

MELODRAMA

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

Problems of definition

The study of melodrama as a cinematic genre is a recent development. It achieved public visibility in 1977, when the Society for Education in Film and Television commissioned papers for a study weekend, some of which were subsequently published in *Screen* and *Movie* in the UK and in *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory*. Around this time and since, a spate of articles has appeared in British, French and American film journals and interest in the genre has been extended to work on television, particularly soap operas.

The British foundations of this work were laid in two very different contexts. In 1972, a small independent film journal, *Monogram*, opened a special issue on melodrama with a detailed and seminal account of the historical sources and aesthetics of the 'great Hollywood melodramas of the 50s', written by Thomas Elsaesser as part of a project of re-evaluating American cinema. Then in 1974, *Spare Rib*, a general interest magazine for the women's movement, published a review by Laura Mulvey of Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul/Angst essen Seele auf* (1974) in which she used the film's acknowledged homage to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1956) to argue a case for feminist interest in the genre. Elsaesser's and Mulvey's contributions represented two very different approaches to melodrama, and dominant film theory and feminist work coexist uneasily on this terrain.

One major source of difficulty in the ensuing debate is the diversity of forms that are gathered under the heading of melodrama. Until the 1970s, the term hardly existed in relation to the cinema except pejoratively to mean a 'melodramatic' and theatrical mode that manipulated the audience's emotions and failed aesthetically to justify the response summoned up. The film industry used the category to denote dramas involving the passions – hence crime melodrama, psychological melodrama, family melodrama. Closely related are two further categories, the woman's film and romantic drama. To these, film critics have added the maternal melodrama and the argument that most American silent cinema should be considered as melodrama, with the work of D. W. Griffith constituting a virtual subset of its own. Ascription of literary and theatrical sources is equally diverse, running from Greek tragedy, through the bourgeois sentimental novel, Italian opera to Victorian stage melodrama. In the face of such confusion, arguments that melodrama constitutes a 'mode' or 'style' crossing a range of different periods and forms are persuasive. However, this does not evade the problem of generic definition, for writers on melodrama have been united in seeking to trace in it the convergence of capitalist and patriarchal structures, a project that requires historical, cultural and formal specificity. The categories set out above belong to particular phases of generic production and particular socio-historic circumstances – although with considerable overlapping and transformation of material between them.

Lack of generic specificity may arise in part from the fact that interest in melodrama first entered film criticism via the channels of *mise en scène* and the auteur. Criticism from this standpoint (such as *Movie*) saw in the work of Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli, Max Ophuls and Otto Preminger a transformation of banal and melodramatic scripts through the power of autho-

rial vision expressed in *mise en scène*. Later, film criticism that re-evaluated Hollywood in terms of ideological textual analysis looked to *mise en scène* for a formal play of distanciation and irony. The work of Douglas Sirk was discovered around 1971 and lined up alongside Ophuls and Minnelli, preparing the ground for the central place occupied by melodrama in debates on ideology and film aesthetics during the 1970s, and at the same time allowing more critical space to the role of generic convention (see Halliday, 1971; Willemsen, 1971). These beginnings in *mise en scène* and ideological criticism account for the tendency of much writing on melodrama to focus on the 1950s family melodramas made by a small number of auteurs, Minnelli, Ophuls, Ray, Preminger and Sirk (see Schatz, 1981). This contrasts with the constitution of film noir as a critical category that led to the greater visibility of a corpus of non-authorial works. On the other hand, more recent work on the woman's film, which is not so predicated on preceding film critical traditions, has allowed a much wider range of titles to emerge.

Early feminist investigation of Hollywood had dismissed much of the work validated by auteurism as enshrining a male viewpoint on the world that was oppressive to women. However, Molly Haskell's (1979) influential chapter on the woman's film of the 1930s and 1940s drew attention to a whole area of submerged and despised production, featuring domestic or romantic dramas centred on female protagonists played by stars valued by the women's movement. Critical work on melodrama has tended to elide the woman's film with the family melodrama. Only feminists have drawn attention to the woman's film as a category of production aimed at women, about women, drawing on other cultural forms produced for women often by women – such as women's magazines or paperback fiction – and to raise questions about the aesthetic and cultural significance of this gender specification.

Theorising family melodrama

While on the surface appearing far removed from the western and gangster film, genres whose plots are often rooted in actual historical events, the family melodrama is nevertheless frequently defined as the dramatic mode for a historic project, namely the centrality of the bourgeois family to the ascendancy and continued dominance of that class. For example, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argued that 'melodrama arises from the conjunction of a formal history proper (development of tragedy, realism, etc.), a set of social determinations, which have to do with the rise of the bourgeoisie, and a set of psychic determinations which take shape around the family' (Nowell-Smith, 1977, p. 113). This description places melodrama within a network of different concerns, the relationship between which is at issue according to the theoretical and political commitments of the writer.

One problem that emerges is the relation between the socio-historical conjuncture that gives rise to a particular form and its subsequent aesthetic development and history. Another set of problems is introduced in the meeting of Marxism and feminism, which offer competing notions of patriarchy, capitalism and bourgeois ideology, sex and class as key terms for the analysis of the family in melodrama. When Freudian psychoanalysis is brought to bear on melodrama, interesting tensions are pro-



Tugging at the heartstrings: Lillian Gish in D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*

duced between the application of those ideas in film theory and in feminism. The feminist emphasis on the problem of the construction of femininity in patriarchal culture introduces questions of gender in relation to both the industrial and aesthetic constitution of a form: what, for instance, is the relation between specific audiences and the forms produced in their name? How is the male oedipal scenario – so often cited as the bedrock of classic narrative cinema and frequently the explicit subject matter of 1950s melodramas – to be understood in forms that offer an unusual space to female protagonists and 'feminine' problems, and are specifically addressed to a female audience?

The question of gender is also a factor in the argument as to whether melodrama is better considered as an expressive code rather than a genre and as to whether it can be considered 'progressive' or not. The taxonomies that arise out of genre analysis bring into focus iconographic motifs, themes and situations that have a material or structural force in feminist analysis of women's lives, but which in *mise en scène* analysis produce metaphorical significance on behalf of patriarchy. Similarly, ironic distanciation or disruption at the level of style may seem progressive in giving the spectator, both male and female, access to 'structures of feeling' normally closed off, but do little to shift the social relations between the sexes represented at the level of plot and character. Such shifts of emphasis characterise the complexities of the melodrama debate.

Melodrama as a problem of 'style and articulation'

Writing in 1972, Elsaesser's approach draws on the 1960s concern to validate Hollywood through *mise en scène* analysis and the post-1968 interest in irony, distanciation and ideological criticism, reworking both in the context of his own concerns with aesthetic affect. Much of Elsaesser's article is concerned to counter the conventional relegation of the form for its blatant use of 'mechanisms of emotional solicitation' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 8). He counteracts this view from two main directions. First, he seeks to show how the aesthetics of melodrama as a popular and commercial form give access to truths about human existence denied to more culturally respectable forms such as European art cinema. Second, he seeks to demonstrate how it is possible under certain social and production conditions for the melodrama to be ideologically subversive.

In common with other critics, Elsaesser establishes melodrama as a form that belongs to the bourgeoisie. In its first manifestations – which Elsaesser cites as the eighteenth-century sentimental novel and post-Revolution romantic drama – it constituted an ideological weapon against a corrupt and feudal aristocracy. The bourgeois family's struggle to preserve the honour of the daughter from despotic and unprincipled aristocrats marked a contest over space for private conscience and individual rights. Elsaesser identifies certain features in early bourgeois melodrama as important to its later developments:

the capacity of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel and romantic drama to make individual conflicts speak for a society that, he argues, lies in the popular cultural tradition it inherited, leading from the medieval morality play to music-hall drama, the most significant aspect of which was its 'non-psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 2); and formal devices such as ironic parallelism, parody, counterpoint and rhythm. Another significant feature is the siting of the struggles of individualism in the family. For Elsaesser, the family is not, except in early forms of melodrama, important in itself as a political institution; rather, through the highly charged formal motifs of melodrama, it provided a means of delineating social crises in concretely personalised and emotional terms.

These constituents of the melodrama – its non-psychological conception of character and formally complex *mise en scène*, its containment of action within the family and consequent emphasis on private feeling and psychic levels of truth – enable Elsaesser to construct the family melodrama of the 1950s as the peak of Hollywood's achievement. According to Elsaesser's argument, by the time melodrama was taken up in the cinema it was already saturated with significance beyond the specific socio-historical conditions that gave rise to it. He therefore looks to cinematic history to illuminate how the strategies of melodrama are realised in film. He argues that in the beginning, all silent cinema was forced into a melodramatic mode – not simply because of its temporal closeness to Victorian popular forms (see Fell, 1974; Vardac, 1949), but because the requirements of expression outside verbal language fortuitously pushed the medium into modes that favoured a melodramatic worldview. While the coming of sound meant the dominance of the verbal register and a consequently different dramatic mode, the development of new technologies in the 1950s – colour, widescreen, deep focus, crane and dolly – often in the hands of German directors with backgrounds in Expressionism, made a complex visual *mise en scène* again possible, in which the spoken word would be submerged as only one strand in a musical counterpoint.

