

## 1 GENRE

Even though melodrama has been a significant feature of cinema from the very beginning, it is only since the early 1970s that film scholarship has paid it serious attention. During the 1970s and 1980s, melodrama acquired a new status amongst film historians, theorists and critics, many of whom sought to define the basic thematic and stylistic features of the form, its antecedents and evolution on screen, its influence, appeal and its ideology. In the process, melodrama was not only defined and demarcated as a genre but also refined and its boundaries redrawn. Within Film Studies, opinion has differed over what the term 'melodrama' means, what it designates, what kinds of films can have this term applied to them.

The identification of melodrama as a genre emerged in the wake of a range of theoretical and methodological approaches being adopted within Film Studies: most notably, Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism. In other words, melodrama became a primary focus of academic interest at a time when ideology, psychoanalysis and gender were the most hotly debated issues within Film Studies, providing opportunities for all of these to be pursued within a single cinematic form. However, what became 'melodrama' within Film Studies was never a *single cinematic form* but rather a hybrid of various sub-genres and film cycles. Films were drawn into the category of 'melodrama' from such areas of cinema as romantic drama, historical costume drama, psychological thrillers, gothic thrillers, women's weepies, domestic dramas, juvenile delinquency films, crime thrillers, and so on. Whilst 'melodrama' became a convenient umbrella term that could embrace all of these types of movie, the term was simultaneously used and applied to a range of specific sub-genres, primarily the 'family melo-

drama' and the 'maternal melodrama'. For some scholars, the term 'melodrama' also became synonymous with the Woman's Film. Not surprisingly, this has led to both confusion and argument on the part of film scholars. In the course of examining the notion of melodrama as a genre, we shall encounter some of the ambiguities and contradictions that have arisen within Film Studies and note some of the ways in which melodrama has been understood in very different terms by different film theorists.

*Determining the genre*

Genre has played an important role in the historical development of mainstream cinema. It is also an important concept within Film Studies. As a concept, genre allows a film to be identified as belonging to a larger body of work with shared themes, styles, attitudes and values. It is also an approach to film study or film history that emphasises the role of the audience in the creation of a series of related films. The development of a specific genre or 'film cycle' requires a consistently positive audience response to its style and content, its associated stars, directors, plots, props and settings. Genre studies have tended to recognise the crucial role played by audiences in the commercial film industry. Such studies tend to reveal how a film that had received a favourable audience response spawned a series of imitations or 'variations on a theme'. This series of films is then seen to have resulted in either a 'cycle' of films over a specific period of time (say, several years), for example the Universal Horror films of the 1930s, or to a more diverse body of cinema over a much longer timescale (say, several decades), involving noticeable shifts in style or content, for example the western.

Genres are not just created by audiences and film companies however; critics and historians play a major role in recognising and, on occasion, *determining* groupings of films and designating them a specific generic category. This was most famously the case with 'film noir', a genre widely recognised today within both Film Studies and the film industry itself. This was a term that had little meaning during the 1940s, the period when most films now labelled 'film noir' were being made and shown. The French film critic Nino Frank first used the term in 1946 to describe a number of Hollywood films made during the Second World War: *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944) and *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944). The term was subsequently taken

up and repeatedly used by critics writing for the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* during the 1950s. By the end of the 1960s, the term 'film noir' was being used widely within Anglo-American film criticism and, since the 1970s, has circulated even more widely within the international film industry and journalism (see Krutnik 1991).

The history of the term 'melodrama' is similar but also significantly different from that of film noir. It is similar in that what came in the 1980s and 1990s to be understood as melodrama is largely the result of the work of film critics and historians long after the films themselves had been made. It is significantly different in that the term 'melodrama' was widely used within the film industry and film journalism prior to its adoption by critics and historians. In fact, it was used to describe something very different to what the term came to mean during the 1970s. Steve Neale (1993) suggests that as far as the American film companies were concerned, from c.1910 to 1970 the term 'melodrama' meant action thrillers with fast-paced narratives, episodic story-lines featuring violence, suspense and death-defying stunts. Dastardly villains, heroines in peril and daring adventurous heroes populated these films, their actions speaking louder than their words. Cowboy films, gangster films, crime thrillers and horror movies were typically labelled 'melodramas' in the trade press. In fact, many of the films subsequently referred to as 'film noir' were described as 'melodramas' or 'mellers' (the shortened, slang version). Although one or two of these found their way into the Film Studies' version of 'melodrama' – most notably, *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) – the vast bulk of the films previously labelled 'melodrama' by the industry have been excluded in order to make way for a strikingly different set of films. Ironically, what Film Studies has come to regard as 'melodrama' since 1970 are films with more words than action, inactive male protagonists, active and even domineering female characters, and anything but clear-cut and easily identifiable villains. In other words, the conception of 'melodrama' arrived at by film scholars after 1970 is almost diametrically opposed to the conception of 'melodrama' that circulated in the American film industry trade press in an earlier period. It is, however, the Film Studies' version of 'melodrama' that is now in general circulation, having been adopted by Hollywood filmmakers, reviewers and journalists since the 1970s. Meanwhile, those films once described as 'melodrama' by various sections of the film industry have come to be re-assigned under headings such as 'film noir', the 'western', 'suspense thriller' and 'horror movie.'

### *Constructing film melodrama's history*

Film Studies has defined 'melodrama' in both broad and narrow terms. At its most general level, film scholars define it as a dramatic narrative with musical accompaniment to mark or punctuate the emotional effects, understanding the word to mean, literally, 'melos' (music) + 'drama'. Film scholarship has traced its history to a time before cinema, to eighteenth-century theatre and literature: for instance, the sentimental novels and plays of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The best explanation of this historical development can be found in Christine Gledhill's essay 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', which forms the introduction to her book *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (1987: 14–22). As Gledhill and others have explained, melodrama emerged onto the stage as a new theatrical genre combining elements of both comedy and tragedy. At the level of pure entertainment, melodrama established notoriety through its astonishing twists and turns of fate, suspense, disaster and tragedy, its last-minute rescues and its happy endings. Whilst many of its themes were derived from morality plays, folk-tales and songs, stylistically it drew upon the conventions of pantomime and vaudeville. A key feature was its dependence upon an established system of non-verbal signs, gesture, *mise-en-scène* (sets, props, costumes and lighting) and music. The themes and style of this highly popular theatrical form proved eminently suitable for adaptation to the new cinematic medium, providing an obvious appeal for filmmakers seeking the widest and largest possible audience for their new product. Indeed, early American films drew heavily upon theatrical melodramas, especially after 1910 when, due to the introduction of four-reel films, more elaborate narratives were possible. One of the pioneering figures of early American cinema, D. W. Griffith, was quick to note the cinematic possibilities of an aesthetic dominated by action, spectacle, convoluted narratives and externalised emotions. *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) are all examples of the adoption of melodrama to the screen.<sup>1</sup> The fact that silent films relied upon live musical accompaniment for punctuation, was yet another reason behind early cinema's adoption of melodrama. In the absence of spoken dialogue, it was necessary for directors to develop a subtle, yet precise, formal visual language, one that could compensate for the expressive potency of the spoken word. Silent cinema, in its effort to engage and entertain, had good reason to be melodramatic but so too did sound cinema after 1927. Hence

the development of a range of sub-genres, such as the Crime Melodrama – for example, *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931) – the Romantic Melodrama – *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936) – and the Maternal Melodrama – *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937). Melodrama not only survived the coming of sound but went on to flourish in Hollywood, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. Films by William Wyler (*The Little Foxes*, 1941), Jean Negulesco (*Humoresque*, 1946), Max Ophüls (*Letter From an Unknown Woman*, 1948), Douglas Sirk (*Magnificent Obsession*, 1954), Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) and Vincente Minnelli (*Home From the Hill*, 1959) testify to the success and pre-eminence of melodrama throughout this period. In short, melodrama has sustained a prominent position within Hollywood throughout its history. Its innate ability to engage, stimulate and entertain its audience, to tears of joy and sadness, has ensured its longevity.

*Film Studies' standard account of melodrama*

Such a long and varied history has meant that the term 'melodrama' can be (and has been) applied to a large and diverse body of film spanning virtually every decade of filmmaking history and to different continents and cultures: American, European (for example, Gainsborough Melodrama) and Eastern (as with Hindi cinema).<sup>2</sup> Of course, such wide application and such a diversity of forms of cinema designated 'melodrama' reduces the term's critical value. What, after all, can be the value of a label that can be attached to so many different types of film? This was an issue that confronted film scholars in the early 1970s when the first steps towards investigating melodrama as a genre were taken. Hence the following quotation from David Morse:

In general, melodrama is a term of little critical value; it has been so corrupted in common usage that to give it a more specific field of reference is a task which almost verges on the impossible. On the other hand, it ought to be attempted because of the important role that melodrama has played in American culture and because of the influence it has exercised over the American cinema. (1972: 16–17)

Since the above comment appeared in print, much has been done to both affirm the critical reputation of melodrama and to determine a significant and identifiable genre worthy of study. Several of the first film scholars to

undertake work on melodrama in the early 1970s sought to narrow the field of enquiry to a more limited and cohesive body of films. Consequently, the field became focused on a group of films made and released in the United States during the 1950s and directed by a relatively small selection of directors: chiefly, Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli. This produced a more coherent field of investigation, a more distinctive canon of films with much greater consistency in terms of visual style, thematic content, performance and ideology. From this emerged what appeared to be the ultimate form of melodrama: the *Hollywood Family Melodrama*. In much the same way that film scholars had defined and demarcated the genre of the 'western', film theorists and historians identified the constituent features of the Hollywood family melodrama, providing a credible form of generic categorisation that enabled melodrama to be studied as a genre. The pioneering work of Thomas Elsaesser (1972) played a key role in this respect. He is commonly held to have been the first film critic to use the term 'family melodrama' and also to take it, implicitly at least, as the ultimate form of film melodrama. Certainly, many film scholars subsequently assumed that his comments regarding the Hollywood family melodrama were applicable to Hollywood melodrama more generally. Many certainly went on to adopt this approach in their own work: most notably, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1977), Laura Mulvey (1977/78) and Chuck Kleinhans (1978).

By the 1980s, a general understanding of what constituted the genre of the Hollywood family melodrama had been reached and a basic model formulated. This is most clearly demonstrated by Thomas Schatz's inclusion of a chapter on the family melodrama in his book *Hollywood Genres* (1981) alongside chapters on the western, the gangster film, the hard-boiled detective film, screwball comedy and the musical. In many ways, Schatz's project was the consolidation of the research that had been carried out by a range of genre critics, theorists and historians, each of these genres having previously been well-researched and critically established by this time. His incorporation of a chapter on the family melodrama indicates that, for Schatz at least, by the early 1980s the family melodrama had the same kind of generic status within Film Studies as the western and the gangster film.

For his chapter on the Hollywood family melodrama, Schatz set out what appeared to be a clear and coherent history from the silent era to 1960. This comprised of 1920s films by D. W. Griffith, 1930s films by Frank Borzage and John Stahl and 1940s films by Max Ophüls, Vincente Minnelli and Douglas Sirk. However, Schatz concentrated primarily on the 1950s,

providing a list of family melodramas from 1954 to 1960. This list was dominated by the films of Sirk and Minnelli. This included Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), *The Tarnished Angels* (1958) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). It also included Minnelli's *The Cobweb* (1955), *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *Some Came Running* (1959) and *Home From the Hill* (1960). Together, the films of Sirk and Minnelli made up almost half the films on the list. The remainder was constituted by such films as Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Bigger Than Life* (1956), Mark Robson's *Peyton Place* (1957) and *From the Terrace* (1960), Gordon Douglas' *Young at Heart* (1954), Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955), Joshua Logan's *Picnic* (1956), George Stevens' *Giant* (1956) and Richard Brooks' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). Lesser-known films were also included, for instance *The Long Hot Summer* (Martin Ritt, 1956), *Too Much, Too Soon* (Art Napoleon, 1958), *A Summer Place* (Delmer Davies, 1959) and *The Bramble Bush* (Daniel Petrie, 1960). Schatz then subdivided this list of films into a number of discreet sub-genres or variants:

- i) the widow-lover melodramas, e.g., *All That Heaven Allows*, *Peyton Place*, *A Summer Place* and *Imitation of Life*
- ii) the aristocratic family melodramas, e.g. *Written on the Wind*, *The Long Hot Summer*, *Giant*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *From the Terrace* and *Home From the Hill*
- iii) the male weepies, e.g., *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Tea and Sympathy*, *Bigger Than Life*, *East of Eden* and *The Cobweb*

Schatz also revealed that many of these films included a number of major themes and character-types, most notably:

- i) the 'intruder-redeemer' figure
- ii) the search for the ideal husband/lover/father by anxious off-spring
- iii) the household as the locus of social interaction
- iv) the ambiguous function of marriage (as simultaneously sexually liberating and socially restricting)

Schatz's descriptions of these films also noted the recurrence of:

- i) victimised heroes
- ii) conflict between the generations

- iii) superficial plots
- iv) obscured (camouflaged) social criticism

All of these would form the foundation of a basic model for the Hollywood family melodrama.

However, it is important to note that Schatz's discussion culminated in the establishment of Douglas Sirk as not only a 'complex genius' but also as the archetypal melodramatist. Curiously, this was in spite of the fact that at one point Schatz noted that Sirk was '[in] style and attitude fundamentally at odds with many, if not most, of the other melodramatists' (1981: 246). Schatz described how Sirk developed a unique approach to the creation of the Hollywood family melodrama in the 1950s. Whilst many of the key themes and character-types of melodrama were retained, Sirk handled these in more ambivalent and detached ways than his colleagues. For instance, Sirk orchestrated audience sympathies and emotions in significantly different ways from most other melodramatists (and from most other Hollywood directors): namely, by refusing to adopt the happy-ending more typical of Hollywood melodramas in general. Despite recognising (even celebrating) Sirk's difference and unconventionality, Schatz took the director not just as a special case but also as the most profound exponent of the Hollywood family melodrama. His extensive analysis of Sirk's films (namely, *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life*) provided a vivid picture of the Hollywood family melodrama. What made these particular films so striking was that they not only employed some of the basic themes identified in other films (such as *Picnic*, *Giant* and *Peyton Place*) but exaggerated them. The style and thematic content of Sirk's films came to dominate Schatz's chapter on the family melodrama, making it seem that these films (and this approach) was what melodrama was really all about. This was in spite of the fact, of course, that these very films were simultaneously presented as an alternative to standard Hollywood melodrama.

If, in the early 1980s, Thomas Schatz's work provided the clearest sense of what a basic model of the Hollywood family melodrama consisted of, this was largely a consolidation of work carried out by film scholars in the 1970s. It was also an affirmation of some basic assumptions and critical perspectives. Douglas Sirk and his 1950s' films were assigned a privileged role in this process of defining the family melodrama as a genre and making that genre stand in for melodrama as a whole. Consequently, Film Studies came to adopt a model of melodrama that, in many crucial

ways, was actually set apart from other forms of popular film melodrama. It is important to remember that this model was determined by a specific set of interests, for example ideology, psychoanalysis and feminism. It is just as important to recognise that these interests influenced the way its key directors and films were adopted as representative of the genre as a whole. Had another set of interests prevailed at this time, different filmmakers and a different group of films would have been privileged, constituting a different model. However, let us now consider how these concerns impacted on the model of the family melodrama.

#### *A basic model*

First and foremost, the basic model chiefly concerns the conflicts and tensions of a middle-class family. More often than not, this conflict is between the generations. In general, the drama is set within an affluent or upwardly-mobile situation and, whilst social and economic concerns are often present, the emphasis tends to be on personal emotional traumas. For instance, in *Giant*, Jett Rink (James Dean) is so consumed with envy of the film's central protagonist, Jordan Benedict (Rock Hudson), that he seeks to possess all he owns, his cattle ranch, wife (Elizabeth Taylor) and daughter. Striking oil on his small plot of land transforms Jett into a wealthy and powerful tycoon capable of buying the Benedict ranch (that is, their home and livelihood) and seducing the youngest daughter. Ultimately though, both of these elude him and despite his success he becomes a tragic and ridiculous figure, alcoholic and consumed with self-pity. Benedict meanwhile is able to preserve his home and family. Interwoven with this story, however, is a persistent criticism of capitalism (particularly the corporate oil industry) and racial prejudice. The Benedict family at the heart of the film struggle to survive and maintain their unity in the face of these two particular threats as well as those of Jett Rink; Rink simultaneously being the embodiment of capitalism and racial bigotry. The challenge they face is to maintain their affection and respect for each other when confronted by these economic and social forces as well as the individualised one (in the character of Rink).

