

Heike Paul, Sarah Marak,
Katharina Gerund, Marius Henderson (eds.)

LEXICON OF GLOBAL MELODRAMA



[transcript] Global Sentimentality

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Lexicon of Global Melodrama

Global Sentimentality | Volume 1

Editorial

The **Global Sentimentality** series conceives of the sentimental as a distinctive code to be examined in literature, popular culture, political rhetoric, and cultural practices of all kinds. The book series offers a platform for reflection on the sentimental – both in terms of its cultural specificity and its transcultural adaptations on a global scale. Located in cultural studies, the series simultaneously invites an interdisciplinary engagement with the sentimental at the intersection of literary, cultural, and social studies. The series will include volumes of essays and survey works on the sentimental as well as monographs.

The series is edited by Heike Paul.

Heike Paul (Prof. Dr. phil.) is chair of American studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and directs the Global Sentimentality Project. Research stays and visiting professorships have taken her to Cambridge (MA), Toronto, Hanover (NH), and Los Angeles, among other places. In 2018, she was recipient of the Leibniz Prize.

Sarah Marak (M.A.) is a doctoral researcher in American studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. Her research interests include popular culture, discourses on terrorism, U.S.-American myths and ecocriticism. Her dissertation project focuses on representations of radical environmental activism in U.S. literature and culture.

Katharina Gerund (Dr. phil.) teaches American studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. Her research interests include transatlantic cultural mobility, popular culture as well as gender and critical race studies. Current projects focus on the U.S. re-education policies of the postwar years and the figure of the military spouse in the cultural imaginary of the U.S.

Marius Henderson (M.A.) is a postdoctoral researcher in American studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. His research interests include critical theory (especially affect and Afro-diasporic theory), North American poetry, and gender studies. His current research project investigates the relation between dynamics of abstraction and abjection in the context of North American modernisms.

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Introduction

The Editors

Welcome to the world of melodrama—and to the melodramas of the world. This book introduces nearly one hundred cinematic masterpieces from various periods and different cultural contexts—ranging from early Hollywood to emergent and popular Bollywood, from Latin American and New German Cinema to contemporary Nollywood, from classic melodrama and commercial blockbusters to arthouse film and meta-melodrama, while also encompassing a number of other local forms and styles in their hybrid or revisionist varieties. Our collection features discussions of seemingly timeless stories of love and loss, demonstrating the possibility and power of melodramatic plots to portray the overcoming of differences and antagonisms. Yet it also reveals how the melodramatic code is time and again used for asserting political claims and articulating critique—and hence for (re)producing powerful dichotomies of good vs. evil, innocence vs. corruption, virtue vs. vice. Melodrama performs and rehearses moral conflict and emotional crisis management on a broad scale, involving intimate relationships and familial relations, on the one hand, and global constellations of oppression, violence, war, and regime changes, on the other. Thus, like no other genre, melodrama indeed makes the political personal and the personal political.

Defining melodrama has been notoriously difficult and contested. Writer and actor William Gillette is known for his *bon mot* that »No one that I ever met or heard of has appeared to know what melodrama really is« (qtd. in Rahill xiii), while Russell Merritt has described melodrama as a »phantom genre.« Regardless of such contentions, many scholars have offered useful classifications that have become largely canonical. John Cawelti, for instance, describes melodrama as »a combination« of formulas and sub-genres that does not »reflect a single overriding narrative or dramatic focus« (44-45), but rather creates »a fantasy of a world that operates according to our heart's desires« (45)—thereby, in fact, subsuming all other formulas. Classic melodrama has been characterized by its distinct set of archetypical characters and themes: long-suffering heroines and lost lovers, mothers separated from their children and abused orphans, heroes and villains, all of them existing in precarious or norm-violating scenarios of kinship and familial attachment. Melodramatic storytelling involves suffering and sacrifice in an attempted (re)alignment with a dominant or emergent moral order. The language of melodrama has been described as one of sensationalism and »excess« (Brooks; Kelleter et al.). According to Brooks, the »theatricality« and excess of melodrama functions as an emphatic affirmation of new »basic ethical imperatives« that are defined when »the allegiance and ordering that pertained

to a sacred system of things no longer obtain« (200-01). Beyond that, melodrama—in many ways a utopian project that aims at perfection—»refuses to content itself with the repressions, the tonings-down, the half-articulations, the accommodations, and the disappointments of the real« (Brooks ix). Genealogies of melodrama have often traced it back to traditions and precursors in literature and on stage—most resonant, perhaps, is Thomas Elsaesser's link between Hollywood melodrama and the *bürgerliche Trauerspiel*. Elsaesser's work still looms large in the archive of melodrama scholarship, and he has further elaborated on the increasing ubiquity of the melodrama in politics and the public sphere (2008). Quite similar arguments have been offered by Elisabeth Anker and the late Lauren Berlant. Berlant has specifically addressed the interdependence of national sentimentality as it appears in film and is orchestrated in political culture with the creation of an »intimate public sphere« (4). This diagnosis is further corroborated in Anker's work on the »political melodrama,« which takes the analysis of the genre further away from the medium of film and into the heart of U.S. politics. Similar analysis has addressed the cultural work of the sentimental and of film in other national imaginaries: Rini Bhattacharya Mehta's book *Unruly Cinema* (2020) on Indian colonial and postcolonial history and film under the arc of a non-Western genealogy of modernity as well as Johannes von Moltke's study of German films re-negotiating *Heimat* in *No Place like Home* (2005) regarding a postwar German national identity, are two cases in point. Furthermore, Jonathan Haynes has detailed in his book on Nollywood cinema that (and why) »the melodramatic mode is capable of an unusually strong grip on Nigerian politics« (207) in its relentless personalization of abstract and structural issues.

Notwithstanding inter- or trans-media relations, the *Lexicon of Global Melodrama* focuses on film as a particularly apt medium for melodrama. The typical affective dramaturgy of the melodramatic mode—that is, a sequence of disruptive instances of heightened affect, a form of »serial discontinuity« (Frank 539)—structurally resonates with the defining formal descriptor of film, or movies, for that matter, as consisting of »moving pictures« and, thus, as being also marked by serial discontinuity. Therefore, Marcie Frank goes as far as stating that »cinema can thus be seen as mechanized melodrama« (539). The specific cinematic melodramatic code has been further unpacked by feminist scholars, such as Mary Ann Doane, Christine Gledhill, and Linda Williams, often with a nod toward psychoanalysis. They have, for instance, examined questions of identification, female spectatorship, and desire in the quintessentially melodramatic »woman's film« (Doane) and have stressed classic melodrama's embeddedness in heteropatriarchal logics as well as its formative and paradigmatic role in »modernizing the dramatic functions of gender, class, and race« (Gledhill and Williams 5). The emotionalized dramatization of social conflict has led to the emergence of specific modes of »melodramatic expressiveness« (ibid. 7), which reverberate on all levels of cinematic form, from set design to camera movement.

Overall, a key function of melodrama certainly consists in »dramatizing experience,« as Zarzosa argues, and mostly in experiences of socio-political and epistemological uncertainty, discontinuity, and rupture. Melodrama, as a mode of cultural expression that strives to »ameliorate suffering« (237), is invoked as a coping mechanism in light of experiences of crisis. More recently, scholars have shifted their attention from taxonomic inquiries and definitional orthodoxies—that is, trying to define what melodrama »is«—toward questions concerning melodrama's performativity and cultural work—that is, asking what melodrama »does« (Gledhill ix). In a similar vein, the

individual entries in this book not only reflect upon which conceptualizations of melodrama are applicable to particular historical and cultural contexts, but they moreover elucidate what kinds of intervention melodramatic modes exert in specific settings. Certainly, one of the most basic cultural functions of melodrama consists in mediating the complex emotional entanglements between individuals and social structures in relation to the maintenance, resurgence, and emergence of »affective economies« (Ahmed). The entries in this *Lexicon* provide instructive insights into the discursive operations that melodramatic films have become engaged in across the globe, in contexts of different moral economies and ethical systems. These manifold approaches toward melodrama—which the *Lexicon* entries showcase in their diverse selection of international film—demonstrate that the late 18th century European model of melodrama, as popular and prominent as it may be, cannot claim universal applicability. Moreover, in her monograph *Global Melodrama*, Carla Marcantonio stresses the importance of a critical examination of melodrama for understanding the conditions of globalization: »Melodrama allows us to make sense of the ways in which globalization has reorganized our affective and sociopolitical domains« (2). After all, »cinema's explosive global spread as the first truly universal medium occurred at the end of the age of empire« (Mehta 179). Concomitantly, the *Lexicon* takes to heart a poignant question raised by Gledhill and Williams: How far might the global proliferation of melodrama be read as »an import from the West and North via colonization, modernization, or, more recently, corporate globalization« (7)? Such considerations have been relevant for the selection of films in this volume. Taken together, the contributions demonstrate how such definitions and trajectories of melodrama can be applied and revised in discussions of global melodrama over time and across cultures. The articles included here highlight how the defining aesthetic strategies of melodramatic film—such as the intensified imbrication of acting, *mise-en-scène*, and music, for the creation of maximal effects of expressivity—have endured and now circulate globally. At the same time, the *Lexicon* features many films that clearly operate with melodramatic strategies but whose aesthetics are indicative of significant transformations and diversifications of the melodramatic formula.

