

3 SENSIBILITY

Beyond genre

Critics and historians of moving images have often been blind to the forest of melodrama because of their attention to the trees of genre. (Williams 1998: 61)

Melodrama consists of much more than the Hollywood family melodrama and the 'woman's film'. Since the 1980s, some film scholars have been rethinking melodrama beyond generic boundaries, as a style, mode, sensibility, aesthetic and rhetoric, crossing a range of genres, media, historical periods and cultures. During the mid-to-late 1980s, film scholars began to turn attention away from investigations into the ideology of the 'family melodrama' and the 'woman's film' to find ways of understanding the distinctive narrational and aesthetic effects of melodrama across a diversity of genres, sub-genres and film cycles. High on the agenda was melodrama's use of pathos and its emotional impact on audiences. So too was melodrama's relationship to realism. Increasingly, film melodrama was linked to stage and literary melodrama, establishing it as part of a much wider tradition. At the same time, the term 'melodrama' was applied to an expanded (and expanding) canon of films. Instrumental in this shift of direction for film scholarship on melodrama was the influence of Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (originally published in 1976 and reprinted in 1985). This book has played a major role in the re-conception of melodrama within Film Studies. It has, amongst other things, provoked a return to the

issue of melodrama's historical development on stage and screen. It has also made pathos one of the defining features of melodrama. On both counts, this has redirected film scholarship on melodrama back towards the debate initiated by Thomas Elsaesser in his seminal 1972 study, 'Tales of Sound and Fury'.

Melodrama as a mode

In 1986, inspired by Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Christine Gledhill began the process of reorienting the debate on film melodrama towards a more sustained investigation of the operations of pathos. Her contribution to a dialogue (with E. Ann Kaplan) on 'Stella Dallas and Feminist Film Theory' established the new terms for understanding melodrama as a distinctive mode. Working with the notion of three modes – realism, melodrama and modernism – Gledhill drew upon Brooks' thesis on melodrama in order to conceive it as 'an aesthetic and epistemological mode distinct from (if related to) realism, having different purposes, and deploying different strategies, modes of address, and forms of engagement and identification' (1986: 45). Where realism ignores and modernism exposes gaps in bourgeois ideology, melodrama insists on the realities of life in bourgeois democracy and, at the same time, implicitly recognises the limits (inadequacies) of conventional representation (for example, exposing the limits of language, its inability to express or articulate certain contradictions). In this way, the 'beneath' or 'behind' (the unthinkable or repressed) is evoked as metaphor through gesture, music and *mise-en-scène*. In Gledhill's account, melodrama was a mode altogether distinct from the classic realist text.¹ She argued that only when film scholars embraced this fact would the debate successfully move on from an ironic and dispassionate appraisal of melodrama's excesses and absurdities to a more authentic assessment. This would entail understanding how melodrama was meaningful when taken at face value, in all seriousness: how, for instance, it was able to move audiences to tears.

Gledhill also noted that the rhetoric of film melodrama was still an 'uncharted field' (ibid.). Only Thomas Elsaesser, she claimed, had provided an account of melodramatic rhetoric in the cinema up until the mid-1980s. Gledhill was particularly interested in his analysis of pathos and, in her own short essay, embarked upon a brief but perceptive discussion of how pathos functions in melodrama. Most crucially, she drew attention to an essential paradox of the form. Although melodrama is primarily

concerned with an intense focus on interior personal life, its characters (including the central protagonist) are not psychologically constructed and, rather than being introspective, convey their inner being through action, movement, gesture, décor, lighting and editing (1986: 46). This results in the spectator possessing knowledge that is not available to the characters themselves and this discrepancy contributes directly to the operation of pathos: 'Pathos involves us in assessing suffering in terms of our privileged knowledge of its nature and causes' (ibid.). This is an application of Brooks' point about melodrama's play with the revelation of the protagonist's virtue, which is misunderstood due to 'misleading appearances, fatal coincidences, missed meetings, etc., all of which lead to a misrecognition of that character's nature or intent' (1986: 46). In this account of melodramatic rhetoric, pathos emerges as an 'aesthetic activity' (1986: 47). This, moreover, is 'intensified by the misrecognition of a sympathetic protagonist because the audience has privileged knowledge of the "true" situation' (ibid.).

Melodrama and pathos

The importance of pathos within melodrama and its operation through point of view and knowledge (between characters and between audience and characters) emerged even more strongly in 1986 in Steve Neale's essay, 'Melodrama and Tears'. As the title suggests, Neale was explicitly concerned with the way in which 'tear-jerking' constitutes a key component of melodrama's effect upon audiences and why audiences find the process of crying pleasurable and satisfying. He begins his essay by talking about melodrama as a 'mode of narration' and examines the specific ways in which melodrama orders and motivates its narrative events. Melodramas are defined here largely by the specific kinds of narratives they employ. For instance, 'melodramas are marked by chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, *deus ex machina* endings' (1986: 6). They also involve continual surprises and sensational developments. Neale suggests that such narratives are essentially unrealistic in the sense that 'the succession and course of events is unmotivated (or under motivated) from a realist point of view' (ibid.). He claims that such preparation and motivation that does exist is always insufficient and that the tendency is towards excess over cause, extraordinary over ordinary (for example, fate, chance and destiny).

For Neale, the key to the narrative logic of melodrama is not realism or naturalism but rather the need to produce discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and point of view of the characters. This discrepancy is ultimately what produces the pathos that culminates in tears. Timing plays a crucial role here. Pathos results, Neale explained, from a realisation (characters discovering what the spectator already knows) that comes too late or almost too late (that is, just in the nick of time): 'tears come whether the coincidence comes too late or just in time, provided there is a delay and possibility, therefore, that it may come too late' (1986: 11). Throughout the period of delay (whilst the spectator waits to see if the characters will discover what they already know), the spectator is unable to intervene, to change the events or the misconceptions of the characters. Tears result, in part, from this powerlessness. Moreover, the longer the delay (the longer the spectator feels this powerlessness) the greater the emotional impact on the spectator when the moment of realisation arrives.

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The dramatic expansion of the melodramatic field

Recognition of the basic narrative structures of melodrama and the pinpointing of the mechanisms by which it provokes tears from its spectators, constituted an important first step towards rethinking melodrama beyond the limits of specific and easily-identifiable generic categories and film cycles. This shift in critical thinking about melodrama was even more marked a year later when the first published anthology of studies on film melodrama and the 'woman's film' was published under the title of *Home is Where the Heart Is*. Here, in Gledhill's introductory chapter, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', a radically new conception of melodrama was set out and a new methodology for studying melodrama was proposed. Written just three years after she had outlined the form as a genre in her section on melodrama in *The Cinema Book* (Cook 1984), Gledhill now outlined the development of melodrama criticism in Film Studies and found it wanting. She noted the largely pejorative use of the term 'melodrama' by film scholars, which had prevailed in film criticism until Douglas Sirk's 1950s films had been rehabilitated, regarded as ironic and subversive critiques of American ideology. Prior to this, she claimed, melodrama had been used by critics as the 'anti-value for a critical field in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of "high" cultural value' (1987: 5). For such critics, melodrama not only lacked the seriousness and

intellectual weight of either tragedy or realism but, perhaps more importantly, was associated with mass entertainment (that is, with its appeal to the lowest common denominator). The rise of genre criticism in the 1960s concentrated on discrete and readily demarcated cinematic categories like the western and gangster film. In contrast, melodrama seemed too messy and uncontainable (as fragmented across genres and pervading others such as the western and gangster film), lacking a clear evolution on screen and being thematically inconsistent. Gledhill noted, however, that radical shifts within Film Studies reversed this situation, bringing melodrama to the fore.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, realism (for example, the 'classic realist text') was increasingly seen as a reactionary form, bound up with bourgeois values. Ideological analysis provided a new critical context in which melodrama emerged 'with full force into this reconstituted critical field' (1987: 6). The advent of Neo-Marxist film theory in the 1970s created a new context for examining (and celebrating) stylistic excess and narrative inconsistency, these attributes prized for their abilities to expose ideological contradiction. As we have explained in the previous two chapters, Sirk's 1950s films played a leading role in this respect; his style and his ironic stance heavily informed notions of melodramatic conventions in Hollywood cinema. As Gledhill put it, 'there occurred a slippage of the "subversion" argument from its attachment to Sirk as "author" to melodrama itself' (1987: 7). She pointed out that Sirk's authorial signature was now expanded to a generic trademark, the genre of the Hollywood family melodrama constructed out of the 1950s films of directors such as Minnelli, Ray, Ophüls, Cukor and Kazan. Gledhill saw this as the expansion of the parameters for a new critical field. At this point, scholars began to wonder what kind of field melodrama offered (genre, style, mode, ideology, and so on).

Reviewing the early film scholarship on melodrama, Gledhill suggested in 1987 that the most useful work was Elsaesser's essay 'Tales of Sound and Fury'. This was partly because it included a historical review of film melodrama's theatrical and literary antecedence and partly because it recognised melodrama as the basis of Hollywood's aesthetic, emotional and cognitive effects. Another important and valuable feature of Elsaesser's piece, for Gledhill, was that it recognised and gave due consideration to the importance of pathos. Of course, what most film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s found valuable about Elsaesser's essay was that it offered the possibility of conceiving of melodrama as a coherent genre;

namely, the 'Hollywood family melodrama of the 1950s'. This provided a much more straight-forward way of thinking about and investigating melodrama than if one were to take the form as an aesthetic or mode which pervaded Hollywood across virtually every decade and every genre, sub-genre and film cycle.

By 1987, Gledhill had come to regret that in the late 1970s and early 1980s 'the issue of melodrama as a formative cinematic mode was not pursued' (1987: 8). She pointed out that this would have entailed a wholesale re-conceptualisation of the form and entailed extensive investigation, particularly into the relationship between realism and melodrama. But in the new critical climate of 1970s' film criticism, realism (not melodrama) was the anti-value and 'realist' texts, under the umbrella of the 'classic realist text' (whether films, novels or television programmes), were condemned as inherently reactionary since they reproduced bourgeois and/or patriarchal ideology. Gledhill argued that the construction of melodrama as the family melodrama, as a specific Hollywood genre, 'made it difficult to pursue its connections with the nineteenth-century melodramatic traditions which ... constituted a founding tradition of Hollywood as a whole' (1987: 12). She challenged this approach by questioning (or demanding a justification) for the confinement of melodrama to films about domestic situations and 'feminine' conditions, suggesting that the themes of the western are just as excessive. She asked, 'if melodramatic rhetoric informs westerns, gangster and horror films, psychological thrillers and family melodramas alike, how tenable is it to constitute melodrama in a critical, disruptive relation to the classic realist/narrative text?' (1987: 13). Gledhill was now describing not a specific group of films that could be labelled 'melodrama' but, rather, a 'melodramatic rhetoric' that a range of films of different genres could utilise. To understand the rhetoric of melodrama, Gledhill perceived that first of all film scholars would have to stop thinking of melodrama and realism as inevitable opposites or as mutually exclusive categories. Consequently, she called for a much more systematic and thorough-going exploration of the relationship between the two modes.

In her introductory chapter to *Home is Where the Heart Is*, Gledhill offered an example of a more wide-ranging cultural and aesthetic investigation. In the sections headed 'Historicising Melodrama' (1987: 14-28) and 'Melodrama as a Cultural Form' (1987: 28-38), she examined the historical relationship between melodrama and the bourgeoisie, drawing upon Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* of 1976. In the process, she also examined the performative and aesthetic traditions of stage

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melodrama and the narrative traditions of stage and literary melodramas. This also involved the institutional and political factors that shaped the aesthetics and rhetorical devices of melodrama as a theatrical form.

The undertaking of such a potentially large academic project within the limited space of a chapter was (it would appear) to fill a perceived gap within Film Studies, undertaking the type of work which could have logically followed on from Elsaesser's essay in 1972 had the ideological debate not imposed itself. Confined as it was to two sections of an introductory essay to the anthology of critical studies on melodrama and the woman's film, Gledhill's project here could never have been more than a sketch or a provisional investigation. Its purpose was to instigate a new approach and a new area of investigation for scholars of film melodrama rather than provide the definitive account. What it did do was identify an alternative body of scholarship on melodrama that film scholars might usefully consult in order to understand its historical development, cultural significance and aesthetic aspects.

Much of Gledhill's revised notion of film melodrama has been derived from Brooks' study of melodramatic theatre and literature. More than any other single source, this book has been instrumental in the perception of melodrama as a mode. In opposition to the more pejorative and restrictive notion of melodrama that had emerged in Film Studies by the 1980s, Brooks perceived melodrama as a 'modern mode', that used the rhetoric of realism alongside an aesthetic of 'muteness' to make sense of everyday life in a modern and secular world. Brooks understood melodrama as a dramatic and literary form that developed in post-sacred cultures where society needed to find a secular system of ethics and of making everyday life meaningful in the absence of religion. He referred to this as the 'moral occult' and saw it as involving a psychic need as well as an ideological one (that is, the need to make sense of life for personal and social reasons). If theatrical forms are to articulate or represent such meanings and ethical values, they necessarily require a degree of realism. The issues, in other words, need to be made relevant to people's ordinary lives. Brooks' assertion that traditionally melodramas have fulfilled this function simultaneously insists that they also required a level of realism in order to win audience recognition and assent (rather than being opposed to realism). Whilst perceiving the necessity for melodramas to use realism as part of their aesthetic, Brooks also described them as being similarly determined by 'muteness' whereby speech was replaced by music, gesture and expressive *mise-en-scène* for dialogue, giving melodrama its distinctive form.

Melodrama and morality

Central to understanding the ideology of melodrama is its Manichean outlook: that is, its polarities of good and evil, vice and virtue, innocence and villainy (as black and white). For Brooks, melodrama always involves ethical conflicts, symbolically rendered (but never abstract). Initially, characters were emblematic (such as mother, father, son, daughter) and the drama was invariably built around the triadic relationships of a hero, heroine and villain, each being clearly, even elaborately, defined and distinguished. The opposition of vice and virtue, good and evil, innocent hero/heroine and villain, insists upon suffering and pathos. The good (hero and/or heroine) suffer as a direct consequence of their virtue, goodness and innocence, falling prey to the evil vices of the villain. Pathos is evoked for the audience and the other characters who witness the suffering of the virtuous innocents, culminating in almost excruciating moments of sympathy and pity at the sight of such prolonged and undeserved suffering. This constitutes the ultimate melodramatic scenario and the ultimate melodramatic emotion and becomes, for Gledhill, what film melodrama is really all about whatever specific form it takes (historical costume romance, science fiction, crime thriller, horror or western adventure):

Characteristically the melodramatic plot turns on an initial, often deliberately engineered, misrecognition of the innocence of a central protagonist. By definition the innocent cannot use powers available to the villain; following the dictates of their nature, they must become victims, a position legitimated by a range of devices which rationalise their apparent inaction in their own behalf. Narrative is then progressed through a struggle for clear moral identification of where guilt and innocence really lie. (1987: 30)

This was a critical statement, describing in precise terms the rhetoric of melodrama that would transform its conception within Film Studies as a mode: as, indeed, the pervasive mode of American cinema. This rhetoric also enables us to see, as Geldhill notes, Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1984) directly linked to D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), both having victimised innocent heroines persecuted wrongfully by their husband/lover, both films driven to identify good and evil.

Melodrama emerged from Gledhill's introductory chapter to *Home Is Where the Heart Is* as something far more wide-ranging and pervasive than

anything described in the other studies of melodrama and the women's film included in that anthology (i.e. the established critical literature). Here it was recognised as a cross-class and cross-cultural form, of mixed heritage, both bourgeois and popular. It was dominated by a non-verbal aesthetic (spectacle, gestural performances and music) but had undergone a series of aesthetic transformations involving fantasy and realism as well as spectacle. It was an intertextual form which drew (promiscuously) on journalism, legitimate theatre, opera, paintings, poetry, songs and popular fiction, for inspiration and adaptation.

Melodrama and realism

Gedhill's essay 'The Melodramatic Field' charts melodrama's history, from European (chiefly France and England in late eighteenth century) to American theatre, to the birth of cinema and its development from silent to sound pictures. What is stressed throughout is the interdependence of melodrama and realism in this development. Realism, is recognised here not as a static form but rather as one that has to consistently change as social and cultural perceptions of truth change. Gledhill sees realism as opening up new areas for representation which, once uncovered, melodrama assumes. Moreover, realism's relentless search for renewed truth and authentication pushes it towards stylistic innovation, whereas melodrama's search is for something lost, producing a more nostalgic attitude that can accommodate not just established forms of representation but even archaic ones. Melodrama's attachment to an outmoded past has frequently resulted in its derision.