The model of the Hollywood family melodrama is also characterised by its central protagonist, who tends to be privileged by a high degree of audience identification. In this way, the audience is invited (or, indeed, induced) to sublimate their own fears and anxieties onto the central figure who is, in most cases, also the victim of the drama. This figure could either

be the son, daughter or the mother but almost never a father. In fact, it is the father who tends to remain throughout these films the most unsympathetic figure, even more so when absent or deceased. Classic examples of dominating fathers reducing their sons to tortured victims can be found in such films as *East of Eden*, where the father is played by Raymond Massey, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, featuring Big Daddy (Burl Ives).

Frequently, in family melodramas, the emphasis is on the direct portrayal of the psychological situation, which the audience is likely to share and understand from their own experiences of family life. Elements of Freudian repression are often depicted as symptoms such as hysteria, oedipal conflict, impotence and alcoholism (see Elsaesser 1972). The 'Return of the Repressed' has, in fact, been noted to emerge within the film-text itself, in the form of a discontinuity in the narrative (see Nowell-Smith 1977). At certain moments, a breaking-down of 'reality' appears, which can be understood as the hysterical moment of the text. At this point, the *mise-en-scène* has a tendency to become explicitly symbolic or coded, with the added accompaniment of heavily repetitive and intrusive music. A classic example of this is when, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim Stark (James Dean) destroys a painted portrait of his mother, by kicking it, tearing through the canvas. This action comes immediately after physically attacking his father and being pulled off by his mother. The action of damaging his mother's portrait as he storms out of the house appears to symbolise his desire to hit or even kill her. Moreover, breaking through the fabric of the painting simultaneously breaks the 'reality' of the scene when (or if) the audience notices how convenient it was that this portrait just happened to be (strategically placed) on the floor against the door, barring his exit from the home that he finds so stultifying. The logic of the painting being there at this crucial moment and thereby enabling the symbolic act of filial aggression has the potential to reveal the contrivance of the scene (and the placement of this prop) which simultaneously ruptures the realism of the film itself. The use of spectacle, dramatic action and suspense are especially important in any melodrama, the action being worked up toward bold and effective climaxes, with strong local effects, such as this scene from *Rebel Without a Cause*. Music is used to mark the emotional events, constituting a system of punctuation, heightening the expressive and emotional contrasts of the storyline. In such moments, music makes these films much more dramatic and, by the same token, less like real life.

A further characteristic feature of the family melodrama, is that of wish-fulfilment and the tendency to culminate the drama in a happy ending.

However, there are many cases when such an ending appears, realistically, to be impossible or at least highly improbable. Nevertheless, a happy-ending in the conventional narrative film appears to be almost compulsory and this means that in melodrama artistic license has frequently to be taken (see the examples in the next section for instances of this). In cases where a satisfactory narrative resolution proves to be impossible, the eruption of excesses in the film-text prove to be impossible to contain, rendering any closure forced and, moreover, exposing ideological contradictions at this point. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argued in his formative essay on melodrama in the late 1970s,

... the importance of melodrama lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems either in a real present or an ideal future, but lays them open in their contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood films have studiously closed off. (1977: 118)

*Case studies: Broken Blossoms, Stella Dallas and Rebel Without a Cause*

This basic model has proved to be highly flexible, enabling very different kinds of film to be discussed in relation to each other – as melodrama. So, for instance, if we take three very different films from three distinct periods of Hollywood film history, we can see how, despite obvious differences, they appear to conform closely to the model in all its key aspects (as outlined above). Take the following examples: *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). All three films have at various times been studied and analysed in detail as examples of melodrama by leading critics, theorists and historians of film. All three though are very different. They employ quite different styles of acting, for instance. They use noticeably different styles of cinematography – black and white in the case of *Broken Blossoms* and *Stella Dallas*, colour and widescreen in the case of *Rebel Without a Cause*. They have different thematic concerns at the heart of their narratives – race and miscegenation in *Broken Blossoms*, class in *Stella Dallas* and teenage angst and non-conformity in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Yet the basic model of the Hollywood family melodrama enables these very different films to be understood (and studied) in relation to each other. Certain key features linking these films emerge when they are simultaneously compared to the basic model.<sup>3</sup>

Firstly, all three films depict conflicts and tensions within the family, particularly conflicts between the generations. *Broken Blossoms* depicts a dysfunctional working-class family in the Limehouse district of London in the late 1800s. 'Battling Burrows' (Donald Crisp) is an uncouth prize-fighter who mercilessly beats his frail motherless daughter Lucy (Lilian Gish). Lucy's only salvation is the gentle kindness of a sensitive and holy (Buddhist) Chinese store-keeper, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess). *Stella Dallas* depicts an equally fragmented family. Here the daughter Laurel (Anne Shirley) is torn between her estranged parents, the lower-class Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) and the upper-class Stephen (John Boles), her future happiness and marital prospects being entirely dependent upon which parent she chooses to live with. To enable Laurel to make the 'right' decision (that is, one that is the most socially acceptable and advantageous), Stella is ultimately forced to turn her beloved daughter against her, forsaking her devotion. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, gender roles are at the heart of the Stark family's domestic tensions. The son, Jim (James Dean) is driven towards adolescent delinquency due to his domineering mother (Ann Doren) and his feminised father (Jim Backus).

All three films place a victim hero/ine at the centre of the narrative and afford them privileged audience identification and knowledge. Lucy (the daughter) is the tragic victim of *Broken Blossoms*, a victim of poverty and domestic brutality. Not only is she brutalised by her father, she has been brought up without the love and affection of her mother, in abject poverty and a bleak and hostile environment, so surrounded by ugliness and despair that she has never had cause to smile. Consequently, the only way to put a smile on her face, when commanded by her father, is to force the corners of her mouth upwards with her fingers. Witnessing Lucy's repeated beatings, the audience is shown that this harsh treatment is unwarranted and unjust, her meek compliance and inability to rebel or escape provoking extreme audience sympathy. Stella (the mother) is the victim of the film that bears her married name, *Stella Dallas*. Married above her station, Stella's dreams of upward mobility turn into a nightmare when she proves an unsuitable companion for her upper-class husband and an unsuitable mother for her middle-class daughter. Her daughter's friends and associates ridicule her for her lack of taste and decorum, repeatedly snubbing Laurel once they learn the identity of her mother. To enable Laurel to enjoy the lifestyle and social status that she herself once dreamed of, Stella realises she must turn her daughter away from her and allow her father to help her make her way in life: that is, marry into middle-class respectabil-

spoiled  
progressive → companion  
po spol. Zebriček

ity. Stella is forced to sacrifice the one thing in life she has come to love above all things, her daughter. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim (the son) is the victim of his own frustrations, in the grip of a teenage crisis. Having a weak father, he lacks an appropriate male role model to live up to, until his delinquency (drunkenness, car chases, knife-fights, and so on) brings him into contact with Ray Framek (Edward Platt), a police officer in the Juvenile Division. Framek's influence stabilises Jim and enables him to become a man, as does his burgeoning relationship with Judy (Natalie Wood). In the process, Jim forgoes his criminal activities and his association with social outsiders and misfits, including the troubled and sensitive – implicitly homosexual – Plato (Sal Mineo).