Many of the films presented in this volume are U.S. productions due to the early institutional prominence and power of Hollywood cinema, echoing Berlant's verdict that the U.S. is and always has been »a sentimental nation.« However, the *Lexicon of Global Melodrama* includes films and (co-)productions from Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, England, France, Germany (both East and West), Hong Kong, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Ukraine, and Venezuela. The collection thus offers a much broader perspective, establishes a global canon of melodrama (notwithstanding its local, regional, and national manifestations), and invites a comparative angle toward a type of film that for more than one hundred years has been one of the most popular, prolific, and commercially successful modes of cinematic expression while becoming ever more ubiquitous over the last decades. In fact, as our selection of films aptly demonstrates, melodrama continues to infuse and inform a very diverse range of genres—amalgamating, in Cawelti's sense, with other formulas such as science fiction, the thriller, and the Western.

Organized in chronological order rather than according to the logics of national or cultural provenance, this volume offers an overview of melodrama since the beginning of film in the early 20th century and shows it for what it is: a global phenomenon. While the book's diachronic trajectory begins over 110 years ago, the synchronic coverage thickens from the 1990s onward. Not incidentally, the first film discussed here is D. W. Griffith's silent film *A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909), which ties the genre to the didactic agenda of social reform movements (here, the temperance movement) and enacts a tale of personal conversion through sentimental appeal. The last film in our chronology is *No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI* (2020), directed by Faraz Shariat and produced by the young, queer, Germany-based BIPOC Jünglinge collective. Set in the present, the film employs melodramatic strategies to provide cinematic space for the marginalized perspectives of queer diasporic, (post-)migrant, and refugee positions, against the backdrop of globalization and its variegated outcomes including global migratory movements and the emergence of transnational pop culture.

Each contribution in this book stands on its own. Entries provide a summary of a film's plot (spoiler alert), critically contextualize the film in cultural and film history, and establish a succinct overview of relevant research topics and trajectories. We have also included cross-references (→) to indicate influences between works and directors across time and place. A film such as Douglas Sirk's popular domestic Hollywood melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* is referenced not only in later films in the Hollywood archive (such as Clint Eastwood's *The Bridges of Madison County*), but also by filmmakers outside of the U.S. (such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ulrike Ottinger, and François Ozon). Similarly, the Nigerian film *Living in Bondage* (1994) has turned out to be foundational for Nollywood filmmaking, while the Argentine film *The Official Story* (1985) has exerted influence for several decades regarding its melodramatic approach to the representation of collective national trauma, in Argentina and beyond.

This book clearly cannot include each and every Hollywood blockbuster. Instead, it discusses specific types of melodramas in exemplary fashion. At the same time, our aim is to move beyond a narrow Euro-American canon of the genre and to present the melodramatic in both its global reach and regional variety. Still, this collection is eclectic rather than exhaustive, and it invites further discussion and extension of its melodramatic canon. We hope this book will encourage interest in the phenomenon and discourse of global melodrama, in the growing scholarship thereof, and in the films themselves.

Finally, a few words of thanks. The editors owe thanks to the large international and multidisciplinary cast of contributors who have written original essays for this volume. At home in a broad range of disciplines—including media and film studies, English and American studies, German studies, comparative studies, Chinese studies, gender and queer studies, area studies, postcolonial studies, political science, and sociology—all have lent their expertise to the making of this book. We greatly appreciate these collaborations in the spirit of intellectual generosity. We are particularly grateful to Kay Kirchmann for helping us reach out to scholars in the field of media studies. The convergence of the manifold disciplinary and cultural perspectives in the *Lexicon* will hopefully pave the way for an increasingly transdisciplinary and multifaceted understanding of global melodrama.

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***A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909)**

Tom Gunning

dir. D. W. Griffith; screenplay D. W. Griffith; photography Billy Bitzer. silent, 35mm, black/white, 15 mins. The Biograph Company.

A Drunkard's Reformation is a one-reel film directed by D. W. Griffith for the Biograph Company in 1909. Not only a seminal film in Griffith's career, it marks an essential moment as the new medium of film defined its relation to the theatrical tradition of melodrama. Griffith and his cameraman Billy Bitzer shot the film in three days



at Biograph's 14th Street studio in New York City in February and March 1909, and it was released in theaters on April 1 (Cherchi Usai 57). The film shows a young father with a drinking problem who attends a theater with his daughter, where they see a performance of a temperance melodrama. The Biograph's own publicity bulletin issued for the film stressed both the film's moral value and its novel narrative form, »showing as it does a play within a play. It is a sort of triangular in structure, that is to say, the play depicts to the leading actor in the picture the calamitous results of drink, while the whole presents to the spectator the most powerful temperance lesson ever propounded« (*Biograph Bulletin*). This structure constitutes an innovative moment in the evolution of film language, as the central sequence introduces a point-of-view editing pattern, alternating shots of the stage drama with the reaction of the audience. The editing not only conveys a character's point of view but also follows in detail a carefully calibrated psychological transformation as we see the father's emotional reaction to the play.

The film demonstrates how cinema absorbed and transformed stage melodrama by literally cannibalizing a staged performance. The play that the father and daughter attend is *Drink*, an 1879 theatrical adaptation by Charles Reade of Émile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* (1877). Whereas Zola's novel offered a scandalous naturalist exploration of working class poverty, Reade's drama staged Zola's work as pure melodrama, especially by making the character Virginie a conventional villain who maliciously gives the drunkard Coupeau poisoned wine (Mayer qtd. in Cherchi Usai 59). The theme of

the miseries of a drunkard's life had formed a major genre of melodrama throughout the 19th century, convincing reformers suspicious of stage entertainments that theater could serve as a moral force. In 1909, *A Drunkard's Reformation* offered a similar justification for the movies, a new cheap form of entertainment viewed as immoral by many conservative critics (Gunning 151-71).

In his essential critical work, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks describes the thematic core of melodrama as the revelation of a »moral occult« (5-8). Melodrama, Brooks demonstrates, does more than simply portray innocence threatened by villainy. Through deceit, the villain of melodrama tries to subvert moral order by obscuring the true signs of innocence. The denouement of melodrama restores moral order through a public proof of innocence and a clear revelation of the villain's perfidy. Melodrama enacts this moment of moral revelation through a triumphant display of veracious signs. During the 19th century the signs of virtue and vice became increasingly psychological and interiorized, but their public acknowledgement remained the genre's central climax. The context of the restoration of virtue also became increasingly domestic, as melodrama placed its faith in home and family.

The opening and closing of *A Drunkard's Reformation* define the initial threat to domestic harmony and the ultimate restoration of a happy home. The film's first two shots present the interior of a family dining room where mother (played by Linda Arvidson) and daughter (Adele De Garde) await the return of father and husband (Arthur Johnson). The third shot presents the threat, cutting from the family scene to the all-male environment of the saloon where the errant father drinks with cronies, ignoring his family. The missing father and the contrast between the family dining room and the saloon establish the moral imbalance this melodrama will resolve. When the father returns home drunk, his behavior marks him as a potential villain: He scorns the slippers his daughter brings to him, smashes crockery, and threatens wife and child with violence.

This disruption of hearth and home will be reversed in the denouement. In the film's penultimate shot, the husband returns to the dining room and pantomimes a vow to never drink again. Griffith then concludes the film with a strongly pictorial closing shot as the family now cuddles together before a glowing hearth; a striking lighting effect basks them with light and warmth, an image of domestic felicity and moral resolution. What has redeemed this family, reformed the drunkard, and motivated this transformation in imagery? The answer, of course, is the stage melodrama the father attended and its moral lesson.

Over twenty shots, Griffith intercuts the stage performance of *Drink* and, crucially, the father's reactions to it. On stage, Coupeau, a young laborer, weds Gervaise after signing a pledge to give up alcohol. The newlyweds have a child and seem happy, but Coupeau's companions persuade him to resume drinking. Drunk, he abuses his wife and child, becoming violent. He is admitted to a hospital with *delirium tremens* and returns home, warned that he must never drink again. A scorned former sweetheart gives him a poisoned bottle of wine. Drinking it, Coupeau succumbs to dementia, attacking his wife and child violently and then dying in convulsions. The acting in this compressed melodrama is intense, violent, and emblematic, with highly expressive gestures, especially during Coupeau's mania and death throes.

In contrast to this intensely mobile action, Johnson's and De Garde's reactions to the play, while expressive and readable, are conveyed primarily by facial and hand gestures, a style of acting arguably more cinematic than the performances presented on

stage. Alternately cutting between stage and audience provides the major means of conveying the film's lesson. This editing articulates *Drink's* action on stage with the reactions of the father in the audience, thus underscoring the play's effect and significance. The pattern of alternation between stage and auditorium does more than simply convey the presence of an audience watching the performance. By Griffith's careful selection of cutting points, it stresses the stages of the father's reaction to the play, creating one of the very first cinematic sequences of a psychological portrayal. This series of reactions thus provides the essential action of the film, rendering the stages of the drunkard's reformation visible.