Melodrama is neither realism nor its opposite. For Gledhill, it takes 'its stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and representation, it proceeds to force into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning' (1987: 33). Whereas realism seeks to possess the world by understanding, melodrama seeks to 'force meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language' (ibid.). This approach to understanding melodrama enabled the re-evaluation of the relationship of melodrama and the woman's film as proposed within Film Studies. Gledhill further noted that the identification of melodrama with the woman's film had been a 'retrospective categorisation' that was a consequence of realism's association with masculinity (ibid.) and how historically the realm of feeling has been assigned to women whilst realism has become associated

with masculine restraint, hence the cultural prohibitions on men weeping in public:

Very soon cinema was constituted as an inherently 'realist' medium and it has become a given of film history that while early cinema produced melodrama by default, the power of speech instituted a critical break between a cinema destined for realism and its melodramatic origins. At the same time genre divisions were consolidated, allowing melodrama a separate identity ... which facilitated critical boundaries drawn by gender. The 'classic' genres were constructed by recourse to masculine cultural values – gangster as 'tragic hero'; the 'epic' of the West; 'adult' realism – while 'melodrama' was acknowledged only in those denigrated reaches of the juvenile and the popular, the feminised spheres of the woman's weepie, the romance or family melodrama. (1987: 34)

Gledhill asserted, however, that many of Hollywood's classic genres retained their melodramatic pre-dispositions and noted that 'the industry recognised this pervasive melodramatic base in its exhibition categories – western melodrama, crime melodrama, sex melodrama, backwoods melodrama, romantic melodrama and so on' (1987: 35). Indeed, she noted a fundamental paradox here, that it was actually the male genres of westerns and gangster films and other action genres that perpetuated a melodramatic rhetoric. Meanwhile, the woman's film (later to be described as melodrama by scholars) adopted quite a different form, being dominated by words and dialogue, openly expressing and articulating its central issues and conflicts. Such films were, in other words, anything but texts of muteness, forced to transform the unspeakable into spectacular action sequences or *mise-en-scène*. Nevertheless, it was the male genres that took on the aura of prestige associated with realism, whilst women's genres became increasingly linked with the pejorative associations of melodrama.

Revising the Film Studies' account of melodrama

Gledhill's position was almost entirely at odds with the other studies contained in her anthology (although sharing occasional sympathies). It was, in many ways, a call for the adoption of a completely new approach to melodrama within Film Studies rather than an endorsement of the

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approaches that had been taken already. Her position has subsequently been taken up most enthusiastically and most explicitly by Linda Williams. In her essay, 'Melodrama Revised', she offered a 'revised theory of a melodramatic mode – rather than the more familiar notion of the melodramatic genre' (1998: 43). She argued that melodrama, rather than being a genre or any other sub-set of American filmmaking, is *the* pervasive American mode of filmmaking, constituting many genres and being ever-present.

Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures. It is not a specific genre like the western or horror film; it is not a 'deviation' of the classic realist narrative; it cannot be located primarily in women's films, 'weepies' or family melodramas – though it includes them. Rather, melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and irrational truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie. (1998: 42)

Williams' arguments and observations were largely informed by Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* and Gledhill's work on melodrama, adopting the thesis that melodrama has been the means of articulating vice and virtue in a post-sacred world. She argued that melodrama is ultimately concerned with articulating moral values and establishing moral right, which usually involves a central protagonist whose moral virtue goes unrecognised by other characters in the film (but, crucially, not by the audience) until the climax of the narrative. Throughout her essay, Williams argued that as melodrama has developed on the American screen it has modernised itself and, effectively, disguised itself by adopting tropes of 'realism' and developing more fully realised characters. She urged film scholars to look beyond these to recognise the more fundamentally melodramatic nature of American movies (old and new): 'If emotional and moral registers are so sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims; if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions, the operative mode is melodrama' (ibid.).

Williams' project was to re-inscribe the melodramatic mode into the history of American cinema, arguing that it lingered on throughout the sound era in many genres (including action movies). For her, the term 'melodrama' indicates a form of exciting, sensational and, above all,

moving story. Constructing a new history of American film melodrama, she linked together American forms such as the novelistic romances of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, the popular theatre of Belasco, Aitken and Boucicault, the silent films of Griffith, DeMille and Borzage and the sound films of Ford, Coppola and Spielberg. The common thread uniting them is, for Williams, 'the combined function of realism, sentiment, spectacle and action in effecting the recognition of a hidden or misunderstood virtue' (1998: 54).

Williams chooses American Vietnam films, including *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Rambo* (1982), *Platoon* (1986) and *Casualties of War* (1989) to make a striking case for the pervasive nature of melodrama. These most male-oriented of action movies might at one time have seemed the very antithesis of Film Studies' definition of melodrama as family melodramas and women's films. Good reason then for Williams to claim that 'what makes them tick is ... not simply their action-adventure exploits but the activation of such exploits with a melodramatic mode struggling to "solve" the overwhelming moral burden of having been the "bad guys" in a lost war' (1998: 61).

Moreover, 'what counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent' (ibid.). Williams warned that neither the realism nor the virility of action should fool us into thinking that action films are not melodramas. This is a way of opening out the 'genre' of melodrama. Williams makes what she herself admits is a 'bold statement' which is that, rather than a submerged, embedded tendency within realist narrative, melodrama has been the dominant form of popular cinema. She argued that as melodrama has developed it has shed its old-fashioned values, acting styles and ideologies along the way whilst continuing to deliver the melodramatic experience. Consequently, the structures and effects of American cinema are in essence melodramatic. Hence, Williams claims:

the basic vernacular of American moving pictures consists of a story that generates sympathy for a hero who is also a victim and that leads to a climax that permits the audience, and usually other characters, to recognise that character's moral value. The climax revealing the moral good of the victim can tend in one of two directions: either it can consist of paroxysm of pathos (as in the woman's films or family melodrama variants) or it can take that paroxysm and channel it into the more virile and action-centered

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variants of rescue, chase, and fight (as in the western and all the action genres). (1998: 58)

This strategy makes all Hollywood cinema, except for comedy, melodramatic given that the revelation of moral superiority is such a central and recurrent feature of American filmmaking.

Facing up to the tears

'In cinema the mode of melodrama defines a broad category of moving pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims' (Williams 1998: 42). This broad definition of melodrama does not simply classify all films that make audiences cry 'melodrama' (because some films that can make audiences cry are not melodrama). It does, however, recognise the importance of the affective and emotive power of film melodrama to move audiences to tears.

In reviewing the Film Studies' account of melodrama from the 1970s and 1980s, Williams noted that the 'so-excessive-as-to-be ironic model rendered taboo the most crucial element of the study of melodrama: its capacity to generate emotion in audiences' (1998: 44). She pointed out that whilst Geoffrey Nowell-Smith suggested that emotion was syphoned off into the *mise-en-scène*, he said nothing about the emotional reactions of audiences. Williams claimed that the 1970s criticism of melodrama implied two different forms: 'bad' melodrama of manipulated, naively felt, feminine emotions and 'good' melodrama of ironical hysterical excess thought to be immune to the more pathetic emotions (ibid.). She also noted that feminist film scholars were just as silent on the topic of emotion as their male counterparts. In the early to mid-1980s, feminists regarded the 'quintessentially feminine emotion of pathos' as a key aspect of women's oppression (whereas anger meant liberation). Tears of pity or (even worse) self-pity would not help women in their bid to transcend patriarchal power and control. Williams noted that in her own writings from this time she too refused to acknowledge the importance of melodramatic pathos, choosing to argue that images of female pathos could engender anger on the part of female spectators:

Both drawn to and repelled by the spectacle of virtuous and pathetic suffering, feminist critics were torn: we wanted to properly

condemn the abjection of suffering womanhood, yet in the most loving detail of our growing analyses of melodramatic subgenres ... it was clear that something more than condemnation was taking place. (1987: 47)

She further wrote that, 'in the process of distinguishing our "properly" feminist distance from melodrama's emotions, we failed to confront the importance of pathos itself and the fact that a surprising power lay in identifying with victimhood' (ibid.). Williams added that the feminist critics of the woman's film (herself included) were 'convinced that pathos was, in itself, an excess of feeling that threatened to overwhelm the emerging liberated woman' (1998: 48). Yet she claimed that underlying much of the feminist work on the woman's films in the 1980s was the implicit but unspoken question of what it meant for a woman viewer to cry at the end of a film. Here she also hinted at another unspoken assumption: men do not cry at movies. Interestingly, however, she refuted this claim by noting that male action films 'pivot upon melodramatic moments of masculine pathos' (ibid.). In such moments, heroic failure often leads to what Thomas Schatz had referred to in conversation with Williams as a good 'guy-cry'. The fact that this reference to male tears was confined to a footnote suggests some hesitancy in tackling the subject. Similarly, the fact that there is no attempt to authenticate the claim beyond this instance of anecdotal evidence (that is, based on spoken rather than written testimony) also suggests that in the late 1990s the topic of male crying was virtually taboo in Film Studies. However, within the main body of her essay, Williams did return to the issue of male tears. She wrote that 'strong emotions that can move audiences to tears are not the special province of women, but of the melodramatic "feminisation" that ... has been a persistent feature of American popular culture at least since the mid-nineteenth century' (ibid.). If men crying at movies is considered in these terms ('feminisation') it is no wonder that they are not prepared to admit to it and that film scholars are so hard-pressed to find tangible evidence of male crying as a regular feature of melodrama. The question of whether male and female viewers cry at the same things in a melodramatic film has barely arisen within film scholarship, constituting another uncharted area.