A key feature of all three films is the way the action is worked up to bold climaxes, music marking the emotional events, and swinging suddenly from one emotion to its extreme opposite. In *Broken Blossoms*, for instance, the film begins in a place of innocence, a happy sunlit haven populated by happy smiling people. This is a Chinese port, where we are first introduced to Cheng Huan. From here we shift to the dark and drab setting of London's Limehouse district, misty and mysterious, threatening and ugly. Here people look miserable, exhausted and suspicious. We first meet Lucy in this environment, wandering about the docks, encountering exhausted housewives and cynical prostitutes. Her home though is no refuge. Upon entering it she is threatened by her father. Although on this occasion she is spared a whipping, he taunts and humiliates her, forcing her to smile (with fear and tears in her eyes). This scene is full of tension due to the threat of violence. It is followed by a period of calm as Lucy sits alone at home and then goes out to the shops. She returns, however, to find her father in a rage and intent on venting his frustration on her. The scene culminates in her being beaten. A quieter passage follows in which Lucy makes her unsteady way back to the shops, staggering into Cheng Huan's shop and fainting on the floor. Scenes of great tenderness and gentleness follow, as he cares for her but these represent the calm before the great storm, in which Lucy is beaten to death by her father. Similarly, *Stella Dallas* juxtaposes moments of calm and happiness with moments of hysteria and tears. A notable instance here is when Laurel comes home from school and discovers a new party dress that her mother has been making. The squeals of delight turn swiftly to tears when Stella is angry that her planned surprise has been discovered too soon. Order and happiness though are quickly restored when Stella allows Laurel to try the garment on but Laurel is soon in tears again when her mother's gentle-



FIGURE 1 Cheng Huan confronts Battling Burrows in *Broken Blossoms*

man friend discovers her taking off the dress and teases her. Similarly, Laurel's ecstatic response to the sight of her birthday table and cake dissolves into sad resignation when none of her invited guests turn up for the party. A prominent feature of the film is that Laurel's moments of jubilation turn instantly into sadness and tears, moments of joy always followed by moments of despair.

2) Psychological and Freudian overtones are evident in all three films. This takes the form of the father's implicit rape of his daughter in *Broken Blossoms*, smashing through the door of a closet with an axe, dragging Lucy out and beating her to death on his bed. A key feature of this act is the phallic imagery, namely the axe and the whip. In *Stella Dallas* the Freudian connection is the initial strong attachment between mother and daughter that is traumatically broken in favour of the relationship between daughter and father, enabling the daughter to mature into adulthood. *Rebel Without a Cause*, on the other hand, is filled with images of sublimated passion, displaced aggression, sexual and gender ambiguity and impotence (such as when Jim's father is depicted wearing a frilly apron, crawling on the floor having dropped his wife's breakfast tray).

3) Finally, all three films have ambiguous (and somewhat unsatisfactory) endings. *Broken Blossoms* ends with the father getting his 'just dessert.'



FIGURE 2 Stella and her beloved Laurel in *Stella Dallas*

There is something deeply satisfying about the moment when the loutish bully is shot dead by Cheng Huan. Nevertheless, the hero and heroine also die in the process, in the tradition of doomed, star-crossed lovers. The death of the evil father is small consolation for the death of these two, whose tentative expressions of love are cut off in their prime. *Stella Dallas* ends with the heartrending maternal sacrifice of Stella watching her beloved daughter being married into middle-class respectability, watching through a window, outside in the rain, clinging to the railings and all too quickly moved on by a policeman. This devastating scenario, however, is followed by Stella's final moments in the film as she strides triumphantly towards the camera, smiling through her tears, achievement writ large across her worn-out face. Meanwhile, at the end of *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim (James Dean) is reconciled with his family (particularly his father) having forsaken his rebellious ways in favour of family life, not only as a dutiful son to his parents but also as the prospective husband of Judy (Natalie Wood). His red jacket – the symbol of his rebellious status

throughout the movie – has been handed over to Plato who has been, in the climactic scene, shot by the police. Though this represents a restoration of the status quo, the loss of the sensitive and troubled outsider Plato and the banal conservatism of Jim's new-found conformity represent two forms of critical loss at the end of this movie. None of these films, in other words, achieves a satisfactory happy ending nor brings the goals and ambitions of the characters to fruition. Lucy does not gain the tender devotion she craved in contrast to her brutal and impoverished upbringing. Stella does not achieve her dream of social respectability and status nor even recognition as a good mother. Jim does not achieve an alternative lifestyle to the stifling suburban conventionality of his parents. In all cases, the viewer is allowed to understand these motivations and identify with them, only to see them thwarted. The problems posed by the films have not therefore found a satisfactory solution. This suggests that for the characters at the heart of these films, the social order can offer no satisfactory solution to their problems, their desires being impossible to accommodate fully within the existing social system.

naradai nai vede  
& esepalii a prosi  
korant do hndulu  
antil mile pu  
reprende me barto  
reho ipich proble  
my noble!



FIGURE 3 The aftermath of the chicken-run in *Rebel Without a Cause*



*Reading against the grain*

For film scholars interested in examining the ideology of Hollywood cinema, melodrama and the specific genre of the 'family melodrama' offered a striking instance where the filmic system could be seen to buckle under the weight of ideological contradiction, exposing the failings of capitalism and/or patriarchy. Neo-Marxist and feminist film scholars were drawn to this debate in the late 1970s. Underlying the whole debate on melodrama in the 1970s was the notion of ideology as defined by the Neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. From an Althusserian standpoint, every sphere of life is determined one way or another by ideology, from politics and religion to ambitions, desires and manners. More specifically, ideology arises in association with processes of communication and exchange. Fundamentally, it is a means by which the existing arrangement of social relations represents itself to individuals. In other words, it is the image a society gives itself in order to perpetuate itself and maintain the status quo. Such representations therefore serve to constrain and establish fixed positions for individuals in society, using the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be. It is the construction therefore of such notions as the 'natural' and the 'normal', constructed according to the 'dominant' ideology that prevails across broad sections of society and, most especially, within what is known as the 'establishment' (state institutions, religious authorities, the mainstream media, and so on).

According to these arguments, dominant ideology is specific to a particular culture at a particular moment of its history. Moreover, it can be distinguished from particular ideologies (alternative, subversive, subcultural and marginal ideologies) which relate more closely to the lived experience of groups and classes, with specific and separate identities, values, ideas, customs, etc. As American society, like all advanced western capitalist societies, is characterised by divisions of class, gender, race, sex and ethnicity, the purpose of the dominant ideology is to establish and maintain a consensus, valid for all members of society. The operations of the dominant ideology are therefore a ceaseless effort to mask or displace both its own contradictions and those that have arisen from alternative ideologies: for example, the contradiction within dominant ideology between its championing of equality and its necessary commitment to inequality.

What emerged from the initial study of Hollywood melodrama as a genre (that is, the Hollywood family melodrama) was that it was not only fascinat-

ing and highly entertaining in its own right but, moreover, that it was an appropriate and valuable register of ideology and ideological contradiction. In particular, melodrama's very failure, its many moments of excess which provoke disbelief, irony, laughter and a whole host of other unwelcome emotions from its audience, became the Neo-Marxist film historian's gain. It was precisely this aspect of melodrama that made it so 'appropriate' a subject of study for the historian seeking to prise the gaps and cracks open further to reveal the world behind the scenes. And indeed, behind each of the films analysed by Elsaesser or Nowell-Smith, there appeared to be a society and a particular set of cultural values and beliefs.

Elsaesser's article, 'Tales of Sound and Fury' (1972), was the first notable study of melodrama, representing many of the concerns and preoccupations of critical thinking of the 1970s. In this article, Elsaesser suggested that, under certain social and production conditions, melodrama could be seen as ideologically subversive. For Elsaesser, the family is not just an important political institution in itself but is also a means through which social crises can be delineated in personalised and emotional terms. He noted the emergence in the 1950s of the impotent hero, trapped within a domestic interior and confined by codes of behaviour appropriate to the family. This he took as an indication of the shift in the ideological conditions pertaining under post-war advanced capitalism. Moreover, for Elsaesser, this represented a shift to a critique of individualism, in which the bourgeois family became the site of both social and emotional isolation and, consequently, of the failure of the drive to self-fulfilment.<sup>4</sup>

*Reading excess as ideological contradiction*

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith continued the ideological debate on melodrama in 1977 in his essay 'Minnelli and Melodrama'. Here he drew on Freudian psychoanalysis to account for the excessive style of Hollywood melodrama, and his essay is based on an analysis of the films of Vincente Minnelli. Though perhaps best known for his popular musicals, such as *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944) (starring his wife, Judy Garland) and *An American in Paris* (1951), Minnelli also directed a succession of melodramas. *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), starring Kirk Douglas as a Hollywood producer, concerns the cut-throat world of the film industry and its ambitious denizens and deals with similar themes to both Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950). *The Cobweb* (1955) is a male melodrama concerning the troubled relationship between

providing  
 melodrama  
 who tried to  
 not know, also  
 Melodrama  
 a melodrama  
 would

zabladu  
 Nospoz →

the proprietor of a psychiatric clinic and his sexually demanding wife and mistress. *Home From the Hill* (1959) is a Texan family melodrama, in the manner of Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*. *Some Came Running* (1958) is another male melodrama, dealing with a writer returning to his hometown following the Second World War. Perhaps most controversially *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) tells the story of a teacher's wife who attempts to 'convert' a 17-year-old student who demonstrates the signs of latent homosexuality (expressed, primarily, as a lack of interest in sport).

