping him in an environment of readymade symbolism."¹⁶ This "problem" underlies the "structural changes from linear externalisation of action to a sublimation of dramatic values into more complex forms of symbolisation."¹⁷ It motivates use of the melodramatic variation of classical narration, employing structural parallels and dramatic acceleration to slow down and break the linear trajectory of the narrative, imparting information outside or even counter to the primary intrigue, and creating achieved situations which invite audience emotional and cognitive involvement.¹⁸

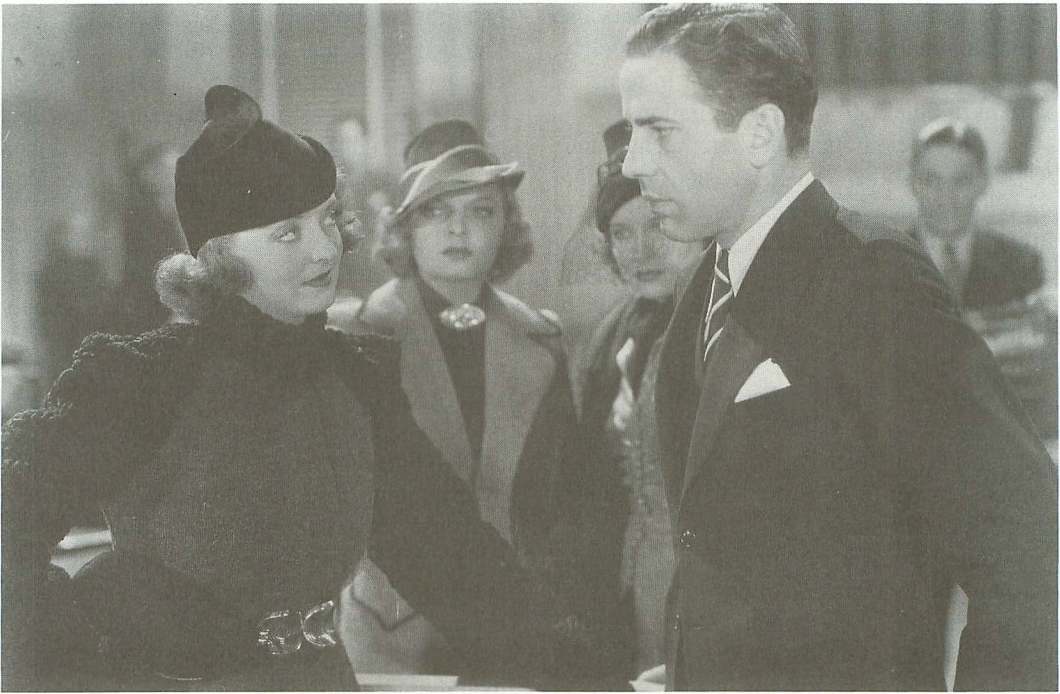
The distinction Elsaesser makes between narrative strategies parallels Raymond Durnat's comparison of pure melodramas and emotional melodramas. In his 1951 essay, "Ways of Melodrama," Durnat describes what Elsaesser

will later call classical narration as "the pure melodrama, the melodrama of pursuit and escape, of threat and self-preservation," with pure melodramas including "the thriller and run-of-the-mill western."¹⁹ Durnat contrasts pure melodramas with emotional melodramas, a variation which Elsaesser will later describe as melodramatic narration. Durnat explains that "the keynote of the emotional melodrama is that emotions which in a melodrama serve as the links between melodramatic episodes are here used to bring about not action but another emotion."²⁰

Durnat and Elsaesser's distinction between the two types of narration parallels a contrast that Willson Disher makes in discussing nineteenth-century stage practice. Disher explains that with the introduction of naturalism in the 1860's, stage melodrama "split in two."²¹ Thus, he distinguishes between stage melodramas that depended on realism and those which employed conventions of naturalism. Classical narration draws upon the tradition of stage melodramas that employed large realism—fire engines and horses on stage. Melodramatic narration follows stage melodramas that depended on small realism—cup and saucer "comedies."