A large section of Williams' essay is devoted to an analysis of D. W. Griffiths' *Way Down East* and much of this analysis is given over to the role of pathos, to the function and provocation of tears. Indeed, she used the film to illustrate that

A melodrama does not have to contain multiple scenes of pathetic death to function melodramatically. What counts is the feeling of loss suffused throughout the form. Audiences may weep or not weep, but the sense of loss that implicates readers or audiences is central. (1998: 70)

Her discussion of pathos drew on Steve Neale's earlier work, adapting and revising his ideas and observations. Whilst noting Neale's argument that we cry due to the fulfilment of our own infantile fantasy (crying being a demand for satisfaction and our tears sustaining that fantasy), Williams disagreed with his view of crying as the product of powerlessness. She argued instead that in melodrama tears may be a source of future power because they acknowledge the hope that desire will be fulfilled. Williams interpreted them as almost an investment in the future and not just a longing for what has passed and cannot be regained (1998: 71). Even she acknowledged, however, that we need a better understanding of the role played by tears in melodrama, specifically in terms of how it is orchestrated by the temporal and rhythmic elements of melodramatic rhetoric. Film scholars also need, as Williams has suggested, a better appreciation of the teasing delay and forward-moving march of time of melodrama, its stop-go progress and the role this plays in provoking tears. What we might add to this is how this process works differently, if at all, for different types of audience (for example, male and female).

It is clear from Williams' discussion of crying at the movies that, even by 1998, much more detailed and wide-ranging research was still required within Film Studies. Her account certainly marked an advance in this direction. Just simply recognising that, in melodrama, the spectator seldom cries at the end simply because the character cries, moved beyond one of the existing basic assumptions. She argued that film scholars needed to give greater consideration to the 'complex negotiation between emotions and emotion and thought' (1998: 49). Furthermore, Williams states that 'the idea that each character in melodrama sounds a single emotional note that is in turn simply mimicked by the viewer – has impeded the serious study of how complexly we can be "moved"' (ibid.).

Pathos and action

Williams attempted a much more sophisticated understanding of emotion in melodrama than in previous accounts. She argued, for instance,

that pathos is always in tension with other emotions in melodramas and also that it is directly related to the action, often the most compelling, dramatic, spectacular and memorable action of a film. Later in her essay, Williams described at length how the pathos of Lillian Gish in Griffiths' *Way Down East* provokes the final climactic action of the film, its most famous sequence involving a death-defying rescue on a moving ice-floe.

Following Peter Brooks' line of argument, Williams asserted that a 'quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to melodrama' (1998: 52). This often results in big sensation scenes that present moral truths (often in gesture). These are never fully spoken in words, they constitute the 'unspeakable truth'. Revelation occurs as spectacular moving sensation (usually as gesture accompanied by music) sustained through physical action without dialogue. Thus, Williams wrote that, 'Melodramatic dénouement is typically some version of this public or private recognition of virtue prolonged in the frozen tableau whose picture speaks more powerfully than words' (ibid.).

Throughout her essay Williams emphasised the relationship between pathos and action in melodrama, distinguishing melodramas by their high quotient of pathos *and* action. She explained the importance of this aspect of melodrama by citing Brooks' thesis:

If, as Peter Brooks argues, melodrama is most centrally about moral legibility and the assigning of guilt and innocence in a post-sacred, post-Enlightenment world where moral and religious certainties have been erased, then pathos and action are the two most important means to the achievement of moral legibility. (1998: 59)

The revised model of film melodrama

Williams has stated that 'film criticism may do well to shift from the often myopic approach to the superficial coherence of given genres and toward the deeper coherence of melodrama' (1998: 62). In the course of conducting her case study of Griffiths' *Way Down East* she identified five melodramatic features central to American cinema:

- i) melodramas begin and end in a space of innocence. Lost innocence provokes nostalgia that in turn provokes pathos
- ii) melodramas focus on victim-heroes and the eventual recognition of their virtue

- iii) melodramas employ an aesthetics of astonishment: at the point where virtue is at last recognised there is a prolongation of emotional effect that often sets up the need for action (the climactic action)
- iv) melodramas employ a dialectic of pathos and action, establishing a tension between being 'too late' and 'just in the nick of time'; time is the ultimate object of loss, this loss provoking tears
- v) characters in melodrama embody primary psychic roles organised in Manichaen conflicts of good and evil. Melodramatic characters are monopathic: that is, lacking more complex mixes of feelings and psychological depth.²

These five distinct features of melodrama (as a mode) are to be found across a wide range of genres, sub-genres and film cycles. Such a model enables a seemingly diverse group of films to be compared, such as westerns (for example, *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939)), fantasy adventures (*The Thief of Bagdad* (Michael Powell, 1940)) and heritage cinema (*Maurice* (James Ivory, 1987)). Irrespective of generic differences (in theme and style), what makes films correspond to this model is the fact that they provoke tears and that their narratives develop by concealing and eventually revealing a character's moral virtue or innocence. To examine such films in relation to this model involves exploring the way in which the audience's knowledge and point of view are established in opposition to that of the leading characters, enabling the audience to anticipate misconceptions, false assumptions and injustices regarding the victim-protagonist. It also involves recognising the extent to which their characters are essentially lacking in psychological depth and emotional complexity, that they are set in direct opposition to other characters, creating a polarisation of attitudes, desires and goals. This is a particular way of seeing the world, a particular way of representing themes and characters and organising the audience's knowledge and sympathy with these. What is melodramatic about these films is not that they deal with a set of specific themes, have certain kinds of characters or use a specific iconography but rather that they reveal a particular approach whatever the themes being dealt with and whatever types of characters are involved. It is the expression of a certain kind of sensibility, requiring audiences to adopt a melodramatic sensibility in order to understand, appreciate and enjoy these films, in order to be able to go with the flow (for example, to be prepared to let the tears flow).

A melodramatic sensibility

The more fluid and progressive conception of melodrama as a mode, argued for by Christine Gledhill and others, is a significant development in discussion around the subject and has wider implications for the study of melodrama and the melodramatic as an expressive code or sensibility in cinema. As Gledhill persuasively argues, considering melodrama as a mode rather than as either a genre or a style has significant benefits:

The notion of modality, like register in socio-linguistics, defines a specific mode of aesthetic articulation adaptable across a range of genres, across decades and across national cultures. (2000: 229)

Regarding melodrama as a mode thus facilitates the consideration of the ways in which a melodramatic sensibility can manifest itself across a range of texts and genres. Thinking of melodrama in these terms is rather more liberating than the predetermined Film Studies accounts that Gledhill notes has 'relegated melodrama as outmoded' (2000: 235). It creates the possibility to discuss forms of expression and representation that are ephemeral or fragmentary; scenes in films that are excessive and yet have an emotional power or resonance, for example. It also enables scholars in film, literature, theatre and art history to re-evaluate the value-laden binary oppositions between realism and melodrama. Gledhill indicates that this reconsideration of melodrama in opposition to realism is already taking place:

There is now underway a vigorous debate between theatre and film scholars around the 'baton' model of stage-screen relations whereby it is supposed the practices of the popular nineteenth-century theatre are passed over to cinema, cleansed of their melodramatic trappings and made fit for the twentieth century, thus installing another boundary between 'old-fashioned' structures of moral feeling and contemporary demands for realist perception. (2000: 231)

Peter Brooks' work on theatrical and literary melodrama, for example, argues that a melodramatic sensibility manifests itself across theatrical and literary texts and is in fact a singularly modern rather than an 'old-fashioned' mode of expression. One has only to look at the pioneering

MELODRAMA
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MODUS

examples of realist theatre such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* or Strindberg's *Miss Julie* to see that melodramatic situations are repeatedly used in plays that scandalised contemporary audiences due to what was regarded as their frank subject matter and 'realistic' portrayal of contemporary life. To modern audiences by contrast, Nora dancing the tarantella in a desperate bid to distract her husband in *A Doll's House*, Hedda throwing Lovborg's manuscript in the fire and finally committing suicide in *Hedda Gabler*, and the almost ritualistic portrayal of the master/servant relationship in *Miss Julie* are not dissimilar, in either register or treatment, to the conflicts, tensions and hysterical climaxes of the Hollywood family melodramas of the 1950s.