Coincident with the development of the technology for such a dramaturgy was the popularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis in America in the 1940s and 1950s. The family reappears as a site of dramatic action, though in a far different ideological context from its heroic stance in the emergence of melodrama as a bourgeois form. The domestic melodrama provides not the exterior spaces of the western or urban gangster film to be conquered by a hero, who, in search of oedipal identity can express himself in action, but a closed self-reflexive space in which characters are inward looking, unable to act in society (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 10).

Not only do the location and mores of the family reduce the scope for dramatic action, but the characters themselves, in line with the melodramatic tradition, are unaware of the forces that drive them. The intensity and the significance of the drama, then, are not carried in what the characters say, or in the articulation of inner struggle as in tragedy: rather it is the *mise en scène* of melodrama, providing an 'aesthetics of the domestic', that tells us what is at stake. The 'pressure generated by things crowding in on the characters ... by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or small town setting' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 13) is intensified through the demand of the 90-minute feature film for compression of what may be far more expansively expressed in its literary sources. There is, Elsaesser argues, a sense of 'hysteria bubbling all the time just below the surface' and a 'feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 7).

Elsaesser draws on Freudian concepts for the interpretation of *mise en scène*, arguing that the aesthetic strategies of 1950s melodrama function similarly to Freud's 'dream-work'. Sometimes this is a matter of the stock characters' lack of self-awareness producing an explicit form of displacement at the level of the plot:

The characters' behaviour is often pathetically at variance with the real objectives they want to achieve. A sequence of substitute actions creates a kind of vicious circle in which the close nexus of cause and effect is somehow broken and – in an often overtly Freudian sense – displaced. (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 10)

In other cases, it functions 'by what one might call an intensified symbolisation of everyday actions, the heightening of the ordinary gesture and a use of setting and decor so as to reflect the character's fetishist fixations' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 10).

This account provides the basis of Elsaesser's argument that in the hands of gifted directors and at the right historical moment, it can be used to critique the society it represents. Key terms here are pathos and irony. The externalisation of feelings and reactions into decor, gesture and events objectifies and distances emotions, producing pathos or irony

through a 'liberal' *mise-en-scène* which balances different points of view so that the spectator is in a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes within a given framework ... resulting from ... the total configuration and therefore inaccessible to the protagonists themselves. (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 15)

Thus melodrama can suggest causes beyond individual responsibility, to be found on a 'social and existential level' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 14).

The melodramatic aesthetic gains its social force in a circular movement of displacement: while capitalist society creates psychic problems that become acutely focused in family and sexual relations, so events within the family are displaced outwards into the *mise en scène* indicating forces that exceed specific family conditions. From this position, Elsaesser suggests that the shift in 1950s Hollywood from the linear trajectory of the active hero conquering the spaces of the west or the city, to the impotent hero trapped within a domestic interior and confined by the codes of behaviour appropriate to the family, indicates a shift in the ideological conditions obtaining under postwar advanced capitalism. The melodramatic form had come full circle from its initial championing of individual human rights via the bourgeois family's struggle against a feudal aristocracy to a later critique of the ideology of individualism in which the bourgeois family becomes the site of the 'social and emotional alienation' consequent on a corrupt individualism and the failure of the drive to self-fulfilment (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 14).

The major distinction between Elsaesser's position and the work that followed later lay in his use of Freud and Marxism. While noting the rich potential of Freudian subject matter for Hollywood melodrama and assuming rather than analysing the oedipal hero as dominating the form, it is on the formal mechanisms of a Freudian 'dream-work' that Elsaesser bases his argument for the rich and complex significance of the melodrama's *mise en scène*. And what he takes from Marxism is not so much a classical definition of class relations as a notion of alienation translated into existential terms. Consequently,

his arguments do not analyse or distinguish between class and gender relations in Hollywood melodrama, beyond the displacement of one into the other, 'the metaphysical interpretation of class conflict as sexual exploitation and rape' that, according to Elsaesser, dominates the form throughout its history (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 3). This means that the question of how a female protagonist may affect plot structures or the trajectory of the hero's oedipal drama remains unexamined. Furthermore, the emphasis on melodrama as 'form' and '*mise en scène*' neglects questions that generic specifications would have raised; for instance, the distinctions and relations between the woman's film, romantic drama, family melodrama – questions important to an understanding of the place of women in melodrama. Issues of class and gender, but particularly of gender, were to figure in the next stage in the emerging debate about melodrama.

Sex and class in melodrama

Later work on melodrama was to prise Elsaesser's groundbreaking work away from its metaphorical and existential proclivity for *mise en scène* analysis. What followed was either a more sociological approach to its subject matter (see Kleinhans, 1978; French, 1978), which understood the family as a political institution and site of real oppression, particularly for women; or work influenced by the development of feminist film theory that produced accounts of the social or sexual positions made available in the narrative to protagonists and spectators. Here *mise en scène*, rather than being metaphorically resonant, was seen as symptomatic, indicating the 'return of the repressed', or insoluble contradictions.

Central to the debates that emerge in these reassessments of melodrama is the significance of the bourgeois family as a product of patriarchy and capitalism. At issue here is how the social relations of capitalist production – class – articulate with the social relations of capitalist/patriarchal reproduction – the family. Once the bourgeoisie stops rising, it is no longer easy to see in it a direct symbolisation of class struggle – as is argued of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel or post-Revolution romantic drama, for instance. However, the family is felt to be related to class at an ideological level. On one hand, it seems to operate as a trans-class institution; on the other, it reproduces individuals as class subjects. The family, however, does not simply secure class subjects; it also produces sexed individuals. Arguably, the neuralgic point for debates around cinema melodrama is the interrelation of sex and class. In this respect, Freud and Marx compete to provide the terms of analysis of the family; according to which authority is given more emphasis, the family is viewed as the site of sexual repression (Nowell-Smith, 1977; Mulvey, 1977/78) or of displaced socio-economic contradiction (Kleinhans, 1978). From Freud is taken the oedipal drama, particularly the moment of castration and repression; from Marxism the concept of the division between productive and personal life, in which the contradictions inherent in the alienated labour of capitalist production are supposed to be compensated for within the family, where, however, they are merely displaced (see Kleinhans, 1978).

The male oedipal crisis

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1977) located melodrama as a bourgeois form by distinguishing its address from that of classical tragedy. Whereas tragedy does not depict the class to which it is addressed, the social relations depicted in melodrama presume authority to be distributed 'democratically' among

heads of families rather than vested in kings and princes. Thus 'the address is from one bourgeois to another bourgeois and the subject matter is the life of the bourgeoisie'. While this apparent egalitarianism avoids questions about the class exercise of power, the relation between social power and gender becomes potentially more visible – less a question of the symbolisation of one by the other (see Elsaesser, 1972) than of their articulation together. The paternal function becomes crucial in establishing both the right of the family to a place in the bourgeois social hierarchy and, through the mechanism of inheritance, the property relations that underpin this position. The problem for the family is the possible failure of the father to fulfil this function suitably, together with the risky business of raising the son into a patriarchal identity in order that he may take over his property and his place within the community. One root cause of such possible failure is the confinement of sexual relations within the family – evoking the oedipal drama – and the problematic position of women there.

However, while Nowell-Smith makes the relations of power, gender and sex more visible, he still leans towards a masculine construction of melodrama. Like Elsaesser, he distinguishes melodrama from the western in the way it closes down on potential social action and turns inward for its drama. Although he does not make the home an existential space, it becomes simply the arena of the 'feminine' characterised by passivity and negativity. Feminist film theory had argued that representation of the 'feminine' as positive, rather than 'non-male', was impossible within the framework of classic Hollywood narrative. Nowell-Smith draws on such arguments to deal with the 'feminine' presence in melodrama. While acknowledging it frequently figures female protagonists, he argues that 'masculinity' still constitutes the only knowable heroic norm, so that acute contradictions are involved in the production of active female characters. The space allowed female characters, while it cannot represent femininity, facilitates an exploration of problems of male identity.

From here, Nowell-Smith goes on to give an account of melodrama as a patriarchal form, taking the oedipal drama (more literally than does Elsaesser) as its subject matter. The Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s is structured in terms of conflict between the generations, in which the son has to accept his symbolic castration by the father before he can take up his place in the patriarchal and bourgeois order, proving himself, by becoming both an individual and like his father, capable of reconstituting the family unit for the next generation (Nowell-Smith, 1977, p. 116).

Like Elsaesser, Nowell-Smith draws on Freud for an understanding of the mechanisms of melodramatic narrative and the *mise en scène*. However, rather than concepts elaborated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Nowell-Smith deploys Freud's account of a childhood fantasy, the 'family romance', and his theory of conversion hysteria. The family romance provides the means of understanding the melodrama as being both about the family, foregrounding female characters, and about patriarchal identity. In the family romance, the child questions its parenthood, exploring through the question 'Whose child am I?', or 'would I like to be?', different family arrangements. Thus the structure allows differential and even taboo sexual relations to be explored, reorganised and eventually closed off in the final resolution of a reconstituted family to which melodrama is committed.

