

REVISITING FILM MELODRAMA
Interdisciplinary and Transnational Aspects, Stylistic Issues
and Contemporary Extensions

AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE organized by the film Department of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Master en écriture et analyse cinématographiques) in collaboration with the Belgian Film Archive (Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique).

Dates and Places: 24-27 November 2009, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgian Film Archive

Languages: Bilingual in French and English

Though addressed in Anglo-Saxon studies since the 1970s with diversified approaches ranging from auteurist perspectives, readings as a feminist sub-genre to diachronic studies, francophone research on the melodrama genre has been very fragmentary and predominantly thematic. The study of melodrama's stylistic construction has not been taken up, several isolated initiatives notwithstanding. This situation to some extent reflects preconceived notions of the genre, but also the absence of a coherent definition.

Misunderstood, minimalized and dismissed since its cinema débuts, the term became pejoratively applied to a "melodramatic mode" that limited the genre to those films that manipulated the emotions of the public. There also is a problem with the multiple and sometimes contradictory usages of the word, resulting in a veritable semantic gulf. The first sense of the term connects elaborate spectacle and feeling, confrontations with moral issues and rhetorical figures of excess; later usage highlights the psychology of sacrifice and pathos. Confusion also stems from the fact that the term might refer both to the effects produced on the spectators and the means by which the effects are produced. While the sources of Classic Theatrical Melodrama are delimited and defined, those of film melodrama, by contrast, are diverse. Theoreticians attribute the origins variously to Greek tragedy, the sentimental bourgeois novel, Italian opera or Victorian theatrical melodrama.

Approaches to melodrama in current publishing, conferences and festivals are almost exclusively based on monographic studies and retrospectives. These privileged approaches are not conducive to developing new lines of research. Furthermore, when film melodrama itself is addressed, it is envisioned within very narrow limits, notably those set by emblematic directors in the genre. The goal of this international conference is to open the field to new historical perspectives, to revisit the most viable ones, and to calibrate those lines of theory with theories of cognition and emotion, philosophical investigations of suffering and pathos, the mythic dimensions of the genre, etc.

These new research lines should be conceived as systematically redefining the topoi of the genre, with special consideration of interdisciplinary dimensions in order to avoid clichés and stereotypes. While studies and research often have focused on literary and theatrical theories, those from opera, music, painting and other art forms have been neglected, despite their pertinence. Moreover, to move beyond the historical, that is, passéist, dimension, it will be necessary to relate melodrama to contemporary issues of the genre—television, dance, installations, multimedia work, etc.

Suggested proposals

1. Diachronic perspectives and historical revisits

- **Terminology:** Reconsider the melodrama genre; Sidestep pejorative uses of the term.
- **Theory:** Survey a panorama of theoretical studies of melodrama already in use and demonstrate their efficacy or limitations.
- **Expanding the field:** Expand the discipline and establish new perspectives relating to published work on the topic. Avoid as much as possible studies of abundantly examined auteurs such as Douglas Sirk, Frank Borzage, etc....

2. Transcultural/ethnographic approaches

- **Decomartmentalizing geographic frontiers:** Get outside of European and American contexts as the only frames of reference. Sketch case studies (production, authorship, films) from other continents (Asia, Latin America, etc.) where analysis is less available.
- **National characteristics:** Are there recurring national characteristics related to the genre or may one cite principles of a common style (that is, is there a Hollywood/European style)?
- **Revisiting and extending contemporary melodrama:** Questions of current melodrama performance; taking up specific contemporary films relating to other genres and sub-genres.

3. Multidisciplinary approach

- **Connections to and relationships with other arts** (stage, opera, literature, choreography...): An opportunity to redefine systematically the topoi of the genre with an interdisciplinary dimension and artistic pluralism. Aim to avoid jargon and stereotypes, and instead of just going back to theater and literature, find new synergies with opera, music and, once again, painting.

- **Connections to and relationships with other media and formats** (television, installations, multimedia works, etc.): Establish the contemporary issues of melodrama in these other formats.

4. Reception

- **Theoretical perspectives:** Open up the field to cognitive theories of emotion, philosophical inquiry into pathos, the mythic dimensions of the genre, etc.
- **Impact on spectatorial reception:** What is the impact of the transition between High and Low Melodrama on spectatorial reception? How may we redefine spectatorial reception according to the category of melodrama? At the same time, re-examine the accepted idea of the melodrama spectator and the misreading by certain non-Anglo-Saxon critiques (that is, reception defined as a function of the kind of emotional response that is unleashed).

General notes

Each subcategory will consider general studies of the field as well as studies of directors, periods or particular films.

Presentations

Presentations will be 20 minutes long, including film clips, slides or other AV support. Proposals must be submitted before 1 May 2008 and will include: Working title, an abstract of about 250 words, the writer's title and institutional affiliation (with address, e-mail and telephone number) and a brief curriculum vitae (about 100 words). Proposals and questions should be submitted to this address: melocoll2009@gmail.com.

Accepted proposals will be confirmed to the participants no later than 1 July 2008.

Conference committee

Dominique Nasta (Professeur, Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Muriel Andrin (Maître de conférence, Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Gabrielle Claes (Conservateur, Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique)

Freddy Malonda y Sanz (Service de culture cinématographique, Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique)