

Blossoms's fantasies of rape and incest within the patriarchal family, and the perverse – ideological – pleasures of such fantasies for female audiences.

Part Four: What do Women Want? focuses debates in feminist textual analysis about how to read the woman's film and its female representations. In this respect it offers a counterpart to Part Two, which approaches texts through their social and discursive contexts. A central question, clarified in Annette Kuhn's concluding essay, is the relation between the female spectator as a set of textual positions and the social audience constructed by gender, class and race. At issue is the cine-psychoanalytic model of spectatorship which, if it appears to account for male pleasure in the fetishised or voyeuristically objectivised figure of the woman, does not fit the female audience's 'recognition' so neatly. Mary Ann Doane uses psychoanalysis to expose the patriarchal workings of classic narrative, arguing that, in the woman's film, which cannot simply reproduce the heroine as patriarchal fantasy, narrative is forced into a series of convoluted strategies to deny the figure autonomy. Drawing on feminist revisions of psychoanalysis, Linda Williams and Tania Modleski offer alternative constructions of the woman's film – Williams arguing of *Stella Dallas* the different subjectivities and spectatorial positions open to the female audience and Modleski, of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the different functions for male and female audiences enacted by melodrama's embodiment of the 'repressed feminine'.

These essays, chosen for their distinctive development of earlier positions or for their introduction of new directions, do not cohere into a linear or consistent argument about melodrama and the woman's film. Rather they both overlap and diverge, their ideas bouncing off one another to open the field to further pleasures of investigation.

The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation

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I Melodrama and Cinema: The Critical Problem

The initial success of romantic tearjerkers reflected their collective capacity to stroke the emotional sensibilities of suburban housewives, but recent analysts suggest that the 50s melodramas are actually among the most socially self-conscious and covertly 'anti-American' films ever produced by the Hollywood studios.

Thomas Schatz, 1981, pp. 224–5

FROM the turn of the century through to the 60s melodrama had been conceived in predominantly pejorative terms. As drama it represented debased or failed tragedy, demarcating an empty period in nineteenth-century dramatic history; in fiction it constituted a fall from the seriousness and maturity of the realist novel, relegating authors such as Dickens and Hardy to the second rank. In this respect melodrama was at the beginning of the century constituted as the anti-value for a critical field in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of 'high' cultural value, needing protection from mass, 'melodramatic' entertainment.

Melodrama and Film Criticism

It was partly its association with melodrama that inhibited the acceptance of cinema as a serious object of study. In literary criticism it was not until the 60s, with the establishment of theatre studies and a growing concern with the history of theatricality and performance¹ that melodrama received any serious attention. Paradoxically, however, while literary criticism sought to recover melodrama as popular and ephemeral form (Booth, 1965; Rahill, 1967; Grimstead, 1968) film criticism was concerned to demonstrate the Shakespearean or Mozartian qualities in the oeuvres of Howard Hawks, John Ford or Alfred Hitchcock. Auteurism dominated 60s film studies, subjecting the extravagances of Hollywood *mise en scène* – later to be analysed as the basis of melodramatic rhetoric – to metaphorical interpretation as authorial vision. Popular films were validated not as melodrama but as exemplars of a humanist-realist tradition.

It may seem surprising that the rise of genre criticism at the turn of the 60s

in acknowledgment of cinema's industrial and popular base, while rehabilitating the notion of convention and typing, did little to recover melodrama. However, the generic enterprise was marked by defensiveness. It focused on discrete genres that could clearly be demarcated from each other and went to those genres which could boast already admired auteurs or prestigious connections with national tradition and history – the western or 'classic' gangster film for example (Cook, 1985). Melodrama was at best a fragmented generic category and as a pervasive aesthetic mode broke genre boundaries. In so far as it had a visible generic existence in the family melodrama and its lowly companion, the woman's film, melodrama could offer neither the thematic and evolutionary coherence exhibited by, say, the western, nor sufficient cultural prestige to appeal to the cognoscenti – condemned as it was by association with a mass and, above all female, audience.

When melodrama finally came into critical view it was in the context of an entirely different debate, when at the end of the 60s, Anglo-Saxon film criticism opened up to French structuralist and neo-Marxist aesthetics, dramatically reconstituting the critical field. In particular the relation between 'art' and 'popular culture' was reconceived. The efforts of the 60s to extend the values of a humanist-realist tradition to Hollywood were critiqued as misconceived liberalism, which ignored capitalist commodity production of both high and mass culture and the intimate connection between signification and ideological reproduction. The aesthetic value of realism was reversed in arguments about its bourgeois underpinnings, auteurism was critiqued for its ideological naïveté and a nascent genre criticism stagnated before melodrama had become an issue.

What allowed melodrama to emerge with full force into this reconstituted critical field was a new emphasis on the operation and ideological effectivity of aesthetic form. The *mise en scène* criticism of the 60s had prepared the way, particularly in certain French variants which had valued stylistic flamboyance for an aesthetic significance of its own, not needing thematic justification². A convergence now occurred between this concern, which had fostered a Franco-American strand of formalist or 'pop-art' appreciation of Hollywood style, and a newly militant ideological criticism that looked to formal analysis in order to assess the complicity or subversiveness of a work. Whereas the realist-humanist tradition had privileged aesthetic coherence as the embodiment of authorial vision, the neo-Marxist perspective looked to stylistic 'excess' and narrative disjuncture for their 'exposure' of contradictions between a mainstream film's aesthetic and ideological programmes. Formal contradiction became a new source of critical value because it allowed apparently ideologically complicit films to be read 'against the grain' for their covert critique of the represented status quo.³

melodrama's hidden critical subagenda?

Enter Douglas Sirk

Many established Hollywood auteurs and genre practitioners were revalued according to this perspective, but some new ones came into view. Significant for melodrama was neo-Marxist reappraisal of the films of Douglas Sirk. Already subject to a camp following, Sirk was now constructed as a Brechtian director, who, constrained by the Hollywood studio system, had lighted on a popular genre – melodrama and with it the woman's film – for the access it gave to the neuralgic centre of Eisenhower's America, which through a range of 'distanciation' devices he exposed in a formal and ironic critique. In the arguments of Paul Willemsen (1971) and Jon Halliday and Sirk (1971) melodrama was not itself the object of analysis, but the use Sirk made of it to disclose the distortions and contradictions of bourgeois – or petit bourgeois – ideology. According to Halliday and Willemsen, Sirk's formation as a left-wing intellectual and theatre director in 30s Weimar Germany and his experience making film melodramas at UFA when the Nazis came to power gave him particular understanding of the contradictions hidden in the formal and ideological operations of melodrama. And in America, the grossness and vulgarity of the cliché-ridden plots handed him by the studios made the Hollywood genre particularly susceptible to formal criticism through parody and stylistic excess.

↳ Willemsen -
↳ Herbert and divergence here

From Sirk to Melodrama

Although the goal of this approach was to demonstrate a 'critical' dimension in Sirk's Hollywood films, it also drew attention to and validated pleasures less ideologically pure. For there occurred a slippage of the 'subversion' argument from its attachment to Sirk as 'author' to melodrama itself. The visibility of Sirk in the early 70s, and the centrality of his high bourgeois family melodramas to a growing concern with ideology, had the effect of reorganising the cinematic field of authorial *mise en scène*. Through discovery of Sirk, a genre came into view. The works of directors, whose exploitation of colour, widescreen, camera movement, had previously been valued for humanist-realist thematics, were now seen as overwrought examples of the bourgeois family melodrama. Stylistic excess had no longer to be defended or justified as the correlative of a coherent vision. It became a positive value, passing from an authorial to a generic trademark and under this rubric the films of Minnelli, Ray, Ophuls, Cukor and Kazan came to stand alongside Sirk to mark the parameters of a new critical field. The problem that followed was precisely what kind of field melodrama offered – genre? style? mode? ideology?

The critical constitution of melodrama in the 70s was substantially determined by larger movements within film theory itself. Thomas Elsaesser's 'Tales of Sound and Fury' (1972) was the earliest, and remains the most comprehensive, account of film melodrama, attempting to come to terms not

Elsaesser
only with the melodramatic nature of Hollywood aesthetics, but with the place of cinema in the total field of European melodramatic forms. Perhaps because arriving early in the decade, it is also a transitional piece, poised between the auteurist and *mise en scène* approaches of the 60s and the ideological concerns of the 70s: its emphasis is formal, posing melodrama as 'a problem in style and articulation' (below, p. 43). However, the historical reach of the essay takes *mise en scène* analysis beyond a residual auteurism, to suggest the constitution of American cinema in a melodramatic tradition and the melodramatic basis of Hollywood's aesthetic, emotional and cognitive effects.

70s Neo-Marxism – Classic Realist/Narrative Texts

That the issue of melodrama as a formative cinematic mode was not pursued and that Elsaesser's seminal essay has waited more than ten years before appearing in three anthologies almost simultaneously, is, perhaps, accounted for by the development of post-structural and cine-psychoanalytic approaches to ideology and aesthetics in the mid-70s. To have pursued Elsaesser's line of investigation would have meant rethinking, rather than dismissing, the 'great tradition' of humanist realism which the *mise en scène* debates of the 60s inherited from literary criticism. In particular it would have meant rethinking both realism and the nineteenth-century novel in their relationship with melodrama.⁴ However, structuralist neo-Marxism, in critiquing the notion of 'popular art', identified 'realism' as the anti-value, in which could be exposed at once literary critical tradition, bourgeois ideology and the manipulations of the capitalist culture industries. Paradoxically, then, neo-Marxist film criticism took the extension of the 'great tradition' to cinema at face value and condemned Hollywood for its perpetuation of the practices of the nineteenth-century – realist – novel. From this, now pejorative, alignment rose the 'classic realist text' as the model which linked the novel, Hollywood films and television programmes.

Classic realist texts, it was argued, reproduce bourgeois ideology because they implicate the spectator in a single point of view onto a coherent, hierarchically ordered representation of the world, in which social contradictions are concealed and ultimately resolved through mechanisms of displacement and substitution. In this process the spectator is 'interpellated' as the 'individual subject' of bourgeois ideology.⁵ Clarification of the Lacanian psychoanalytic underpinnings of these arguments in the mid-70s produced a second line of attack on mainstream cinematic forms: the critique of the patriarchal subject. This Oedipal construct links the child's perception of sexual difference as the woman's castration or 'lack' with the acquisition of language and gendered identity. Repressing this traumatic knowledge, the (male) child achieves in the same process mastery of the symbolic codes of language and unified, stable identity. The price is 'femininity', the sign of difference, recalling counterva-

lent linguistic and psychic realities – the unbridgeable gap between words and meanings, between 'I' and self, which, operating through the unconscious, subtend illusions of the subject's command of language and its world. The 'classic narrative text', refining the earlier realist model, describes patriarchy's obsessive return to this founding scenario, analysing in the processes of narrative disruption and resolution, and in textual play round the figure of 'woman', mechanisms of identification which evoke the desire and at the same time resecure the homogeneous identity of a patriarchal subject.⁶

The subversive construction of Sirk and the dominance of the classic realist/narrative text from the mid-70s on influenced subsequent approaches to film melodrama. A central concern was to establish the nature of melodrama's radical potential. The critique of realism meant anti-realist excess came to be highly valued, while cine-psychoanalysis found in 50s family melodrama, which drew on the popularisation of Freudian ideas, self-consciously Oedipal screenplays. It remained a question, however, whether a Sirkian capability could be legitimately attributed to melodrama as a whole, or, whether Sirk constituted a special case in relation to other 50s melodramas.⁷

Psychoanalysis and Melodrama

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's intervention (1977) drew the anti-realist and psychoanalytic strands together. Pointing out the historical relation of realism and melodrama and drawing on the Freudian concept of 'conversion hysteria', his generic rather than authorial analysis rearticulated melodrama's disruptive relation to the classic realist/narrative text. As a bourgeois form, melodrama is constrained by the same conditions of verisimilitude as realism. If the family melodrama's speciality is generational and gender conflict, verisimilitude demands that the central issues of sexual difference and identity be 'realistically' presented. But these are precisely the issues realism is designed to repress. Hence the syphoning of unrepresentable material into the excessive *mise en scène* which makes a work melodramatic. From this perspective the radical potential of melodrama lies less in a Sirkian critique of bourgeois life style and values than in the possibility that the 'real' conditions of psychic and sexual identity might – as symptoms of a 'hysterical text' – press too close to the surface and break the reassuring unity of classic realist narrative. 'Ideological failure', built into the melodramatic programme, results in the breakdown of realism.

While this generic approach disposed of the 'Sirk factor', a second problem emerges with the construction of the genre itself on the basis of the 50s family melodrama – a profile soon to become sufficiently solidified to warrant a chapter in Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* (1981). Not only did this perspective inhibit exploration of melodrama's affiliations across a range of melodramatic cycles of earlier and later decades, it obscured the relation between family melodrama and the woman's film – a major, if disdained,

production category of the 30s and 40s, which the former happily pillaged in a series of remakes and adaptations. This became a crucial question for feminist consideration of the form.

Melodrama and the Woman's Film

Feminist writing about melodrama and the woman's film has confronted a paradox. The crux of the classic realist/narrative text – the function of the female figure as a representation both of the threat of castration and ultimate goal of desire – produces a contradictory scenario in which 'woman' is subjected alternately to voyeuristic punishment or fetishistic idealisation. From this stems the feminist argument that female figures in mainstream cinema do not represent women, but the needs of the patriarchal psyche.⁸

However, where film theory saw in melodrama's exposure of masculinity's contradictions a threat to the unity of the (patriarchal) realist/narrative text, feminists found a genre distinguished by the large space it opened to female protagonists, the domestic sphere and socially mandated 'feminine' concerns. The fact that the home and personal relationships provide common ground to the family melodrama and woman's film has given substance to the assumption that the latter constitutes a sub-set of melodrama, tailored specifically for female audiences. However, subversive construction of melodrama begs the question whether 'subversion' works in the same way for both forms.

Laura Mulvey's essay on Sirk and melodrama (1977/8) examined this question in terms of the intersection of gender with genre. Noting the intense recognition felt by many women of the emotional and ideological dilemmas played out in Sirk's woman's films, she questioned the construction of melodrama as a form which exposes *hidden* contradiction. Pointing out that ideology is always and necessarily contradictory, Mulvey argued that patriarchal culture has consistently turned to domestic conflict as a safety valve for social problems arising from the over-valuation of masculinity. In this respect a similar function is performed by Greek tragedy and Victorian melodrama. By extension, the rise of the 50s family melodrama out of remakes of 30s women's pictures could equally be understood as attempting reconstruction of heterosexual relations and gender roles in a post-war rapprochement with the 'feminine'.

However, if contradictions arising from the sexual and social positioning of men and women in relation to each other are hidden from the male in the accommodations Western culture makes to the symbolic functioning of masculinity – for example the western or gangster film with their codes of action, honour, success and failure – they are part of the daily lived experience of the female audience, who have little need to practise subversive reading in order to perceive them. From this position Mulvey proposed the influential distinction between male and female point-of-view melodrama, demarcating the

'tragically' inclined family melodramas of Minnelli and Sirk from Sirk's work in the more humble sphere of the woman's film, centring on female protagonists.

Re-thinking Anti-realism

By drawing attention to the differentially gendered evaluations of melodrama and the woman's film and to the contradiction between participant recognition and ironic distancing in Sirk, Mulvey's argument invites reconsideration of the subversive construction of Sirkian irony.⁹ For if melodrama can be a radically 'critical' form, what then is being critiqued and for whom? In Brechtian interpretation of Sirkian strategies the object of parody is bourgeois wish-fulfilment, an identification supported by the high production values of 50s family melodrama which focused on upper-middle-class homes crammed with lavish furnishings and consumer goods, celebrating the life-style of a class 'basking complacently under Eisenhower, while already disintegrating from within' (Halliday, 1971, p. 10). This assumes not only that particular 'fantasies' belong to particular classes, but that a film's fantasy is a reflection of its audience's fantasies:

... the world the audience wants to see (an exotic world of crime, wealth, corruption, passion, etc.) is a distorted projection of the audience's own fantasies to which Sirk applies a correcting device, mirroring these very distortions. (Willemsen, 1972/3, p. 130)

However, while this assumption might be justified in the case of Brecht's intervention into the bourgeois theatre of Weimar Germany (from which the argument is extrapolated), its application to Sirk's position in Hollywood sidesteps the question of the mass audience and its differential composition by class, gender, race, age. If we grant the appeal of 50s family melodrama to the upwardly mobile ambitions of Hollywood's petit bourgeois or working-class audiences, the question still remains how the material goods and marital scenarios supposedly fantasised by one class function in the fantasy of another class.

Irony and parody operate between two secure points: the position which we who perceive the irony occupy and that which, held at a distance, is critiqued. The 'radical readings' of the 70s belonged to the critics, made at the expense of the naïve involvement of American 'popular' audiences in the 1950s.

The problematic identification of melodrama with bourgeois fantasy was compounded by another commonsense identification of melodrama with women. This is evident in accounts of Sirk's 'mastery' of what would otherwise be dismissed as Hollywood's lowliest form, the woman's weepie.

In *Imitation of Life* Sirk is fighting – and transcending – the universe of Fannie Hurst and Ross Hunter (not to mention Lana Turner, John Gavin, and Sandra Dee) . . . On the surface, *Heaven* is a standard women's magazine weepie – mawkish, mindless, and reactionary. Yet just beneath the surface it is a tough attack on the moralism of petit bourgeois America. (Jon Halliday, 1971, pp. 9–10)

An intelligent director confronting the world of Fannie Hurst or of Lloyd C. Douglas, confronts not only banality but an even more virulent kind of falsity; the self-deceptions and consoling lies about life and human character that the tearjerking mode exists to supply us with. (James Harvey, 1977/8, p. 54)

The designation of the family as a bourgeois institution, the perceived materialisation of bourgeois ideology in these films in a sphere conventionally assigned to women – the home, family relations, domestic trivia, consumption, fantasy and romance, sentiment – all imply equivalence between the 'feminine' and bourgeois ideology. The two audiences for Sirkian irony can be further specified: one which is implicated, identifies and weeps, and one which, seeing through such involvement, distances itself. The fact that, across all classes, the first is likely to be female and the other male was not remarked on. Nor was the recourse of 50s family melodrama to the 30s woman's film as a source of patriarchal renewal investigated. To take a well known example, Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*: John Stahl's version (1934), however myopic it may be on the issue of race, is thoroughly a woman's film, suppressing the male role to the margins in the interests of an all female household. Sirk's remake turns the story into a problem of the absent husband and father and obtains his critique of white values at the cost of turning poor, struggling Lana Turner into a 'bad mother' – a judgmental temptation few Sirkian commentators have been able to resist, despite the possibility within the logic of the 'Sirkian system' for ironically exposing ideologies of motherhood. Ironic value in this context has an implicitly misogynist edge.

Melodrama and the History of Cinema

The constitution of melodrama as family melodrama and as a genre that 'disrupts' the classic realist/narrative text not only obscured its relation to the woman's film, but made it difficult to pursue its connections with the nineteenth-century melodramatic forms which, it has been suggested, constitute a founding tradition of Hollywood as a whole. What, for instance, is the justification confining melodramatic categorisation to films about domestic situations and 'feminine' conditions? Why are the shoot-out, the lone trek through the wilderness, the rituals of horse and gun, any less excessive

than a family conflict about – taking an example from Minnelli's *The Cobweb* – curtains destined for a psycho-therapeutic clinic? But 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?¹⁰

A different Marxist tradition, which should be acknowledged, reverses the aesthetic values adopted by the post-structural ideological project. For example, Raymond Williams's discussion of melodrama's defeat of English naturalism (1977), Charles Eckert's analysis of *Marked Woman* (1973/4) and Chuck Kleinhans's account of family melodrama (1978), all deploy the concept of displacement to suggest melodrama's mystifying resolution of 'real' social conflicts – which realism would seek to lay bare – at the surrogate level of family and personal relations. What is valued as critical irony by the anti-realist school represents merely an evasive ambivalence, seeking to accommodate all possible audiences. This reversal of aesthetic/ideological value, however, is no more satisfactory a mode of categorisation, for it suggests that the 'real' lies in a set of socio-economic relations outside the domestic and personal sphere, to which issues of sexual relations, of fantasy and desire are secondary.