Regarding melodrama as a modality also makes it possible to consider a range of films produced outside of the mainstream of Hollywood film production and consider the extent to which melodramatic aesthetics and techniques are deployed to convey emotional conflicts. Popular Hindi cinema, colloquially known as 'Bollywood' cinema, for example, is especially receptive to readings that demonstrate a melodramatic sensibility in operation. Ravi Vasudevan (1989) draws on Peter Brooks' account of melodrama to analyse Indian cinema. In films such as Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (1971), a story of courtesans, star-crossed lovers, history repeating itself, improbable coincidences and mistaken identities, the dramatic tropes, excessive spectacle substituting for words and clear sense of a moral order that Brooks identifies as features of theatrical melodrama are very apparent. For example, in an especially notable scene, the film's protagonist, condemned to life as an ostracised courtesan, dances on shattered glass at the wedding of her lover. This hysterically dramatic sequence acts as the catalyst for the revelation of Pakeezah's (a name meaning 'pure of heart') true identity to be revealed and a satisfactory conclusion to the film whereby the heroine is freed of the shame of her current existence and reunited with her lover in marriage. Of equal interest, both Nick Browne and Ma Ning (1994) have discussed the social and political significance of melodrama as a mode of expression in the cinema of the People's Republic of China. It is not just popular cinematic forms like Bollywood (which very evidently draws directly on the strategies of theatrical melodrama) and Chinese cinema that demonstrate the manifestations of a melodramatic sensibility, however. The work of Ingmar Bergman for example, usually categorised outside of the mainstream of popular cinema as 'art house', frequently deals with thematic concerns and demonstrates a stylistic aesthetic that might be understood as articulating a melo-

matic sensibility. Films like *Persona* (1966) with its theme of muteness, or the claustrophobic atmosphere evoked in *Cries and Whispers* (1972), both featuring female protagonists, are especially good examples of the ways in which Bergman's cinema could be read as melodrama. Equally the films of the Dogme 95 movement such as *Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998) and, especially, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) (all directed by Lars von Trier) whilst utilising a scrupulously realist aesthetic, deal with highly-charged emotional states and situations, seemingly pushing the boundaries of realism to its limits in ways that can provoke extreme discomfort in audiences. Once again this cycle of films that challenge audience expectations and have the ability to elicit strong emotional responses through their charged dramatic register are prime examples of the melodramatic sensibility at work in contemporary cinema outside of the Hollywood mainstream. Yet there is a potential danger here in assuming that all forms of emotion and sentiment are conveyed in an intrinsically melodramatic fashion. There is therefore the need to be mindful that melodrama engages with and manifests itself through extremes of emotion and is a rhetorical strategy that struggles to convey charged emotional and psychic states through visual and dramatic means. Melodrama, in this way, exists at the very limits of a visual and dramatic medium like cinema; it attempts to articulate those things that it is almost impossible to represent – melodrama speaks the unspeakable and represents the unrepresentable. Much of the scholarly work into the ways in which a melodramatic sensibility inflects cinema outside of Hollywood is yet to be done but this small sample of examples indicates some of the interesting directions that these investigations may take in future.

Consideration of melodrama as a mode or sensibility, then, broadens the parameters of what constitutes melodrama and the ways in which the term can be usefully applied in the first instance. The other important development that this more progressive understanding of the term enables is to break the longstanding and problematic link that has prevailed in Film Studies between melodrama and the 'woman's film'. As Gledhill points out:

Inevitably, given the weak twentieth-century commonsense boundary between anything labelled 'woman's' and melodrama, the woman's film and melodrama are frequently (but not invariably) treated by critics – both journalistic and academic – as one. (2000: 225)

departure from
woman's film

Though it is important to acknowledge that important developments in the understanding of melodrama in cinema have been brought about as a direct consequence of this linkage and the crucial intervention of Feminist film scholars, the possibility of discussing melodrama and its effects in operation outside of films aimed at a female audience creates conditions in which it is possible to discuss a much wider sample of filmic texts and genres. In particular genres more generally associated with male audiences either through theme or mode of address come into view as demonstrating a melodramatic sensibility.

The male melodrama

The category of male melodrama, as Gledhill implies, already exists within the standard Film Studies account of the family melodrama, though it is usually seen as a diversion from the, more usual, female centred melodramas of 1950s Hollywood. Laura Mulvey points to the differences in narrative strategies between melodramas with a male protagonist which, she argues, tend to result in the resolution of 'irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas' (1977/78: 56) and films with a female protagonist where resolution cannot be achieved. Thomas Schatz also identifies 'male weepies' as a distinct subdivision of the Hollywood family melodrama. He argues that such films as *Bigger Than Life*, *East of Eden*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Cobweb* deal with the problems of 1950s masculinity and the need for the male protagonist to assume, in some form or other, the role of patriarch within a family unit.

For Schatz, in these films, concerned with two character types – the archetypal, aging father and inadequate son – 'the central conflict involves passing the role of middle-American "Dad" from one generation to the next' (1981: 239). The 'male weepie' cycle, of course, has continued to the present day and can still be regarded as a type of cinema in which the assumption of a paternal role is discussed in emotionally charged terms. *Dead Poet's Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) for example, dealing with the inspirational English professor John Keating, is notable for its tear-jerking qualities and extremely emotional mode of address. Mike Hammond notes the parallels, as well as the significant shifts that have taken place, between the 1950s and the 1980s construction of this particular form of melodrama:

Where the 1950s melodrama had to chart a path between arbitrary and formal resolution of conflicts and letting the 'crises of

identification follow their self-destructive course' the 1980s male melodrama ... dispenses with the latter and, instead of questioning the power of authority, it reinforces it through the production of all-male families and by investing in the masculine the reproductive powers of the feminine. (1993: 60)

Phil Alden Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989) even more clearly falls within the parameters of the standard Film Studies account of the male melodrama. The film deals with the story of Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer who begins to hear voices in his dreams that tell him to create a baseball field on his farming land. Kinsella is presented as an idealised American family man, clearly linked to the country's agrarian, pioneering heritage. Ray is in possession of a dream that no one else shares or understands, a dream that symbolically represents the American dream of individualism and personal freedom. This dream threatens the stability of Ray's home-life and his livelihood as a farmer and, towards the end of the film, his farm is on the verge of repossession through the intervention of a duplicitous in-law and the concerns of bankers representing the heartless bureaucracies of corporate America. The film's resolution is especially notable for its emotional and affective qualities with the dream of the baseball field realised and the magical appearance of sporting figures from America's past as well as the apparition of Ray's own, long dead, father. Through its highly emotive narrative and rhetoric the film suggests the potential, even if only through fantasy, of regaining the liberal ideals of what is presented as a lost America and the possibility of reconciliation with the past through the pursuit of dreams.

The melodramatic sensibility and the action movie

Moving outside of the Film Studies designation of the family melodrama as a generic category it is possible to see a melodramatic sensibility in operation in a wider range of male-orientated texts and genres. Nowhere is this truer than in the genre of the action movie, frequently concerned with staging conflicts between polarised moral forces (good vs. evil). Action movies inevitably, though frequently inadvertently, explore gender constructions and primarily the construction of masculinity itself, either to assert, and thereby celebrate, masculinist values, or in some cases, to call them into question. The excessive, spectacular and overstated nature of the action movie, especially those of the 1980s, lends itself particularly

Moneyball?

well to a discussion of the ways in which melodrama manifests itself outside of the terrain of the family melodrama. By investigating the action movie as an articulation of the melodramatic sensibility it is possible to salvage and apply several of the conceptual models proposed by scholars who have discussed the generic category of the 'family melodrama'. In this way, by thinking about melodrama as a sensibility, we are able to build upon, rather than merely dismiss, the substantial body of academic work undertaken into the connections between melodrama and cinema that has been discussed in the previous two chapters.

Two films made in the 1980s by John McTiernan, a director who specialises in action movies, demonstrate very clearly how melodramatic rhetorical and narrative techniques are frequently deployed in action movies more generally.

Die Hard

A hugely popular film that established television actor Bruce Willis' credentials in cinema and has resulted in two sequels with a third to be released in 2005, *Die Hard* (1988) can be regarded as a melodrama in the classic theatrical sense and also as a melodrama according to Steve Neale's 'historicist' account of the term based on industrial categorisation. As we noted in the first chapter Neale argues that, for the film industry at least, melodrama 'meant crime, guns and violence; they meant heroines in peril; they meant action, tension and suspense; and they meant villains' (2000: 179). This description of melodrama as concerned with spectacular action and suspense epitomises the concerns and affects that *Die Hard* engages with. The film also conforms to Peter Brooks' identification of the sensibility that expresses itself in theatrical melodrama in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Die Hard*, like the classical theatrical melodrama, concerns the virtuous but lowly hero (the policeman, John McClane) who finds himself inadvertently tested through, what Brooks describes as 'the introduction of menace or obstacle, which places virtue in a situation of extreme peril' (1976: 31). *Die Hard* is, to use Brooks' words, a 'text of muteness' in which gesture and, in the case of this particular film, spectacular action substitutes for words. McClane, we understand from the outset of the film, is overworked and often away from home. His professional commitments as a New York law enforcer have inevitably had a negative impact on his family life, meaning that he is becoming increasingly estranged from both his children and Holly, his wife. Holly also has a pressurised job within the corporate world and has relocated, with her children, to Los

Angeles. McClane struggles to combine the patriarchal role of father with that of bread-winner and the film suggests that his failure in this respect, as well as his wife's rejection of the role of home-maker and the implicit suggestion that she rejects his status as patriarch (it is revealed that she uses her maiden name at work) threatens the stability of their home. This context provides the narrative backdrop for the dramatic and spectacular assertion of McClane's masculinity.