Classical and melodramatic narrative strategies are not directly related to genres, subject matter, or character types. "The melodrama issue" has come to be equated with "how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a female character occupying the centre of the narrative arena."²² However, for both Elsaesser and Durnat, emotional melodramas are directly related to 'the melodrama in the *serie noire* tradition' in which the hero expresses himself in strong, albeit fruitless action.²³

In the American cinema, both melodramatic and classical modes of narration are used to create identification, recognition, and sustained sympathetic attention. The melodramatic variation represents a distinct form of textual address. This means that instead of engaging the audience by the dynamic movement of the hero, melodramatic narration stimulates audience involvement and investigation by inserting pauses (after throttling character and audience expectations)



Bette Davis and Humphrey Bogart in Marked Woman (1936)—situations create a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes

in the narration. Similarly, while classical narration engages the audience by generating suspense, melodramatic narration generates emotional response by using structural parallels that complicate audience identification with characters. In films where situations are designed to produce suspense, audience involvement depends on stimulating interest in what will happen next. By comparison, films with a melodramatic, non-linear narrative structure use situations to create “a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes within a given framework,” so that audience involvement is generated by provoking interest in characters’ reactions to (achieved) situations.²⁴ This overlooked, alternative method of activating certain psychological processes, involves “a ‘liberal’ mise-en-scene which balances different points of view... [which activates] very strongly an audience’s participation, for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency, to impart the different awareness, which in other genres is systematically frustrated to produce suspense.”²⁵

Gaps Created by Formal Strategies not Subject Matter

The distinction between Elsaesser’s thoughts on narrative structure and those on the existential truth of family melodramas has often been blurred. When Elsaesser points out that family melodramas stimulate an audience’s “desire to make up for the emotional deficiency... which in other genres is systematically frustrated to produce suspense,” he is calling attention to the fact that emotional melodramas and pure melodramas (of pursuit and escape) use different *narrative strategies*.²⁶ By comparison, when Elsaesser observes that family melodrama “at its most accomplished seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society,” he is describing the thematic concern that links these films to films, plays, and novels that investigate similar issues.²⁷ Family melodramas reproduce patterns of domination more directly than some genres, but are not the only type of film, play, or novel that represents and reflects

such patterns. Horror and gangster stories also depict domination and exploitation in a society. Further, any film can be analyzed in terms of patterns of domination and exploitation.

Family melodramas' thematic niche can be compared with other films, plays, and novels that reproduce certain features of social reality more directly. However, Elsaesser does not suggest that family melodramas inadvertently expose contradictions in society because they fail to achieve narrative closure. Also, he does not propose that family melodramas provide some privileged view of capitalist ideology or that family melodramas fail to accommodate their problems, laying them "open in their shameless contradictoriness" because the family under capitalism is the subject.²⁸

While Elsaesser's comparison of westerns and family melodramas has often been understood as a discussion of their thematic 'cores of truth,' his analysis is in fact designed to contrast the classical narrative strategy of "central conflicts successively externalised and projected into direct action" with that of melodramatic narration in which there is "a sublimation of dramatic values into decor, colour, gesture and composition of frame."²⁹ His comparison of westerns and family melodramas is designed to examine the formal distinctions between narrative strategies that rely on the audience following the dynamic movement of the central character and those that play upon the technical problem of restricted scope for external action. Elsaesser argues that mise-en-scene dependent films present a special case in the American cinema, a departure from the classical norm.

Structural Parallels/Oppositions and Dramatic Acceleration

Elsaesser describes classical narration in terms of its use in westerns, and melodramatic narration as it is found in family melodramas, yet the two types of narration are not mutually exclusive. Durgnat is especially clear on the fact that use of one mode does not preclude use of the other. He observes that *The Third Man* (1949) is an example of a film that uses strategies associated with both pure and emotional melodramas. As an

example of how the two modes interrelate, Durgnat notes that action can be revealing of character, suggesting that "the action of a film may be... psychologically revealing" and that while a fist fight might add "nothing to the drama except physical intensity, [it] can often provide a searching test of character."³⁰

Elsaesser also suggests that the two modes are not mutually exclusive, for classical and melodramatic narrative strategies are simply conceptual categories which group the use of more basic formal devices: structural parallels and oppositions, and dramatic acceleration. These primary, technical elements of narration can be used to intensify intrigue or stimulate audience investigation. When used to produce and sustain suspense in a linear narrative, these formal techniques are seen as part of classical narration. When used to produce and sustain evaluation of contrasting attitudes, structural parallels/oppositions and dramatic acceleration form part of melodramatic narration.