A major issue, then, in the exploration of melodrama is the relationship and difference between melodrama and realism. Is one the ideological undoing of the other, or do they constitute different projects?

Some Questions about Melodrama

In this survey of the development of melodrama criticism in the 70s, several points of tension have surfaced. The first is the identification of melodrama with bourgeois ideology as opposed to its sub-cultural use, particularly by women. A second concerns the relation of melodrama as either a founding mode of Hollywood cinema, or a particular, if mobile and fragmentary, genre, specialising in heterosexual and family relations. A fourth tension emerges around gender, as concerns critical value, genre (the relation of the woman's film to melodrama) and representation (where melodrama's investment in 'woman' as patriarchal symbol conflicts with the unusual space it offers to female protagonists and women's concerns). Finally, melodrama raises issues of pleasure, fantasy, ideology and their role in 'popular' culture.

These are areas which cannot be examined within the parameters of film studies alone because they pose pressing questions of a wider history of cultural institutions. Nor can they be covered within the scope of an introductory piece like this. But in what follows, drawing on a variety of writings in theatrical history, literary and film criticism, I attempt to sketch a contextual framework in which such questions can be pursued.

II Historicising Melodrama

When we look at the emergence of the modern melodrama about 250 years ago ... everyone can clearly understand its class nature as drama of and for a specific class poised against another class.

Chuck Kleinhans, 1978, p. 40

Melodrama always sides with the powerless.

Martha Vicinus, 1981, p. 130

Melodrama is a notoriously bourgeois aesthetic.

Wylie Sypher, 1965, p. 267

Melodrama itself was essentially entertainment for the industrial working class ... its basic energy was proletarian.

Michael Booth, 1965, p. 52

Melodrama as echo of the historically voiceless ...

David Grimstead, 1971, p. 80

Like the novel, melodrama is frequently associated with the bourgeoisie – in the eighteenth century a European bourgeoisie, struggling for ascendancy over a decadent aristocracy, or, two hundred years later, a bourgeoisie ‘decaying from within’ in Eisenhower’s America. However, between these two periods of bourgeois ‘crisis’ lies the intervening generalisation of ‘crisis’ and ‘mode’ across social classes and cultural forms which made melodrama both a central nineteenth-century paradigm and a formative influence in twentieth-century mass culture. A crucial factor in these shifts is the role played by emergent working-class audiences and ‘popular’ tradition in the early formation of melodrama.

Melodrama and Class Struggle

The conditions for the emergence of melodrama, many histories suggest, were created when, during the eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie took power from the aristocracy by assimilation or revolution and manoeuvred for cultural hegemony in the name of ‘ordinary citizens’. Although the common alignment of melodrama with the theatre and realism with the novel is misleading, nevertheless the theatre constituted an important site of contestation in this struggle, the institutional and aesthetic forms of which would be central to the development of melodrama.

In eighteenth-century England and France, royal patents granted to two or three theatres monopoly over the ‘official’ repertoire and rights of censorship over all other forms of ‘illegitimate’ or ‘Minor House’ entertainment. Thus protected, and drawing dramatists from the ranks or associates of their

aristocratic audience, the Patent Theatres were the social centre of the ruling elite and therefore a stake in bourgeois struggle to redefine reality and aesthetic value. For in opposition to aristocratic theatrical monopoly, rapid urban growth, consequent on capitalist expansion, produced broadening audiences drawn from newly emerging middle, lower-middle and proletarian classes. Since the monopoly of the Patent Theatres was vested in the performances of ‘plays’, defined by their use of spoken dialogue, consolidation of an ‘illegitimate’ theatre depended on the entrepreneurial development of former folk and popular entertainment traditions for their capacity to evade official restrictions: dumb show, pantomime, harlequinade, ballets, spectacles, acrobatics, clowning, busking, the exhibition of animals and freaks, and, above all, musical accompaniment and song.

In Paris the entrenchment of the aristocracy, to be removed only by revolution at the end of the century, and the grip of an outworn aristocratic neo-classic tradition over the official repertoire, led to the thriving institutionalisation of alternative entertainments (Rahill, 1967, pp. 16–17, and Brooks, 1976). In England, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie, having gained power earlier in the century by assimilation rather than revolution, perceived these developments as cause of deteriorating ‘dramatic standards’ in the Patent Houses themselves. This judgment, compounded by the growth of political satire, led to the legal codification of former aristocratic restrictive practices in the Licensing Act of 1737, designed to control the minor theatres and police the pleasures of newly emerging ‘popular’ audiences (Loftis, 1963).

Paradoxically these attempts to control a developing theatrical culture drove the ‘illegitimate’ theatre still further into elaboration of spectacular traditions and the consolidation of an alternative dramatic rhetoric, which eventually risked lines of spoken dialogue to clarify increasingly complicated plots. Box-office receipts outweighed the problems of police harassment. In consequence the English Patent Houses, unable to survive on the drawing power of the official repertoire, were forced into competition for the new audiences such entertainments attracted, interlacing the ‘official’ repertoire with ‘box-office pullers’ stolen from the illegitimate theatre.

In France, the Revolution legalised such entertainments, removing all but political aesthetic restriction. For several critics (notably, Peter Brooks, 1976), French post-Revolutionary theatre is central to the codification of melodrama as a distinct theatrical genre. The violent accession of the bourgeoisie, the extreme constraints of an outworn neoclassicism and the oppositional consolidation of a vigorous ‘illegitimate’ popular theatre meant that Revolution and the end of restriction brought a more complete break with aristocratic culture than occurred in England and a more flourishing alternative in the theatrical explosion that followed. However, although French melodrama was distinguished by strong internal coherence and wide international influence, it was not a purely national product. Rather the

institutional and ideological conditions of French theatre at the turn of the century made it a crucible in which a wide range of European fictional and dramatic currents, popular traditions, and an extremist form of bourgeois demand met.¹¹

Forging a Melodramatic Aesthetic: Two Cultural Trajectories

Contradictions between cultural monopoly and economic expansion opened spaces for the insertion and development of popular traditions and laid the institutional basis for the emergence of melodrama out of a convergence between bourgeois and 'popular' cultural trajectories.

Melodrama's bourgeois inheritance Many dramatic histories locate the inception of melodrama in the degeneration of bourgeois tragedy. Raymond Williams' study, *Modern Tragedy* (1966), by historicising the category of tragedy as well as its form, opens up the implications of this perception, suggesting how bourgeois appropriation altered the aesthetics of tragedy in ways that both contributed to melodrama and eventually led to its critical repudiation.

Contrary to common belief, Williams argues, the significance of the Greek tragic hero was not his status as an individual. The term itself indicated membership of a group, not the unique and isolate personality suggested in modern usage. Society in ancient Greece and medieval Europe was organised in visible hierarchies – from the king down to the peasant and upwards to the gods or God. Tragedy turned on actions of momentous social import. If the hero were a king or head of a ruling household, his actions, through a web of hierarchical interconnections, had significance for society at large. The representative role of the tragic hero is demonstrated in the fact that, contrary to modern conceptions, pre-bourgeois tragedy did not end in the death of the hero but 'with the affirmation made possible and informed by the death' (p. 54).

Neoclassicism had made significant inroads into the social representativeness of early tragic forms by appropriating the tragic hero in the image of a ruling minority. Rank now stood not for a network of feudal social and spiritual relations and responsibilities, but a source of aristocratic class style. The tragic action was increasingly internalised as individual error, to which rank conferred tragic value in so far as the hero, conforming to elite codes of decorum, displayed dignified and noble endurance of his fate (p. 26). While the moral dimension of decorum and notions of individual error appealed to the bourgeois sensibility, the investment of tragic value in a person of rank was both meaningless and intolerable to its democratic ideals. Eighteenth-century bourgeois culture abandoned the aristocratic trappings of neoclassic tragedy: 'From Lower Life we draw our Scene's Distress – Let not your Equals move your Pity less' (quoted in Williams, p. 91).

With elimination of the hero's rank, went also the fatalistic emphasis on 'dignified endurance' of fate as an acceptable tragic stance. In its place emerged the notion of 'poetic justice' and a new moral mission for the theatre. Tragedy must demonstrate not only that suffering arises from moral error, but also that happiness rewards steadfast virtue and moral reform. The theatre took on an educative role through the power of example and appeal to the 'sympathetic emotions' of what was understood to be an essentially benevolent human nature. The protestant conscience identified with the heart. A sentimental dramaturgy emerged, demanding a new kind of spectatorial response of recognition and identification with familiar characters in affecting circumstances. Poetic justice was the morality of feeling: 'the tragic catastrophe either moves its spectators to moral recognition and resolution, or can be avoided altogether, by a change of heart' (Williams, p. 31). Sentimentalisation, stress on the individual, appeals to the personal, all supported the shift in the social terrain of bourgeois fiction and drama from feudal and aristocratic hierarchies to the 'democratic' bourgeois family – arena of personal, moral and social conflict, and support of the triad, heroine/villain/hero, which became a dominant dramatic structure from thereon.

However, eighteenth-century sentimental drama failed either to create enduring forms or to command the new audiences congregating in the cities. Nor, though bequeathing a repertoire of character types, plot devices, rhetorical structures, dramatic conflicts drawn from the central image of the family, did it of itself produce melodrama. Despite the stress on the 'sympathetic emotions', argues Wylie Sypher (1965), eighteenth-century culture produced largely 'mental fictions' (p. 260). In Peter Brooks's view (1976), bourgeois sentimental forms lacked 'the heroic dimensions, overt excitement and ... cosmic ambition which melodrama would yield' (p. 83). Frank Rahill (1967) adds 'violence' as another missing element. For these, melodrama would draw on popular traditions brought to a high degree of sophistication in the illegitimate theatre.

Popular traditions Prohibition on spoken dialogue opened the way to the development of earlier traditions in at least three areas of major significance to melodrama. First, if illegitimate entertainments were to become a viable economic and professionalised concern, *spectacle* provided that element which could be most fully developed without running the risk of falling into the forbidden category of the 'play'. This led to increasingly sophisticated productions with elaborate and varied costuming, exotic sets, spectacular enactments and special effects (Rahill, 1967, p. 23). Spectacle in its turn demanded and developed earlier *performance* traditions such as dumb show, pantomime, harlequinade, tumbling, acrobatics and balladry.