Through a combination of expressions, gestures, and intercutting, Griffith shows that the father discovers a parallel between the stage play and his own life. The first such indication is rather anodyne: As Coupeau's family appears on stage with a young daughter, Griffith cuts to the father who nudges his daughter and points at the stage. This cut between stage and audience, bridged by the father's gesture, establishes an essential significance of the film's structure and defines the role of melodrama in the film. To be a spectator, it tells us, means to see analogies, to recognize that a play can mirror one's life. The dynamic meaning of this mirroring is stressed through the successive alternations between stage and spectator, as Johnson repeats this pointing gesture to his daughter. As the play progresses, the father soon becomes bored and restless. However, as on stage Coupeau's cronies persuade him to break his vow and take a drink, the film cuts to Johnson becoming uncomfortable in the audience. In the following shots Johnson looks increasingly disturbed as he witnesses Coupeau getting drunk and violently pushing Gervais to the floor when she comes to bring him home from the tavern. Later in the play when Coupeau returns from the hospital and becomes manic after drinking the poisoned wine, attacking his wife and child, Griffith cuts to Johnson fully alarmed, repeatedly touching his breast to express his identification with the stage action, recognizing his possible future.

The return home of father and daughter after the play displays the impact of the lesson of the melodrama. Standing in their dining room, Johnson performs a pantomime: pointing off (presumably towards the theater), pounding his chest, and then holding up a wine bottle before throwing it to the floor. The pantomime clearly visualizes that he has identified the true villain of his own drama: himself (through pounding his chest) and the demon drink. As the *Biograph Bulletin* indicates, the »triangular« structure of the film demonstrates not only that the melodrama has reformed the film's character, but that the film as a »whole« has the potential to transform the viewers of the film as well. Besides showing how melodrama can teach a moral lesson, *A Drunkard's Reformation* reveals cinema's ability to express the moral occult through its own stylistic means: not only the narrative action and pantomime but also through the portrayal of psychological transformation by means of cinematic point-of-view editing. This film thus establishes a motif that becomes crucial in movie melodramas: The witnessing of a scene whose moral and emotional significance is visually marked through both its stylistic framing (the staged play in *A Drunkard's Reformation*) and its subjective impact. The role of the spectacle as revelation of the moral occult becomes essential to the best film melodramas: from the courtroom revelations in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) to the wedding witnessed by the mother through the window in King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), to the final public funeral march in Douglas Sirk's → *Imitation of Life* (1959). Cinematic style not only stages such moments of melodramatic

significance and transformation but even underscores their impact »triangularly«—to characters, and, by extension, to spectators.

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Back to God's Country (1919)

Markus Heide

dir. David Hartford; prod. James Oliver Curwood, Ernest Shipman; screenplay Nell Shipman, James Oliver Curwood; photography Dal Clawson, Joseph Walker. silent, 35mm, black/white, 73 mins. Canadian Photoplays Ltd., distrib. First National Exhibitors' Circuit.

Back to God's Country is a Northwoods melodrama, a genre quite popular in the first decades of North American filmmaking: a sentimental adventure story set in the Canadian »wilderness,« juxtaposing the purity of nature to urban immorality and vice. *Back to God's Country* is considered the most successful Canadian silent film with regard both to financial profit and critical acclaim (Clandfield 5-6). The film is based on the short story »Wapi, the Walrus« by U.S.-American novelist James Oliver Curwood. The lead actress, Nell Shipman, adapted the adventure story and made the protagonist female—much to the disapproval of Curwood himself, who disliked the fact that in the film adaptation it is a heroine who saves her husband (Morris 95). While *Back to God's Country* faced problems with censorship authorities due to its nude scene, this scene at the same time aroused the heightened interest of the audience. For a few seconds, Shipman can be seen bathing naked under a waterfall (Heide and Kotte 30; Armatage).

This melodrama, following the formula of the captivity narrative, is built on a suspense structure nurtured by a clear contrast between evildoers and morally pure representatives of Canadian society. The set-up of characters and settings reflects social differences and conflicts within Canadian society, such as regional characteristics, gender roles, ethnic diversity, and racism. While the movie fosters a critical view on anti-Chinese sentiment as well as sexualized violence, its use of blackfacing and the »entertaining« depiction of Inuit confrontation with modern technology borrow from and reproduce racist forms of representation. The setting of the love drama spans the nation, from West to East to North, from British Columbia to Ontario to the



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Arctic—corresponding to a stronger demand for distinctly Canadian perspectives in film during and after World War I (Morris 82, 92, 175). This filmic journey through the Dominion of Canada turns social space into a domestic stage that must be protected and cleared from sexual transgression, illegitimate violence, and crime. The emotional drive of the narrative is heightened by the inclusion of domesticated animals and the protagonist's strong emotional ties to a dog as well as bear cubs, racoons, and other animals and friendly forest creatures. The »wildlife film« (Armatage 262) was particularly successful because of its leading actress, Shipman (Heide and Kotte 28-31), who had already starred in the U.S.-produced Northwoods melodramas *God's Country and the Woman* (1916) and *Baree, Son of Kazan* (1918).

Back to God's Country opens with two storylines: One focuses on Dolores LeBeau (Shipman), spanning from her late childhood into married life and motherhood, and the other on the fate of the dog, »Wapi, the Killer,« spanning from his ancestry to his domesticated life in the caring human community of the Canadian family. These storylines eventually merge, with both protagonists in existential struggle against evil forces and the hostile Arctic. The meeting of the narratives eventually results in a happy ending for both the human and non-human protagonist.

The drama begins with a prologue on the history of Far North settlements in the 1870s, told through the fate of a Great Dane and his owner, as the intertext puts it, »in days when the lure of gold lay heavy on the land there labored into the great white north a Chinaman named Shan Tung, and with him a giant dog called Tao.« When Shan Tung and Tao enter the lively saloon, the impressive dog is welcomed by friendly looking and curious eyes, but the crowd reacts with dismissive and hostile looks when Shan Tung takes off his fur cap and reveals his face. At the bar, a drunken brute approaches Shan Tung and cuts off his braid. The fellow guests are amused and react with laughter. But the intertext informs the audience that this is the »deadliest of all insults« to the Chinese man. When Shan Tung takes out his knife to take revenge, the brute shoots him dead. With this act of violence, the dog's migration further north begins: »In the years that follow, farther and still farther north wanders the blood of Tao the Great Dane, until at last [...] on the edge of the Arctic Sea, comes »Wapi, the Killer,« a throwback of forty dog generations, a white man's dog in a brown man's land.« Wapi is trained to be a fighting dog, constantly chained and mistreated by his owner, Sealskin Blake, a trader among »the Eskimo.« The prologue introduces Wapi in sentimental and anthropomorphic terms: »An alien without friends, hating the men who understand nothing of the magic of kindness and love, but whose law is the law of the whip and the club.« Beyond introducing the animal protagonist, the prologue defines the leitmotif of the melodrama: the danger of destroying the friendly coexistence between different ethnic groups, between the sexes, and between humans and animals in the North.

Following the prologue, the viewer encounters Dolores as a young woman who grew up in the northern Rocky Mountains. The first scenes show her enjoying an isolated life, solely with her father, in a remote log house, in total harmony with nature and wildlife. When Peter (played by Wheeler Oakman), a researcher sent by a government agency, enters the scene, Dolores' father senses that a marital prospect might open for his daughter, who had thus far led a life fully immersed in nature, unexposed to human society and the city. And indeed, Dolores and Peter eventually fall in love and plan on a future together. However, the editing technique reveals that the idyllic life in »God's Country« is under threat. Here, the camera's gaze shifts to »Captain« Rydal

(played by Wellington A. Playter) and his companion, who appears in blackface. After having brutally killed a Canadian mounted policeman, Rydal puts on the latter's uniform. The evildoers first spot Dolores when she bathes naked under a waterfall. While Peter is on his way back to Ottawa, Rydal tries to rape Dolores, with his companion staring on lustfully at the scene. When Dolores' father interferes, he accidentally kills the blackfaced man. Rydal, still in disguise, arrests the father and leads him into the forest, isolating Dolores in the log house as his prey. In the woods, Rydal pushes the father down a cliff into a wild river, from which Dolores retrieves his dead body. Peter returns unexpectedly and finds Dolores devastated on the riverbank. Rydal observes the scene from afar and gives up on Dolores—escaping, before reappearing in the second part of the film.

A fade-out and a fade-in indicate a leap in time. We see Dolores and Peter, now a married couple, settled in a luxurious house in Ottawa. While Peter works in his library, Dolores dreams of a return to her childhood home in the West. The couple receives note that Peter's agency will be sending him up North. We next see the couple »weeks later aboard the *Flying Moon*. Round the jagged coast of Baffin Land into the edge of the Arctic Sea.« It turns out that Rydal is the captain of the vessel. He threatens to kill Dolores' husband if she reveals his identity. Dolores is therefore completely at the mercy of the evil captain, who continues to try to seduce her. Following Rydal's first attempt at murder, Peter is left injured and has to stay in his cabin as a captive. Later, Rydal and his evil companion, Sealskin Blake, keep the couple trapped in a lonely wooden hut in the midst of Arctic ice on Baffin Island. In this hopeless situation, Dolores, the animal lover, befriends Wapi, who is kept in unbearable conditions, chained, and abused by the whip. At this point, the generic narrative takes an exceptional turn. Dolores assumes an active role, transforming into a heroine who fights against male persecutors and thereby confronts the viewer with a matrimonial relationship that contradicts traditional patriarchal patterns. The husband is injured, passive, immobile—while the wife acts in a male-dominated environment, defends herself, shoots at her kidnappers, and endures the extreme hardship of the Arctic. With the help of Wapi, Dolores manages to escape on dog sleds—led by faceless, voiceless Inuit—across the Barents Sea. The wild chase on the ice is framed in spectacular, on-location images, following the desperate heroine and her merciless pursuers. Some of the scenes are ostensibly shaky images, adding existential urgency and suspense. Finally, Dolores makes Wapi attack Rydal's sled dogs. With Wapi's aid the couple reaches civilization at Fort Confidence in the Northwest Territories, but Wapi himself is left severely injured on the ice. At the Fort, the military police are informed about Rydal's evil activities. Rydal, who tries to escape, falls into the frozen lake, and the camera follows his sinking dead body. Finally, Wapi reappears, and the narrative solution is dramatically triggered: »Wapi—dear old Wapi—we're going home—home—and you are going with us...«

The closing scenes show the couple happily back in the Western idyll, back in »God's Country,« where Dolores grew up and for which she has longed: »and then the old dream . . . COME TRUE.« We see a group of wolf puppies, bears, and other animals in the forest. A shot of Dolores cuddling with a bear cub is followed by the couple at the desk: Peter writing, Dolores sewing. Both observe the scene, gently smiling. The final shot focuses on Wapi next to Dolores and Peter's infant on the floor. As Gittings rightly observes, »the film's opening image of a Chinese man and his dog is displaced by the white family and their dog« (110).