However, Nowell-Smith argues, such resolution is consequent on castration and therefore on repression; for fiction, this means an initial laying out of the problems, entry into the fantasy, which, nevertheless, cannot be articulated explicitly. This



Daydreamer: Jane Wyman longs for Rock Hudson in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*

leads Nowell-Smith to the notion of *mise en scène* as 'excess' – a 'too much' of music, colour, movement that indicates not simply a heightening of emotion but a substitution for what cannot be admitted in plot or dialogue, a process for which Freud's theory of 'conversion hysteria' provides an analogy (Nowell-Smith, 1977, p. 117). From a perspective that views classic Hollywood in terms of the 'classic realist text', such 'hysterical moments' can be seen as a breakdown in realist conventions, where elements of the *mise en scène* lose their motivation and coherence is lost. Such moments of breakdown cannot be done away with by a 'happy end' but represent the 'ideological failure' of melodrama as a form, and so its 'progressive' potential.

Melodrama and real life

Chuck Kleinhans offers a different perspective. A Marxist-feminist sociology of the family, rather than Freudian theories of sexuality, provides the premiss of his arguments: 'Since bourgeois domestic melodrama emerges with the ascension of capitalism, and since it deals with the family, it makes sense to look at the family under capitalism to better understand melodrama' (Kleinhans, 1978, p. 41). He characterises the social relations of capitalist production in terms of a split between 'productive' work and personal life now confined to the home – the sphere of reproduction. The alienation of the labour process within capitalist forms of production is disguised and compensated for in the notions of personal identity and happiness supposed to be found in the family, a bourgeois conception of 'people's needs' shaped by the ideology of indi-

vidualism. At the same time, women and children are marginalised outside production and confined to the home, while women become responsible for providing the fulfilment that capitalist relations of production cannot – a need whose source lies outside the family and therefore cannot be achieved. 'This basic contradiction forms the raw material of melodrama' (Kleinhans, 1978, p. 42).

Kleinhans argues that, in the piling on of domestic conflict and disaster, in its concentration on 'the personal sphere, home, family, and women's problems' (Kleinhans, 1978, p. 42) and its closeness to real life, melodrama deals more directly than many other genres with themes and situations close to its audience's experiences. In so doing, its function is similar to that of the family itself, displacing social contradiction, working through the problems of keeping the family intact at the cost of repression and women's self-sacrifice. In these terms, melodrama is a profoundly conservative form. Its penchant for ambiguity, far from providing an ironic critique of bourgeois society, disperses critical focus among a number of possible readings. In *All That Heaven Allows*, for instance, the unsuitability of Cary's second marriage to her gardener is equally and indifferently a problem of class, of age, of lifestyle – thus attenuating the film's purchase on its subject matter. For Kleinhans, these films are symptomatic – indicating the strategies of bourgeois ideology for evading structural problems. They are not, however, instances of ideological breakdown or aesthetic radicalism and it is only analysis from quite a different position to that of the film that can reveal its project.

The two voices of melodrama

Laura Mulvey's (1977/78) contribution shifts the emphasis away from melodrama as a 'progressive' genre by reinserting questions about the place of women both in the subject matter of melodrama and in its conditions of production and consumption. While sharing some of Kleinhans's concerns, her feminist perspective produces a very different intervention. Kleinhans sees the family as a product of capitalist social relations residing in the split between 'productive' and 'reproductive' life: patriarchy does not enter as a term in his analysis, and, as with Elsaesser, the question of gender specificity in melodrama disappears.

For Mulvey, however, it is in patriarchy that the pertinent and irresolvable contradictions lie. For her, the notion that melodrama exposes contradictions in bourgeois ideology by its failure to accommodate the 'excess' generated by its subject matter (see Nowell-Smith, 1977) fails to understand either the degree to which family and sexual relations are constituted as contradictory or the role of melodrama in providing a 'safety valve' for them. Drawing on Helen Foley's view (about Aeschylean tragedy) that 'over-valuation of virility under patriarchy causes social and ideological problems which the drama comments on' (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 54), Mulvey argues that 'ideological contradiction is the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious threat' (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 53). Consequently, *mise en scène* can no longer be the means of privileged critical access to progressive interpretation, but rather, in 1950s Hollywood melodrama, represents the specific aesthetic mode that distinguishes it from tragedy, working overtime to carry what the limited stock figures of bourgeois melodrama cannot consciously be aware of, 'giving abstract emotion spectacular form' (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 55). Thus Mulvey closes off the notion of a formal subversiveness being inherent in the melodramatic mode.

Instead, she looks to the production conditions of melodrama and its relation to its imputed female audience, whose material and cultural conditions of existence the form, despite the 'symbolic imbalance' of narrative structures, was forced to acknowledge: it is, after all, the patriarchal need for coexistence with women that produces the crisis melodrama seeks to alleviate. Because she insists on the real contradictions of patriarchal ideology for women, rather than their metaphorical significance for men, Mulvey begins to show how melodrama can both function for patriarchal ends, bringing about a narrative resolution of its contradictions, and at the same time perform a quite different function for women: offering the satisfaction of recognising those contradictions, usually suppressed (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 53).

This view leads Mulvey to distinguish between those films that are 'coloured by a female protagonist's dominating point-of-view' and those that deal with male oedipal problems by 'examining tensions in the family, and between sex and generations' (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 54), constructing the hero as Elsaesser's and Nowell-Smith's victim of patriarchal society. Sirk, she argues, worked in both traditions, his independently produced *The Tarnished Angels* (1958) and *Written on the Wind* (1957) conforming to the second pattern, his work for Ross Hunter at Universal, who specialised in women's pictures (see *All That Heaven Allows*), belonging to the first. Women's pictures, variously known in the trade as 'weepies', 'sudgers' or 'four handkerchief pictures', were tailored to the female matinee audience, generally deriving from women's magazine fiction or novelettes, and had a tangential relation, yet to be fully explored, to the family melodrama derived from the bourgeois novel. These films are characterised by an attempt to reproduce the woman's point of view as central to the narrative, and if

there is subversive excess in melodrama, this is where Mulvey locates it. Whereas the patriarchal mode of melodrama is able to produce some form of readjustment of its values, some reconciliation between the sexes, the attempt to entertain the woman's point of view, to figure feminine desire, produces narrative problems of an order impossible to tie up, except in the fantasies of women's magazine fiction. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary, a widowed mother of two, past child-bearing age, is able to unite with her younger, employee lover only when a last-minute accident renders him bedridden and incapable. However, such a fantasy, while resolving certain of the narrative's contradictions, touches on 'recognisable, real and familiar traps, which for women brings it closer to daydream than fairy story' (Mulvey, 1977/78, p. 56).

Progressing the debate

Two major and interlinked areas of debate emerged from Mulvey's and Nowell-Smith's interventions. The first concerns the 'observed dialectic between class politics and sexual politics, bourgeois ideology and the patriarchal order' (Pollock, 1977, p. 106); the second, the question of whether gender difference can be said to have aesthetic consequences in fictional structures.

The repressed feminine

Griselda Pollock (1977) takes up the first issue in a consideration of what precisely is repressed in the oedipal moment. She notes confusion in discussion of melodrama as to whether its representation of the family signifies an interrogation of bourgeois family relations, or the displacement of contradictions found in bourgeois social relations, or both. Behind this lies an issue about the primacy of patriarchal or of capitalist relations – of sex or class determination. Pollock wants to argue the necessity of thinking of the family, and the place of women within it, as a product of both in dialectical articulation together. In this respect, she sees both Nowell-Smith (1977) and Mulvey (1977/78) as in danger of 'reifying sexuality outside the social formation', arguing that 'the contradictions which *All That Heaven Allows* exposes are between different social positions, not just irreconcilable desires or the sexuality of women' (Pollock, 1977, p. 110). Taking issue with the view that femininity in patriarchal culture is unrepresentable because unknown and unknowable, Pollock argues that femininity can be produced only as specific social positions. In western society, the social position of mother is crucial to the perpetuation both of capitalist social relations and patriarchal dominance, demanding the subjugation of female sexuality in social and cultural life. From Pollock's perspective, the women's point-of-view movies and male oedipal dramas have one thing in common: the relocation of the woman as mother, a position that, while fathers may disappear, be rendered silent or impotent, dominates the conclusion of these films.

However, such relocation faces the problem of 'the extraordinary and disruptive role played by the woman's uncontained, withheld or frustrated sexuality in the dynamic of the narrative' – which includes 'female sexuality outside familial roles' – which includes 'female sexuality outside familial roles' (Pollock, 1977, p. 111) and the continued sexuality of mothers. This leads Pollock to posit the 'repressed feminine' as the key to understanding melodrama. In her terms, the 'feminine' represents a psycho-sexual position, hypothetically available to either sex, but foregone and repressed in the reproduction of sons in the patriarchal, masculine position and daughters as mothers. What is important here is that femininity is understood not simply as an empty, negative, passive space, but

something positively 'lost' in the construction of the social and sexed subject positions necessary to patriarchal, bourgeois society. Although Pollock does not do so, the fantasy of the family romance could be invoked here to explain the patriarchal function of both women's film and male family melodrama. In one of its forms, it allows the child to disown the father and fantasise the mother's independent sexuality with another man. This, for the male child in particular, allows both an exploration of incestuous desire and identification with the female position; for the female child, it allows a refusal of the repression required for the confinement of female sexuality to reproduction.

Taking up Mulvey's (1977/78) 'safety valve' theory of melodrama, Pollock goes on to suggest that many of the contradictions exposed in 'progressive' analysis of melodrama are in fact ones that patriarchal and bourgeois culture can contain. And this is as true of the women's picture tradition as of the male family melodrama; the woman's point of view in *That Heaven Allows* is not in the last analysis what is disruptive. Cary in fact is offered as a passive spectator of her own fate, quite in line with patriarchal ideology, whereas in *Home from the Hill* (1960), on the surface a male melodrama, the figure of the woman, totally robbed of point of view, holds nevertheless enormous control in the disposition of narrative events.