Music constituted a third non-verbal dimension of meaning and link to

popular tradition. For, although – apart from the French neoclassic stage – music had always had a place in the theatre (David Mayer, 1981), it was for 'illegitimate' theatre both a legal and aesthetic means of existence. The use of song also permitted the undercover insertion of a verbal element. However, mimed dumb show and pantomime offered other means to this end. According to Peter Brooks (1976) the display of placards with explanatory information was common, as was the unfurling of flags and banners at appropriate moments to reveal written inscriptions. Beyond this, pantomime had evolved a whole repertoire of non-verbal signs or 'visible emblems' such as meteors, rainbows, lightning, spectres, crosses in flames, rising tombs and the like, which would instantly tell the audience the nature of a particular situation, or a character's moral standing (pp. 63–4). Elaborating such traditional techniques, the illegitimate theatre had by the end of the eighteenth century consolidated a sophisticated theatrical *mise en scène*.

The Socio-Cultural Formation of Melodrama

Bourgeois and popular cultural trajectories were brought together by the peculiar social and institutional circumstances of theatrical entertainment from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Under such conditions earlier folk and current 'popular' traditions overlaid, or coalesced with, 'establishment' dramaturgical and fictional structures.

From institutional to aesthetic intertextuality Shifting class formations and the increasingly mixed social composition of the audience (Grimstead, 1968; Douglas Reid, 1981) gave rise to a number of theatrical practices aimed at attracting a wide range of social groups. Programming was lengthy and heterogeneous. For example, at Covent Garden in the early nineteenth century, *Romeo and Juliet* was paired with *Puss in Boots*, and *Hamlet* with *The Miller and His Men*, a popular melodrama (Frank Rahill, 1967, p. 114). Such programming initiated audiences into a range of cultural forms, both 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' and prepared the way for aesthetic transmutation between genres and modes – for a welding of fantasy, spectacle and realism – which would be crucial to the melodramatic aesthetic as a cross-class and cross-cultural form.

Melodrama arose to exploit these new conditions of production, becoming itself a site of generic transmutation and 'intertextuality'. Based on commerce rather than cultural monopoly, melodrama multiplied through translation, adaptation, and, in the absence of copyright laws, piracy. Literary and dramatic classics – including Shakespearean tragedies, popular fiction, Romantic poetry and operatic libretti, newspapers and topical events, police journals and penny dreadfuls, paintings and etchings, popular songs and street ballads all provided material for melodrama (Michael Booth, 1965, pp. 50–1 and 1981; Frank Rahill, 1967, p. 115).

Heterogeneous programming also created conditions for intertextuality in production style and performance mode. Not only might the same company perform melodrama, Shakespearean tragedy, opera, eighteenth-century comedy or fairy-tale plays (Grimstead, 1968, p. 107), but in one evening's entertainment a single actor would perform acrobatic numbers and comic dance routines, sing ballads and double in pantomime, melodrama, or Shakespeare (Louis James, 1981, p. 11). In this context older traditions and new ideas converged at the level of performance. On one hand, many nineteenth-century actors had acquired acrobatic and miming skills through experience in circus or travelling troupes (James, op. cit.). On the other, melodramatic performance modes relate to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century treatises codifying the language of bodily gesture, facial expression and intonation (Peter Brooks, 1976 and James, 1981). These theories were of widespread general interest, passing into the popular Victorian science of phrenology and providing the basis of widely used French and English acting manuals – for instance the Delsarte method. The control over gesture and facial expression which dumbshow and acrobatics taught the actor merged with such theories to produce a precise but versatile body language (see James, 1981; Susan Roberts, 1986).

Music offered another site of coalescence. The dependence of illegitimate theatre on music was not only legal. Apart from the inclusion of popular songs and ballads, music, 'often written and performed with great care ... to clarify the action and enhance the dramatic effect', was integral to Minor House entertainments (Rahill, 1967, p. 24; Mayer, 1981) and led to the emerging genre's appropriation of the French term, 'mélodrame'. In fact this had been coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the early 1770s, to distinguish his '*scène lyrique*', *Pygmalion*, from Italian opera. In the belief that French was 'too harsh a language to be sung', Rousseau experimented with new verbal and musical relations in which – prefiguring melodramatic usage – 'words and music, instead of going together, are heard alternately and where the spoken phrase is ... announced and prepared by the musical phrase' (quoted in James Smith, 1973, p. 1). 'Music-drama' as such had a relatively short life, but the term achieved lasting currency as a designation for melodrama, a form which embedded words in music, song and dance, in a way that imparted a musical dimension to every other register – verbal and visual.

Melodrama as a Nineteenth-Century Paradigm

Despite the pressures of aesthetic restriction, a socially broadening audience, and a heterogeneous repertoire, neither legal enforcement nor the contingencies of programming were alone responsible for the emergence of melodrama as a pervasive aesthetic mode. Other forces operating in nineteenth-century culture brought pressures to bear under which the new aesthetic became a central cultural paradigm.

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The manichean outlook If eighteenth-century sentiment produced only 'mental fictions', by the mid-eighteenth century countervailing tendencies came into play, notably in the rise of gothic fiction in England and the *Sturm und Drang* movement in Germany. Several commentators point to the importance for melodrama of gothic fiction (Booth, 1965; Rahill, 1967; Brooks, 1976). Arguably, in its widespread popularity, bourgeois and popular traditions met on equal terms and to their mutual profit. English gothic fiction, succumbing to Germanic influence and in its turn highly influential in France, reintroduced a metaphysical dimension to moral conflict, facilitating the gradual slide from bourgeois sentiment to the sensation, spectacle and violence of melodrama, from the ancient routines of dumb show, pantomime and balladry to a consolidated melodramatic rhetoric. Moral drama, the conflict of manichean opposites, and spectacle converged. Illegitimate theatrical entertainments such as pantomime drew on the gothic fiction of Mrs Radcliffe and Monk Lewis in what for many constitute the first melodramas. According to Wylie Sypher (1965) melodrama's conflict of polar opposites provided an epistemological and imaginative paradigm across nineteenth-century culture and thought. Darwin, Freud and Marx were all products of the melodramatic imagination.

Melodrama and social change Nineteenth-century society, subject to rapid change consequent on industrialisation, experienced class similarly as polarisation rather than as hierarchical relationship – polarisation dramatised in revolution, the growth of Chartism, trade unionism and Communism. Oppositions in wealth, education and welfare became a highly visible feature of rapidly industrialising and expanding cities, while imperial conquest brought home contrasts between ethnic mores and life-styles.

With the passing of hierarchical social relationships went also the traditional values and ways of life that had given society its cohesion. Because of its multi-valency, this loss was shared by new entrants to the middle class, the emerging working class, the rural labourer and by women across classes (Grimstead, 1971; Vicinus, 1981). Arguably such social extensiveness served to modify the complacency of eighteenth-century sentimental fiction and open up the heroine/villain/hero triad – which heretofore had articulated the triumph of the bourgeois victim over an aristocratic villain – to the pessimistic ironies of folk tradition, with their implication that 'the losers are not always those who deserve it most' (Elsaesser, p. 4; see also Louis James, 1981).

The family, the country and the past Where eighteenth-century sentimental fiction, in rejecting the public arena of aristocratic social relations, had found in the private bourgeois family a compensatory source of moral and social order, the family itself came under increasing social and symbolic pressure in

the nineteenth century. The separation of work and home, consequent on industrialisation and the withdrawal of married middle-class women from production, combined with philanthropic struggles around the employment of working-class women and children in factories, brought the family into new social and emotional configurations (see Grimstead, 1971; Kleinhans, 1978; Vicinus, 1981; Kaplan in this volume).

Despite current association of melodrama with the domestic, it could (and arguably still can – see below, p. 23) be created out of almost any topic. Nevertheless melodrama's invariable deployment of familial values across sub-genres attests to a psychic overdetermination in the conjunction of social and personal, charging the idea of home and family with a symbolic potency. This surfaces in a persistently nostalgic vein. As David Grimstead and Martha Vicinus note, melodrama's challenge lies not in confronting how things are, but rather in asserting how they ought to be. But since it operates within the frameworks of the present social order, melodrama conceives 'the promise of human life' (Grimstead, p. 28) not as a revolutionary future, but rather as a return to a 'golden past': less how things ought to be than how they should have been. The Edenic home and family, centring on the heroine as 'angel in the house' and the rural community of an earlier generation, animate images of past psychic and social well-being as 'moral touchstones' against which the instabilities of capitalist expansion and retraction could be judged and in which both labourer and middle-class citizen could confront the hostilities of the modern world.

Within this nostalgic structure it was possible for melodrama to shift its sympathies from the struggle for bourgeois ascendancy to the victims of its success. 'Melodrama', Martha Vicinus states, 'sides with the powerless', while evil is associated with 'social power and station' (pp. 130, 132). Powerlessness regains moral power in its association with a family or social position that should command protection: that of the child, the daughter or mother, the ageing parent, the labouring poor. Through such 'moral touchstones' the contradictions of capitalism are negotiated: the apparently powerless, who by their persevering endurance win through, defeat the logic of capitalism, for reward comes through 'wholly noncompetitive virtues and interests' (Grimstead, 1971, p. 90). At the same time innocence and villainy construct each other: while the villain is necessary to the production and revelation of innocence, innocence defines the boundaries of the forbidden which the villain breaks. In this way melodrama's affective and epistemological structures were deployed, within the constraints of dominant socio-economic frameworks, to embody the forces and desires set loose by, or resisting, the drives of capitalism.

Nineteenth-century picture stories The energy and ambivalence of the melodramatic imagination found their aesthetic release in an expanding culture of the visible. Eighteenth-century Minor House dependency on spectacle

met with a growing emphasis on the visual across a range of cultural forms, as a generalised shift took place from verbal exposition towards visual demonstration: eventually 'visual proofs ... substituted for dramatic proofs' (Vardac, 1949, p. 96). This was intensified in the nineteenth century by developments in optical science and technology and in the rise of mass consumer markets and visual media. Aside from the toys and spectacles which anticipated cinema, Michael Booth (1981) cites the building of art galleries and museums, the development of lithography and the craze for illustrated editions of the 'classics', the invention of the plate-glass window and electric lighting which introduced store fronts and the shopping arcade as sites of spectacle and consumption, and the architecture of the city itself with its public monuments and mercantile and industrial structures, constituting visual evidence of the spoils of commerce and imperialism. 'The world', he comments, 'was saturated with pictures' (p. 8).