McClane arrives at his wife's place of work, the Nakatomi Plaza, on Christmas Eve to confront his wife and unsuccessfully resolve their differences. Through remarkable circumstance, at the same time, a group of European terrorists enter the building, taking everyone, including Holly, hostage. Just as John McClane personifies the heroic American everyman, so the terrorists, led by Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman), are clearly codified through their sophisticated uniform of dark European tailoring and their Germanic accents, as the personification of evil. As Brooks observes of the villain of the classical melodrama:

He is reduced to a few summary traits that signal his position, just as physically, do his swarthy complexion, moustache, cape, and concealed dagger. But he is strongly characterised, a forceful representation of villainy ... The villainy at issue may be more or less motivated ... And in almost every case it appears somewhat



FIGURE 12 The melodramatic villain Hans Gruber holds Holly captive in *Die Hard*

inadequate to the quantity of villainy unleashed. The villain is simply the conveyor of evil, he is inhabited by evil. (1976: 33)

McClane, alone in his wife's office is left undetected by the terrorists and the stage is set for the classical Manichean conflict between good and evil enabling McClane to perform his narrative function as hero. Through a succession of daring escapades, including explosions, leaping from burning buildings and crawling barefoot over broken glass, all designed as extreme trials of his determination, the heroic and virtuous McClane is finally able to save the hostages and his wife, simultaneously preserving his marriage and ultimately reasserting his patriarchal status.

Predator

If *Die Hard* conforms in many ways to the tropes of theatrical melodrama, epitomising a melodramatic sensibility and aesthetic concerned with the moral conflict between the forces of good and evil, then McTiernan's earlier film, *Predator* (1987), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, can also be regarded as demonstrating a melodramatic sensibility, through its problematic representation of the signs of masculinity as spectacle and its hysterical attempts to counter alternative or oppositional readings. Susan Jeffords (1994) argues that the emergence of the muscular action hero of the 1980s coincides with the right-wing conservatism of the Reagan administration and an anti-feminist backlash with the attempt to reassert patriarchal ideals through culture. Films such as *Rambo* (George Cosmatos, 1985) and those starring Schwarzenegger, in particular, *Conan the Destroyer* (Richard Fleischer, 1984), *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), *Commando* (Mark L. Lester, 1985), *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), *Red Heat* (Walter Hill, 1988) and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) as well as Jean Claude Van Damme in *Kick Boxer* (Mark Di Salle, 1989) and *Double Impact* (Sheldon Lettich, 1991), though in some cases made after the Reagan administration ended in 1989, illustrate this tendency well. This is not to say that popular cinema simply reproduces dominant ideology but rather that the ideological agenda of any given historical period (and the debates and contradictions that lie within and beneath ideology) can be read, symptomatically, in cultural products including Hollywood cinema. *Predator* is an interesting case inasmuch as it vividly asserts a reactionary macho masculinity typical of the 1980s action movie whilst simultaneously through its recourse to a melodramatic mode of address and excessive, hysterical *mise-en-scène*, calls this ver-

sion of masculinity into question. By drawing on Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's work on 1950s melodrama, especially his argument concerning conversion hysteria and the return of the repressed, it is possible to identify *Predator* as manifesting a melodramatic sensibility.

In *Predator*, Dutch (Schwarzenegger) and his team of mercenary commandos are sent to the jungles of Central America on a secret mission to rescue American airmen captured by terrorists. Their mission fails, resulting only in the capture of a local woman and they soon find themselves trapped in the jungle. On their journey to a rescue point, the commandos are attacked by an unseen enemy who seems to take pleasure in the gory dismemberment of human (almost exclusively male) bodies. The commandos realise too late that they have become the prey of a mysterious non-human creature and it is left to Dutch, after the rest of his team have been killed, to finally confront the creature that has been attacking them. From the outset of the film Schwarzenegger's physicality is presented as spectacle. In a notable scene at the start of the film he is reunited with a colleague and greets him with a handshake that emphasises, in close-up, his overdeveloped biceps. The rapidly edited and exaggerated close-up is so emphatic in its assertion of Schwarzenegger's macho masculinity that it seems parodic. Once in the jungle, both Dutch and his colleagues, who are all uniformly muscular, are soon presented sweating and bare-chested in the exotic, sultry environment. The possibility for interpreting this, often gratuitous, display of all-male, spectacular, muscled masculinity as a homoerotic scenario within the context of a mainstream Hollywood action movie must, naturally, be disavowed at all costs. The potential for this reading is diminished in the first instance by the introduction of a superfluous female character and, earlier in the narrative through a scene where the commandos exchange crude sexual jokes. Irrespective of these attempts at recuperating heterosexual masculinity however, the film struggles to deny the potential for this reading throughout and recurses to a *mise-en-scène* that is hysterically excessive. The commandos' cache of weaponry, for example, is unfeasibly large, each of them possessing a gun that seems to outdo the previous one in its magnitude and potential for destruction. Their iconography as characters is similarly excessively coded as stridently macho, to such an extent in fact that it seems almost ironic. Unintentionally, the commandos do not so much function as epitomes of macho manhood, they seem rather more like 'The Village People' transplanted to the rain forest. The predator itself is equally problematic and again opens itself to the possibility of an oppositional reading.



FIGURE 13 The commandos demonstrate their firepower in *Predator*

Originally the predator is invisible, hidden both from the audience and the commandos. At this point, the creature watches the commandos from the safety of the jungle, detecting them by the heat of their bodies. When the creature is finally revealed its physicality is clearly masculine and dressed in what appears to be the futuristic, black-leather clad accoutrements of a biker with a head-dress of what appears to be dreadlocks. Through iconographical elements then he is presented as both racially and sexually 'othered'. This sense of otherness is emphasised by the revelation of the reasons for the predator's bloodthirsty pursuit of the commandos, which, it seems, is in order to make a gruesome necklace of human skulls that he wears as a trophy. The predator's actions seem motiveless and excessive in their violence. In *Predator* the creature is presented, through his racial and implicit sexual differences, as a threat to conventional patriarchal masculinity and it is only the true epitome of that particular version of masculinity, Dutch, who can defeat him and restore order. In this light, drawing on Nowell-Smith's arguments it is possible to see the melodramatic sensibility employed in *Predator* to reassert dominant ideas of masculinity even as it problematises them. The film, in effect, contains a subtext that deals with the heterosexual fear of homosexual contamination.

This reading then brings us to the final set of debates that this book will deal with; the connections between melodrama and a gay sensibility.

Melodrama and the gay sensibility

Whether regarded as a genre, a cinematic style, or as a mode/sensibility, melodrama has almost always been the subject of interest for film scholars because of the ways in which it opens up discussions around questions of gender and sexuality within cinematic texts. As we have seen throughout this book investigations into the ways in which discourses of femininity and the feminine are articulated in the woman's film for example, undertaken largely by feminist academics, have often focused debate on melodrama and its relationship to cinema aimed at a female audience. Likewise, the more recent developments in the study of the cultural construction of masculinity and the ways in which masculinity is represented and played out in cinema enable a much broader range of films to be identified as demonstrating melodramatic narrative and stylistic techniques and a melodramatic sensibility. From the mid-1980s onwards sexuality has become an increasingly significant area of debate in Film Studies. This is largely due to the intervention of gay and lesbian scholars working within the discipline and also to the development of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory as theoretical paradigms. With these developments within Film Studies as a discipline in mind, questions of gay spectatorship and a gay sensibility and their relationship to melodrama emerge. Whilst this is still a rather marginalised area of investigation it is nonetheless one interesting direction that discussion around melodrama may take in future.

Camp

It is notable that the films that have been collectively identified as melodramas through the standard Film Studies account have spoken to audiences other than the, largely assumed, female audience for the woman's film. The most conspicuous group who have found the 1950s family melodrama of particular interest are gay men. The gay male appreciation of these films, however, has usually been due to their spectacularly unintentional manifestations of camp. Camp is a difficult subject to summarise in a few sentences. As Barbara Klinger notes 'Cultural critics tend to define camp by discussing three of its aspects: camp taste, camp practitioners and camp politics' (1994: 134). Susan Sontag's essay, 'Notes on Camp', though dated, remains one of the most perceptive descriptions of what camp is and what camp does. Both scholars note that camp is a fundamentally

subversive method for re-reading and creating cultural products, a reading strategy that takes pleasure in the excessive and the fake. As Sontag puts it, 'a good taste of bad taste' (1966: 291).