Back to God's Country shows a strong heroine who successfully defends herself against sexualized violence, and who takes the lead in rescuing her weakened husband—a role Nell Shipman repeated in *Something New*, a 1920 film she both wrote and directed (Armatage 121-60; Heide and Kotte 30). This gender constellation and this strong heroine may be read as an emancipatory statement. In fact, it attempts »to reverse the gaze of male voyeurism« (Gittings 108). However, the narrative closure reverts to traditional patriarchal patterns: Dolores' adventure ends in matrimonial reproduction. The ending reintroduces traditional middle class ideals of the nuclear family, with the sewing wife as mother and domestic laborer, and the husband, in his writing, professionally linked to the outside world. Through the anthropomorphized character of Wapi, even male heroic agency is reintroduced at the climax of the wild chase. When Wapi launches his decisive attack on the enemy's sled, the intertext comments: »Fighting at last the greatest of all his fights—for a woman.«

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Blind Husbands (1919)

Kay Kirchmann

dir. Erich von Stroheim; prod. Carl Laemmle; screenplay Erich von Stroheim; photography Ben F. Reynolds. silent, 35mm, black/white, 93 mins. Universal Studios, distrib. Universal Studios.

Blind Husbands was Erich von Stroheim's first directing job, after he had previously worked as an extra, actor, military advisor, and assistant for, among others, D. W. Griffith, upon leaving his home country, Austria, in 1909 to immigrate to the United States. There, his range of roles would initially be limited to the figure of the amoral German »Hun,« which eventually earned him the nickname »The Man You Loved to Hate« (Koszarski). Meanwhile, von Stroheim created his own fictional persona, using false statements concerning his confession, his supposedly noble descent, and his wide military experience, all of them self-fictionalizations only unmasked with the discovery of his birth certificate in 1966 (Lignon). The line between the self-stylization of his life's journey and the profiles of the characters he portrayed became increasingly blurred, with respect to both his own films and his appearances in the films of other famous directors (e.g. Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, or Billy Wilder's *Five Graves to Cairo* and *Sunset Boulevard*)—roles that von Stroheim was forced to accept more and more, once no major film studios were willing to offer him directing jobs after 1933. The reason was von Stroheim's notorious perfectionism, which made him infamously overspend any budget and abandon all shooting schedules, leading to legendary conflicts with producers like Carl Laemmle or Irving Thalberg, and which was also one of the reasons why nearly all of von Stroheim's directorial works were later cut or recut by his producers.

However, these aspects of Erich von Stroheim's biography and self-elevation as an artist figure, only briefly sketched here, have proven critical for the central place he occupies within a history of global melodrama. Von Stroheim decisively remodeled the generic precepts of directors like Griffith and synthesized them with the literary influences of Viennese modernism (especially that of Arthur Schnitzler). Similarly, the settings



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of his films sprang from a partly phantasmic, partly meticulous reconstruction of European settings in U.S. film studios (Cuff). For example, von Stroheim's excessive realism led him to recreate the Monte Carlo setting for *Foolish Wives* (1922) in great detail, even though these sets were on screen for but a few minutes. Only two of his altogether nine films—*Greed* (1924) and *Walking Down Broadway* (1944)—were set in the United States, with all others set in Europe (Weinberg). This also applies to *Blind Husbands*, which—together with the *The Devil's Passkey*, now lost, and *Foolish Wives*—forms the so-called trilogy of Seduction. The Armstrongs, a U.S.-American doctor-couple, spend their vacation in Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomites, where they encounter the Austrian Lieutenant Eric(h) von Steuben (played by von Stroheim), who quickly notices that Margaret (Francelia Billington) is neglected by her husband, Robert (Sam de Grasse), and he therefore tries to seduce her. After a long deliberation under the incessant observation of Sepp (T. H. Gibson-Gowland), a mountain guide who is a friend of Robert's, Margaret finally renounces von Steuben's erotic advances. Nonetheless, a dramatic showdown ensues between the rival men during a mountain tour, with von Steuben finally falling to his death from the mountaintop. Upon his departure, Robert promises Sepp that he will take better care of his wife.

Von Stroheim makes clear that he almost provocatively adheres to traditional melodramatic triangulation when he opts not to list the characters' actual names in the opening credits but lists them instead as »The Husband,« »The Wife,« and »The Other Man« and thus strips them of any individualization. And despite the film's ending, which would be worthy of a morality play, *Blind Husbands* sharply differentiates itself from the familiar sentimentalisms of melodrama, instead portraying its protagonists both as sex-driven and with a moral integrity that is superficial at best: »There is an honest depravity to his characters, none of whom shy away from, or apologize for their amoral desires. The philandering wife of *Blind Husbands* and the duplicitous seducer of *Foolish Wives* are certainly a world away from the True Heart Susies of D. W. Griffith« (Gallagher). American Puritanism, personified in the film by Robert, whose sense of duty causes him to overlook his wife and her needs, is countered by von Stroheim's character, the caricature of a superficially polite and educated European aristocrat and officer, who is, however, ultimately exposed as a braggart and pathological womanizer: »The lieutenant's part was an extension of »the man you love to hate,« the Prussian villain created by von Stroheim in films like *The Hearts of Humanity*« (Koszarski 41). Again and again, von Stroheim acts out the female characters' erotic fascination for uniforms, here as well as in later films, supplemented by the allure of other fetishes such as the monocle, the rapier, and gloves. Von Stroheim, according to André Bazin, is the inventor of a »Cinema of Cruelty,« whose symbolic manifestation is represented by uniforms and other military devotional objects. In contrast to the erotic attraction in the female gaze on the militaristically adorned body, the gazes with which Sepp and von Steuben alternately assess their clothing are marked by pure contempt. Von Stroheim's historical contribution to the development of melodrama lies in the reflexive integration of scopophilia and fetish into the genre's formal arsenal. In his taxonomy of cinematic signs, Gilles Deleuze has identified von Stroheim, along with Luis Buñuel, as a protagonist of the so-called impulse-image, and emphasized the constitutive importance of the fetish and, consequently, of the partial object for this special form of the cinematic affection-image (2002, 128-30). One of von Steuben's very first looks at Margaret during

the carriage ride to the hotel is already directed at her shackles and shoes, which are highlighted as special objects of display through his monocle.

Nevertheless, the voyeuristic curiosity in *Blind Husbands*, as in von Stroheim's other films, does not merely consist of a libidinal-voyeuristic visual paradigm. It is furthermore substantially supplemented and superimposed by a masochistically connoted *compulsion* to watch, especially in the context of female characters. The fetish, and the gaze at it, are, as Heide Schlüpmann has pointed out, central elements of masochism (46), which is why they take on such dominant roles in von Stroheim's films. As Deleuze (1991) has shown for literature, on the basis of Sacher-Masoch, and for film, on the basis of Josef von Sternberg, the masochistic gaze is initiated by a painful-pleasurable submission—grounded in infantile emotional needs—to the feeling of helplessness and the separation from the object of desire, irreversible but still played out again and again. On an aesthetic level, this corresponds with an emphatically desexualized coldness of style and gestures (Studlar 21), as has also been attested time and time again in the case of von Stroheim's films (Schlüpmann 47). Fully committed to this visual paradigm, Margaret's gaze, too, masochistically rests one time after the next on the happiness of the honeymooners, which is diametrically opposed to her own married life, and she also subdues herself to the controlling, and potentially deprecating, stare of the mountain guide. Furthermore, the »Vamp«-waitress (played by Fay Holderness), who is infatuated with von Steuben, follows his simultaneous courtship of several women with a self-tormenting, lustful devotion to masochistic pleasures of watching.

Coldness, cruelty, fetishism, masochistic curiosity—these are the structural changes that von Stroheim added to the early history of the melodrama. These innovations are linked back, on the one hand, to the stylization of the actor's body as a depraved figure of art, and, on the other hand, to the overwriting of U.S. genre traditions with the discourses of European literary and intellectual history (e.g. Sigmund Freud, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. *Blind Husbands* therefore stands at the beginning of a short-lived filmography that nevertheless provided decisive impulses for the globalization of melodrama.

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Applause (1929)

Stefanie Diekmann

dir. Rouben Mamoulian; prod. Monte Bell, Jesse L. Lasky (uncredited), Walter Wanger (uncredited); screenplay Garrett Ford, Beth Brown; photography George J. Folsey. 35mm, black/white, 80 mins. Paramount Pictures, distrib. Paramount Pictures.