This stress on visual address meant that when theatrical restrictions were lifted (1843 in England, 1789 in France) and spoken dialogue universally permitted, the theatre did not abandon its spectacular practices. Rather, increasingly sophisticated technology led to their elaboration. At the vortex of such diverse pressures, melodrama became a model for the nineteenth-century imaginative enterprise, in which narrative enactment of manichean moral conflict meshed with an aesthetics of the visible. Nicholas Vardac (1949), John Fell (1974), Peter Brooks (1976) and Michael Booth (1981) show how pressure towards visual narrativisation brought painting, the novel and theatre onto the same terrain. While many Victorian genre painters drew on acting manuals and theatrical tableaux for codes of gesture in order to tell pictorial stories of human nature caught in climactic moments (Booth, 1981; Louis James, 1981), theatrical *mise en scène* strove to attain the condition of painting, often deploying artists to execute scenery, or dramatising well known pictures (Booth, 1981). The proscenium arch became a picture frame. Cinema emerged from this common pictorial and narrative impetus: 'what is interesting ... is the very nonuniqueness of the movies' techniques' (John Fell, 1974, p. xii).

Melodrama and the archaeology of the movies If 'theatricality' were part of a melodramatic aesthetic shared across cultural forms, nineteenth-century melodramatic theatre laid institutional and aesthetic foundations from which cinema would draw – specifically: techniques for 'cinematic' narration; a 'studio'-type system of generic production; and a model of circuit distribution.

Nicholas Vardac's pioneering study, *From Stage to Screen* (1949), charts the development of techniques bent on the narrativisation of action through 'telling' gestures, incidents or situations and an episodic, pictorial mode of narration which dispensed with dialogue and conventional 'dramatic' construction. Problems of continuity were solved by an increasingly sophisticated

stagecraft which anticipated, either by mechanically moving scenery and stages, or by gas and later electric lighting, many cinematic effects. Dissolves and fades eliminated the disruptive curtain drop, permitting swift changes in locale or time, or of 'vantage point within a given scene' (p. 65). Combined with a complex system of traps, bridges and moving scenery or stage structures, such techniques achieved what were effectively tracking shots, allowing movement from interior to exterior locations, or, the 'parallel editing' between different actions that was integral to melodramatic suspense. Rolling panoramas suggested the passage of time or movement of stage, ships, horses, trains, etc. The pictorialisation of the nineteenth-century stage produced what were effectively 'moving pictures'.

Such techniques dispensed with the expression of character through dialogue, relying on 'effective situations and telling *mise en scène*' (p. 52), 'action-tableaux' and episodic narration to externalise the inner states of characters. Vision effects, exploiting the 'dissolve' – deploying projection devices and combined with 'parallel editing' techniques – could shift 'the scene from what the character was doing to what he (sic) was thinking' (p. 35), while character itself was carried in 'external visual values' such as costume, makeup, gesture and facial expression. Louis James (1981) describes melodramatic acting as at once pictorial and dynamic, capable of producing shifts in the state of being or 'personae' of a single character or between the moods of alternating scenes.

The potentially amorphous diversity of the melodramatic mode was stabilised in a range of generic sub-divisions which picked up on historical, national and regional variations, many of which found new life in Hollywood genres: for example, gothic and eastern melodrama, heroic or nationalist melodrama, aquatic melodrama deploying great tanks of water, equestrian melodrama performed on horseback, nautical and domestic melodrama, the fallen woman melodrama, murder mystery, frontier and temperance melodrama, and so on (Booth, 1965; Rahill, 1967; Bradby et. al., 1981). Generic stability was promoted in the formation of stock companies, 'in which each member was hired to act a specific character type, performing it and no other', types which 'perpetuated generic conventions' (Booth, op. cit., p. 65).

In the system of production that evolved with melodrama the individual playwright vanished from the theatre. Two types of melodrama producer emerged: the actor turned showman, who combined a feeling for popular taste, a flair for inventive stagecraft and the financial sense of the entrepreneur; or the literary hack, often on contract to a particular theatre, who in order to make a living had to churn out a vast number of plays at great speed, and who consequently relied on adaptation and plagiarism. More important than the writer, however, were the large number of carpenters, scenery painters, gasmen and electricians, scene movers and special effects operators, whose efforts realised melodramatic *mise en scène*, spectacle and obligatory 'sensation scenes'. Often all that was required from the writer was a skeletal outline for

action and situations as support for theatrical production values (Rahill, 1967).

Melodrama in America

Twentieth-century popular culture's melodramatic inheritance must be traced through the passage of European melodrama to America, for its transformation there was arguably a determining factor in the emergence of Hollywood aesthetics and its later international power.

David Grimstead's study of melodrama in nineteenth-century American theatre (1968) details how early puritan distrust of drama as diversionary or immoral gradually gave way to a post-Revolutionary desire to equal the cultural heritage of the 'old' country. Despite national ambition, however, the models of cultural achievement remained European and in a country where primary energies were still committed to expanding geographic, economic and political frontiers, drama constituted an importable commodity – especially when in the absence of copyright restrictions, already tried and tested material could be pirated with impunity at small cost (p. 144). Not only plays, but players too, came from England, considerably outweighing native production until towards the end of the nineteenth century (Rahill, 1967, p. 225).

Nevertheless melodrama's adaptation to the different socio-political conditions of American culture was transformative. First there was no already situated landed aristocracy against which a rising bourgeoisie had to struggle. The dominant ideology was republican and democratic, the evils of class inequality and injustice associated with a European yoke recently thrown off. American drama's national specificity was initially confined to expression of a democratic sensibility. The compatibility of melodrama with this form of nationalism was a major reason, David Grimstead (1971) suggests, for its centrality to the nineteenth-century American stage.

American adaptation of melodrama began to dismantle the class oppositions of European melodrama. In the first instance, melodrama's stress on unpremeditated feeling as an index of moral status and social value functioned for American nationalism as a 'great equaliser', bypassing inequalities of class and education (Grimstead, 1971, p. 88). Secondly, the expression of class oppositions in European melodrama were, in American versions, often transposed into country/city oppositions. In early American melodramas the villain was associated with the city, and its growing divisions between rich and poor. He often sported European airs, thus further demarcating national boundaries. The country, meanwhile, was invested with America's founding ideology, egalitarianism, and regeneration was found in its rural past (Grimstead, 1971, pp. 198–9; also Viviani in this volume, pp. 83–99). Melodrama's nostalgic mode, David Grimstead suggests, was strategic for a national identity convinced of its radicalism, acknowleg-

ing, but displacing into the past, the inequalities emerging with industrialisation.

Arguably, these shifts in emphasis contributed to melodrama's later power as an international source of popular culture. An egalitarian ideology, intensified by the historical closeness of the social forms – the rural, extended domestic unit – in which one aspect of that ideal was rooted, produced an insistently populist address, that could make a cross-class and international appeal. And the ambivalent dynamic of the villain both acknowledged the pleasures, and at the same time judged the drives, of capitalism – aggression, acquisitiveness, competition, blatant individualism.

The delay, relative to European developments, in the maturing of a native melodrama was important to America's taking the form into the twentieth century. According to Frank Rahill (1967), truly American melodrama emerged only in the 1880s with a cycle of native civil war and frontier sagas. In his view these plays, working over issues of national identity made critical by the war, represented the sought for national drama. Coinciding with innovative theatrical technologies and a rising generation of inventive theatrical producers, these plays achieved a more sophisticated, if still spectacular, melodramatic rhetoric. While in Europe melodrama was waning, in America the melodramatic project gained new life, pushing theatrical technique still further in the direction of cinematic *mise en scène*, and into competition with the new medium.

But these developments were confined to metropolitan cities, where the size of middle-class audiences justified the capital outlay. Parallel to metropolitan culture, however, a new source of production arose in the growth of melodrama houses in the lower-middle and working-class districts of urban centres and with the organisation of syndicated circuits devoted to the exclusive production and touring of melodramas of a simpler, more traditional kind, which were patronised by provincial audiences. Melodrama became a theatrical industry, organised to produce and circulate standardised product, which would lay the basis for the film industry to come (see Pryluck, 1986).

Melodrama as Cultural Category

Cinema participated in a critical phase in the shifting composition of theatrical audiences. As industrial expansion was followed by the pursuit of consumers, the middle classes were sought as up-market and lucrative audiences. As Raymond Williams (1977) notes of London theatres, 'new dividing lines appeared between the "respectable" and the "popular", and at the respectable end there was an integration of middle-class and fashionable audiences and tastes' (p. 210). This integration was facilitated by a programme of theatre building and refurbishment, in which facilities were upgraded and performance times shortened and made later to suit the work hours and

social engagements of the middle class (Williams, op. cit.; Rahill, 1967; Grimstead, 1968; McCormick, 1981). Melodramatic intrigue went upmarket in 'sophisticated' drawing-room melodrama, or in technically ever more spectacular sensation melodramas. Alternatively it went underground into the new 'society dramas' of Jones and Pinero, or was displaced by opera and ballet. In America, melodrama's late flowering, resulting in a more 'plausible, adult and intellectually respectable' form, enabled it to hold onto the middle-class audience longer (Rahill, 1967, p. 268).

High art versus mass entertainment Division of the audience into 'establishment' and 'popular' according to geographical location, ability to pay and sub-cultural taste was supported and contributed to the consolidation of the categories of 'high' and 'low' culture that have been crucial to twentieth-century evaluation of melodrama. Michael Booth (1965) has remarked on what he sees as the unprecedented 'detachment and isolation from the theatre of the great writers of the nineteenth century' (p. 47). The subordination of the word in favour of production values, the low fixed fee system of payment and lack of copyright, drove the potential dramatist to the more private forms of poetry and the novel. However, the emergence of a high-paying audience and consequently higher payments for plays, together with copyright legislation, encouraged the return of the dramatic 'artist' to the theatre. At the same time a minority intelligentsia supported an 'independent' theatre movement, promoting the 'new drama' of Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov, while nascent cinematic entertainments competed for the popular audience. To this cultural divide the redefinition of the categories of tragedy and realism were crucial.