Though Nowell-Smith's essay confines itself to observations based on two of Minnelli's musicals (*The Pirate* and *Meet Me in St Louis*) and *The Cobweb*, many of Minnelli's melodramas, as well as those made by Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk, reveal the latent repression that is the focus of his analysis. Nowell-Smith's essay is concerned with the Freudian concept of conversion hysteria, which enables him to construct a symptomatic reading of the cinema of the 1950s. Nowell-Smith notes that Freud observed that patients undergoing psychoanalysis could be identified as repressing strong emotions, which have been pushed into the unconscious. These repressed emotions often then emerge, in a perverse way, as physical symptoms, a condition usually described as conversion hysteria or as 'the return of the repressed'. Nowell-Smith suggests that there is a clear parallel between the process of conversion hysteria and the excessive style (and excessive behaviours) evident in the Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s and Minnelli's films in particular.

He first points out that we should recognise that melodramas are not stories concerned with action and an active protagonist but rather they are principally concerned with emotion. Broadly speaking, in the American movie the active hero becomes the protagonist of the western, the passive or impotent hero or heroine becomes the protagonist of what has come to be known as the melodrama (Gledhill 1987: 72). Nowell-Smith believes that this means that melodrama's characters are noted by their inability to take action to resolve their problems; they are effectively oppressed and repressed individuals. He suggests that, as a consequence of this passivity and inaction, we see emotions and tensions building up that cannot be turned into action and then resolved in a satisfactory fashion. It is certainly true to say that films from this period seem to be bursting with pent-up emotion, with things characters cannot say or do and information that the narrative cannot reveal or depict. Because of this, Nowell-Smith suggests that repressed emotions erupt in moments of high tension or drama and manifest themselves as symptoms through performance, music and *mise-en-*

*scène* and it is at such points of heightened emotion that the characteristic excesses of the melodrama manifest themselves. In Nowell-Smith's words:

The laying out of the problems 'realistically' always allows for the generating of an excess which cannot be accommodated. The more the plots press towards a resolution the harder it is to accommodate the excess. What is characteristic of the melodrama, both in its original sense and in the modern one, is the way the excess is siphoned off. The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance, is traditionally expressed in the music and in the case of film, in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*. That is to say, music and *mise-en-scène* do not heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it. (1987: 73)

Here Nowell-Smith argues that at points of high drama the melodrama that usually aims to convey a strong sense of realism (for example, by using the rhetorical conventions of Classical Hollywood cinema) literally exceeds the limits of what can be considered realistic; it goes 'over the top'. Nowell-Smith is suggesting that there is such an excess of conflict and contradiction that the narrative cannot contain it and that, consequently, realism and narrative coherence breaks down. Like a saucepan full to the lid with boiling water, the excess emotion leaks out. It is at such highly emotional points that hysterical conversion takes place, that the repressed starts to emerge. At such points, the *mise-en-scène* directly represents the emotions and conflicts that the film's narrative and characters cannot articulate (for example, the damaged portrait of Jim Stark's mother in *Rebel Without a Cause*).

This account provides an explanation of the expressionistic and extravagant *mise-en-scène* that Minnelli and many of his contemporary directors used: most notably Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray. This psychoanalytic model proved to be an extremely useful way of understanding the excessive moments in Sirk's films, generally accepted as being the most excessive of all the 1950s Hollywood melodramatists. Marylee's (Dorothy Malone) so-called 'dance of death' in *Written on the Wind* provides an excellent example. In the scene, Marylee is escorted home to the Hadley residence by the police, after an evening's debauchery. At the same time, her father, Jasper Hadley, is presented with the shocking revelation that

his daughter is a 'tramp' by the service station attendant that she has been found with. Marylee returns to her bedroom and starts to play 'Temptation' on a record player changing from her evening dress into a lurid pink negligée. As Jasper Hadley climbs the sweeping staircase to confront his daughter the tempo and volume of the music increases and, through an increasingly frantic montage of parallel edits, the audience sees Marylee and her father simultaneously. Whilst Marylee dances ever more frenetically, almost at the top of the stairs, with the music blaring, Jasper has a heart attack and falls back down the stairs at the same time as Marylee falls into a seat waving her legs in the air. Marylee's sexual energy (and implied nymphomania) was a subject that a 1950s film could not possibly depict naturalistically. It is therefore transformed in this extraordinarily hysterical scene, into a frantic dance that not only disrupts family harmony and causes the death of her father but also creates an excess that disrupts the conventions of cinematic realism.

For Nowell-Smith 'excess' acts as a safety valve, siphoning off the ideological contradictions that cannot be resolved in the narrative of the melodrama. Laura Mulvey also used this idea in her essay 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in which she argues that it is in fact a feminine point of view represented in the Hollywood melodrama that results in the excessive style of these films. Mulvey points out that there is a fundamental difference, at a narrative and discursive level, between the male melodrama and the female point of view melodrama. The former, such as Minnelli's *The Cobweb* or *Home From the Hill*, although excessive, arrives ultimately at some kind of final satisfactory conclusion. By contrast, the melodramas with a female point of view, such as *All That Heaven Allows*, tend to deny a satisfactory conclusion and often end in a very contradictory fashion.

It is as though having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that the escape is closer to a daydream than a fairytale. (Mulvey 1987: 82)

#### *A feminist critique of film melodrama*

From 1977 onwards, when Film Studies adopted melodrama and Hollywood's films for women as major areas for research and debate, film schol-

ars repeatedly demonstrated the extent to which patriarchal ideology was deeply embedded within these movies. Laura Mulvey and Chuck Kleinhans initiated a line of critical enquiry into melodrama that would largely determine the agenda for many years, one that would be developed and refined in the work of Barbara Creed, Christine Gledhill, Mary Ann Doane, Lea Jacobs and Tania Modleski.

In his 1978 essay 'Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism', Chuck Kleinhans described the family as a political institution and as a site of real oppression, for women especially. He pointed out that the nature of the family allows it to function in society as a trans-class institution that reproduces individuals as both class and sexed subjects. Taking a Marxist-feminist sociological approach, Kleinhans characterised the social relations of capitalist production in terms of a split between 'productive' work and personal life confined to the home, in effect the 'sphere of reproduction'. In this way, women and children are marginalised outside of production. He argued that one of the most fundamental contradictions of capitalist society is the notion that people's problems can be solved in their private life. Women, as the guardians of the home, are effectively required to provide the rewards and satisfactions that have otherwise proved unobtainable in public life. Kleinhans recognised that family melodramas employed the same process of displacement by making the family and the domestic context the arena for articulating social pressures and problems, frustrations and dissatisfaction. In so doing, the burden of solving social problems is placed largely with the female characters. In most instances, the female characters in family melodramas attempt to solve these problems and maintain the family (that is, to resolve familial conflict) through the repression of their own desires and other acts of self-sacrifice.

Writing around the same time as Kleinhans, Barbara Creed pursued a feminist investigation into the patriarchal ideology of melodrama in her essay 'The Position of Women in Hollywood Melodramas', as did Laura Mulvey. All three publications had in fact emerged out of the same context, a weekend school organised in London (25–27 March 1977) by the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), an event which feminist scholar Griselda Pollock reported on in *Screen* later that year. It is clear from Pollock's report that this event had a decidedly feminist agenda and, with hindsight, it can be seen to have marked the beginning of the second stage of scholarship on melodrama. This represented a shift in two important directions. Firstly, a shift from male film scholars interested in questions of *mise-en-scène*, genre and ideology to feminist scholars interested

in Hollywood's attempts to cater for female audiences. Secondly, a shift from recognising melodrama's potential progressiveness or subversiveness to revealing its more conservative and repressive aspects.