As both Klinger and Gledhill have noted Douglas Sirk's Universal melodramas had attracted a gay following as camp texts many years before they were 'recovered' as examples of subversive Hollywood cinema by Film Studies academics. Films like Sirk's, as well as examples from the oeuvres of Minnelli, Ray, Cukor, Wilder and Losey, achieved cult status within the gay subculture as a direct consequence of the very excessiveness, extreme emotionality, mannered performances, style and very direct sentimental form of address that these films demonstrate. In fact, many of the features that film theorists would later suggest were the basis for the family melodramas' canonical status as subversive, progressive texts were the very qualities that gay men identified as a source of humour. In a chapter dealing with camp reception of Sirk's films, Klinger provides several textual examples of the camp excesses of the Universal melodramas:

Sirk's melodramas lend themselves to a kind of exposé of gender stereotypes. In *Imitation of Life* when Susy runs out on a balcony to proclaim to her mother and their party guests, 'Oh, Mama, look! A falling star!', or when Marylee responds to her brother's accusation that she is a filthy liar with 'I'm filthy, period', the roles of virginal and debauched women, respectively, reach the level of caricature. (1994: 151)

Klinger also notes that camp is often concerned with an ironic revision of the anachronisms of past attitudes or aesthetic devices:

From the Victorian ethos surrounding an illegitimate birth in D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) to the anti-marijuana hysterics of *Reefer Madness* (1936) to Dorothy Malone's nymphomania in Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957), what represents one era's supreme scandal can strike a future generation's funny bone. (1994: 143)

It is nonetheless ironic that gay audiences should take such pleasure in films that so repeatedly celebrate heterosexual union and so consistently deny the existence of gay desire at all. Jane Shattuc suggests that this is due to two factors:

Gays not only identified with the marginality of the melodramatic form as a 'castrated culture', they displaced their sexual identities onto the melodrama's heroine as a victim of patriarchal discourses on sexuality. (1995: 101)

So, for Shattuc at least, melodrama is not just the object of camp appreciation for gay men due to its excesses and outmoded representations of gender roles, it is also of interest to gay men because of its lowly status as a form of representation aimed (as is often argued) at women primarily and finally because the female heroines of such films provide a figure of identification for gay men, a group who are often denied any representation in cinema.

Klinger notes that whilst camp has traditionally been associated with the gay subculture, within a more media literate, contemporary culture, camp has become available as a reading strategy to a much wider audience. The pleasures of camp therefore are no longer confined to gay audiences but can be accessed by the general public. Klinger refers to this phenomenon as 'mass camp' epitomised by the fashion for parodic or ironically self-reflexive humour in television and cinema more generally. Camp however still has strong associations with gay men and gay culture and is perhaps the most evident expression of a gay sensibility just as melodrama, a dramatic mode that engages with intense emotional and dramatic conflict still attracts the interest of gay audiences and increasingly over the past thirty years has become a form of expression that has interested a generation of gay filmmakers in a variety of ways.

Gay cinema and the gay auteur

Gay cinema is far too broad a subject to summarise satisfactorily here, and a more detailed exploration of the social and cultural history and significances can be found in Richard Dyer's *Now You See It* (1990), which charts the emergence of gay and lesbian cinema in underground cinema and elsewhere. It is nonetheless true to say that the gay affinity with melodrama as an expressive code manifests itself in many examples of gay and lesbian cinema. From the theatricality and emotional crescendos of the cinematic adaptation of Harvey Fierstein's play *The Torchsong Trilogy* (1988), through a succession of films dealing with the shattering consequences of the AIDS crisis, such as *Longtime Companion* (Norman Rene, 1990) and *Savage Nights* (Cyril Collard, 1992), to the affecting, true-life story of Teena

Brandon, *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Pierce, 1999), gay cinema frequently deals with crises, dilemmas and the effects of social prejudice and in order to address difficult or controversial themes has often resorted to the rhetoric of melodrama.

There are also several examples of gay directors who have adopted the Film Studies designation of the family melodrama for their own uses. Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes, discussed in previous chapters, both openly gay and both leading figures in the New German Cinema and the New Queer Cinema respectively, have drawn on the Sirkian melodrama in the course of their careers. In Fassbinder's case, Sirkian techniques are used to create subversive critiques of attitudes towards a range of issues from racism, social prejudice, bourgeois ideology and contemporary German society and in Haynes' work to explore gay sexuality, New Age religion, and contemporary suburban America. The gay French filmmaker Francois Ozon has also used the stylistic devices of the Hollywood melodrama in *8 Women* (2001), the emotional address and distancing devices of Sirk in *Under the Sand* (2000), as well as directing his own cinematic version of Fassbinder's play *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* (2000), dealing with the complexities and power dynamics in relationships both gay and straight.

An even more explicit example is offered by the work of John Waters. Famed for his low-budget cinema and deployment of a kitsch aesthetic, Waters' cinema is imbued with a vividly camp humour that over the years has been diluted to some degree to appeal to a wider mainstream audience. From the outset of his career in the late 1960s, Waters' films positioned themselves in an unusual narrative terrain, somewhere between the 1950s melodrama, social problem film and exploitation movie. The stylistic excesses, contrived narratives and hysterical performances of the melodrama, however, were a particular source of inspiration. In his early (and most notorious) films, Waters repeatedly used a small group of performers, often friends, and consistently cast the drag star, Divine, in a leading role, often playing the victimised heroine roles associated with the woman's film. In *Polyester* (1981) for example, Waters' directly references the Sirkian melodrama, combining narrative themes from both *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*. In the film, Divine plays Francine Fishpaw, a suburban housewife, trapped in a loveless marriage to a local pornographer with two delinquent children (a drug addict, footballer son – the notorious Baltimore foot stomper – and a nymphomaniac daughter) and a money-crazed duplicitous mother. Francine bears the

brunt of the communities' rage with her disreputable family. Francine falls in love with a younger man, Todd Tomorrow (played by 1950s star Tab Hunter) who offers her the prospect of happiness and an escape from her stifling and miserable existence. Sadly Francine discovers, too late, that Todd is, in fact, a chancer, hired to steal the Fishpaw fortune and run away with her mother. In a further acknowledgement of the gimmicks of 1950s cinema, *Polyester* was originally screened with the distribution of scratch and sniff cards to be used at key moments in the film where Francine's highly attuned sense of smell is a key narrative device. Similarly, in *Female Trouble* (1975) Divine plays Dawn Davenport, a young woman who embarks on a life of crime as a direct consequence of her parents failing to provide her with her longed-for Christmas gift of a pair of cha-cha heels. The unfortunate Ms. Davenport eventually finds herself on death row, echoing the hysterical dénouement of the Susan Hayward vehicle *I Want to Live!* (Robert Wise, 1958). As Richard Dyer notes in his study of lesbian and gay cinema, it is through this reappropriation of the contrivances of 1950s melodrama that a gay sensibility emerges, often through camp parody and in some cases through explicit, though still comedic, expression:

In *Female Trouble*, Edith Massey declares 'The world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life' and it is just this that the films show, but with a gleeful sense of the gross that make them intoxicating. (1990: 170)

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary example of a gay director inspired by melodrama is to be found in the work of the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. Almodóvar's early cinema, such as *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980) or *The Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), was not dissimilar to the work of Waters inasmuch as the films were designed for shock value, featuring a repertory company of friends and with low production values. However, though Waters' cinema has remained resolutely low budget and outside of the mainstream, success has meant that Almodóvar's cinema has become increasingly sophisticated making full use of the potential of widescreen colour photography, elaborate production design, star performers – in fact, the full armoury of devices that Thomas Elsaesser has noted contributed to the expressive range of the 1950s melodrama. Almodóvar is a well-documented fan of the 1950s woman's film and this influence is very evident in his use of female protagonists who are, often, either mothers or middle-aged women.



FIGURE 14 Leo's mother and sister provide colic relief in *The Flower of My Secret*

These characters often appear to be points of identification for Almodóvar himself. In *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) for example, Leo (Marissa Peredes) is a lonely author of romantic fiction who begins to realise that the romantic dreams that populate her successful novels are illusions. Throughout the film, material is included that points up the connection with Leo and Almodóvar himself. For example, Leo discards one of her manuscripts which is later sold to Bigas Lunas (another famed Spanish director) who we are told has developed it into a screenplay, a sly suggestion perhaps that material that Almodóvar would reject is the best that Lunas can hope for. Later in the film Leo returns with her mother to the small town of Extremadura, the town where we are told she was born and also Almodóvar's home town.