Applause is one of many films from the 1920s which chose the backstage as their main setting and the idea of hidden drama as their main trope. Other examples from the same decade include *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Nana* (1926), → *The Blue Angel* (1929), and → *Pandora's Box* (1929). *Applause* remains one of the earliest films to associate the backstage with the spectacle of female suffering which, located behind the scenes and in the dressing room, remains unseen and unnoticed, except by the cinema audience. At the same time, it is also a film about the power of the (male) gaze and a fitting example to illustrate the discomforts of cinematic spectatorship.

Director Rouben Mamoulian is mostly remembered today for his critically acclaimed film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) and for his second melodrama, *Queen Christina* (1933), with Greta Garbo as the eponymous queen. *Applause* was his Hollywood debut, filmed and premiered in 1929. Until that year, Mamoulian had almost exclusively worked in the theater (with the exception of a two-color short film for the Eastman School of Music and Drama), first as a stage director in London and later as a director and producer of very successful Broadway plays such as *Porgy and Bess* or *Oklahoma*. Musical would also play a role in his filmography as a Hollywood director, alongside romantic adventure films like *The Mark of Zorro* (1940) and *Blood and Sand* (1941), before his career started to peter out in the 1940s. However, notwithstanding his interest in musical, comedy, and melodrama, he is less remembered for an affiliation with any particular genre than for his unconventional use of camera and sound, already visible in *Applause*. (With the advent of Technicolor, color schemes also came to play an important role in his films, starting with *Becky Sharpe* in 1935). Mamoulian's is a cinema marked by its proximity to theatrical settings and to drama as a mode of interaction. His films are above all con-



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cerned with intensity: Locations, decor, backdrops as much as camera, sound, and color are employed to heighten the potential of cinematic expression.

Applause was by no means an immediate success. Instead, the film, made before the Production Code, was lauded for some of the performances (Helen Morgan as the aging vaudeville star, Joan Peers as the young daughter who is urged to succeed her, Fuller Mellish Jr. as the nasty paramour and artistic manager), but also criticized, both for the supposed sleaziness of its backstage drama and for the introduction and staging of an unusual assortment of locations and settings. Several critics remarked that the film's plot represented a curious mixture of sentimentality and cruelty, focusing on the struggles of Kitty Darling (Morgan), single mother, burlesque dancer, and singer, exploited by her unfaithful lover, and, for most of her time on screen, presented as a performer unable to realize that she is long past her prime. In contrast, the story of April Darling (Peers), her daughter, is told as a straightforward compassionate tale, from innocence to peril, from peril to suffering, and from suffering to rescue; innocence and rescue both being associated with ordered life (a convent, a marriage) and rural environments, while peril is clearly located in the city, in the theater, and in the show business.

Indeed, pre-code or not, the plot of *Applause* contains little to offend self-appointed moral guardians. If it knows a thing or two about show business, that knowledge is used to present vaudeville as a place where misery starts early, a world associated with illegality (in one of the first scenes, the protagonist receives a telegram announcing the execution of her daughter's father in prison), exploitation, loose morals, and the ruin of many a poor girl. The daughter, who has spent her childhood years in the countryside, comes into contact with this world belatedly and all the more brutally, as a witness to her mother's decline and public ridicule and as the near-victim of a scheme to replace the aging body of the mother-performer with the young one of the daughter—a drama of succession and a crude but effective twist on the concept of succession which has been described in the famous study of *The King's Two Bodies* (Kantorowicz). From this fate, she will be rescued by a young man who will marry her and take her away from the city (theater, stage, backstage) and back to the countryside.

If these aspects (especially the daughter's struggle to remove herself from the world of burlesque performance) can be read as attempts to mark a certain distance between *Applause* and the world of ›cheap‹ entertainment to which cinema originally belonged (as part of fairground attractions and vaudeville shows), that distance is by no means stable. Moments of uneasy proximity between Mamoulian's film and the theatrical setting which it purports to investigate can be found throughout the story. This becomes particularly obvious in one scene, early on in the film, in which Kitty Darling appears in front of a male audience whose derisive and distorted faces are shown in a long series of close-ups, while the film cuts back and forth between the audience, clearly marked as voyeuristic and malicious, and the performer on stage who, just as clearly, is presented as a woman unable to judge her own appearance.

The film's mixed attitude towards its vaudeville protagonist, at once destructive and empathetic, is just as ambivalent as its attitude towards theater and showmanship. Vaudeville, as it is represented in *Applause*, may be exploitative, cynical, and misogynist. At the same time, as scene after scene makes evident, the film shares the idea that the downfall of Kitty Darling is that of a protagonist who has just missed the right time to step out of the limelight. The humiliation she experiences on stage, at the hands of the

audience, is continued off-stage, in the dressing room and in her hotel room where she is followed not just by various characters but also by the camera which observes the various stages of her disintegration and, finally, her collapse when she realizes that her career is over and that she is no longer wanted or desired.

In its representation of the backstage and the theater performer, *Applause* takes a different approach from many films of the 1920s and is actually closer to feature films from the 1930s onwards. In many of the earlier works, the dressing room is still a place of seduction and mastery, governed by a sovereign and sometimes mischievous performer firmly in control of the impression she makes and of the schemes and intrigues behind the scenes (a motif still to be found in the backstage scenes of Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* from 1942). It is only in the 1930s and 1940s, with films like *Stage Door* (1937) or *Entrée des Artistes* (1938), that the backstage and particularly the dressing room will be reconfigured as backgrounds to hidden suffering and desolation, an element that is both essential to many backstage movies and to the melodrama.

Indeed, the undeniable affinity that exists between backstage films and melodrama well into the 1970s and 80s may be explained by the fact that melodrama is a genre which tends to privilege the interior (closed spaces, walls, the private sphere) and by the tendency of many films about the theater to represent the dressing room as the sealed space *par excellence*, accessible only to the film camera, and, by mediation of that camera, the cinema audience. This approach goes hand in hand with the notion that hidden drama should be regarded (or represented) as more interesting than any drama that takes place on stage, just as the suffering behind closed doors promises to convey a higher state of intensity and authenticity than any public spectacle, be it located on a theater stage or elsewhere.

In short: Melodrama loves the dressing room, and the dressing room attracts melodrama, at least in cinema (Diekmann). In *Applause*, this liaison is used to create a number of scenes in which the stage performer, who is no longer fit to perform, will be submitted to a gaze that is at the same time compassionate and destructive (an observation which may be true for many film melodramas). It is also an essentially male gaze, endowed with the power to either affirm or negate the spectacle of the female body (Mulvey); and Mamoulian, in spite of his contemptuous attitude towards the men who visit the vaudeville *enfer*, fully subscribes to the idea that women of a certain age should best stay out of view if they want to stay out of trouble. Kitty Darling, the stage performer who has remained in the picture too long, is punished by an extended death scene, surrounded by photographs that depict her former, attractive stage persona. And if that spectacle of loneliness, despair, and bodily decline is drawn out to maximum effect, it also indicates that, in its attitude towards female protagonists, melodrama is rarely without sadism.

To establish the possibility of escape from the theatrical environment of closed spaces and hidden misery, *Applause* chooses the obvious way out: to encounter her young savior, the daughter first has to leave the theater building and step out into the city streets, and once the encounter has taken place, it is followed by a rather astonishing episode of outdoor scenes that take the lovers to various landmarks in New York City. If the film's ending with its promise of marital bliss in the Midwest remains a little bleak, there is no doubt that Mamoulian both excels and delights in the filming of these intermediary and semi-documentary outdoor scenes, mostly shot on location (with the exception of one scene on Brooklyn Bridge), with natural lighting, offering

spectacular views of cityscapes and the most striking contrast to the lugubrious rooms which are so present in the film's other episodes.

In many ways, *Applause* can be regarded as a good example of Frieda Grafe's observation about (middlebrow) cinema: It is often neither the story nor the message that constitute the value of a film. Instead, the interest lies in the images that tend to grow and unfold beyond the storyline. In the case of Mamoulian's Hollywood debut, these images may include: the intense observation, both relentless and compassionate, of a body in decline; the repeated focus on appearances on and off stage; the extended death scene, in which not even those who are in the same room pay attention to the protagonist; the extravaganza of the New York City shots; and the final scene which positions the young couple, firmly committed to a future in the Midwest, in front of a large poster that shows Kitty Darling, former vaudeville star, in all her splendor and glory, clearly designed to outshine the two and to destabilize any closure that may have been implemented by the plot (Kappelhoff).

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Pandora's Box (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1929)

Sophie Johanna Schweiger

dir. Georg Wilhelm Pabst; prod. Seymour Nebenzal;
screenplay Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Ladislaus Vajda;
photography Günther Krampf; music Timothy Brock.
silent, 35mm, black/white, 110 mins. Nero-Film A. G.,
distrib. Süd-Film.

Released just before the Weimar film scene's transition from silent to sound, *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1929) stands among the most iconic moving pictures of its time. The production is the first in a series of filmic collaborations between Austrian director G. W. Pabst and U.S.-American actress Louise Brooks—a rather unlikely constellation, considering the competitive relationship between Berlin's and Hollywood's production empires at the time. The two films that Pabst and Brooks worked on next, *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929) and *Beauty Prize* (1930), are frequently read as serial continuations of the narrative around »Lulu,« the infamous heroine of *Die Büchse der Pandora*. However, neither of these unofficial sequels reached the fame and cult status that the debut has enjoyed. While initially *Die Büchse der Pandora* was neither critically nor commercially successful, it belatedly gained iconic status in the 1950s, due to the efforts of *Cinemathèque Française*'s founder, Henri Langlois (Krenn and Moser). Today, *Die Büchse der Pandora* is viewed as an emblem of its time. This is rooted in the film's exploration of seriality's relationship to the melodramatic mode as well as in the ambiguity of the heroine, Lulu, who continues to inspire new interpretations in film, text, comics, and countless other visual and new media.