Mulvey's essay played a seminal role here. Noted for her groundbreaking feminist critique of Hollywood cinema, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey turned her attention towards Hollywood's films for women and, in particular, its female-centred melodramas (mainly directed by Douglas Sirk). Her essay on melodrama was initially presented at the SEFT weekend school in March 1977, published in the Winter edition (1977/78) of the journal *Movie* and subsequently reprinted in Christine Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987). In part, the importance of this essay was that it established the notion of melodrama as a 'safety valve' for enacting the contradictions of family and sexual relations under patriarchy. Here melodrama was regarded as a means for the patriarchal order to sustain itself through a temporary and fictionalised acknowledgement of its repressive effects upon half the population (that is, women). However, her essay was also important for initiating what was to become the new and dominant line of enquiry into Hollywood's films for women. Mulvey made a critical distinction between two types of melodrama: one dominated by a female protagonist's viewpoint, another that deals with the oedipal problems of a male hero (as fellow victim of patriarchal society). The latter referred to the genre as it had been established and described by Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith. The former was prompted by the films of Douglas Sirk that centred on female characters (namely, *All That Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life*) but, potentially, it referred to a much larger and long-standing category of films made for a female audience: for instance, 'women's weepies', romantic and costume dramas. This much more diverse category of cinema subsequently became the basis of Mary Ann Doane's research during the 1980s. It also provided the basis for many future discussions of 'melodrama and the Woman's Film,' for instance, in the work of Christine Gledhill in the 1980s.

*Melodrama and the woman's film find a home together*

Christine Gledhill produced an important chapter on melodrama for *The Cinema Book* (Cook 1984) in which she assessed and explained the published literature on film melodrama from 1971 to 1983. This represented the first major summing up of the debate on melodrama within Film Studies, describing and to some extent evaluating the writing of

Elsaesser, Nowell-Smith, Kleinhans, Mulvey and Creed, and introducing the 'new feminism' of Lea Jacobs, Mary Ann Doane and Tania Modleski. Gledhill's feminist agenda in reviewing and summing up the melodrama debate within Film Studies is clear from her criticisms of Elsaesser's seminal study of the genre. She criticised him for failing to investigate how a female protagonist affects plot structures and for not attempting to distinguish the family melodrama from women's films and romantic drama. In contrast, the emergence of a feminist project on melodrama was described in more positive terms, with a general conclusion that the major interest of melodrama for feminist film scholars lay chiefly in revealing the ironies and instabilities of Hollywood's attempts to reproduce the contradictions of femininity under patriarchy.

A number of the essays reviewed by Gledhill in *The Cinema Book* would, a few years later, form the basis of her edited collection of studies on melodrama and the woman's film, *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987). The essays of Elsaesser, Nowell-Smith and Mulvey were reprinted alongside works by a second generation of scholars. It is clear that by 1987 feminist scholarship had come to dominate research on film melodrama, hence twelve of the total nineteen essays included in this collection were feminist investigations (or critiques). Moreover, nine of these were concerned with the 'woman's film'. Both Gledhill's chapter on melodrama in *The Cinema Book* and her subsequent anthology indicate that within Film Studies 'melodrama' and the 'woman's film' had become largely synonymous during the 1980s. It is important to remember, however, that the films discussed by Elsaesser in his 1972 study of the Hollywood family melodrama were not made for exclusively female audiences and could not be described as women's films. Indeed, for him, their significance was primarily for male audiences. Mulvey's 1977/78 essay had, of course, recognised this but it had also recognised what was missing: films for women. Subsequently, the feminist project within Film Studies (largely inspired by Mulvey's intervention) was to redress this imbalance. So successful was it that, for a time at least, feminist film scholars led the debate on melodrama: that debate being, very largely, a debate about Hollywood's (and Gainsborough's) films for women. However, in the 1990s the debate shifted again. By this time, feminist interest had moved either towards television (for example, soap opera) or to films and videos made by women for women. It was at this point, that a critical new intervention into understanding melodrama as genre was made by two leading genre theorists, Steve Neale and Rick Altman.

*Redefining the Film Studies' account of melodrama*

In 1993, Steve Neale's article 'Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term "Melodrama" in the American Trade Press' attempted a radical revision of the Film Studies' conception of melodrama. Revealing that the term 'melodrama' was used originally in Hollywood to designate films featuring crime, guns and violence, along with action, tension and suspense, Neale showed how radically at odds the Film Studies' notion of melodrama was compared to that of the film industry that created these movies. Whilst for film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, 'melodrama' was taken to mean female-oriented weepies and male oedipal dramas set within the context of the family, for the film reviewers and critics in the 1940s and 1950s 'melodrama' meant male-oriented thrillers, chillers and action movies.

Neale subsequently reworked his essay as a chapter on melodrama and the woman's film in his book *Genre and Hollywood* (2000). Here he noted that, within Film Studies, since the mid-1970s, a number of things had been attributed to cinematic melodrama: an antecedence, an aesthetic, a critical status, a generic (or sub-generic) categorisation, and even a gender-specific audience. All of these, he argued, were questionable. In fact, he held Thomas Elsaesser and Douglas Sirk equally responsible for the genesis of the 'standard account' of melodrama: Elsaesser through his highly influential 1972 essay and Sirk through his published interview with Jon Halliday in *Sirk on Sirk* (1971). Both film scholar and director had been instrumental in the establishment of a canon of films understood as 'melodrama', along with a basic set of terms, concerns and definitions, and a topic of investigation, discussion and debate: in other words, they set the agenda. Neale was concerned to establish a precise historical account of 'melodrama'; in contrast to the 1970s and 1980s engagement with neo-Marxism, film scholarship in the 1990s was characterised by a return to historicism and something of a backlash against 'Theory' with a capital T. This period also saw the emergence of 'reception studies' with Film Studies, in which investigations were conducted into the ways that actual audiences (that is, specific social groups) interpreted a specific group of films or an individual film in a particular place and time. Reception studies of cinema shifted the focus from theoretical analysis of film-texts to interviews with people about their earlier film-going experiences<sup>5</sup> or to extra-cinematic material in circulation at the time of a film's release – press ads, reviews, publicity, journalistic articles, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Neale's approach to investigating melodrama can be seen as part of a larger project in Film Studies in the 1990s to re-evaluate established accounts of film history from the new perspective of reception studies. In revising the 1970s and 1980s Film Studies' account of melodrama, Neale would challenge virtually every major aspect of it: disputing the relevance of the 'family melodrama' as the ultimate form, dissociating melodrama from the 'woman's film' and proposing an alternative basic model. All of this was achieved, of course, by his adoption of an entirely different method of investigation from the earlier generations of melodrama scholars. His alternative conception of 'melodrama' was based on definitions and designations of the term in film review journalism in a selection of newspapers, film journals and the trade press. In short, he examined the way the terms 'melodrama', 'meller' and 'melodramatic' were used in film publications from the 1910s to the 1950s, in press releases and publicity sheets from the Hollywood studios. Amongst his most significant claims was that the term was not pejorative, implying low-status, and was not used to suggest an absence of realism. Nor did it imply a masculinity that was impaired, qualified, questioned or castrated (as assumed by Elsaesser, Mulvey and Nowell-Smith). Whilst noting the recurrence of terms such as 'vigorous melodrama', 'virile melodrama' and even 'he-man melodrama', Neale argued that terms such as 'romantic melodrama' or 'domestic melodrama' were rare and that the term 'family melodrama' was entirely absent.