Redefining tragedy and realism Despite his own antipathy to melodrama, Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (1966) is important for its historicisation of formal categories, showing how tragedy, far from attaining timeless universality, has been subject to appropriation and redefinition by successive social formations. His argument suggests how current conceptions of the tragic hero and tragic action, resulting from bourgeois redefinition of the form (see above, pp. 16–17), serve to demote melodrama.¹² Williams argues that Romantic endeavour to reinvent tragedy after its eighteenth-century demise did little to extend the social reach of the form initially promised by bourgeois cultural reform, but rather further narrowed the category to apply only to the inner conflict of a uniquely self-conscious individual, opposed to, or outside of society altogether, expressing an 'often minority attitude to life and contemporary experience' (p. 36). By the end of the nineteenth century, tragedy became an elite category by virtue of its distance from common life, so that, Williams suggests, events 'deep in the pattern of our own culture ... war, famine, work, traffic, politics' are not considered tragic (p. 49).

While tragedy had been effectively displaced from the theatre by the dominance of nineteenth-century melodrama – indeed often staged and even rewritten as melodrama – realism was at the heart of popular developments. Nicholas Vardac (1949) identifies three broad, inter-related trends in nineteenth-century theatrical aesthetics: spectacle, melodrama and realism – all constituted within what he defines as a 'realist-romantic movement' and existing in uneasy and uneven relationship to the end of the century. Vardac documents this paradox in the history of nineteenth-century theatrical staging. However romantic the dramatic conception, the producer, carpenters and set painters, the lighting and special effects personnel, were committed to as realistic a materialisation of the 'romantic idea' as possible. Thus melodrama could bring together the grandiose and the banal.

Nevertheless, realism, along with tragedy, emerged at the end of the century as a criterion of elite cultural value. According to Vardac, theatrical realism gained its edge as a cultural touchstone when the technologies for realistic staging became too cumbersome for melodrama's need of speedy, episodic narration. With the return of the 'literary' dramatist to the theatre, greater value was placed on dialogue, character analysis and naturalist performance. Realism became a singular goal on its own account, and the hallmark of metropolitan 'high culture', while melodrama was relegated to entertainments for popular and/or poorly equipped provincial theatres. The separation out of a middle-class audience, the impact of 'new drama' and the reformed categories of tragedy and realism led to melodrama's derision.

Melodrama and Cinema

The emergence of cinema made a significant intervention into this cultural field, setting up new relations of competition and influence between different branches of the growing culture industries. Nicholas Vardac's account of the incompatibility of the staging demands of melodrama and realism suggests that part of cinema's success was its capacity to reweld the symbiosis of 'photographic realism' and 'pictorial sensationalism' which in the theatre had been breaking up. Technically the cinema solved the problems of the stage, and the verbal limitations of the novel, in their common search to realise the melodramatic imagination. Film offered the photographic naturalism to which audiences had become accustomed through the illustrated press and the new staging techniques of the metropolitan centres, while editing could reproduce at a fraction of the cost the narrative continuity which in the theatre demanded either complex and labour intensive machinery, or 'non-naturalistic' sets and backdrops. Cinema, moreover, could bring the sophistication and spectacle of the metropolitan theatres to provincial and working-class audiences. It offered to twentieth-century society a renewed site of cultural cohesion. In its turn the melodramatic stage contributed to cinema both audiences prepared for visual narrative and a repertoire of

non-copyright material, 'pre-formed for pictorial illusion' (Vardac, op. cit., p. 173) for which there was known appeal and which film could better. More significant, perhaps, was the theatrical bequest of a range of staging and performance techniques tailored to the requirements of 'telling stories in pictures'.

Despite its melodramatic heritage the cinema's critical entourage was soon to constitute it as a singularly 'realist' medium (Vardac, p. 200). Characterisation was a central element in this claim. However, discursive analysis dialogue are a major source of realist character, while the melodramatic aesthetic had striven to eliminate or subordinate dialogue in favour of the demonstrative, musically co-ordinated gesture and action. If the film industry did not hurry to overcome the technical problems of synchronising sound and picture, this was perhaps because it had no need to; music and sound effects provided the aural resources that its melodramatic constitution required without the cost of technological research. In the cinema, however, as Griffith demonstrated, exteriorisation of character is not dependent on the large-scale gesture alone; the intimacy of the photographic close-up could register subjective states and relationships with an immediacy that lent credence to the perception of cinema as a naturalist medium, supporting the claim that all cinema required was synchronous sound in order to outgrow its melodramatic origins. Whether such cinematic subjectivity, however, constitutes 'psychological realism' or a basis for the renewed intermeshing of realism and melodrama in twentieth-century culture is an issue to be determined only by investigating melodrama's survival after the demise of the specifically Victorian form that dominated the theatre for nearly a century.

III Melodrama as Cultural Form

It could not be more bluntly put that it was the bourgeoisie itself that invented for the people the popular myth of the melodrama ... serials in the popular press, cheap 'novels' ...

Louis Althusser, 1969, p. 139

Twentieth century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority.

Jane Tompkins, 1985, p. 123

How can the nineteenth-century melodramatic project be thought in a way that clarifies its passage into, and function for, twentieth-century mass culture?

Although constructed outside the immediate concerns of film theory, Peter

Brooks's recently influential study, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), recasts many of the features of nineteenth-century melodrama in a way that is pertinent to the problems film theory has confronted. Because Brooks is concerned to justify the melodramatic as source of inspiration for Balzac and James, he is committed to re-evaluation of the form rather than to its critique; moreover, he has little interest in the ideological questions that inform contemporary cultural analysis. However, this allows him to investigate melodrama on its own terms and take seriously its appeal. This distinguishes his approach from many previous literary studies which, despite serious intentions of historical recovery, tend to dwell on entertaining curiosities and find it difficult to describe the plots and characters of Victorian melodrama without a smile of condescension at the 'popular' mind of our forbears (see especially Maurice Disher, 1949 and 1954). It also puts Brooks on a different footing from film theory which till recently either valued melodrama only if it could be shown, through analysis of covert operations not available to its audiences, to be 'symptomatically' ruptured; or critiqued the form as an instrument of the capitalist culture industries, which imposed on or mystified the mass audience. Brooks permits a look at melodrama outside the entrenched oppositions of such approaches: bourgeois/working-class; melodrama/realism; empathy/criticism.

Brooks investigates melodrama as a specifically modern mode, which evolves out of the loss of pre-Enlightenment values and symbolic forms, in response to the psychic consequences of the bourgeois social order, in which the social must be expressed as the personal. In this argument feudal societies derived cohesion, legitimation and self-perpetuation, through the 'Traditional Sacred' – in Brooks's terms, an 'evident, persuasive and compelling ... system both of mythic explanation and implicit ethics' (p. 18). He sees the passage from the Renaissance, through the 'momentary compromise of Christian humanism' to the Enlightenment as a slow process of desacralisation during which 'the explanatory and cohesive force of sacred myth lost its power, and its political and social representations [church and monarchy, ed.] lost their legitimacy' (pp. 15–16). Consequently post-sacred society needed to find both a secular system of ethics and a means of investing individual everyday lives with significance and justification.

In place of the 'traditional sacred', melodrama uncovers what Brooks calls the 'moral occult', 'the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality' (p. 5). Expressed in such terms, the notion of a 'moral occult' suggests an idealist portmanteau for 'bourgeois ideology' and this would surely be the case if Brooks focused on specific contents. However this concept develops in his account as a generalised need for 'significance', the terms of which are historically relative, rather than as a set of specific ideological ideas. In melodrama an ideological meets a psychic need, needs that are not necessarily identical.

Central to this argument is the concept of repression, which in post-Enlightenment, secular bourgeois society, characterised by the 'reductions of rationalism' (p. 19) and orientation to the 'reality principle', operates in codes of social behaviour, conventions of language and the structure of the psyche. At the same time the post-Enlightenment project stimulates demands for personal significance and value, and for acknowledgment of all that cannot be contained within the dominant order – anti-social desire, the 'numinous', the struggle of good and evil.

Melodrama's inheritance from popular tradition enabled it to apply 'pressure' to the conventional and repressive discourses of the post-Enlightenment order, breaking through 'everything that constitutes the "reality principle", all its censorship, accommodations, tonings-down' (p. 41). To this end melodrama utilises narrative mechanisms that create a blockage to expression, thereby forcing melodramatic enactments into alternative and excessive strategies to clarify the dramatic stakes. 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 the 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 all protagonists and is finally resolved by public recognition of where guilt and innocence really lie.

Melodrama's recourse to gestural, visual and musical excess constitutes the expressive means of what Brooks calls the 'text of muteness'. Devices such as dumb show, pantomime, tableaux and spectacle reach 'toward ... meanings which cannot be generated from the language code' (p. 72). The spectacle, moral polarisation and dramatic reversals for which melodrama is so often criticised serves the purpose of clarification, identification and palpable demonstration of repressed 'ethical and psychic' forces, which nevertheless constitute compelling imperatives (p. 36).

Thomas Elsaesser's analysis of pathos (see below p. 66) extends this view of melodramatic epistemology to Hollywood's domestic melodrama. Its central protagonists become objects of pathos because constructed as victims of forces that lie beyond their control and understanding. Nevertheless, the externalisation of conflict into narrative structures or *mise en scène* offers the audience signs of the protagonists' condition and the forces in play. Pathos, unlike pity, is a cognitive as well as affective construct. The audience is involved on a character's behalf and yet can exercise pity only by reading and evaluating signs inaccessible to the dramatis personae.

Melodrama's ethical conflicts, however, though symbolically rendered, are not produced as allegorical abstractions, since bourgeois culture insists that the moral is the personal. But neither is personalisation in melodrama a

mechanical reflection of the ideology of individualism. In the absence of a metaphysical system of transcendent value, the personality becomes the source of overriding imperatives, now 'identified with emotional states and psychic relationships, so that the expression of emotional and moral integers is indistinguishable' (p. 42). The family, with its ties of duty, love and conflict, the site where the individual is formed, and the centre of bourgeois social arrangements, provides a repertoire of such identities and the space for melodramatic enactments. Characters in melodrama 'assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child and express basic psychic conditions' (p. 4). This leads Brooks onto Freudian terrain. The family, as an 'over-determined' psychic institution locks into unconscious desires and forces. However, this does not mean that melodrama is about either the family or individual psychology, 'because melodrama exteriorises conflict and psychic structures, producing ... what we might call the "melodrama of psychology"' (pp. 35–6). For melodrama, working less towards the release of individual repression than towards the public enactment of socially unacknowledged states, the family is a means, not an end.