Elsaesser explains that classical use of structural parallels and oppositions occurs, for example, when the hero and villain are shown "passing the same street corner in hot pursuit of the heroine."³¹ By comparison, melodramatic use occurs when the hero and villain are shown "doing trivial acts in a similar way."³² The melodramatic use of structural parallels is a method of "'soft-pedaling' in the telling of the tale," so that "the actual working out of the scenes [can] present fundamental social evils."³³ In other words, regardless of theme, subject, or setting, use of structural parallels is a primary factor in determining whether a narrative imparts a different awareness (melodramatic narration) or whether it frustrates that awareness to produce suspense (classical narration).

Similarly, in classical narration, dramatic acceleration produces and sustains suspense, and is used to present central conflicts projected and externalized into direct action. By comparison, in melodramatic narration, dramatic acceleration takes the form of dramatic discontinuity (dramatic reversal) and is used to produce and reproduce conflicting emotional responses.



Mary Astor and Humphrey Bogart in The Maltese Falcon (1941)—the American melodramatic tradition uses structural parallels to complicate identification

Dramatic Discontinuity

In "Tales of Sound and Fury," Elsaesser focuses upon dramatic discontinuity (melodramatic incident). He describes it as a formal technique of "letting-the-emotions-rise and then bringing them suddenly down with a thump."³⁴ He explains that it is a structure involving "from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement."³⁵ He argues that the device not only produces "some rather strong emotional effects," but also contributes to putting "the spectator... in a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes."³⁶ Dramatic discontinuity allows a narrative to be "the vehicle for diagnosing a single individual in ideological terms and objective categories" while still functioning on the level of a "blow-by-blow emotional drama."³⁷

The different uses of structural parallels and dramatic acceleration are all important. Elsaesser proposes that "the specific values of the cinema (as in poetry and drama) lie in its concentrated visual metaphors and dramatic acceleration rather than in the fictional techniques of dilation."³⁸ At

the same time, Elsaesser suggests that dramatic discontinuity is finally more central to the American cinema than the other strategies are. He argues that the use of this technique in the American cinema makes for "a kind of realism and toughness rare if not unthinkable in the European cinema."³⁹

Elsaesser suggests that dramatic discontinuity is a significant formal device because its use allows a narrative to represent the modern world. He describes the use Balzac, Sue, and Dickens made of dramatic discontinuity, arguing that it allowed them to portray "existential insecurity and moral anguish which fiction had previously not encompassed."⁴⁰ Elsaesser explains that dramatic discontinuity (which underlies narration that is characterized by "shifts in mood ... , different 'tempi' ... and the mixing of stylistic levels") made it possible for these nineteenth-century authors to express the "spiritual crisis" of their age "more in plot and style than through direct comment."⁴¹ He writes that their work represents a "conscious use of



Susan Hayward in Back Street (1961)—characters are not revealed through dramatic action

form-as-content, which is a mark of what I would consider to be the very condition of modern art.²⁴²

Elsaesser argues that dramatic discontinuity is a central formal device of the American cinema. It is primary because the American cinema is a spectacular (rather than mimetic) dramaturgy “characterised by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual ones.”²⁴³ The American cinema depends upon mood shifts, achieved situations, and action renewed rather than continued. It is a dramaturgy in which surface details supply a substructure of atmospheric meaning, and sequences “rather than playing any explicitly denotative or even connotative role in the dramatic progression,” have instead “a more or less precise ‘melodic’ function.”²⁴⁴ In other words, (symbolic) meaning is not fixed by relations to existing texts, but instead develops in context, in the “musical” phrases that structure the film.

Elsaesser’s analysis of dramatic discontinuity, along with that of the other formal devices, pertains to his discussion of larger formal distinctions in the American cinema, that is, between classical and melodramatic narrative strategies. His analysis of formal devices also relates to the premises he will use to evaluate films of the American cinema, for his formal distinctions and assessments of value are interrelated, and he discusses primary features of the American cinema in terms of exemplary, rather than typical, film practice.