Like the cinema of Fassbinder and Waters, Almodóvar's films include relatively few gay characters, and the protagonists, with the exception of those in *The Law of Desire* (1987), are almost always heterosexual. The gay sensibility in his films is expressed through narrative twists and turns that confound our conventional expectations of heterosexual romance, the inclusion of characters whose sexuality is ambiguous or whose sexual identity or gender identities are in flux. There are many examples here; the transsexual Tina in *The Law of Desire*, the revelation that Manuela's lover, the father of her child is now a transsexual and Huma Rojo's lesbianism

in *All About My Mother* (1999), the sadomasochistic relationship in *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1990), the sexual ambiguity of Benigno in *Talk to Her* (2002) and Angel in *Matador* (1985). The recurrence of these characters creates a sense of a world in which preconceptions of 'normal' sexual behaviour are constantly questioned and undermined.

The contemporary interest in the narrative and stylistic strategies of the films that the standard Film Studies account has designated as melodrama points to a final irony in discussion around melodrama as either a genre, style or sensibility; irony and paradox, of course, being characteristic of melodrama as a means of expression. Just as Film Studies academics have seemingly reached a point at which melodrama is no longer the focus of heated debate that it was in the 1970s and 1980s, and have seemingly also reached something of an impasse in terms of either establishing what melodrama is and what its function or significance is, so filmmakers, many of them emerging from film schools and academic backgrounds where they would have been introduced to many of the academic debates on the subject, have once again alighted on and found a renewed interest in the family melodrama and the woman's film, identified as genres through the standardised Film Studies account. Gay filmmakers like Fassbinder, Waters, Almodóvar, Haynes and Ozon as we have seen, have been especially drawn to melodrama as a form. This is doubly ironic, given that the 1950s Hollywood melodrama, as identified through Film Studies, is a particular type of cinema that assiduously and consistently excluded the possibility of either homosexuality or gay desire as a narrative focus. In fact, homosexuality in the 1950s melodrama becomes perhaps the most conspicuously absent of discourses of sexuality, in a cinema that as Klinger has observed repeatedly addressed 'adult' themes. It seems odd then that gay filmmakers at the end of the twentieth century should so frequently recourse to what might be seen as a rather anachronistic dramatic or stylistic register. One explanation for this paradoxical choice might be the popular contemporary taste for the self-reflexive and ironic, epitomised by Klinger's notion of 'mass camp': melodramatic, 'over the top' narratives and stylistic techniques draw attention in a parodic sense to the artificial construction of gender roles and the norms of heterosexual romance. Another explanation might be that openly gay filmmakers entering the mainstream of culture have to use a recognisable, if anachronistic, rhetoric to situate gay desire because wider heterosexual culture has neither a visual or emotional language to adequately articulate gay desire, existing as it still does outside of societal norms. It might also be as Jane

Shattuc argues that melodrama's lowly status within wider discourses around culture means that it is particularly well suited to gay reappropriation either through camp humour or as a vehicle for the expression of a gay sensibility. Whatever the answer to this question may be it indicates that far from being a redundant mode of expression, melodrama still has the power to move audiences through its ability to convey charged emotional states and moral dilemmas. Melodrama's ability to speak louder, and more eloquently, than words is perhaps the true reason why it remains relevant to critics, filmmakers and audiences alike.

CONCLUSION: IT ALWAYS ENDS IN TEARS

One important thing to emerge from this book is the impact the director Douglas Sirk has had on generations of filmmakers and film scholars. We have seen how the Film Studies debate on melodrama was stimulated (in part, at least) by a reappraisal of Sirk's work and that the initial discussions were concentrated on a relatively small number of his films produced at Universal Studios during the 1950s. These formed the basis of the 'Hollywood family melodrama' as defined by film scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey, Paul Willeman, Fred Camper, Chuck Kleinhans and Thomas Schatz. However, as we have also seen, this was merely the starting point for the study of melodrama. Increasingly the debate has drawn on a wider and much more diverse canon, to the extent that by the 1990s it was being argued that melodrama includes male action movies as much as 'woman's weepies' and domestic dramas. By this time, melodrama was understood to be (as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams argue) the most pervasive mode of American cinema rather than merely a particular branch of it.

The revision of melodrama within Film Studies that took place from the mid-1980s onwards has extended its scope beyond genre to encompass many (indeed most) genres. Nevertheless, it is clear that a certain conception of melodrama as a more narrowly defined category of cinema (that is, a genre or a small number of closely related genres) still persists within the spheres of film education, film journalism and in the film industry, even within society more generally. The account of melodrama that emerged within Film Studies during the 1970s and early 1980s has established itself firmly within the critical and cultural consciousness.

Consequently there is a widespread presumption that 'melodrama' refers to a set of films that deal with highly-charged emotional issues, characterised by an extravagantly dramatic register and an overtly emotional form of address. In the popular mind, the 1950s films of Douglas Sirk remain the epitomé of this style of cinema. Therefore, his style has been the most emulated, parodied and quoted by successive generations of filmmakers in Hollywood and Europe. It has also inspired and found favour with generations of film students, including ourselves. As university students, we both encountered Sirk's 1950s productions on our film courses. Our teachers valued them and presented them to us as classic examples of Hollywood melodrama. They had a powerful effect upon our hearts and minds, stimulating an abiding fascination that has never diminished and provoked our continued exploration of this area of film in terms of research and teaching. Years later we both find that our university students respond enthusiastically to these same films, consistently choosing them as their examples of classic Hollywood melodrama, producing detailed (and often loving) analyses. It is almost unthinkable that a film course, festival or book on melodrama would not include *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind* or *Imitation of Life*. We certainly could not have imagined writing this book without reference to them, nor had we any doubt that the cover should be a still from one of these movies.

Yet we also understand that Sirk's 1950s Hollywood films are not the be all and end all of melodrama and that good and convincing arguments have been made for why we should look further afield to investigate the operations and effects of melodramatic cinema. As we have described in this book, the debate on melodrama may have begun with a critical engagement with Sirk's films but it very swiftly moved into a larger arena. As the notion of the 'Hollywood family melodrama' was being established, the films of Sirk's contemporaries were included. At the same time, the melodramatic field was traced back to the great silent features of the 1920s and to the films of the 1930s and 1940s, initially associated with Hollywood's films for women but then absorbing films of action, chiefly film noir and crime thrillers but also westerns. Finally, in more recent years, there has been an even more radical expansion of this canon to incorporate the work of Hollywood directors such as Stephen Spielberg. At the same time, the study of melodrama has moved beyond Hollywood (even North America), to include not only British cinema but also the commercial Hindi cinema ('Bollywood'), Chinese cinema and even post-war European art cinema (see the filmography for further details).

We recognise, however, that the dramatic expansion of what is understood as melodrama (shifting from genre to more fluid forms such as style, mode, rhetoric, aesthetic, sensibility) makes this a potentially confusing area of film scholarship. Nevertheless, we also recognise that this has the potential to make melodrama more relevant as a critical tool. Students working in almost every aspect of film are likely to encounter the rhetoric of melodrama operating to greater or lesser extent. This could be in relation to a musical (Hollywood or Bollywood), a western (Hollywood or Spaghetti), in relation to a romantic comedy or a British heritage film. Some scholars and some students of film will embrace this opportunity to rethink established generic categories and investigate the deeper structural levels of films that exist across virtually all genres. In such instances, the expanded notion of melodrama as a mode will be used to examine a more heterogeneous group of films in relation to each other. Others though may continue to cling on to a more established notion of melodrama as a genre or cluster of closely related genres and sub-genres.

Melodrama has always provoked strong emotions, not just from audiences but also from film scholars and critics. We have seen how highly charged the debate on melodrama has been within Film Studies. This has entailed an initial conflict between *mise-en-scène* critics (such as Thomas Elsaesser and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith) and feminist film critics (including Laura Mulvey, Christine Gledhill and Mary Ann Doane) and a later conflict between genre critics (namely, Steve Neale and Rick Altman). No doubt melodrama will remain a contested area of Film Studies, providing an ever-expanding arena in which these battles can be fought out. As film students, we are all able to take up a position within this arena, to take sides or, alternatively, to attempt to arbitrate between the warring factions. Remembering that the tendency within melodrama is towards polarised conflict, if we embark upon this task as students of film, we should steel ourselves to face the sound and fury of our antagonists. Moreover, we should know from the outset that we are likely to fall victim to misunderstanding, even misrepresentation: that it could be a long time before the truth and value our position is publicly recognised and that, in the meantime, many tears will have to be shed. In the end, we may not get all we desire out of such a project but we may at least get something. So, to put it more melodramatically (as Bette Davis does at the end of *Now, Voyager*), 'don't let's ask for the moon, we have the stars!'