Ultimately Brooks's 'moral occult' shifts between the refiguring of Good and Evil in human life, demonstration of conflicting, unconscious forces in the psyche, and confrontation with the limits of language and the decentred subject exposed by modernism. The terms of this slippage suggest ways to re-pose the commonly assumed hostile relations of melodrama and realism.

Old-Fashioned Melodrama, Contemporary Realism

Nineteenth-century aesthetic history suggests the interdependent development of melodrama and realism. However, realism is not static. As the systems of explanation which ground realism change – sociology, Marxism, psychology, economics, phenomenology, existentialism, feminism and so on – the codes and conventions of realism shift in pursuit of new 'truth' and greater 'authenticity'. And as realism offers up new areas of representation, so the terms and material of the world melodrama seeks to melodramatise will shift. What realism uncovers becomes new material for the melodramatic project.

Despite, however, their orientation to similar material, the epistemological projects of the two modes diverge. Although there may be conflict between the systems of explanation different realisms draw on, by definition they assume the world is capable of both adequate explanation and representation. Melodrama, however, if Peter Brooks' view is right, has no such confidence, for it attests to forces, desires, fears which, though no longer granted metaphysical reality, nevertheless appear to operate in human life independently of rational explanation. Thus if realism's relentless search for renewed truth and authentication pushes it towards stylistic innovation and the

future, melodrama's search for something lost, inadmissible, repressed, ties it to an atavistic past.

Arguably the importance of the gothic to Victorian melodrama lay precisely in such a return, its medievalism providing a theatrically pictorial vocabulary – the castle, the towers and dungeons, the landscape and the elements – with which to construct a symbolic arena for the acts of figures in whom moral polarities could be invested without depending on either transcendental hierarchies or the constraints of realist discourse. In its turn the Victorian has provided for Hollywood – notably its 1940s cycle of gothic romances – exactly the same function: a past that could be recalled to incarnate moral conflict contemporary society believed it had outgrown. In place of monks, nuns and abbeys, the literal or implied presence of Dr Freud – arch-Victorian, patriarch – offers scenarios which promise secret knowledge and hidden conflict.

Derision of melodrama frequently stems from such attachment to an outmoded past – to what seem simplistic Victorian personifications of Good and Evil, Innocence and Villainy. However, melodrama re-enacts for contemporary society the persistent clash of moral polarities by exploiting its shifting relations with the realism; for it deals in conditions of personal guilt and innocence which can be established in relation to any discourse that demarcates the desirable from the taboo. Thus if the good and evil personifications of Victorian melodrama no longer provide credible articulations of conflict, modern melodrama draws on contemporary discourses for the apportioning of responsibility, guilt and innocence – psychoanalysis, marriage guidance, medical ethics, politics, even feminism. In this respect Brooks argues that the greater psychological sophistication of modern genres – the police series, the western, or the hospital drama – indicates not an abandonment of melodramatic rhetoric but a fuller realisation of psychology's 'melodramatic possibilities' (p. 204). To take recent examples, *Coma* (1977), despite its recourse to topical public debates about the morality of organ transplants, its 'independent' heroine and reference to women's movement discourses, harbours a melodrama of hospital intrigue in which the chief surgeon attempts to discredit a female doctor's pursuit and disclosure of medical malpractice (see Pribram, 1987). *Witness* (1984) hides its nostalgic re-creation of lost innocence hounded by the corruption of the modern technocratic police state behind claims to anthropological representation of the Amish. And in Steven Spielberg's adaptation (1984) of Alice Walker's feminist *The Color Purple* a victimised heroine denounces her persecutor-husband. These films, as different as they are in subject matter, emerge in direct line of descent from *Way Down East* (1920) in their drive to identify the good and the evil and in their scenarios of persecuted innocence.

Melodrama's survival rests in the fact that its conflicts are not tied to a particular moral outcome or content: they turn 'less on the triumph of virtue

than on making the world morally legible' (Brooks, p. 42). In this respect melodramatic desire crosses moral boundaries, producing villains who, even as the drama sides with the 'good', articulate opposing principles, with equal, if not greater, power. In so doing it accesses the underside of official rationales for reigning moral orders – that which social convention, psychic repression, political dogma cannot articulate. Thus whether melodrama takes its categories from Victorian morality or modern psychology, its enactment of the continuing struggle of good and evil forces running through social, political and psychic life draws into a public arena desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of the publicly acknowledged world.

Melodrama, realism, modernism Melodrama's pleasure in naming names, is, Brooks suggests, the pleasure of articulated identities: 'Desire cries aloud its language in identification with full states of being' (p. 41). This formulation touches recent debates in post-structural film studies, positioning melodrama in opposition to the modernist claim that the only verifiable reality is the surface of the signifier itself. Peter Brooks argues that writers like Flaubert, Zola, Kafka and Joyce confront an 'abyss' of the kind theorised by the post-structuralists: the endless play of the signifier, the decentred subject, the impossibility of perfect coincidence between speaker and utterance, the chimera of identity and meaning. The project of realism tips over into its obverse: if it is impossible representationally to flesh out the world, then deconstruction will reveal the bare bones. Melodrama marks out a third route into this post-Enlightenment terrain. Taking 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. The signifier cannot cover the possibilities of the signified; nor will the melodramatic subject accept the gap between the self, its words and meaning laid bare by the post-structural project. Melodrama is above all a 'language of presence and immediacy' (p. 67). While the drive of realism is to possess the world by understanding it, and the modern and post-modern explore in different ways the consequences of this ambition's disillusion, the central drive of melodrama is to force meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language, 'making large, but unsubstantiable claims on meaning' (p. 199). In the face of the limitations of realism exposed by post-structuralism, it operates on the level not so much of 'Yes, but ...' than of 'So what!'

Genre and gender: melodrama and women Re-thinking melodrama and realism illuminates the problematic relation of the woman's film to melodrama and questions about the representation of women in either.

Melodrama has frequently been identified as a woman's genre. However, this is arguably a retrospective categorisation, following the role played by gender in the delegitimisation of melodrama by realism and tragedy. David

Grimstead (1968) notes the centrality of emotion to nineteenth-century culture as a source of moral value: 'emotional sensibility was the real criterion for virtue, and crying became its testament' (p. 11). Because it produced contradictions for the ideology of masculinity, the realm of 'feeling' was assigned to women. The heroine, idealised as 'Angel in the House' and focus of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' (see Ann Kaplan, below, p. 113) was often of more significance to the drama than the hero in her capacity to evoke and legitimate emotion. The obverse side of idealisation was fascinated horror at the prospect of the heroine's fall and subsequent degradation. Victorian patriarchy could weep publicly over the female victim, in demonstration of renewed feeling and virtue.

Recovery of realism and tragedy at the turn of the century as categories demarcating high from popular culture coincided with a re-masculinisation of cultural value. Realism came to be associated with (masculine) restraint and underplaying. It eschewed flamboyant characterisation in favour of psychological analysis, carried in verbal discourse and dialogue. The gestural rhetoric of melodramatic acting was displaced by 'naturalist' performance styles. Tragedy and realism focused on 'serious' social issues or inner dilemmas, recentring the hero and claiming tragic value for the failure of heroic potential. Sentiment and emotiveness were reduced in significance to 'sentimentality' and exaggeration, domestic detail counted as trivia, melodramatic utopianism as escapist fantasy and this total complex devalued by association with a 'feminised' popular culture. Men no longer wept in public.

Melodrama initially survived in cinema's capacity to embed melodramatic sentiment and feminine idealisations in photographic realism. However, the pursuit by a growing industry of the middle-class audience, abetted by the critical apparatus which sprang up around the new medium (Vardac, 1949, p. 200), gave rise to an industrial ambivalence about a product which was geared both to prestige and 'popularity'. 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 (Bourget, 1985) which facilitated critical boundary lines 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. However, it is doubtful whether Hollywood's major genres veered from their melodramatic predispositions. Nick Roddick's study of Warners (1983), for instance, qualifies the reputation of its product for realism, pointing to the studio's pre-eminent concern to achieve the 'best [aesthetic] effect' (p. 25). Arguably, synchronous

sound was exploited for the sensation it could bring to contemporary material – for example, the gangster film's screeching car tyres or machine-gun fire – as much as for verisimilitude. The industry recognised this pervasive melodramatic base in its exhibition categories – western melodrama, crime melodrama, sex melodrama, backwoods melodrama, romantic melodrama and so on.

In Hollywood, realism came to be associated with the masculine sphere of action and violence. Paradoxically it was the woman's film with its emphasis on talk rather than action, which really benefited from the new access to realism which dialogue allowed (Andrea Walsh, 1984), while codes of action and taciturnity perpetuated and justified the gangster and westerners' melodramatic rhetoric, disguised by prestigious critical labels. In contrast the woman's film was identified with melodrama, syphoning off this pejorative ascription from Hollywood's mainstream product.

Clarification of the relation between the woman's film and melodrama, however, means considering not only gendered critical categories, but the role of women as cultural producers and consumers. Maria LaPlace argues that the film industry, needing to formulate a genre to attract female audiences, drew on a 'circuit of women's discourse' circulating on the margins of the mass media and traversing women's fiction, pamphlets, magazines, journalism, and more ephemeral forms, much of which is generated by and for women. While such female cultural practices do not operate in some free 'feminine' space, they are produced from the different social and psychic positioning of women within an overall complex of social relations and discourses. Both Maria LaPlace and Ann Kaplan trace the historical affiliations of the woman's film with traditions of nineteenth-century female writing in order to investigate its relation to Victorian melodrama's investment in woman, on the one hand, and the historical conditions of women's reading, writing or spectating on the other.