Questioning High Art Values

Elsaesser proposes that films of value share formal strategies with artistic practice that has been considered of merit. At the same time, he argues that films of artistic value need not depend on formal approaches that characterize the (European) art cinema or other works customarily considered within the realm of high art. Instead,

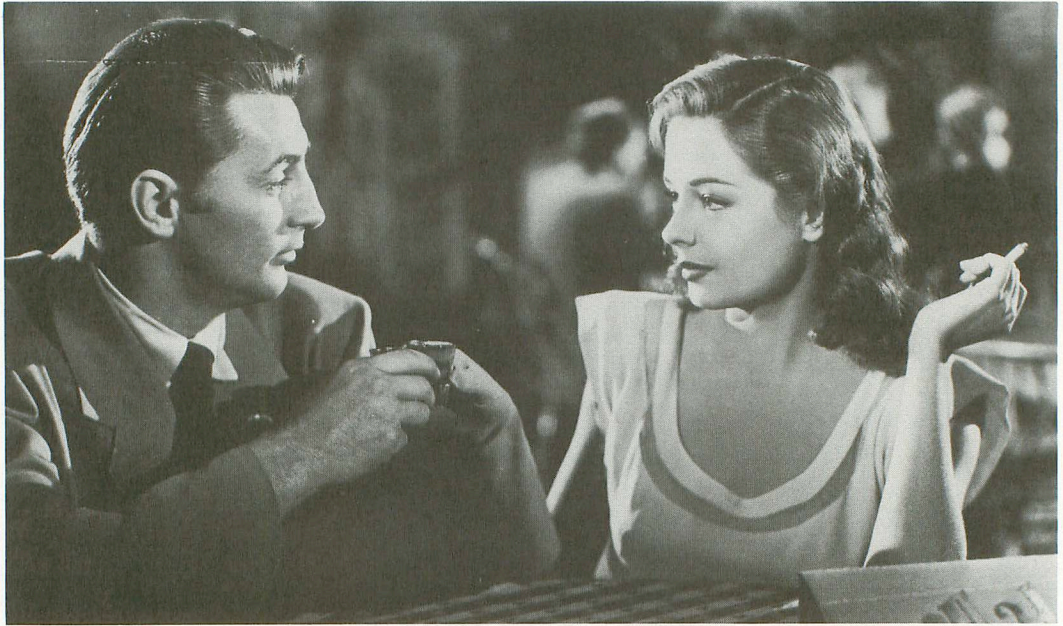


Edmund O'Brien, James Cagney, and Virginia Mayo in White Heat (1949)—in classical narration, the hero is the center of continuous movement

first-rate films of the American cinema express the full potential of the Hollywood aesthetic.

Elsaesser locates family melodramas in the (European) melodramatic tradition on the basis of shared formal techniques, especially those used in nineteenth-century realistic novels. He *does not redefine* melodrama in order to cite a connection between the narrative strategies used in family melodramas and those found in novels by Dickens and Balzac. Rather, he calls attention to largely overlooked shared formal devices, specifically the way soft-pedaled structural parallels and dramatic discontinuity are used to create conflicting and layered emotional responses. He argues that family melodramas' connection with the (European) melodramatic tradition is not a coincidental connection based on mere formal techniques, for the films also share thematic concerns with significant artistic practice, especially eighteenth-century domestic tragedies.⁴⁵

Elsaesser questions identification of artistic value with use of modernist formal devices that often define high art (self-reflexivity, collage technique, subjectivity, fragmented storyline). He directly addresses the issue, confronting assumptions that artistic value can only be conferred on work that is cerebral, self-reflexive, and difficult. He argues that films of the American cinema are valuable because they are dramatic rather than conceptual, for the American cinema is not a system of conveying ideas, but instead one designed to create complex emotional responses. Elsaesser also counters high art's exclusion of artistic practice that has broad appeal in arguing that films of the American cinema are valuable because they are dramatic rather than lyrical, relating "trans-individual, popular mythological experiences" rather than personal impressions or private experiences.⁴⁶ Rejecting values based on work outside the American cinema, Elsaesser establishes (new) criteria on



Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947)—melodrama, as a system of punctuation, uses dramatic discontinuity to throttle expectations.

the basis of the primary formal components of the American cinema. He proposes that the best American films communicate through visual representation and narrative strategies, providing access to content through form rather than dialogue. Films of merit communicate by engaging audiences emotionally, by stimulating identification and recognition. First-rate films of the American cinema do not communicate by appeal to personal or idiosyncratic symbolism, or by allusions to works of high art, but rely instead “on the aptness of the iconography (the visualisation) and on the quality (complexity, subtlety, ambiguity) of the orchestration.”⁴⁶ The best American films use narrative structure rather than dialogue or ad hoc appeal to sentiment to create strong emotional effects, and create sustained audience sympathy through continuously qualified identification and recognition.