Neale's investigation also revealed discrepancies between the American film industry's and the Film Studies' accounts of melodrama when he examined the discourses surrounding the 1950s canon – the films of Sirk, Ray, Ophüls and Minnelli. Here he found that the term 'melodrama' was used in reference to some of these films but not to describe their emotional or psychological aspects; rather to indicate their sensational themes. He notes, for instance, that Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* was described as a melodrama by *Film Daily* due to its theme of juvenile delinquency, its knife fights and 'chickie-run' with stolen cars. Neale also noted that woman's films were rarely described as melodrama. Less than half the women's films made in Hollywood actually fit the standard account of melodrama, he argued, the greater proportion of woman's films being comedies, musicals, murder mysteries, historical dramas, westerns and gangster films.<sup>7</sup> Neale argued that from an industry perspective the women's films that were melodramas according to the industry's definition were the serial queen films: that is, sensational adventures built around a heroine, from the 1910s to early 1920s.<sup>8</sup> From his investigations into Hollywood's

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kteréto melodrama  
se je považuje pro  
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nebo jeho aspektů

films for women, Neale insisted that the woman's film was anything but a despised and lowly genre, as many feminist film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s had claimed (for example, Molly Haskell, Mary Ann Doane and Christine Gledhill). On the contrary, Hollywood's films for women were, he claims, rather 'lofty', associated with 'taste' and 'quality' and aimed squarely at middle-class women.

#### *Reconstructing melodrama's history*

In tracing melodrama's antecedents and early development on screen, Steve Neale found that its recurrent features found their fullest expression not in the films defined as 'women's films' by 1980s feminist film scholars but rather in the big-production adventure and action movies. Neale spoke of a kinship between nineteenth-century melodrama and Hollywood's action and suspense genres. Melodrama's actions, he pointed out, involved bodies tied to rail-tracks, heroes in cellars with the water level rising, circular saws and steam hammers threatening the hero's life in some fiendish trap: all of which are more closely associated with the 'James Bond' film cycle than the films of Sirk and Minnelli.

Neale identified the key components of nineteenth-century stage melodrama as follows:

- i) conflict of good and evil
- ii) eventual triumph of good over evil
- iii) hero, heroine and villain as principal types
- iv) demonstrative and hyperbolic aesthetic
- v) episodic, formulaic and action-packed plots with fate, coincidence and chance playing a major role
- vi) 'situations' (for example, tableaux) forming moments of dramatic revelation or display

Neale argued that such features are commonly found in the industry's conception of 'melodrama', where the term is used to describe gangster films, westerns, horror and war films. Meanwhile, such features are rarely found in Hollywood's romantic dramas, weepies and family dramas, which Film Studies has labelled 'melodrama'.

In the light of Neale's case against the Film Studies' account of melodrama, it has become a matter of concern that the conception of melodrama circulating in contemporary Film Studies is one that has emerged

→ to p'ale podobný příběh jako v novem → tuto specifickou  
MELODRAMA  
koncept vytvořila film, kulika a historiogr.

from within the discipline itself rather than the industry. Furthermore, this definition is at odds with the industry's own version, directly contradicting it. It may have proved to be a useful category for film scholars over the years, enabling them to designate a group of films that share a similar set of themes and stylistic features. It may also have enabled scholars to consider a specific group of films in relation to each other that otherwise belonged to very different production categories. For instance, understood as melodrama, *Now, Voyager*<sup>9</sup> (Irving Rapper, 1942) and *Written on the Wind*<sup>10</sup> can be compared in terms of their treatment of parental conflict, their use of Freudian psychoanalysis, and such issues as sexual repression or female independence. However, such a comparison may in fact distort the actual relationships between films that pertained for producers and audiences during the 1940s and 1950s. Given the growing importance of understanding films' historical reception, for many film scholars in the 1990s this may have been the deciding factor against the Film Studies' account of melodrama as a genre.

Steve Neale's intervention within the melodrama debate in the early 1990s led to a serious reassessment of this particular area of film scholarship. Highly polemical, it renewed discussion of melodrama within Film Studies, adding new impetus to a debate that had more or less fizzled out. It also, of course, stimulated vehement defence of the original Film Studies' account of melodrama, most notably from Rick Altman. Curiously, until this moment, Altman had expressed little interest in melodrama, concentrating his research into the Hollywood genre system on the musical (see his *Genre: The Musical* (1981) and *The American Film Musical* (1987)). However Altman was to provide the first chapter for *Refiguring American Genres* (Browne 1998). Here he not only proposed a new conception of Hollywood's genre system and the way genres evolve over time but also took melodrama and the woman's film as his primary focus. In so doing, Altman was able to directly contradict many of the claims previously made by Neale in his 'Melo Talk' essay of 1993.

#### *In defence of the Film Studies account of melodrama*

Rick Altman, in his earlier work on the musical, had offered an original thesis on the nature and effect of Hollywood's genre system. For instance, in the introduction to his book on the *American Film Musical*, he had argued that genre operates as a restrictive, even oppressive system to reduce the ability of audiences to read films freely (1987: 2). Consequently,

part of the task of a critic or film scholar is to liberate films from the industry's generic categorisation of them (and the reading processes that this entails) enabling films to be opened up to freer interpretations. Altman's conception of the genre system was that it invariably links producers, their films and their audiences to an 'interpretative community' that produces meaning. This interpretative community is constituted chiefly by a specific set of 'intertexts', which are the other films that the industry identifies as belonging to the same genre. In consequence, this cuts out or delimits alternative ways for audiences to read, compare and draw meaning. This system, Altman argues, controls the audience's reaction to any specific film by providing the context in which that film is interpreted.

If we accept this situation, we need to consider whether the meanings constructed for a melodrama were governed or restricted by its relationship to another set of similar films. For instance, in its time was *Rebel Without a Cause* only considered (that is, interpreted) alongside other films dealing with juvenile delinquency (for example, *The Wild One*<sup>11</sup> (Stanley Kramer, 1954))? If so, did that obscure the significance of its father/son conflict that might have emerged more fully through comparison with, say, Richard Brooks' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where Paul Newman's character suffers from alcoholism and impotence as a result of his domineering father, Big Daddy? If the father/son conflict at the heart of these two films was the more critical social issue in the USA in the mid-to-late 1950s, then that would only emerge through the intervention of the Film Studies' account of melodrama that situates these two films within the same generic category. What the film industry had itself obscured through its different categorisation of these films would at last come to light in film scholarship, hence the value of the reclassification.

For Altman, 'genres are not the democratically elected representatives of a group of like-minded texts'. In fact he described them as 'autocratic monarchs dictating a single standard for all subjects' (1987: 5). The inference here is that by liberating films from the generic definitions once imposed on them by the (repressive) film industry, the film critic or historian can free their meanings, liberating a fuller regime of meaning. Consequently, for Altman, it is the task of critics and scholars to:

- i) explain the genre and its texts
- ii) to create an appropriate vocabulary for the purposes of analysis
- iii) to explain the function of a genre
- iv) to establish its limits/boundaries (that is, its demarcation)

In the second part of his 1998 essay Altman refined his thinking on Hollywood's genre system as a direct result of Steve Neale's intervention in the melodrama debate, proposing a new model of generic process, one he calls 'genrification'. This investigation into how genres develop emerged, as had Neale's, from an examination of Hollywood publicity from the 1930s and 1940s. Altman noted that in press ads and posters for films of this period the generic specificity of the films were seldom mentioned and, more often, mixed generic categories was used to describe films. Film journalists, critics and reviewers, on the other hand, would more readily use generic terms to label individual films, as Neale has demonstrated. Altman revealed, however, that this latter group had very different objectives from the studio's publicity departments and therefore used generic terminology in very different ways. Moreover, he demonstrated that genres were always temporary classifications and thus what was designated 'melodrama' in the 1920s could well have changed radically by the 1950s. Altman noted that the lexicons of different ages are always retained and remain available, so that 'melodrama' in its original sense of thrills and spills could continue alongside newer notions of melodrama born out of 1970s film scholarship. Both uses of the term 'melodrama' remain available to studios, critics, journalists, audiences and scholars. Both therefore are relevant and valid, able to co-exist. In other words, the recognition of one does not invalidate the other.

Rick Altman argued that 'two generations of genre critics have done violence to the historical dimensions of genre [by] laying so much emphasis on generic fixity' (1998: 2). He also argued that recent genre theory has devoted too little attention to 'the logic and mechanisms whereby genres become recognisable as such' (ibid.). And this is precisely Altman's project; whilst traditional genre theory had highlighted coincident structures and concerns by ignoring difference and disagreement, Altman emphasised such discrepancies to reveal what makes difference within genres possible.