Die Büchse der Pandora is divided into eight consecutive episodes or »acts.« Organized by »an optics of eroticism« (Doane 66), the intermittent narrative tells the story of Lulu, a *variété* dancer who engages in a series of flirts, affairs, and romantic liaisons, as well as one unhappy marriage, before she eventually falls prey to the notorious serial killer, Jack the Ripper. Throughout this series of melodramatic events, Lulu, far from passively



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enduring her fate, proves herself a willful agent of the plot. It is Lulu who approaches the men—and women—she is interested in, and who makes sure that her desires are met, usually with seemingly little awareness for the consequences of her behavior. It is Lulu who torpedoed the happy engagement of a wealthy man so that she can marry him herself, before she then also ensnares her new husband's adult son. It is Lulu who puts an end to the unhappy marriage and stabs the abusive husband—arguably in an act of self-defense. It is also Lulu who eventually seals her own fate with a last romantic conquest: In the final act, set in murky London and in a milieu of abject poverty, she heads out on Christmas Eve to find her murderer. Unaware of his identity, she picks up Jack the Ripper, coaxes him into coming with her, ignoring his reluctance and insistence on the inability to pay for her services. »Come on, I like you« are Lulu's final words.

The episodic structure of *Die Büchse der Pandora* highlights how the proliferation of melodrama is intricately linked to the heroine's—as well as the filmic medium's—dependence on seriality. Indeed, the melodramatic mode seems to emerge from the heroine herself. After Alexander von Antalfy's *Lulu* (1917), starring Erna Morena, and Leopold Jeßner's *Pandora's Box* (1921) and *Earth Spirit* (1923) starring Asta Nielsen, Pabst's 1929 adaptation both responds to and fully exposes the material's affinity to serial iteration. »Lu-Lu« is conceived as the very principle of dramatic repetition. She becomes legible as the protagonist in a violent soap opera, a format that, like Pabst's film, »defers its moment of narrative closure« (Allen and van den Berg 2). And it is in this regard that the melodramatic mode reveals itself most openly: in Lulu's fundamental inability to avoid repeating mistakes, in her insatiable hunger for more, her irrepressible movement from conquest to conquest, and from sexual encounter to sexual encounter. The schematic formula of »the stronger the serialization [...] the more overt the melodrama« (Williams 177) proves accurate and simultaneously sums up the hopelessness of a dilemma that cannot be resolved—or only could be in radical ways. Significantly, *Die Büchse der Pandora* enlists an actual »serial killer« to stop the proliferation of drama and to put a preliminary end to the series.

Despite the radicality with which the film eventually disposes of its heroine, she is not the villain, and she resists being identified as »the very principle of evil,« as Frank Wedekind, the author of the textual Lulu, did. Rather, the film »updated Wedekind's femme fatale« (McCarthy 217) and found ways to give more nuance to the character. In Pabst's version, and even more so in Brooks' unique interpretation of the character, Lulu remains an ambiguous figure. She is, as has been argued, »always in-between« (Elsaesser 19). She is also, one could argue, always *both*: perpetrator *and* victim, androgynous *and* classically feminine, resistant *and* fragile. In this, Lulu marks an eminently modern intervention into the history of a tearful genre. In contrast to the heroines of the classical domestic tragedy, who proved themselves worthy of the spectator's compassion by marrying all qualities seen as desirable in a female (virtuousness, modesty, sensibility, compassion, and innocence), Lulu, in her perfect ambiguity, rather poses a challenge to the tradition—and thereby to the affective response of the audience. While there is no question that Lulu is the victim of the patriarchal structures surrounding her, the mere fact that she refuses to suffer quietly—and, for instance, is capable of publicly throwing a tantrum to get her way instead of despairing in private, of pleading not guilty after stabbing her husband, of eventually trying to sell her body in order to earn money—distinguishes her character from that of the classical melodramatic heroines prevalent in the films of her time.

This is how *Die Büchse der Pandora* modernizes melodrama. The film employs an aesthetic of serialization to amplify the melodramatic mode. At the same time, it presents a heroine as vector throughout the series, who at times invites classically melodramatic modes of reception—pity and compassion for an illegitimately suffering female, for example—but who also systematically disappoints the viewer, should they, as the domestic tragedy has taught them to, attempt to identify with the heroine fully and at all times. *Die Büchse der Pandora* is a formal-aesthetic celebration of melodrama that refuses to be watched and enjoyed as such. That Lulu has been and still is subject to citation across media is also rooted in this very tension: The film presents itself as a melodrama, but Lulu, the melodramatic subject, discourages the viewer from identifying with her. It is the medium's intrinsic seriality itself, exemplified by Lulu's incessant need to repeat and reproduce drama that gives the melodrama its modern form and that lays the ground for Lulu's continued citation.

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The Blue Angel (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930)

Lars Nowak

dir. Josef von Sternberg; prod. Erich Pommer; screenplay Carl Zuckmayer, Karl Vollmöller, Robert Liebmann; photography Günther Rittau, Hans Schneeberger; music Friedrich Hollaender. 35mm, black/white, 104 mins. UFA, distrib. UFA/Paramount.



In *Der blaue Engel*, an early sound film, the unworldly grammar school teacher Immanuel Rath (played by Emil Jannings) falls in love with the lascivious nightclub singer Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich). As his marriage with her forces him to give up his middle class existence, he joins her vaudeville troupe, where he makes himself useful by acting as a clown. Having to appear in this humiliating role in a guest performance in his hometown as well as being sexually betrayed by his wife, he breaks down and returns to his school, where he eventually dies. This story of psychological degradation, social decline, and physical death is predominantly categorized as a tragedy (e.g. Sarris 25, 28; Bronfen 117; Klein 67). Yet McCormick calls this tragedy »rather trite« and »heavy-handed« (125, 201), while Bartl explicitly distinguishes Rath from a »tragic martyr« (46; all translations mine). Consequently, Seeßlen instead classifies the film as »melodrama« (61), which, although sharing commonalities, differs from tragedy in more important respects.

Indeed, Rath's only tragic feature is his moral ambivalence, which primarily results from the fact that he himself brings about his downfall by marrying Lola—an ambivalence that applies to characters in tragedy as well (Nowell-Smith 72; Kappelhoff 250). In contrast, the pathetic character's male identity is *not* a specifically tragic trait, as it also occurs in American melodramas of the 1950s in which young men fail to advance to the paternal position as well as in other cinematic corpora that can be interpreted in terms of the melodramatic mode, such as the film noir or the action film, where men often fall victim to *femmes fatales* or are physically tormented by other men (Elsaesser 79; Kappelhoff 245-62; Mercer and Shingler 89, 98-104).

Instead, several elements of the film indicate that Sternberg converted Heinrich Mann's 1905 novel, *Professor Unrat*—which ends with the title character's transformation into an anarchist rebel (Müller 38-39)—from a satire into a melodrama. To begin with, Rath is a petty bourgeois who, as a bachelor, is already socially marginalized and receives little respect from his students. This limitation of the character's social decline corresponds to the supposedly general human suffering of melodrama's bourgeois protagonists, who, unlike the politically powerful aristocrats of pre-bourgeois tragedy, at best command a family and private property, but not the polity (Nowell-Smith 71). Moreover, Rath's decline shows a melodramatic contingency (Elsaesser 87) as it results from an individual misapprehension of what marriage to a vaudeville singer means. This error arises from the immaturity of Rath, who relates to Lola like a son does to his mother, just as melodrama typically enacts a regressive desire to return to the mother-child dyad (Neale 17-18). Finally, Rath does not bear his fate with tragic composure, but rather indulges in melodramatic self-pity (Elsaesser 87).

Although a teacher representing the social—or, in Lacan's terminology, the symbolic—order, Rath primarily laments his fate nonverbally, due in part to Jannings' attachment to silent film acting. This lack of verbal articulation reaches its climax when Rath, in the role of »Stupid August,« taken from a mute actor, can give only a desperate and inarticulate rooster cry (Klein 66-67). Another nonverbal means of expression is the exuberant décor that characterizes *Der blaue Engel* (and all subsequent films Sternberg realized with Dietrich). This is especially true of the eponymous nightclub, in which a visual excess is combined with an acoustic one, as an overabundance of decoration obscures the camera view just as different sounds cacophonously overlap. Again, these excesses point to melodrama, in which the characters' sufferings find no verbal expression because of their own repressions or textual censorship and instead manifest in physical symptoms or emotionally charged props (Brooks 56-80; Nowell-Smith 73-74; Elsaesser 75-76).

The most interesting melodramatic trait of *Der blaue Engel* is connected to the fact that melodrama can be understood as a masochistic genre, the audience of which voluntarily exposes itself to the empathy generated by the depiction of suffering characters. Like all Sternberg-Dietrich films, *Der blaue Engel* mirrors this performative masochism in a diegetic one (Studlar 1988) which at the same time includes elements of sadism (Koch 63, 65; McCormick 114). This aspect has been discussed by many critics. Bronfen, for instance, has pointed out a sadomasochistic circulation of the gaze that alternately assigns exhibitionist and voyeuristic positions to characters (124-29). Likewise, on the basis of Deleuze's theory of masochism, Lola (like Dietrich's roles in other Sternberg films) can be interpreted as a masochistic mistress (Koch 68) due to her multiple fetishizations and vestimentary and emotional ambiguity (Baxter; Pilipp 96-98, 102).