Given that it organises the same terrain as realism, nineteenth-century melodrama could not evade the fact that its domestic and feminine idealisations were rooted in the daily, lived experience of women, and unwittingly provided ground for female colonisation. Melodrama's over-investment in the symbol, combined with the impossibility of actually living it, produced a complex, highly ambivalent field for women. Kaplan, LaPlace and others show how female writers and readers took both melodramatic and realist routes into the sphere of the domestic, in a series of sub-cultural and 'trans-valuative' discourses. Melodramatic pathos could be turned to assertion: the victimised heroine proves 'weakness is strength' as the assaults of the villain draw out 'hidden talents and unrecognised virtues' (Martha Vicinus, 1981, pp. 135–6); the martyrdom of the 'fallen woman' produces 'posthumous vindication' (Sally Mitchell, 1977, p. 42); the 'villainess' gives rise to iconoclastic and symbolically vengeful fantasies (Showalter, 1976; Vicinus, 1981).

On the other hand, some writers, particularly in America, produced a domestic realism that more literally transvalued that realm, focusing on the minutiae of the daily life of the home and personal relationships as the site of wider social and political organisation and value (see Sally Mitchell, 1977; Nina Baym, 1978; Jane Tompkins, 1985 and Kaplan and LaPlace in this volume). In nineteenth-century culture, however, these two strands did not demarcate rigid boundaries because of the interdependence of melodrama and realism, and the fact that the symbolic values of the domestic and 'feminine' permeated the culture as a whole.

Twentieth-century remasculinisation of cultural value meant, as Mitchell, Baym and Tompkins argue, that women's domestic realism has scarcely been recognised as such, because its terrain was foreign to a male canon. So when 30s Hollywood took women's fiction – itself divided between realist and melodramatic strains – as sources for the woman's film, aesthetic conflict displaced inter-dependence. For instance, at the textual level, the novel *Now, Voyager* is a realist rather than melodramatic fiction, but subject to a melodramatic overlay in the film's organisation of incident, music and *mise en scène*, which conflicts with its articulate dialogue (drawn from the book), realist characterisation and performance. Confusion – or contest – is suggested by the range of permutations produced in the 30s between patriarchal melodrama and women's fiction, offering such sub-genres as maternal sacrifice, fallen woman and romantic melodramas alongside women's pictures.

Arguments that melodrama is the 'drama of articulation', or allows the return of repressed psychic conflict, may not apply to the woman's film when it draws heavily on women's cultural discourses which themselves struggle, as Tania Modleski suggests of *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, to force patriarchy to speak (below, p. 326). The distinction can be pursued by comparing Stahl's with Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), where the dialogue of the first functions as personal conversation and in the second – in true melodramatic fashion – as 'emotional utterance, outburst ... expressive cadenza' or 'scenic element' (Brooks, 1976, p. 63 and Elsaesser, below, p. 51). In the end there appears to be no absolute line of demarcation between melodrama and the woman's film but, rather, a contest between them over the construction and meaning of the domestic, of personal life, and the place of men and women in this.

Melodrama and ideological analysis The notion of contested meaning suggests a basis for ideological analysis of melodrama. Subject to diverse pressures and inputs and the meeting place of bourgeois and working-class cultural trajectories, melodrama contributed to the institutional and aesthetic formation of 'the popular'. Emerging with capitalist mass entertainment, this term defines a terrain in which different classes and social groups meet and find an identity. To this extent it is judged an ideological construction – in which class

divisions and struggle are dissolved, displaced by compensatory wants more easily satisfiable by the capitalist culture industries. However, if the 'popular' is claimed as a point of social cohesion, it is also contested. The 'popular' is fraught with tension, struggles and negotiations.

In this context the heterogeneity of the melodramatic aesthetic facilitates conflict and negotiation between cultural identities. At issue from an analytical perspective is the degree to which the melodramatic text works both on an 'imaginary' level, internal to fictional production, and on a realist level, which refers to the world outside the text. If, as Peter Brooks contends, melodrama feeds a demand for significances unavailable within the constraints of socially legitimate discourse but for which there is no other language, it must invest in highly symbolised personages, events and relations. But equally, melodrama must conform to realism's ever shifting criteria of relevance and credibility, for it has power only on the premiss of a recognisable, socially constructed world. As the terms of this world shift so must the recognition of its changing audiences be continually re-solicited. As melodrama leaves the nineteenth century behind, whose moral outlook it materialised, these two levels diverge, and it becomes a site of struggle between atavistic symbols and the discourses that reclaim them for new constructions of reality. David Rodowick (below, p. 268) analyses one form of such negotiation in the 50s domestic melodrama.

In the twentieth century, gender representation has been a major source of such contest. The figure of woman, which has served so long as a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, is also a generator of female discourses drawn from the social realities of women's lives – discourses which negotiate a space within and sometimes resist patriarchal domination. In order to command the recognition of its female audiences, melodrama must draw on such discourses. Thus in twentieth-century melodrama the dual role of woman as symbol for the whole culture and as representative of a historical, gendered point of view produces a struggle between male and female voices: the symbol cannot be owned, but is contested.

Cultural negotiation, however, is not easily decided. Melodrama touches the socio-political only at that point where it triggers the psychic, and the absence of causal relations between them allows for a short-circuiting between melodramatic desire and the socially constructed world. As Martha Vicinus (1981) notes, 'archetypal and mythic beliefs' associate with 'time-specific responses' (p. 128). This suggests a disjointed relation between aesthetics, pleasure and ideology in melodrama. For as different social groups reclaim the image, melodrama strives to recover its sources of symbolic enactment. The power of the symbol is not always destroyed by its exposure as ideological construct, for, as Ian Ang (1984) has suggested, the pleasures of the one do not necessarily coincide with the functions of the other. The argument between the Amish and Hollywood over their representation in *Witness* exemplifies such contest.

Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse. If melodrama can only end in the place where it began, not having a programmatic analysis for the future, its possibilities lie in this double acknowledgment of how things are in a given historical conjuncture, and of the primary desires and resistances contained within it. This is important for understanding not only what we want to change but the strengths and weakness of where we come from.

Notes

1. I am indebted to John Caughie for pointing out the role of theatre studies in the recovery of melodrama.
2. See Richard Roud, 'The French Line', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 29 no. 4, Autumn 1960, for negative British response to *Cahiers du Cinéma's* practice of formalist *mise en scène* criticism, and Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s – Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) for translations of some key examples.
3. A seminal exposition of this approach is Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni's 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', originally a *Cahiers* editorial (October/November 1969) and translated in *Screen*, vol. 12 no. 1, Spring 1971. This was followed by a translation of the *Cahiers* editorial board's equally influential analysis of *Young Mr Lincoln* in *Screen*, vol. 13 no. 3, Autumn 1972.
4. Thomas Elsaesser suggests this possibility in his piece on Minnelli (see below, p. 217) and Peter Brooks (1976) argues the inter-dependency of the novel and theatrical melodrama (pp. 75–8 and 83–4).
5. The British anti-realist critique began to emerge in a special issue of *Screen*, vol. 13 no. 1, Spring 1972. Colin MacCabe's 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses', published in *Screen*, vol. 15 no. 2, Summer 1974, provided an influential formulation of the 'classic realist text'. The notion of 'interpellation' is derived from Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in Brewster, Ben (trans.), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).
6. The psychoanalytic underpinnings of the classic realist text were first signalled in a special issue of *Screen*, vol. 14 no. 1/2 Spring/Summer 1973, dealing with semiotics and cinema, and were developed by Colin MacCabe, in 'The Politics of Separation', and by Stephen Heath in 'Lessons from Brecht', both in *Screen*, vol. 15 no. 2, Summer 1974. In Heath's later influential writings the critical emphasis was shifted from the classic realist to narrative text; see *Screen*, vol. 16 no. 1, Spring 1975; vol. 16 no. 2, Summer 1975; vol. 17 no. 3, Autumn 1976, vol. 19 no. 3, Autumn 1978. *Screen*, vol. 16 no. 2, translated Christian Metz's 'The Imaginary Signifier' in a special issue on psychoanalysis and the cinema.

7. This question was raised in a sceptical aside by Peter Lloyd (1972) and pursued by Steve Neale (1976/7).
8. Claire Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', *Screen Pamphlet*, no. 2, September 1972, is an early and influential exposition of this view. Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Screen*, vol. 16 no. 3, Autumn 1975 provided an equally influential development of feminist cine-psychoanalysis. See also my 'Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism' in Doane, Mellencamp and Williams (eds.), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1984) for an account of feminist engagement with anti-realism and psychoanalysis.
9. Steve Neale (1976/7) raised this question in cine-psychoanalytic terms, examining from the perspective of the spectator constructed by textual irony and parody, the different accounts of irony offered by Elsaesser and Willemsen. But the question can also be asked – as I do – of the socially constructed audience.
10. To put the question more concretely, if we take together *River of No Return*, *Salt of the Earth* and *Written on the Wind*, does *Written on the Wind* constitute melodrama, as opposed to *River of No Return* and *Salt of the Earth*, representing classic realist/narrative texts? Or could a dividing line be drawn between *Salt of the Earth* and the other two as different kinds of melodrama, to be distinguished from a work of social realism?
11. Among the international sources of early melodrama cited by Michael Booth (1965) and Frank Rahill (1967) are: the sentimental tragedies of George Lillo and Edward Moore, comedies of Steel and Colley Cibber and fiction of Samuel Richardson; *drame sérieux*, theorised by Diderot, and attempted by Beaumarchais, Mercier, Sedaine and others; the work of English 'mortality moralists', the Reverends James Hervey and Edward Young; Rousseau's cult of sensibility; English gothic drama and fiction by Horace Walpole and Anne Radcliffe; *Sturm und Drang* and *Ritterdrama* plays; Goethe and Schiller; Shakespeare; the bourgeois drama of August von Kotzebue; the Romantic narrative poems and fiction of Southey, Byron and Scott, Victor Hugo and the two Dumas, and so on.
12. Formal accounts of melodrama such as those offered by Eric Bentley (1967) or Robert Heilman (1968), while committed to its re-evaluation, locate the form on a continuum with tragedy which places it on the side of the extrovert, 'monopathic' character (Heilman) or the raw desires of the child and dreamer who confuses 'I want' with 'I can' (Bentley). Such a character is defined in opposition to the 'divided', introspective protagonist of tragedy, who reaches a 'higher' plane of human experience. Heilman argues that it is necessary to recover melodrama in order to preserve the category of tragedy from its commonsense and journalistic dilution.