Pollock's intervention in the debate constitutes a useful appraisal of its theoretical assumptions. She attempts to construct terms in which the women's picture and family melodrama can be thought through together in terms of a problematic that embraces the dialectic of sex and class. However, attractive as Pollock's conception of the source of potential disruption in melodrama might be, the notion of the 'feminine position' outside of patriarchal and bourgeois social relations is highly abstract, and not much further forward in providing a sense of the articulation of sex and class that she demands.

Class and sex in the maternal melodrama

Christian Viviani (1980) is concerned with 'woman' as an already culturally coded figure capable of mobilising audience response towards new conceptions of social organisation. He attempts an analysis of the ideologies reworked in a subset of Hollywood melodrama that appears to effect a passage between its Victorian forms, epitomised in the work of Griffith, and the woman's film – a subset that Viviani dubs 'the maternal melodrama'. His analysis of this subgenre in the 1930s deals with the transformation of European, Victorian themes under pressure from New Deal ideology. In this, the role of woman as mother is pivotal, suggesting something of the way issues around female sexuality and maternity can be dramatised as a displacement or resolution of class issues (see Elsaesser, 1972). Viviani's contention is that as a fictional mode, melodrama seeks to move its audience emotionally by an appeal to everyday feelings and experiences that are then magnified in intensity through a complexity of baroque incident and coincidence. The fallen mother is a figure who can readily summon up such feelings, particularly for the male audience for whom she carries a charge of oedipal eroticism. At the same time, the sexual transgression of the mother is capable of evoking not only a moral but also a class register, for the variations in moral attitude to her speak different class ideologies.

The dramaturgical structure on which this is based, and which was adopted by Hollywood from the European Victorian stage, involved

a woman [who] ... separated from her child, falls from her social class and founders in disgrace. The child grows up in respectability and enters



A mother's love: Barbara Stanwyck as Stella in *Stella Dallas*

established society where he stands for progress ... The mother watches the social rise of her child from afar; she cannot risk jeopardising his fortunes by contamination with her own bad repute. Chance draws them together again and the partial or total rehabilitation of the mother is accomplished, often through a cathartic trial scene. (Viviani, 1980, p. 7)

This basic structure could be organised ideologically according to two different codes of judgment, one moral, the other social. For the European-influenced and smaller cycle, the woman's fall 'was traceable to her adultery, committed in a moment of frenzy and expiated in lifelong maternal suffering' (Viviani, 1980, p. 6). In Hollywood, this vein represented a female equivalent to Warshaw's 'gangster as tragic hero' (see *The gangster film as an experience of art*, p. 280). Although still morally condemned, the heroine's descent into the 'more realistic, more tawdry or desperate' atmosphere of music halls and furnished rooms marked an opposition to the permanence of the bourgeois household, a 'veritable ideal of this thematic, totally impregnated by Victorian morality' (Viviani, 1980, p. 8). Her fate of 'anonymity and silence' was the opposite of the tale favoured by Hollywood of success and rise to fame. However, though admitting its potentially critical slant on European aristocratic moral codes, Viviani argues that this cycle looked decidedly reactionary from the perspective of the New Deal:

Heroines who are submissive, resigned, sickly, even naive ... defenceless, lacking in energy or decisiveness were hardly good examples for the movie-going public of 1932 and 1933 who needed to be mobilised to face the economic crisis. The direct lineage of *Madame X* was an uncomfortable reminder of an earlier state of mind which had led to the Wall Street crash. (Viviani, 1980, pp. 9–10)

As America became more isolationist and nationalistic, the moral codes of the maternal melodrama shifted gear. The foundations of such a shift had been laid in the work of Griffith, who had performed the necessary transposition from a European aristocratic urban milieu to an American, petit bourgeois and rural one, which both bore the brunt of an ideological criticism (as, for instance, in *Way Down East*, 1920), but was capable of regeneration. New Deal ideology, according to Viviani, 'is incarnated halfway between city and country' (Viviani, 1980, p. 12), and it is the figure of woman with her culturally given connection to nature, who can facilitate this incarnation, which both castigates 'the residue of an outworn morality' hung on to by the idle city rich and the rigidity of rural society in the name of the 'pantheistic philosophies of Thoreau and Whitman'. In the American maternal melodrama of the 1930s, epitomised by *Stella Dallas* (1937), the motif of maternal sacrifice is rearticulated in relation to themes closer to American society of that time: 'prejudice, education, female understanding, the "good marriage" of the children' (Viviani, 1980, p. 10). In this context, moral sin is replaced by social error and a new kind of heroine can emerge whose sacrifice is less dumb acquiescence to an inevitable and remote fate than a struggle to survive in a society whose values need correcting: 'Integrated into the world of work, she unconsciously participates in the general effort to bring America out of the crisis; she is set up as an antagonist to a hoarding, speculating society, repository of false and outworn values' (Viviani, 1980, p. 12).

Her child becomes a stake in this regeneration, not taken away from the mother as in the European cycle, but given up 'to insure him an education, a moral training that only a well-placed family can give him' (Viviani, 1980, p. 13). 'These films recount the tale of a woman's loss due to a man's lack of conscience and show her reconquering her dignity while helping

her child re-enter society thanks to her sacrifices. It is a clear metaphor for an attitude America could adopt in facing its national crisis' (Viviani, 1980, p. 14).

The figure of the mother could effect such ideological work because of the powerful emotions she calls up in the viewer, producing 'an illusion destined to mobilise the public in a certain direction, an illusion that transposed the anguish of an era, an illusion ... knowingly grounded in eroticism' (Viviani, 1980, p. 16). By implication, the power of such eroticism to effect displacement or resolution of class difference lies in the flexible class definition of the woman. On the one hand, this is dependent on familial and sexual placing, transgression of which produces the woman in the position of outcast. On the other, ideologies of maternity and femininity – for example, the woman sacrifices self for child, or acts out of true love for a man – can be utilised to argue for an ideological shift in the moral balance of power between different class forces.

Feminist approaches

Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' has been seminal in suggesting the role the figure of woman plays in patriarchal fiction. Her concern there, as she has since explained it (see Mulvey, 1981), was to examine the masculinisation of spectator position and identification in classic Hollywood cinema. However, as she herself argued (1977/78), a female protagonist at the centre of the narrative disturbs this structure. This view has led to work by feminists on the possible aesthetic consequences of gender difference. Pam Cook (1978) argued that *Mildred Pierce* (1945) represented a mixed-genre film in which the male voice of film noir combated the



A mother's guilt: Joan Crawford is economical with the truth in *Mildred Pierce*

female voice of the woman's film, with both narrative structure and mise en scène enacting the subordination of the latter to the former. Barbara Creed (1977) considered the narrative consequences of the generic necessity of the woman's melodrama (in her terms, any melodrama that supports a central heroine) to produce the figure of the woman as leading protagonist. She investigated the differences between the narrative structures developed to cope with a female protagonist and those that characterise most other genres. The problem the melodramatic structure faces is one of producing drama while conforming to social definitions of women in their domestic roles as wives and mothers (Creed, 1977, p. 28).

From a small group of women's pictures, she derives a typical narrative structure capable of supporting a central feminine protagonist 'which involves a pattern of female role transgression; the entry of an exceptional male; marked change in the heroine's point of view; suffering and sacrifice; and, finally, her acceptance of a more socially desirable role' (Creed, 1977, p. 28). She goes on to show how in the three women's pictures she studied, the discourse of the doctor is used to bring the transgressing woman's viewpoint into line with the accepted codes of feminine behaviour. For Creed, the displacement of the female protagonist's dilemma into mise en scène and into a range of other characters, far from combating an ideology of individualism, simply restates her problem in terms of other people's needs – reproducing a scenario in which the woman does not speak, but is spoken for (Creed, 1977, p. 29). Like Kleinhans, she sees melodrama as interesting for the questions that an analysis constructed elsewhere – by Marxism or feminism – can show it touching on but not able to ask. Whereas in Kleinhans's case there are questions of capitalist relations of production and class, Creed suggests that the unspoken question of women's melodramas is to do with the taboo subject of female sexuality.

Melodrama and the status quo

Most accounts of melodrama in literature and cinema, including those discussed above, agree on one thing: that in its post-revolutionary bourgeois forms, the boundaries of the field in which it operates are those of the established social order as lived in everyday domestic terms. For instance, Stephen Neale argues that whereas in most other genres the establishment of law and order is the object of the narrative, melodrama focuses on problems of living within such order, suggesting not 'a crisis of that order, but a crisis within it, an "in-house" rearrangement' (Neale, 1980, p. 22).

Jean-Loup Bourget presents the same idea in ideological rather than moral terms: 'America after questioning the myth of progress, urbanisation and socialisation, is content with a rhetorical question and at the end of the story reinstates the same belief' (Bourget, 1978, p. 32). Elsaesser concretises these generalities in an acute description of the mise en scène of the domestic, arising from an account of *Hilda Crane* (1956), which, he argues, 'brings out the characteristic attempt of the bourgeois household to make time stand still, immobilise life and fix forever domestic property relations as the model of social life and a bulwark against the more disturbing sides in human nature' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 13). Thomas Schatz, in a survey of 1950s melodramas, notes the paradoxical narrative function of marriage and the family, which provides both dramatic conflict and resolution. Of *Young at Heart* (1955) he argues: 'We have seen the central characters as either victimised by or utterly hostile to the existing social-familial-marital system, but somehow romantic love and parenthood magically transform familial anxiety and despair into domestic bliss' (Schatz, 1981, p. 229).