*The genrification of melodrama and the woman's film - případně studie předchozího*

In the third and final part of his essay Rick Altman explores the confusions of genre definitions and demarcations in melodrama. It is here that he provides his most explicit counter-argument to that put forward by Steve Neale. First, Altman traces the antecedence of the term, locating the first use to 1770, by Rousseau in connection with his play 'Pygmalion'. Subsequently applied to many plays, novels and films, Altman notes that

it has designated very different things and regards it as an 'evolving category'. He accuses some critics of holding on too tightly to generic terms, maintaining their consistency and continuity because they possess a level of prestige. He argues that it is primarily the critics that have a vested interest in reusing generic terms given that they make their subjective and historically specific readings appear universal and unchangeable. He notes that 'Whereas producers are actively destroying genres by creating new cycles ... critics are regularly trying to fold the cyclical differences into the genres, thus authorising continued use of a familiar, universalising, sanctioned, and therefore powerful term' (1998: 25). A clear instance of this, for Altman, is the project that emerged initially in the 1980s to draw attention to the inconsistent way in which the term 'melodrama' had been used, citing Russell Merritt's 'Melodrama: Postmortem for a Phantom Genre' (1983) and Ben Singer's 'Female Power in the Serial Queen Melodrama' (1990) as two early examples of this. However, Altman describes Steve Neale as 'the first scholar to directly tackle the disparity between recent and traditional definitions of film melodrama' (1998: 26).

Altman notes that in his bid to establish a fixed meaning for melodrama at odds with that in film scholarship, Neale has actually conflated the trades of film criticism/journalism with film production; that he has failed to recognise the disparities that Altman's own investigation has revealed. He suggests that Neale's main aim was to show that film scholars had misused the term 'melodrama' by applying it to woman's films and weepies. Altman's main concern here was to trace the history of the constitution of the woman's film as a genre and its connections with melodrama in order to come to terms with the problem of defining 'melodrama' posed by Neale. This is a highly instructive discussion that details the way in which the genre of the woman's film came about within Film Studies.

Altman starts with Molly Haskell's use of the term 'woman's film' in her book *From Reverence to Rape* in 1974. Here she used it to define a specific Hollywood genre and, significantly, repeatedly placed it within quotation marks as the 'woman's film'. Altman notes that Mary Ann Doane adopted the same practice in her first essays on Hollywood's films for women. Reminding us that the building of genres is usually a critical rather than production-based activity, he argues that Haskell and Doane created a genre by attaching the label 'woman's film' to a succession of different, already existing genres: in Doane's case, the woman's gothic, woman's horror, woman's film noir and woman's melodrama. Tellingly though, he points out that, in 1987, when Mary Ann Doane published her book *The*

*Desire to Desire* on Hollywood's films for women, based on the essays she had published in the early-to-mid-1980s, the quotation marks were dropped from the woman's film. This small but significant act, Altman suggests, marked the abandonment of 'any remnant of doubt regarding the category's right to independent existence' (1998: 31), although he does note some hesitation in Doane's conclusion to the first chapter. He interprets this as Doane hesitating about the generic status of the woman's film at the very point at which she is involved in changing that status, suggesting that, 'a major purpose of *The Desire to Desire* is to establish the woman's film as a genre' (ibid.). This process, Altman claims, involved 'the assimilation of the woman's film to an already established genre [melodrama] capable of lending to the woman's film some of its long-standing genericity' (ibid.). For this association to be effective, however, melodrama needed to be rethought as a genre addressed primarily to a female audience. Altman points out that

Only when this junction took place ... would the woman's film abandon its quotation marks in favour of full generic status. Since the late 1980s, the generic status of the category has never been in doubt ... Indeed, a new generation of introductory texts has begun to treat the woman's film as fully the equal of established genres. (1998: 32)

This account helps us to understand why the categories of melodrama and the woman's film became synonymous in the 1980s, that this represented an important (even necessary) stage in the constitution of the 'woman's film' as a genre. Moreover, it also informs us of the need of a particular group of scholars to devise their own generic category. In this case, feminist film scholars, needing a coherent group of films that addressed issues of female subjectivity and desire, constructed a genre that the industry itself had avoided. Altman's account suggests that the film industry had little to gain economically from developing a genre of films for women, since it excluded a significant part of the cinema audience; that is, male viewers. An alternative, and more economically viable strategy, this argument would suggest, was to occasionally produce films for women within existing generic categories such as thrillers, horror movies, gangster pictures, historical costume dramas, and so on. Film critics, journalists and reviewers may have recognised these as films for women but the studios, according to Altman's thesis, would have been more likely to publicise these in general, stressing male and female appeal. In a sense, this could

lost quotation marks by process



be thought of as a refusal on the part of the film studios to acknowledge that they were in fact producing a series of films built around female stars, with women as their central characters and appealing almost exclusively to female audiences. Feminist film scholars in the 1980s, however, had no such reason to deny this situation and, in fact, had some very good reasons for acknowledging that films for women (henceforth 'women's films') were a staple of Hollywood production throughout its history. Given that one of the primary objectives of feminist scholarship is the restoration of what has been hidden from history (that is, patriarchal histories), this was inevitably going to be one of the first tasks of feminist film scholarship.

Altman's examination of the construction of the family melodrama and the woman's film as genres in the 1970s and 1980s forms a major part of his project; a project that enabled him to formulate a new hypothesis for the genrification process. This consists of five main points:

- i) 'The genre constitution process is not limited to a cycle's or genre's first appearance' (1998: 33)
- ii) 'Taking one version of the genre as representative of the genre as a whole ... is a normal step in the regeneration process' (1998: 34)
- iii) The prestige of a genre's label means that it is regularly retained for use for newly formed genres
- iv) 'Any group of films may at any time be generically redefined by contemporary critics' (1998: 35)
- v) 'critics recourse to regeneration as part of their critical and rhetorical arsenal is entirely expected, and in any case not preventable' (1998: 35-6)

Rick Altman's conception of genrification offers a useful way for us to retain the idea of melodrama as a genre. In particular, it allows the different forms of 'melodrama' in circulation at any one time – by film studios from the 1940s, film theorists from the 1970s and film historians from the 1990s – to co-exist. It enables us to understand why so many definitions of melodrama exist and circulate and allows us, as film scholars, to adopt any one (or several) of these where it is appropriate for our particular project.

#### *Melodrama's on-going redefinition*

The continued redefinition of melodrama, firstly in the 1970s by the film ideologists and, secondly, by feminist film scholars in the 1980s is, accord-

ing to Altman's thesis, both an inevitable process of genrification and the very life-blood of the genre. In the absence of filmmakers continuing to produce the same, recognisable and established form of melodrama, film scholars have, in a sense, taken the lead in keeping melodrama alive as a genre by continually revising its corpus and its history. Moreover, film scholars have produced not only new understandings of the established generic model but also, more radically, they have reinvented the model itself. If this makes for a confusing account of a genre such as melodrama, it is only because of the persistence of a false assumption that genres exist as stable categories, used in the same way by film studios, publicists, journalists, critics and scholars alike and irrespective of time or history.

Melodrama owes its longevity to the fact that it has existed – and continues to exist – as a category of films defined differently at different times by different types of people (both within and beyond the film industry). Different kinds of film can be (have been and will continue to be) grouped together under this label not in any arbitrary fashion and not because anything can be thought of as melodrama but rather because it is an evolving form. It evolves with every new film that is made that refers directly to its established canon: such as *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002). It evolves with every advertisement that describes a film (old or new) as a melodrama or as melodramatic. It evolves when groups of film scholars discuss the meaning of the term and when a film historian discovers a print of an unknown film that can be said to manifest stylistic or thematic features redolent of what has previously been described as melodrama. It also evolves when new media forms refer to, are promoted as, or are otherwise described as having some resemblance or affinity to what is commonly held to be some existing form of melodrama. For some, however, this may seem too fluid, too slippery and too uncertain. For them, melodrama must either take one form or not be a genre at all. As melodrama has clearly never taken a single form and, over time, has developed many variants (that hardly seem to correspond at all in some cases), the alternative is to conceive of melodrama as something beyond genre. Numerous film scholars have adopted this approach since the 1980s. Melodrama has been re-articulated within Film Studies as several other things: a style, a mode and even a sensibility. In the remaining chapters of this book, we shall examine how melodrama has been thought of as something other than a genre and consider how appropriate and useful these approaches have proved to be.

*Handwritten notes:*  
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