In Elsaesser’s outline, films at the top of the scale are visually complex, engage audiences by examining character and situation, and more often than not appeal to audiences’ experience by using an ironic mood or world view. By comparison, films at the bottom of his scale

involve little aesthetic manipulation, make an appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions, and are largely pedantic in tone. In “Tales of Sound and Fury,” Elsaesser argues that films on the lowest level appeal “to a culturally literate and literary public,” and “have a certain degree of (mildly) intellectual sophistication, but nothing in terms of visual elaboration to compensate for their verbal explicitness, or on the emotional side to make up for their literalness of story and symbolism.”⁴⁸

The lowest level, literary films, *High Noon* (1952) for example, differ *in kind* from the dramatic films that occupy the middle and upper tiers of the hierarchy described in “Tales of Sound and Fury.” By comparison, films on the middle tier, the classical norm, *Winchester 73* (1952) or *White Heat* (1949), and those on the upper level, the melodramatic variation, *Home From the Hill* (1959) or *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), differ *in degree* of complexity. Elsaesser proposes that both types of dramatic films produce meaning and audience identification through subtle visual representation rather than explicit symbolism or dialogue. However,

films on the highest tier create meaning and emotional effects without using the more standard and perhaps simpler device of externalizing character through action.⁴⁹

Elsaesser's way of evaluating films in the American cinema parallels criteria outlined by earlier film scholars. In "Ways of Melodrama," Durgnat's formal distinctions lead him to propose precisely the same scale of value, with literary films different in kind from both pure melodramas (the norm) and emotional melodramas (which approach a kind of drama). In *Hollywood in the Forties* (1968), Higham and Greenberg describe a comparable hierarchy, with the notable difference that they relegate "lavish productions built around a female character" to a category called "broadest melodramas," and locate these films off to the side in the realm of commerce.⁵⁰

Positioning the Home in the American Melodramatic Tradition

Elsaesser emphasizes the formal elements family melodramas share with acknowledged works of merit, and calls into question certain notions of artistic value (those drawn from art cinema or high art), in order to position family melodramas within the American melodramatic tradition. Elsaesser proposes that family melodramas warrant consideration because, like other films of the American melodramatic tradition, they depend upon elaborate visual style, a sophisticated, sometimes world-weary mood, and plot formulas that focus on frustrated desire and ineffectual action. At the same time, he introduces a radical perspective by refuting the (Bazinian) view that the meaning of an image in a film resides in "natural," pro-filmic associations—with the remarkable consequence that the American melodramatic tradition is now identified with films that depend upon the iconography of the bourgeois home.

Elsaesser *does not* redefine the American melodramatic tradition in order to locate points of contact between family melodramas and the tradition. Instead, he focuses on family melodramas' visual sophistication to demonstrate that this quality links the films to the American melodramatic tradition. He emphasizes story

elements that family melodramas share with other films of the tradition: frustrated desire, illicit sex, and purposeless action. He calls attention to family melodramas' worldly mood of despair, and places the films in the tradition by pointing out that the films "record some of the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the 'affirmative culture.'"⁵¹

By highlighting rather than minimizing the shared emphasis on visual style, the shared themes of ineffectual and problematic action, the shared mood of fashionable despair, Elsaesser opened the possibility that "reality" is the subject of films that use the iconography of the Home Beautiful world. He shifted the prevailing identification of reality with 'brute realism marked by repulsive particulars' to include 'scandalous realism of moral indiscretion.' He shifted the existing view that reality could (only) be represented by images of dark, wet city streets to the view that reality could also be represented by images of faces framed by television sets and bay windows.