The necessity for melodrama to produce dramatic action while staying in the same place gives it a characteristically circular thematic and narrative structure – many cinematic melodramas start out from a flashback so that their end literally lies in their beginning. And it gives melodrama a characteristically ambiguous modality and address, which has given rise to different interpretations. Bourget, writing about the romantic dramas of 1940s Hollywood, describes their hesitation between, on the one hand, a heavy-handed moralistic realism, operating in parable-like fashion in support of the bourgeois family, and on the other, the disbelief of whimsy, of escape offered by 'romance'. Stephen Neale, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, describes this ambiguity of melodrama as a form of pathos to do with the narrativisation of desire, which, by its very nature, can never be fulfilled (Neale, 1980, p. 30).

While these accounts vary in the degree to which they see subversive potential within, or despite, such constraints, they are alike in concentrating on formal analysis of the genre. Only a feminist interest in the relation of the films to the lives of their audiences has suggested that the formal ambiguity within which the genre works is neither simply a meretricious ploy to soak the drama for all the pathos it is worth without confronting serious issues, nor a mass medium's attenuation of the tragic vision, but provides a structure that relates to the material conditions of women's lives.

What appears as the affect of form in one critical context is given a material reality in another. This observation is not quite the same as noting the 'real life' occurrence of events that seem exaggerated or absurd in the films. Links between the form and the lives of the presumed female audience are commonly made by industry, establishment critics and feminists. The audience for women's pictures and melodramas is most often characterised as composed of frustrated housewives, oppressed by the duties of motherhood and marriage, by sexual frustration and lost fantasies of romantic love. In this view, the women's pictures and melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s gave cultural expression to these frustrations, offering in vicarious outlets escapist fantasy, rage, or sublimation. In the words of Molly Haskell (1979), the films represent 'soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife'.

What the industry and Marxist feminism have in common is an implicit view of the housewife's life and the emotions it calls forth as being narrow, circumscribed, petty, boring and frustrated. Critics, and many of the directors and writers involved in these films, regard them with contempt or mild patronage, looking for value in what can be made of the situations in terms of the 'human condition'. Hence the great interest in the notion of the form's power lying in its capacity to subvert its content. Recent work on melodrama, however, has ceased to look for textual progressiveness. This is partly due to the displacement of mise en scène by a psychoanalytically construed concept of narrative as the key to a film's ideological operation. In this view, classic narrative functions precisely to engage with 'difference' – whether social, sexual or unconscious – but always from the reassuring perspective of 'the same' to which everything is returned at the end. From quite a different approach, the notion of progressive reading has become suspect because of the formalism that constitutes meaning textually, without reference to the reading situation and practices of actual audiences. Further work on melodrama and the woman's film has been pursued predominantly by feminists, proceeding in two main directions: one a formal, narrative/discourse-orientated approach; another, frequently focusing on TV soap opera, an audience-orientated approach. The former is concerned to analyse the work performed by narrative structure and the process of enunciation when a female protagonist

is posited as subject of desire and discourse rather than its object (see Lea Jacobs, 1991; Mary Ann Doane, 1983). The latter traces a homology between the ambiguous modality of melodrama, its circular structure, and the contradictions within which women's lives are constructed. The woman's film and melodrama provide fictional structures and forms of pleasure that reproduce a 'female' subject, and at the level of the text some of the material conditions in which women live (see Modleski, 1979; Brunson, 1981). In these terms, the duplicitous complexity with which Kleinhans charges *All That Heaven Allows* – where the displacement of problems to do with class, age, sexuality into female problems of personal relations renders them simply confusing – is not so much a question of ideological poverty in the analysis of class or age, but of the difficulty of mapping the 'question of femininity', of women's issues, across other social definitions.

Melodrama and the woman's film since the 1990s

STEVE NEALE

In 1987, many of the articles discussed above were collected together and introduced by Christine Gledhill in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. Far from signalling the culmination of work in these areas, this publication coincided with and helped to promote and focus additional research, including books by Lang (1989), Byars (1991), Jacobs (1991), Basinger (1993), Klinger (1994) and a further collection of articles edited by Bratton, Cook and Gledhill (1994), based on papers delivered at a major international conference on melodrama held in London in 1992. In addition, E. Ann Kaplan discussed melodrama and the woman's film at some length in *Motherhood and Representation* (1992), and the directing and scripting of women's pictures by women were discussed by Judith Mayne (1994) and by Lizzie Francke (1994) respectively.

Each of these books and studies presented new insights and/or new research. Lang's book was the first systematic study of the 'family melodramas' directed by Griffith, *Vidor* (1928), as well as *Stella Dallas* and *Ruby Gentry* (1942), *Madame Bovary* (1949), *Some Came Running* (1958) and *Home from the Hill*, placing these films within the context of familial, oedipal and patriarchal issues and concerns.

Byars's book was a study of gender in the films of the 1950s, and highlighted the extent to which the films themselves drew on and interacted with wider social and cultural debates and representations. Focusing on men as well as women, she extended the canon of films traditionally discussed by referring in detail to films such as *Picnic* (1955), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *All That Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life* (1959). She also addressed issues of class and race.

Klinger also focused on the 1950s, specifically on the films directed by Douglas Sirk. Eschewing traditional auteurism and conventional textual analysis, Klinger's concern was to trace the contemporary contexts within which Sirk's films, their devices, their stars and their style were understood. Her approach represents – and seeks to bring together – renewed interest in historiography and historiographical research on one hand, and interest in audience research and in the multiple readings of films produced by audiences on the other.

Kaplan situated an array of films and film cycles from different periods in cinema's history within and across changing – and unchanging – ideologies and representations of mother-

hood. Within this context, she considered topics such as the maternal woman's film, themes of maternal sacrifice and paradigms of motherhood such as 'Angel' and 'Witch'.

Jacobs considered in detail a particular cycle of films – the 'Fallen Woman' films of the late 1920s, the 1930s and the early 1940s – which in many ways represented and embodied a challenge to traditional ideologies of motherhood and femininity. Focusing on the issue of self-regulation and self-censorship, and using specific archival case files, Jacobs's study demonstrates on the one hand how social ideologies and the practices of the film industry interacted at a specific point in time, and on the other how that process of interaction was always also a process of negotiation, a two-way or sometimes a three- or four-way process whose results – the films themselves – were often highly complex, ambiguous and contradictory.

These characteristics were also stressed by Mayne in her study of the work of Dorothy Arzner, and in Francke's account of the work of several generations of female scriptwriters in Hollywood. They also formed the basis of Basinger's account of the woman's film. For Basinger, as for many others:

What emerges on close examination of hundreds of women's movies is how strange and ambivalent they really are. Stereotypes are presented, then undermined then reinforced. Contradictions abound, which at first sight seem to be merely the result of carelessness, the products of commercial nonsense. But they are more than plot confusion. They exist as an integral and even necessary aspect of what drives the movies and gives them their appeal. These movies were a way of recognizing the problems of women, of addressing their desire to have things be other than the way they were offscreen. (Basinger, 1993, p. 7)

Unlike others, Basinger offers a 'working definition' of the woman's film that extends well beyond the traditional canon, the traditional label and the traditional confines of 'melodrama'. 'A woman's film', she writes, 'is a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems connected to the fact that she is a woman' (Basinger, 1993, p. 20). It thus includes – or should include – 'Rosalind Russell's career comedies, musical biographies of real-life women, combat films featuring brave nurses on *Bataan*, and westerns in which women drive cattle west and men over the brink' (Basinger, 1993, p. 7).

The point that Basinger makes here is clearly both polemical and logical. It is also a point that raises questions about generic labels and terms, and about the relative weight to be accorded institutional terms – the terms used by Hollywood, and by contemporary reviewers, critics and journalists – as opposed to those used and defined by subsequent theorists and subsequent historians. Similar questions have been raised by Ben Singer (1990) and by Steve Neale (1993), who have researched the deployment and definition of 'melodrama' as a term both inside and outside Hollywood, and its relationship to female-centred narratives on the one hand, and to the woman's film on the other. Both find significant differences between the understanding and use of the term in and around the film industry and other contemporary institutions of entertainment – the theatre, and in Neale's case television and radio – and the understanding and use of the term in and around film, media and cultural studies.

Broadly speaking, both Singer and Neale have found that 'melodrama' meant 'thriller', and hence was used principally to describe and to label crime films, adventure films, war films, westerns and horror films. Singer, who is concerned with the 1900s, the 1910s and the 1920s, quotes from a 1906 article enti-

tled 'The Taint of Melodrama': 'Ask the next person you meet casually how he defines a melodramatic story, and he will probably tell you that it is a hodge-podge of extravagant adventures, full of blood and thunder, clashing swords and hair's breadth escapes' (Singer, 1990, p. 95). Neale, who is concerned with the sound period through to the end of the 1950s, quotes from an issue of *Life* magazine (27 August 1925, p. 26):

Melodrama, on the screen, is identified almost entirely with fast physical action; cowboys or sheiks or cavalrymen riding madly across country, men hanging by their teeth from the ledges of skyscrapers, railroad wrecks, duels, heroines floating on cakes of ice toward waterfalls, and every known form of automobile chase.