However, to adequately describe other aspects of the masochism represented in *Der blaue Engel*, especially those related to Rath, a recourse to Lacan's theorization of this »perversion« is necessary (1966, 774-78; 2016, 103-99). This perspective reveals that through his marriage Rath turns from a sadist into a masochist, in the sense of the relation between these two psychic structures as described by Lacan. The phantasmatic staging of both perversions corresponds to the fact that Rath regularly appears on literal and figurative stages in both phases (Koch 69; Bronfen 129, 133; Klein 57, 59, 62).

The reference to the big Other that is also crucial for both perversions (which includes both the will to enjoy and anxiety) presents itself in the sadistic phase through

the way that Rath—as a teacher who is introduced by his name and forbids the pupils to have contact with Lola, in whom he initially sees a daughter—appears as a (ridiculous) father figure, and thus as an embodiment of the law (Baxter 23; Bronfen 114, 117; Pilipp 92, 96). Rath's switch to the masochistic position entails a transition to the roles of disciple and son, which implies a subjection to the big Other, who is now represented not only by the masochistic mistress Lola, but also by the head of the show troupe, the dedicated sadist Kiepert (played by Kurt Gerron), and, eventually, again by the institution of the school (Baxter 22; Bronfen 117-20; McCormick 126; Pilipp 96, 100, 102).

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the imaginary self-images of human beings include various partial objects attached to the erogenous zones of their bodies. Since these »objects small a« are cut off by symbolic castration, they are not only the general object-causes of desire but also the reference points of the masochistic and sadistic will to enjoy and anxiety. In the latter case, the anal object plays a particularly important role, which is demonstrated in *Der blaue Engel* through an extensive thematization of impurity and contamination (Bartl). When during the sadistic phase Rath and one of his pupils involuntarily spit at each other while practicing English pronunciation, it becomes obvious that Rath primarily seeks the »object small a« in the body of his victim, but also already identifies himself with it. Rath's move to the masochistic position allows the identification with the »object small a« to come to the fore. From the viewpoint of bourgeois morality, Lola's vulgarity and open sexuality appear as filth (Bartl 37, 41, 43), which then rubs off on Rath—who is already deranged by his first contacts with her, and after the marriage goes to rack and ruin, ending up as a carcass in his old classroom (Klein 64; Bartl 37, 41-48). Yet, in the process, several objects are only transformed into dirt when touching Rath's body. Apart from the fact that, according to Lola, Kiepert drags Rath »durch den Kakao,« he actually smashes eggs on his head, which otherwise serve both oral nourishment and genital reproduction, while Lola herself blows her facial powder, whose proper function is narcissistic beautification, into his face (McCormick 202; Pilipp 93, 99-101; Bartl 45). It is thereby made clear that the vaudeville troupe merely reinforces an impurity that is already inherent in Rath himself (Bartl 43, 47). In fact, he is not only introduced by his name, but also by the waste and stench resulting from his cigar smoking and from the bird he keeps caged and finds dead one morning (Bartl 37, 47). He is furthermore characterized by the repulsive habit of demonstratively blowing his nose and is explicitly associated with filth by his students, who nickname him »Unrat« (a pun on the German word for »debris«). While Pilipp reads Rath's various bodily fluids as ejaculate and his clown act as castration (Pilipp 92-94, 97-99), all above-mentioned elements of the film indicate that an interpretation in terms of the anal »object small a« is more plausible.

Just as this subject matter makes *Der blaue Engel* Sternberg's most brutal film (Sarris 25, 28), it is also his only German production, a fact that is highlighted through its numerous borrowings from Weimar cinema (McCormick 114-22). This is no mere coincidence. Rather, Rath's downfall points just as much to the widespread prevalence of male fears of social descent in the Weimar Republic (McCormick 124) as his sadomasochism betrays an authoritarian character that can be considered, in a more general sense, typically German (Sembach 17).

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Ganga Bruta (1933)

Ana M. López

dir. Humberto Mauro; prod. Adhemar Gonzaga; screenplay Humberto Mauro, based on an idea by Octavio Gabus Mendes; photography Edgar Brasil; music Hacket Tavares and Radamés Gnatalli. 35mm, black/white, 82 mins. Cinédia, distrib. Cinédia.

Described by George Sadoul as »a landmark of Brazilian cinema« (123), *Ganga Bruta* deeply impressed the future directors of Cinema Novo when they saw it at a 1961 retrospective. Glauber Rocha, the best-known Cinema Novo director, celebrated the film as one of the best twenty films of all times and as a precursor of what the nascent movement was trying to accomplish. Yet, at the time of its release, *Ganga Bruta* was a box office failure and a disappointment for critics: Audiences were already used to imported »talkies« and the film's sound on disk with sparse dialogue did not resonate (Schwarzman). It was a huge setback for producer Adhemar Gonzaga, owner of the Cinédia studios, who was intent on proving that cinema that speaks Portuguese would be commercially successful in the pages of the well-known film magazine *Cinearte*. The film's failure almost derailed Humberto Mauro's directorial career, but Cinédia's subsequent musical films, closely linked to carnival and to urban popular music (and the impact of radio), would indeed prove Gonzaga right. The historical conjuncture of *Ganga Bruta*'s release was marked by profound uncertainty and change in media production and use: The early 1930s were interim years between the almost artisanal silent cinema era and the institutionalization of sound cinema as an industrial practice; at the same time as the emergence of sound cinema, radio, recording, and the discographic industries were growing as well (López). Neither Mauro nor Brazilian cinema had yet identified a route to commercial success in 1933.

Mauro had had a successful stint in silent films in his home state of Minas Gerais and had moved to Rio de Janeiro to work at Cinédia (which had new modern facilities). He went on to direct six more feature films after *Ganga Bruta* and more than 200 short and mid-length documentaries when he went to work at the National Institute of Educational Cinema, INCE (inaugurated in 1936). He eventually became a sort of »film laureate of Brazilian culture« until his death in 1983 (Rist).



Ganga Bruta is, above all, a family melodrama. The film begins with an upper class wedding and Marcos' (played by Durval Bellini) fatal shooting of his bride (played by Lu Marival) in their luxurious honeymoon suite upon discovering her alleged infidelity (that is, the fact that she is not a »virgin«). After being acquitted in the capital (with much press coverage) because of a law that allowed men to protect their »honor,« Marcos arranges for a high-ranking job in the countryside overseeing the construction of a mining plant. There, he is hosted by a middle manager at the plant, Décio (played by Décio Murillo), and moves into the company's large compound with him (and his wheelchair-bound mother and her beautiful, adopted daughter, Sônia [played by Déa Selva], who is also Décio's girlfriend). Marcos becomes infatuated with Sônia who instigates a romance and is very responsive to his romantic approaches. Eventually, after their relationship is disclosed, he accidentally causes Décio's death in a waterfall during a fight and marries Sônia, following the double funeral of Décio and his mother.

This plot summary is the stuff of most classic family melodramas of the early 20th century. Yet Mauro's film is surprising in its execution of this basic melodramatic plot. Beyond the over-the-top explicit representation of the film's melodramatic events, especially the bride's murder and Sônia's very sexually explicit attempts to seduce Marcos, Mauro uses the melodramatic mode to organize the film's stylistic heterogeneity. Take for example the very beginning of the film in which we only know what we know through dramatic close-ups of a luminous bride's face, a ring on a finger, gruesome shots of the »other« man, and the sound of shots when the bride is murdered. Similarly, the aftermath, shot in a super realist documentary-like style in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, the faces of newsboys hawking papers, the sounds of cars and trolleys (the sounds of modernity) and Marcos, on a trolley reading the headlines about himself. Above all, most of the film's key moments are presented via close-ups that would be disorienting were it not for their melodramatic force.

This formal heterogeneity does not undermine the melodramatic mode of the film; indeed, I would argue it heightens it. So much in *Ganga Bruta* depends on the spectator making narrative connections, deciphering, and anticipating the next steps as the plot unfolds. Without the melodramatic thread that Mauro keeps alive through his and Edgar Brasil's superbly poetic and extremely sensual cinematography, the film would not cohere. Their images are suffused with *chiaroscuros* and are romantic when the camera focuses on Sônia's almost innocent playful sexuality, dramatically expressionist when framing the construction site (machinery, sharp angles, nameless laborers at work, juxtaposed against the rolling hills of the landscape and the bucolic ways of country life), or almost like a neorealist rendition of a John Ford Western when depicting Marcos' visit and subsequent brawl at the local tavern, drunk over his remorseful attraction to Sônia.