Calling into question the presumed necessary and exclusive connection between dark images of the inner city and reality, Elsaesser directly countered Higham and Greenberg's marginalization of broadest melodramas by asserting that family melodramas have an even deeper connection with reality than do other films of the American melodramatic tradition. He argues that family melodramas are "capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society."⁵² In other words, Elsaesser used the same criteria to include domestic dramas in the American melodramatic tradition previous scholars had used to exclude the films, namely that they show the real world, not an ideal world.

Elsaesser's argument for family melodramas' place in the American melodramatic tradition is so convincing that the tradition has come to be identified with the "structural and stylistic constants" that belong to family melodramas: the iconography of the bourgeois home, externalization of character through mise-en-scene, translation of public issues into family

situations, scenarios of ineffectual action and inadequate response. By comparison, Elsaesser would note that some but not all of the "constants" are to be found in the range of films which make up the American melodramatic tradition.

His discussion of family melodramas' place within the American melodramatic tradition has also been (mis)taken as an argument for the existence of a genre, "family melodrama." However, his analysis of family melodramas' structural and stylistic constants does not establish necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of such a genre. The elements that describe but do not legitimately define family melodramas include: the distinction between family themes and "potential" family themes (in westerns, for example); the "glossy but hard-edged look" that distinguishes family melodramas from women's pictures; and the distinction between family melodramas and westerns based on the way audiences relate (to family melodramas by reference to daily life, to westerns by reference to conventions). The arguments against these serving as defining traits seem readily available: what is the ground for distinguishing between actual and potential family themes; how does the look distinguish between melodramas from musicals; might not more acquaintance with family melodramas lead to audiences reading them in terms of conventions.

Melodrama: Soft-Pedaled Parallels and Dramatic Discontinuity

While Elsaesser's analysis of melodramatic narration includes discussion of constants found in family melodramas, his consideration of narrative strategies is most directly related to his formal analysis of the American cinema. Yet his exploration of these formal strategies only comes into view once "the cultural and psychological context which this form of melodrama so manifestly reflected and helped to articulate" is set aside.⁵³ Elsaesser demonstrates that the films belong to the (European) melodramatic tradition in drama and literature because they depend upon melodramatic narration, using dramatic symmetries (soft-pedaled structural parallels), and ironic reversals (dramatic discontinuity) to

disrupt audience expectation and narrative progression. In addition, he shows that family melodramas belong to the American melodramatic tradition, and suggests that family melodramas rival the best films of the tradition because of their visual complexity, sophisticated mood, and connection with "reality." Interestingly, his argument that family melodramas reproduce social reality more directly than other films draws its strength from its appeal to earlier definitions of the tradition.

Melodramatic narration represents a variation of the classical norm. It uses structural parallels to complicate identification, while classical narration employs parallels to create suspense. Melodramatic narration depends on dramatic discontinuity which positions the spectator to see and evaluate contrasting attitudes within a given framework. By comparison, the classical narration of melodramas of pursuit and escape establishes the central characters as agents of conflict, complication, and resolution, and positions the spectator to identify with the hero as the center of continuous movement.

Reconsidering "Tales of Sound and Fury" discloses the fact that the essay is concerned with narrative strategies in the American cinema, rather than simply the thematic issues of a specific genre. By foregrounding different arguments, it becomes possible to see that melodrama need not be defined in terms of content (subject matter, character types, typical incidents or locales). By reading the essay from a new vantage point, another, perhaps more useful definition of melodrama appears, one which calls attention to formal operations, namely melodramatic punctuation that structures textual address and spectator positioning.

¹Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is*, (London: British Film Institute, 1987) 3.

²Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, (New York: Random House, 1981) 221.

³Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," *Monogram* 4 (1972) 5.

⁴Elsaesser 5.

⁵Gledhill 8.

⁶Gledhill 8.

⁷Elsaesser 15.

⁸Elsaesser 14.

⁹In "Pathos of Failure" Elsaesser examines the second variation, one caused by "the technical problem of how to depict the unmotivated hero." (Elsaesser, "Pathos of Failure," *Monogram* 6 (1975) 18.) He discusses how "the affirmative-consequential model of narrative is gradually being replaced by another, whose precise nature is yet to be determined." (Elsaesser, "Pathos of Failure" 14.) The model is yet to be determined because it may or may not take the form seen in the 70s road moves, for while depending upon modernist strategies that deny audience involvement, the films consistently close with an ad hoc appeal to sentiment—an appeal which is incompatible with the narrative strategy of creating distance.

¹⁰Thomas Elsaesser, "The American Cinema: Why Hollywood," *Monogram* (April, 1971) 6.

¹¹Elsaesser, "The American Cinema" 6.

¹²Elsaesser, "The American Cinema" 10.

¹³Elsaesser, "Pathos of Failure" 13.

¹⁴Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 10.

Elsaesser's analysis seems to be a response to the view Bazin outlines in *What is Cinema?* Bazin proposes that "it is easy to say that because the cinema is movement, the western is cinema par excellence." (Andre Bazin, "The Western: or the American Film Par Excellence," in *What is Cinema? Vol. II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 140.

¹⁵Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 5.

¹⁶Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 8.

¹⁷Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 10.

¹⁸Elsaesser makes comparable observations regarding narrative strategies in films of the New German Cinema which position the spectator so that there is "detachment which implies rather than solicits understanding and sympathy." (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 133.) These films "demand from the viewer a different kind of perception, one that is slower, more patient," perception set up by narrative strategies in which there is an "interplay of victimisation and heroism... of deviancy and excess... of flamboyance

and perversity." (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 133.)

¹⁹R. E. Durnat, "Ways of Melodrama," *Sight and Sound* 21:1 (August-September, 1951) 37.

²⁰Durnat 36.

²¹M. Willson Disher, *Melodrama: Plots that Thrilled* (London: Rockliff, 1954) 36.

Disher notes that "floods and oceans as depicted in sensation scenes may be contrasted with a stage direction in a cup-and-saucer comedy which says, 'the umbrellas to be wet.'" (Disher 36.) He writes: "it has become difficult to define 'real.' Sometimes it was a term of praise, sometimes of blame. Real cabs or real fire-engines were despised by the very people who admired real doors... The difference concerns size. While the champions of realism surpassed themselves exhibiting animals, vehicles, and machines that were better because they were bigger, the leaders of naturalism who had started with doors, chairs, and umbrellas, won their most resounding triumphs with smaller and smaller things, down to tongs and spoons on their tea tables." (Disher 37.)

²²Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework* (Summer, 1981) 12.

²³Strong, but ineffectual action can be seen in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), a melodrama of the serie noire tradition. Bogey's decision to turn Brigid in seems to be an expression of a code of honor. The underlying reason, however, is that he must turn her in to avoid being "had" in the future; turning her in is a way of admitting defeat. His (strong) action, far from being a liberating action, has its source in weakness and only places his farther away from his desire, romantic happiness.

²⁴Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 15.

²⁵Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 15.

²⁶Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 15.

²⁷Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 14.

²⁸Geoffery Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," *Screen* (Summer, 1977) 118.

Elsaesser does praise the films' portrayal of liberal idealism's consequences and contradictions, suggesting that the thematic problem these films examine is reflected in characters "trying to live up to an exalted vision of man," and that the films are aesthetic revisions which "record some of the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the 'affirmative culture' spawned by liberal idealism." (Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 15.)

²⁹Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 9, 7.

³⁰Durnat, "Ways of Melodrama" 35.

Action can also be presented so that "the spectator is in a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting

attitudes within a given thematic framework.” (Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 15.) For example, while *The Searchers* (1956) is constructed in terms of Ethan’s pursuit of Debbie with scenes linked by the fervor of his quest, the scene in which the marriage is disrupted and Ethan and Martin are arrested, provides commentary on the “lawfulness” of Ethan’s quest, and calls Ethan’s relationship to family life into question.

³¹ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 6.

³² Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 6.

³³ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 6, 4.

³⁴ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 12.

³⁵ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 7.

³⁶ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 12, 15.

³⁷ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 13.

³⁸ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 7.

³⁹ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 12.

⁴⁰ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 4.

⁴¹ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 5.

⁴² Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 7-8.

In writing on the New German Cinema, Elsaesser points out that Fassbinder “never abandoned the structural principles of melodrama (its dramatic symmetries and ironic reversals).” (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 139.) By identifying Fassbinder’s use of dramatic symmetries (soft-pedaled structural parallels) and ironic reversals (dramatic discontinuity) as melodramatic, he is locating Fassbinder’s work within the (European) melodramatic tradition, a tradition which includes the realistic novel that drew upon changes in narration developed in the Gothic novel, and stage melodrama developed in response to Neo-Classic drama.

⁴³ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 6.

Elsaesser locates the American cinema within the tradition of spectacular drama in saying that “the American cinema [is historically] determined ... by an ideology of the spectacle and the spectacular.” (Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 8.)

Dramatic discontinuity’s importance in films of the American cinema discloses their connection with earlier forms of spectacular drama (stage melodramas, operas, and masques), for it has been a primary formal device in modern spectacular drama and has had a less important place in mimetic drama (to use Northrop Frye’s term), where situations continue rather than renew the action, where layered circumstantial details or deeper examination of a central incident serve in place of telling pictures and music.

⁴⁴ Elsaesser, “The American Cinema: Why Hollywood” 7.

⁴⁵ The films’ place in the tradition would have been even more clear had Elsaesser acknowledged family

melodramas’ connection with nineteenth-century domestic drama, which further developed the critique of society found in eighteenth-century drama. Michael Booth observes that the most vivid domestic melodrama of the nineteenth century concerns crime and drink, for while “the criminal is usually the villain” these plays represent “a body of melodrama featuring the most desperate criminals as heroes,” with “the criminal-heroes represent[ing] the idealized common man, brave and clever and humane, rebelling against the forces of society—’them’ as personified by the law. (Michael Booth, *Hiss the Villain* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode) 28-29.)

⁴⁶ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 8.

⁴⁷ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 8.

⁴⁸ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 8.

⁴⁹ Elsaesser outlines a similar hierarchy in “Pathos of Failure.” He leaves “literary films” out of this discussion entirely, and locates classical narratives on the lowest level, citing the fact that while they are visually elaborate, because their narratives represent positive action they are out of touch with contemporary perspectives. He places melodramatic narratives on the middle tier, noting that while their style and themes are internally consistent, there is still reference to some outside (higher) metaphoric realm in which order and reason is alleged to exist. He proposes that both classical and melodramatic films differ in kind from modern narratives of the American cinema, for in films of the 70s with unmotivated heroes, style and theme are consistent, and further, the themes reflect the era’s lack of faith.

⁵⁰ Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1968) 140.

Higham and Greenberg refer to five types of melodramas, distinguished by degree of stylization, mood, and relation to “reality.” Films in the central category (the norm) are called “grey melodramas” and are generally adaptations of novels by Hammett, Chandler, and Greene. Films one step above are called “period melodramas,” more heavily stylized and with a bleaker outlook than grey melodramas. Higham and Greenberg refer to films at the top of the hierarchy as “black cinema,” very stylized films that disclose a director’s personal (and very ironic) view of the world.

Higham and Greenberg locate “semi-documentary crime melodramas” and “social problem films” below (the norm) grey melodramas. They argue that these films differ in kind from other melodramas, for while they deal with the same subject matter other films in the American melodramatic tradition do, they do not share the style or mood of that tradition. By comparison, the fifth type of melodrama, broadest melodramas, are

considered within the American melodramatic tradition in so far as they have “an exhilaratingly alive and dynamic physical presentation.”(Higham and Greenberg 140.) Yet, the films do not fall within the American melodramatic tradition except in a qualified way, for they allegedly depend upon inane stories that convey the unrealistic view that life can be beautiful.

⁵¹ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 15.

Elsaesser suggests that some films of the New German Cinema also share a common feature (dark, brooding mood) with films in the American melodramatic tradition. He finds that the New German Cinema involved a “revival of melodramatic modes designed to enlist the spectator on behalf of victims, outsiders and outcasts,” and that the “the feel, the mood of West Germany [in the 70s]... critical, melancholy, angry, desperately excessive and [prone to] extreme attitudes

and stances” is the basis of “the famous ‘subjective factor’ of the New German Cinema.”(Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 63, 5.)

Like the films of the American melodramatic tradition which express moods that are dark (troubled, somber, world-weary) by employing variations on the classical use of formal devices, the ‘subjective factor’ of New German Cinema is “an effect of the cinematic form and its modes of address,” rather than a function of character types or subject matter.(Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 63.) As with films of the American melodramatic tradition, cinematic form and modes of address provide a means of distinguishing the films of the New German Cinema from other film practice.

⁵² Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 14.

⁵³ Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury” 2.