He also quotes from numerous trade reviews, and notes that the only two films made by Hollywood with the word 'melodrama' in the title – *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) and *Washington Melodrama* (1941) – were both thrillers or crime films.

As Singer and Neale both point out, women's pictures – and films marked generally by domestic settings, by romance and/or by pathos and sentiment – were called dramas, not melodramas, and Neale goes on to speculate that this use of the term may derive from theatrical genre, 'drama'. The only female-centred films regularly described as melodramas were, precisely, action films and thrillers of one kind or another, from the 'serial queen' adventure films that Singer discusses – *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914–15), *The Hazards of Helen* (1915) and others – through such female-centred aviation films as *Tail Spin* (1939) and *Women in the Wind* (1939), to the numerous female-centred detective films and Gothic thrillers of the 1940s – *Murder among Friends* (1941), *Second Chance* (1947), *Mary Ryan, Detective* (1949) and *Gaslight* (1944), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1948), *Undercurrent* (1946) and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948). (For further discussion of the aviation films, see Paris, 1995, pp. 114–16; for further discussion of the Gothic thriller, see Waldman, 1983; Walsh, 1984; Doane, 1987; Barefoot, 1994.)

Neither Neale nor Singer denies a relationship between the woman's film, as traditionally defined, and nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama. But they both point to the heterogeneous – the multi-generic – nature of nineteenth-century melodrama. And they both point to the possibility that the meaning of melodrama as a term may have altered as melodrama itself altered and changed. Singer argues that there was a division between cheap, popular, sensational melodrama and highbrow and middle-class theatre at the turn of the century.

A Fool There Was (USA 1915 p.c – William Fox/Box Office Attractions Company; d – Frank Powell)

This film plays on a typical theme of nineteenth-century stage melodrama – the disaster that besets a respectable family when its head falls prey to a fashionable vamp (a stereotype instituted in Theda Bara's role here, and which made her a star). Examples of early film melodrama style can be found in the film's use of the static camera, the lack of close-ups and the reliance on natural light sources. Viewed from the perspective of 1950s family melodramas, this can be seen as a lack of technological development; or it can be understood

Despite the fact that elements of nineteenth-century melodrama fed into the latter, the former became the site of an equation between 'melodrama' and thrills, spills and action, blood, thunder, villainy and vulgarity upon which commentators, critics, audiences and reviewers in film and in the theatre increasingly drew. Neale's argument is similar, though, drawing on Rahill (1967), he places the division further back in time, arguing for a correspondence between the woman's film and what Rahill calls 'modified melodrama', a form of melodrama that emerged initially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in which:

The 'heart' became the target of playwrights rather than the simple nervous system, and firearms and the representation of the convulsions of nature yielded the centre of the stage to high-voltage emotionalism, examination of soul-states, and the observation of manners ... The unhappy end became common. (Rahill, 1967, p. xv)

Neale argues that it was this form of melodrama, an inheritor of *drame*, which became known simply as drama. The action-based forms fed first in the theatre and then in the cinema into action-based genres of various kinds and tended to retain the melodrama label. Some of these points were made some time ago by Michael Walker (1982), who sees nineteenth-century melodrama as a matrix both for action genres and what he calls 'melodramas of passion'.

It is clear that melodrama, the woman's film and the precise nature of the relationship between them remain key areas of debate and research. It is equally clear, as numerous commentators have pointed out (for example, Vardac, 1949; Fell, 1974) that melodrama is related to other genres, and that further research – and debate – is needed in this area as well.

Selected Reading

Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1993.

Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, London, BFI Publishing, 1987.

Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, University of Indiana Press, 1994.

Ben Singer, 'Female power in the serial-queen melodrama: the etiology of an anomaly', *Camera Obscura* 22: 94–5, January 1990. Reprinted in Abel (ed.), *Silent Film*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1995.

as the continuity, even fulfilment, of certain nineteenth-century theatrical traditions (see Vardac, 1949). Melodramatic effects, for instance, are produced by the crosscutting between pathetic scenes of the wife with her angelic daughter or in church, and the scenes of dissolution at the vamp's apartment or of despair in the husband's home, wrecked through his squandering time and money on his mistress and drink. The husband himself becomes the site of a struggle between two representations of women: the wife, who hearing of the vamp's desertion declares 'If he is as you say my place is with him', and the dark-haired sexual woman. Melodramatic expression is carried, as in

the theatre, by furnishing and fittings – a chaise-longue, a card table, half-empty bottles and glasses, costume – the wife's squashed-down hat, the furs and silky gowns of the vamp, and significant gesture – the vamp's stare that drives the wife from her husband's arms. The scene utilising the staircase was to become a standard feature of a cinematic rhetoric in the expression of melodramatic confrontation (see also *Written on the Wind*, 1957). Here, the husband is tempted to return to wife and daughter until the vamp appears in her nightdress at the top of the stairs to drive them away, causing the husband to collapse, his hand reaching through the banister in a gesture of helpless appeal. The necessary reliance on natural light is turned to theatrical affect by lighting schemes exploiting the dramatic conflict of darkened rooms pierced by shafts of light as curtains and blinds are drawn or closed. And a substitute for the play of light and shade is found in the wreaths of incense that swathe the vamp in her apartment, evoking an atmosphere of decadence and mystery.

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

Way Down East (USA 1920 p.c – D. W. Griffith; d – D. W. Griffith)

Way Down East was based on a Victorian melodrama of the same name. Griffith bought the rights in 1920, at a time when films were moving away from melodrama to become more naturalistically rooted in contemporary issues. Both play and film, as Kozloff (1985), Lennig (1981) and Kauffmann (1972) have observed, drew on certain themes and specific events in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The melodramatic origins of the film are evident in the stereotypical characters (virginal heroine, clean-cut hero, idealised mother, stern father, shrewish busybody), as well as in instances of narrative coincidence, such as when the heroine Anna (Lillian Gish), having started a new life in another town, happens to be seen by her ex-landlady, who knows the secret about her dead illegitimate baby. The film also contains several inexplicable moments that seem to operate from what Peter Brooks (1976) calls the 'occult realm'. Foremost among these are the scenes showing David (Richard Barthelmess), who has yet to meet Anna, waking from a bad dream while she gets married to the villain, and the one in which David 'senses' Anna's arrival at his farm although it is spatially impossible for him to see her.

But *Way Down East* is not just unadorned melodrama. According to Cardullo, 'Filming the whole of Anna's story, as opposed to solely the plot of the play, gave Griffith one large advantage; he could make it appear less melodramatic, or better, he could enhance the realism of the melodrama' (Cardullo, 1987, p. 17). Melodrama, although often forming the emotional core of Griffith's films, is always accompanied by a sense of the

'photographically realistic'; we are shown – we see – concrete realities, with locations and interiors 'made real' through meticulous detail. In narrative terms, Griffith usually chooses to show us events rather than allowing them to take place off screen. For example, with the ice-flow rescue of Anna at the film's climax: 'In the play, we only hear of Anna's incredible rescue. In the film, her rescue becomes credible because we see it happen ...' (Cardullo, 1987, p. 17). The rescue off stage allows Poetic Justice to claim at least a partial role; in the film, the rescue is all down to David's (and Barthelmess's) courage in actually braving the rapids. It becomes an almost strictly human act.

Significantly, whereas the play opens with Anna's arrival at the Bartlett farm, and only gradually reveals her secret, Griffith chose to tell the story chronologically. In the play, therefore, Anna's guilty secret is gradually revealed to both spectator and other characters at the same time. In the film, the spectator knows the secret as it happens, well in advance of the scene that finally reveals it to the other characters. Thus viewers are positioned with Anna throughout the film, intensifying the emotional affect of the melodramatic chain of events.

MICHAEL ALLEN

Sunrise A Song of Two Humans (USA 1927 p.c – Fox Film Corporation; d – F. W. Murnau)

The plot of this film is typical of nineteenth-century domestic melodrama, involving the temptations held out to a young farmer, living happily with his wife and child, by a city vamp, who consumes his small financial resources and finally suggests murdering his wife. The iconography of the domestic melodrama is everywhere: the oil lamps, soup bowls, peasant bread and chequered tablecloth signifying domestic virtues; conflicting representations of femininity – the wife and mother with blonde hair pulled back flat in a bun, associated with traditional peasant country life, the sexual woman in silky garb, black bobbed hair, smoking, jitterbugging and associated with the modern city; the moon and mists over the marshes as the site for the young farmer's succumbing to the murder plot. This iconography contributes to the extreme moral polarities between which the man is pulled, and which are intensified by the non-individualisation of the protagonists, designated only as the man, the wife and the woman from the city.

While much of the film's iconography, melodramatic structure and *mise en scène* looks back to nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama, it also looks forward in its style to the full development of cinematic melodrama. Notable in this respect is, first, the influence of German Expressionism that Murnau brings to Hollywood, particularly in the distorted perspectives of the interior sets, the stereotyping of the woman from the city, the dramatisation of typography in the



High emotions: country boy George O'Brien is seduced by city vamp Margaret Livingston in Murnau's *Sunrise*

intertitles that spell out the murder plot, the split screen, superimpositions and dissolves that link the woman and the city; second, Murnau's development of the moving camera, which led Bazin to put him on the side of the realists. Arguably, however, the moving camera (for instance, to bring the young farmer to the city woman on the marshes) and the long-take, deep-focus tracking shot that allows us to travel with the young couple on the trolley from lakeside to city are part of the externalisation of emotion into cinematic *mise en scène* that Elsaesser (1972) describes as the hallmark of full-blown Hollywood melodrama in the 1940s and 1950s.

Finally, the film's use of sound marks its transitional status. For while it utilises a synchronous soundtrack, it fulfils the nineteenth-century melodramatic ideal of reducing dialogue in favour of music and pictorial *mise en scène*, adding only a few expressive sound effects.

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

Stella Dallas (USA 1937 p.c – Samuel Goldwyn Inc; d – King Vidor)

This is a classic and much-debated woman's film, so designated because of its central woman

protagonist, its 'feminine' subject matter and its address to a female audience. These features overlap with the melodramatic mode insofar as domestic subject matter, family relations and the expression of 'feelings' are seen as both sources of the melodramatic and belonging to the feminine province. In this context, and given the cultural ghetto in which the woman's film existed until recently, the melodramatic becomes a pejorative designation, associated with tear-jerking pathos and sentimentality, provided frequently by the presentation of women as victims of their circumstances or nobly self-sacrificing. Christian Viviani (1980) has described a shift in the articulation of the maternal self-sacrifice theme in 1930s Hollywood when, under pressure from New Deal ideology, the motif of the mother's fall and degradation gave way to her energetic attempts at recovery, providing a more upbeat ending. It is this spirit that motivates *Stella Dallas*, where the motif of maternal sacrifice is called on to collaborate in the portrayal of the family as a means to upward mobility and social hope. Stella's (Barbara Stanwyck) 'failing' is not so much the utilisation of her charms to catch a rich man as a means of escaping her Depression-oppressed family, but her

refusal to tone down her ambitions and lifestyle in order to match those of her upper-class husband, or to suppress her sexuality once a mother, and then later allowing her bonding with her daughter to replace conjugal relations. Stella's punishment is the crushing realisation that her lack of financial and social capital will hinder the possibility of a 'happy', upwardly mobile marriage for her daughter. She therefore proves her superior motherhood by deliberately alienating her daughter to make such a marriage possible, thereby loses for ever the relationship that motivates the sacrifice.

The debate about the film is how to understand the implications of the ending. Does it represent the punishment of the erring mother, or is it more contradictory? Arguments that this is the case point to the difference in the maternal sacrifice theme when played out in a woman's film. The scene in which Laurel (Anne Shirley) turns down the offer of a fur coat is an interesting example of this, where Laurel is entranced with the 'good taste' and economic well-being of the Morrison household to the detriment of Stella's good-hearted vulgarity. The scene is played out through women's magazine iconography – the dressing table, mirror, cold cream and hair bleach – and the activities of the 'feminine' world. However, this iconography does not simply dramatise the problem of female upward mobility; it also plays on the dependency of such mobility on the right appearance, a rightness that has little to do with the real underlying relations between mother and daughter.

This suggests a second twist to the maternal sacrifice theme offered by the woman's film. E. Ann Kaplan has argued (in Gledhill, 1987) that the mother/daughter bond characteristic of the woman's film is potentially threatening to patriarchal social and sexual relations. This, Kaplan argues, gives a special meaning to the film's ending when Stella is forced to accede to the sacrifice of the bond so that her daughter can enter heterosexual monogamy and contribute to social progress, while she herself is reduced to mere spectatorship, outside the scene of action. However, Linda Williams gives a different inflection to the ending by concentrating on its address to a female audience (in Gledhill, 1987). Williams argues that the multiple identification through which the 'feminine' is constructed in the film means that the female audience identifies with the contradictions of Stella's position itself. The only possible unifying point of identification is Stephen Dallas (John Boles), who, however, is totally lacking in empathy. The audience stand-in at this point is Helen Morrison (Barbara O'Neil), the only person to recognise Stella's sacrifice, and who purposefully includes Stella into the scene patriarchy would exclude her from by leaving the wedding parlour curtains open. We see Stella's patriarchal placement, but feel the loss of mother and daughter to each other.

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

Gaslight/The Murder in Thornton Square (USA 1944 p.c – Loew's Inc/MGM; d – George Cukor)

The nineteenth-century theatrical roots of Hollywood melodrama are explicitly drawn upon – and transformed – in *Gaslight*. The film's stage origins, its Victorian setting and its melodramatic narrative led *Variety* to comment that the film verges 'on the type of drama that must be linked to the period on which the title was based', but also to compliment it for 'lacking the ten-twenty-thirty element that had been a factor in the stage play'. The reviewer's reference is to the 10, 20 and 30 cent admission charges levied at the beginning of the century by theatres specialising in lowbrow melodrama (see Rahill, 1967, pp. 272–83). The MGM production values clearly indicate more prestigious aspirations, but the Victorian furnishings displayed in *Gaslight* have the additional function of forming a decorous surface that conceals but at the same time accentuates the force of the film's melodramatic material. Thus the scene in which the married couple attends a musical recital lends itself to the display of production values characteristic of many period films, but also allows the melodrama to be acted out behind this ornate façade. Indeed, the decorum of the occasion partly serves to heighten the force of the disruption.



Ornate setting for repressed feelings: Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in *Gaslight*

The fact that in *Gaslight* the husband (Charles Boyer) and wife (Ingrid Bergman) have a relationship tantamount to that of oppressor and oppressed has allowed it to be interpreted as a critique of patriarchy and the institution of marriage. Key issues here are the confirmation or denial of the heroine's perception, and her ability to articulate her fears. Thomas Elsaesser lists *Gaslight* as belonging to a cycle of 'Freudian feminist melodramas' – films 'playing on the ambiguity and suspense of whether the wife is merely imagining it or whether her husband really does have murderous designs on her' (Elsaesser, 1972, p. 11). Other writers have related the cycle to a 'female Gothic' tradition, given a particular inflection by the shifting demands made on women in wartime and postwar America (see Waldman, 1983).

In *Gaslight*, there is confirmation of the heroine's point of view. But if this signifies a validation of female experience, it can be argued that it also ushers in a restoration of the patriarchal order. The detective who comes to the wife's rescue and confirms what she has seen and heard provides a sympathetic male to counterbalance the figure of the tyrannical husband. The narrative closure also serves to locate the film within the codes of classic Hollywood cinema – the sensationalism of the melodrama is ultimately contained by the film's narrative resolution. The question here is to what extent can this resolution accommodate what has gone before?

GUY BAREFOOT

Written on the Wind (USA 1957 p.c – Universal-International; d – Douglas Sirk)

This film was central to the rediscovery of melodrama in the early 1970s, when a reevaluation of Douglas Sirk as auteur (see also Douglas Sirk, p. 451) pointed to the ideological critique that his ironic *mise en scène* operated on 1950s middle-class America.

Its plot enacts a typical family melodrama in which the constriction of its range of action is reinforced by the circularity of its flashback structure and the hopeless, limited and incestuous channels for its protagonists' desires, locked as they are within the bourgeois patriarchal family. Behind Kyle Hadley's (Robert Stack) impotence lies his father's (Robert Keith) failure as patriarch, further manifested in the excessive, misdirected desire of his daughter Marylee (Dorothy Malone), expressed here in the displacement of her desire for Mitch (Rock Hudson) into her active pursuit of a lower-class petrol-pump attendant. In this respect, the plot foregrounds the interconnection of class and sexuality that Elsaesser (1972) and others contend is central to melodrama, class struggle being enacted as a problem of desire, in which female sexuality plays an ambiguous but central role (see Pollock, 1977).

The play of class and sex is carried in the iconography of the film – all the signs of conspicuous bourgeois consumption of the Hadley



Mismatched: Dorothy Malone lusts after Rock Hudson in *Written on the Wind*

mansion, the oil pumps working incessantly against the skyline, the contrasting colours and costume of the conflicting couples – particularly reds associated with Marylee (sports car, flowers, negligée) and the cool green twinsets of Lucy (Lauren Bacall). Such use of decor, costume and consumer goods is typical of Hollywood family melodrama, as is the use of the space of hallway and landings where characters cross paths, eavesdrop, exchange confidences, malicious innuendo or accusations. Overlaying 1950s melodramatic plot structure and iconography is the special injection of Sirkian irony into its excessive *mise en scène*; his play with cliché (the nodding mechanical horse and grinning child that confront Kyle at the moment he believes himself impotent); an obsessive play with mirrors (Mitch's entrance with a drunken Kyle over his shoulder is first caught in a hallway mirror); screens and windows (Marylee looking through her window panes to the policeman and the petrol-pump attendant); and above all an Expressionist use of colour, which breaks with realist conventions for the sake of wresting ironic contrasts from objects and faces (the harsh lighting and make-up on Lucy's and Mitch's faces as they attempt to soothe Kyle at the country club, where the palm-court music is also in striking contrast to the extreme emotions expressed by Kyle).

Sirkian *mise en scène* can also be read in terms of the repression so often said to provide melodrama with its outbreaks of expressive excess, which in turn draws its audience into the emotional drama rather than putting them at a critical distance. The breaking out of repression at the level of plot, florid *mise en scène* and crosscutting typical of melodramatic style are epitomised in the climactic scene where the father falls to his death down the staircase while daughter Marylee dances wildly and erotically to blaring pop music in her bedroom. The scene also exemplifies the extension of 'musical counterpoint' so crucial to nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama into visual and aural *mise en scène* (see Elsaesser, 1972).

CHRISTINE GLEDHILL

In the Mood for Love/Huayang Nianhua Hong Kong/France 2000 p.c – Block 2 Pictures/Jet Tone/Paradis Films/Orly Films; d – Wong Kar-wai

Though melodrama has largely been discussed as a western European phenomenon, as a popular form it extends beyond national boundaries. One of the richest examples occurs in Chinese culture, where melodrama is found in theatre, opera, literature and film (see Chinese cinema, p. 192). Many of the tropes perceived as specific to Hollywood melodramas and women's pictures are present in Chinese cinema, from the social realist dramas to the stylised art movies of the Fifth Generation film-makers. But although these iconographic, narrative and thematic elements resonate across national contexts, their expression is specific to their cultural and historical origins.

Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai is known for his stylish, postmodern adaptation of Hong Kong genre movies, themselves indebted to Hollywood (see Hong Kong cinema, p. 224). *In the Mood for Love* has been seen as a tender reworking of Chinese cinema melodramas such as Fei Mu's 1948 *Springtime in a Small Town/Xiaocheng Zhi Chun*, which told the

story of a married woman's unconsummated love for a young doctor, and her inability to free herself from a loveless marriage. Fei Mu's film, which was controversial in China because of its focus on interpersonal relationships rather than politics, had at its centre key melodramatic themes: the passage of time, memory and coincidence. The heroine's decision to stay with her ailing husband has been perceived as conservative and nostalgic, harking back to a period of moral and social stability. *Springtime in a Small Town* resonates with David Lean's World War II women's picture *Brief Encounter* (1945), which told a similar story of frustrated adulterous passion and was received with ambivalence by contemporary audiences because of its nostalgia for prewar values (see David Lean, p. 432).

Several commentators have remarked on the similarities between these films, Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas and Wong's *In the Mood for Love*, which is set in 1960s Hong Kong and concerns a married woman, Mrs Chan/So Lai-chen (Maggie Cheung) who suspects her husband of having an affair with the wife of Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung), living in the same crowded apartment building (see Teo, 2005). As these two share their fears, they embark on their own tentative affair, though it is not clear whether it is consummated, and the story ends with So Lai-chen returning to her husband, leaving Chow Mo-wan bereft. Wong's exquisite staging of this scenario of passion deferred is poetic in its play with ritual, repetition and lost opportunities, and it wears its debt to Hong Kong cinema and culture on its sleeve, both in its allusive visual design and in its eclectic use of music. The film's use of classic melodrama to evoke the transience of Hong Kong's culture and communities testifies to the enduring power of the genre and to its transnational nature.

PAM COOK

Far from Heaven (USA/France 2002 p.c – Vulcan Productions/Focus Features/Killer Films/John Wells Productions/Section Eight/USA Films/Clear Blue Sky Productions/TF1 International; d – Todd Haynes)

Todd Haynes's appropriation of Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas in *Far from Heaven* has been the subject of much debate. Its strategy of quotation and allusion has been seen by some as draining Sirk's films of their powerful emotional affect, and by others as using pastiche and irony to intensify emotion (see Dyer, 2006). Indeed, on its release, the film sparked a controversy about the value of pastiche. Its reworking of classic melodrama has also been controversial among feminists (see *Camera Obscura*, 2004).

Haynes's film can be approached from a different perspective. It borrows from several different Sirk films to create a new, multi-layered object: a reflection on the limitations of 1950s melodrama in dealing with its socio-political context, and a retrospective look at 1950s America



Desire deferred: Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung in *In the Mood for Love*



A sense of loss: Julianne Moore and Dennis Haysbert relive the past in Todd Haynes's Sirk tribute *Far from Heaven*

that attempts to make visible the social problems that Sirk's films could not confront or express directly. The result is a poignant play on 'then' and 'now' in which both are interleaved with one another, creating a sense of loss that echoes the tragic scenarios of Sirk's films, while allowing a fragile intimation of hope. The film may be seen as using nostalgia politically to activate a sense of lost ideals in its post-feminist, post-civil liberties audience, at the same time as recognising the achievement of some political aims. Thus it can be said to encourage historical reflection by generating the emotion of loss (see Cook, 2005).

As an essay on melodrama, *Far from Heaven* takes the famous visual excess of Sirk films such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1956) and *Written on the Wind* (1957) a stage further. Haynes uses costume,

props, saturated colour and high-contrast lighting as a self-conscious homage to Sirk, but also to create a different aesthetic that might be called 'hyperbolic'. Hyperbole is a literary term that refers to a form of rhetoric; it employs exaggeration to produce a vivid impression in the reader, and it can be linked to the 'purple prose' characteristic of pulp romance fiction. In Haynes's Sirk tribute, it is represented by a knowing, symbolic use of costume and visual design that both alludes to its source texts (and the way they have been discussed in film studies), and refers to its own creative reinterpretation of those films. Like Wong's *In the Mood for Love*, *Far from Heaven* is both a love letter to past melodramas and a celebration of the genre's enduring relevance and vitality.

PAM COOK

THE MUSICAL

STEVE NEALE

The Hollywood musical is a product of the advent of sound, of the industry's commitment to an ethos and to forms of entertainment represented, among other things, by the theatrical musical, by Broadway and by Tin Pan Alley, of its stake in the music publishing, recording and radio industries (acquired during the conversion to sound in the late 1920s), and of developments in and on the musical stage in America and elsewhere during the previous 80 to 90 years. Film versions of stage musicals such as *The Merry Widow* and *The Student Prince*, and of operas such as *Carmen* and *La Bohème*, had been produced during the silent era. So, too, had filmed records of dancers and dances. As Collins (1988) points out, these and nearly all other films were usually accompanied by live music, and were often shown in contexts and venues that included musical performances of one kind or another. As he goes on to argue, it was the presence and popularity of these musical acts that helped prompt the first experiments with sound in the mid-1920s, and that helped function as a model for the preludes and shorts produced by Warners and others at this time. And as he goes on to suggest, the ensuing 'tension between live musical acts and film presentation', between 'the increasing technological sophistication of the medium ... and the sense of nostalgia for a direct relationship with the audience' has marked the musical ever since, providing the focus for such studies as those by Feuer (1993) and Altman (1987), and the motivation for his own concentration on the 'ever-shifting relationship between performance, spectacle, and audience' (Collins, 1988, p. 270). In the meantime, as Wolfe (1990) has pointed out, the established nature and shape of the musical short helped govern the use of musical sequences in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the film usually cited as the first feature-length musical. During the course of the next three years, over 200 musical films of one kind or another were made, and despite a decline in the number of musicals produced and released in the early 1930s, the musical had re-established itself as a routine component in Hollywood's output by 1934 (Altman 1996; Balio, 1993; Barrios, 1995).

The musical has always been a mongrel genre. In varying measures and combinations, music, song and dance have been its only essential ingredients. In consequence, its history, both on stage and on screen, has been marked by numerous traditions, forms and styles. These in turn have been designated by numerous terms – 'operetta', 'revue', 'musical comedy', 'musical drama', 'the backstage musical', 'the rock musical', 'the integrated musical' and so on. As we shall see, historians, critics and theorists of the musical sometimes disagree about the meaning of some of these terms. As we shall also see, some invent their own. Nevertheless, it is possible to provide some basic definitions, to indicate areas of debate and disagreement, and in the process to highlight the extent to which the musical has always been, despite its accessible and effortless image, multifaceted, hybrid and complex (Collins, 1988, p. 269).

Revue, to begin with, is usually uncontentiously defined as a series of comic and musical performances lacking a narrative framework (lacking what in the theatre is called a 'book'), and unified, if at all, only by a consistent style, design or theme, a common set of comic targets, or a single producer, director

or venue (Bordman, 1985; Kislán, 1980). Pure revue in the cinema is rare, though there was a vogue for revue in the late 1920s and early 1930s when, as Balio, citing Walker (1979), points out, it 'was used by producers to showcase stars and contract players and to offer "proof positive that everyone could now talk, sing and dance at least passably well"' (Balio, 1993, p. 211). And as Delameter points out, the influence of revue is evident in the backstage musical, where the show in preparation is usually a revue of one kind or another (Delameter, 1974, p. 122).

One of the distinguishing marks of operetta, by contrast, is the presence of a book. Important too, though, is the nature of the book, the nature of the setting, and the nature and importance of the music (in 1946, *Variety* argued that 'In operetta the score is the primary consideration ... The book, dancing (if any), comedy (if any), production and acting (if any) are all secondary to the music and singing' (p. 49). To quote Rubin: 'Operetta is characterized by its European origins, its elegance and sophistication of tone, its use of melodic, waltz-time music, its picturesque and exotic settings, and its strongly integrative organization around a melodramatic, romance-oriented book' (Rubin, 1993, p. 48). In the cinema, operetta is usually exemplified by the films of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy (*Sweethearts*, 1938; *Rose-Marie*, 1936) and others, all based on stage hits by proponents of American operetta such as Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg, and all produced as a series by



On with the show: Lloyd Bacon's classic backstage musical *42nd Street*