Thematically the film follows a conservative social impulse that favors the patriarchal elite (rather than the working class). After all, Marcos does escape punishment after the femicide, has extraordinary physical strength, the will power, and professional savvy to build and manage a mining plant in the countryside, and manages to get the beautiful girl at the end even though he caused the death of her boyfriend. This is in fact, what the film's title alludes to: The »ganga« in the title refers to gangue, the waste materials of mining processes. The title of the film leads us to read Marcos, the protagonist, as the valuable ore that results from processes that also generate human discards (the first wife, Décio), certainly the profile of the type of man socially valorized at

the time (Schroeder Rodríguez). Although thematically the film seems to fully support a heteronormative conservative social position, its stylistic heterogeneity undermines that »message« at every turn and underlines the director's ironic perspective on the narrative. For example, the tavern brawl in which Marcos demonstrates his physical prowess and which is filmed like a saloon fight in a western proves his alleged superiority, but in a subsequent tavern sequence, he proceeds to misuse that power by demeaning the tavern's customers and making them do circus tricks upon demand. Similarly, Mauro focuses on and prolongs images that capture details of the *mise-en-scène* (leaves, shadows) or of Sônia's languid poses, laying on a hammock or on the grass, distending the »simple« narrative and establishing a cinematic grammar to manage and guide the spectator's emotions.

It is also important to note the shift in the film's narrative from Rio de Janeiro, the modern capital, represented by luxurious garments and mansions, a tuxedoed butler, and all the accoutrements of modernity (fast trolleys, traffic, newsboys), to a town in the countryside. Mauro shows us the *mise-en-scène* of modernity common in other early sound films but leaves it aside for the beauty of the rural landscape and its lush tropical plants, birds, and waterfalls. When Marcos must leave the city, the countryside still offers him hope, the opportunity to engage in what still could be. As the modern construction site—filmed in long shots that amplify its massive hulk—appears to put the human figure in its place, so does the waterfall—a site of beauty and tragedy—in which Décio meets his death. It is doubly ironic, of course, that the film ends almost exactly where it began: with a wedding and a death, only now in reverse order.

Mauro's *Ganga Bruta* points to stylistic directions that were not resurrected in Brazilian cinema until the Cinema Novo decades later. As Glauber Rocha (qtd. in Mauro 20; my translation) put it: »I can't stop thinking about *Ganga Bruta* [...] Mauro is not a poet of words, but a poet of images. [His] poetics completely annuls the primacy of literature, not by overcoming it with ingenuity but by destroying it in a universe created by the visual rhythm.«

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Masquerade in Vienna (Maskerade, 1934)

Robert Dassanowsky

dir. Willi Forst; prod. Karl Julius Fritzsche;
screenplay Walter Reisch, Willi Forst; photography
Franz Planer; music Willi Schmidt-Gentner. 35mm,
black/white, 95 mins. Sascha-Verleih, distrib.
Huschak & Company.

With the emergence of sound, Austrian cinema gained international renown for a stylized romantic-melodrama genre known as »Vienne-se Film.« It was created by Austrian musical star and film director Willi Forst, who was widely popular in Germany and across Europe, and noted screenwriter Walter Reisch, who would flee the Nazi German annexation of Austria to become an Oscar-winning Hollywood writer at MGM and Twentieth Century-Fox. The genre's narrative center in the original early and mid-1930s versions deals with the question of sacrificing love for art, which is presented philosophically, but is clearly an emotional and sentimental experience rather than a rational choice. By the late 1930s, as other directors took on the genre, the films continued to deal with the figure of the artist and such an existentialist choice but were also more broadly about sentimental narratives of Viennese life and its mores. What the genre also continued was stylized art direction, favoring elements of the Habsburg baroque, but also romanticized images of the suburban and even working class world and bohemian life, influenced by French director René Clair's poetic realism. A rich musical score borrowing from classical themes framed these melodramas in a uniquely sophisticated manner that made them significantly detached from the structures of Viennese operetta. As this »topos Vienna« moved beyond Forst and Reisch, its elements became established in Hollywood and further mutated there with Austro-Hungarian and German expatriate talent (Dassanowsky).

The plot of *Maskerade* (1934) is based on games of decadence like anything that might have been written by the Viennese author and playwright Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931).



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It recalls his plays *Anatol* (1893), *Liebelei* (*Flirtation*, 1895), and *Reigen* (1897), with their impressionistic interplay of sexuality and the unyielding demands of class and elitism. As he would do in most of his films about Vienna, Willi Forst places a passive man between two distinct types of women: the naïve and self-sacrificing *süßes Mädel* (the »sweet girl« of the suburbs or provinces) and the *femme fatale* (Jung; Linhart). For Austrian clerico-authoritarianism of the 1930s, as for German National Socialism, the image of the pure and devoted girl served as an important female role model in theater and film melodrama, and the debut of Paula Wessely as Leopoldine Dur (»Poldi«) in *Maskerade* establishes her image as the anti-glamour star until the postwar era (Seefßlen). Wessely's »naturalness« in appearance and acting provides Austrian and German film of the era with an adaptable ideal. She is able to win the hearts of handsome male leads in her films and to provide sympathetic identification for a female audience (Brecht and Steiner).

Willi Forst strove to season sentimentality with irony throughout his Vienna oeuvre, yet he grants Wessely's Poldi a tenderness that glows with *both* erotic and motherly possibilities. She represents the first in a long line of female leads to come who represent the filmmaker's desire to evoke the theatricality of a lost Vienna, while realistically skewing traditional gender roles and relationships. In *Maskerade*, which is set in the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Forst opens with its now famous sweeping shot of the ball, moving with the dancers in what appears to be an unedited continuous shot that pulls the audience into the movement and headiness of the moment. We are introduced to the fashionable society artist and philanderer Paul Heideneck (Adolf Wohlbrück) and his former mistress, Anita (Olga Tschechowa), who has won a chinchilla muff at the ball's tombola. He later sketches Gerda (Hilde von Stolz), the wife of the famous surgeon Dr. Carl Harrandt (Peter Petersen), as she poses wearing only a mask and Anita's fur glove. When the drawing is published in the newspaper as a tribute to the ball, a scandal is ready to break. The surgeon's brother, Paul Harrandt (Walter Janssen), demands to know if the unclothed model was indeed Anita, his fiancée. Heideneck is unable to tell him the truth about Anita or his sister-in-law, Gerda, and simply invents a model by the name of »Leopoldine Dur.« Unfortunately, Leopoldine, better known as »Poldi,« actually exists. She is a »sweet girl,« and a reserved and clear-headed companion to the elderly Princess Metternich. When Poldi subsequently appears at a gathering, Heideneck has to make good on the pretense that he knows her. He pays her such flattering attention that Poldi eventually becomes infatuated with him.

Anita details the entire affair without naming names to the Princess in the presence of Poldi and Gerda. Poldi, who knew nothing of her supposed »notoriety,« realizes she has been used and breaks up with Heideneck; but he is now in love with her and ignores the gossip. At yet another ball, Anita shoots him in a jealous rage. Poldi rushes to find Dr. Harrandt at the opera, and insists he help the seriously wounded Heideneck who has been carried out of the ballroom to a greenhouse. Dr. Harrandt, who now also knows the truth of the matter, refuses to save the decadent Heideneck at first, but is ultimately moved by Poldi's insistence that he must perform his duty as a physician. Given the success of the emergency operation in the greenhouse, Dr. Harrandt rescues his masculine pride and forgives both Anita and his wife, Gerda. Heideneck awakens to Poldi and is humbled by her actions. Poldi now sees the honest and talented man she wanted to love and forgives his scandalous ways by tenderly kissing his injured hand. The film ends, however, without the resolute conclusion given to the stilted 1935 MGM remake, *Escapade*, which indicates marriage between the two characters (Horak). In

Forst's original version, the final shot of the film is taken from outside the greenhouse windows in the snow. It lends the couple a gentle transcendent quality and suggests a resurrection tableau (snow = water = baptism) in which Heideneck is saved by Poldi's love, as the greenhouse suggests the hopefulness of a spring »blossoming.«

Both Anita and Gerda are theatrical *femmes fatales*, while Poldi demands true emotion and an honest relationship. Forst and Reisch flip gender roles in this adaptation of the bourgeois tragedy. The usual victim in such a melodrama is the *süßes Mädel*. Here, although Poldi is wronged, her possible tragic outcome is hindered by her intelligence and combination of pity and compassion that makes her understand Heideneck's unhappiness and even self-destructive qualities. Nevertheless, to ensure that Forst's beloved imperial era is not injured by too strident an accusation of irresponsibility and adultery in Old Vienna, the wise cigar-smoking Princess Metternich concludes that female sexual desire certainly exists, but that it was (and should be) better served in the context of wedlock: »In my day, when a woman had a headache, she got married and did not take aspirin.«

Viennese Film's intensity in its use of metaphor and allegory, along with its stylized orchestration of settings, music, and story as well as its juxtaposition of eroticism and sentimentality, made it a welcome genre for Hollywood remakes and adaptations. The genre satisfied the censorship demands of the Hays Law and the Motion Picture Production Code, which took effect in 1930, while offering sensuality, strong emotional manipulation, and female protagonists overcoming traditional gender roles, thus making it popular with women. The genre was somewhat similar to Hollywood's own moralistic melodramatic social narratives, while the venerable imperial settings proved to be a draw for American audiences faced with the era's supposed threat of social disintegration. Popular remakes of Viennese Film also underscored the transcultural adaptability of the genre and style. These include the British remake of Forst's Schubert biopic, co-directed by Anthony Asquith and Forst as *Unfinished Symphony* (1934); *Maskerade* as *Escapade* (1935), directed by Robert Z. Leonard; Geza von Bolvary's *Frühjahrsparade* (1934) as *Spring Parade* (1940), directed by exiled Austrian director Henry Koster (Hermann Kosterlitz); and the production that unconvincingly moved Vienna into the MGM backlot, the Johann Strauss Jr. biopic, *The Great Waltz* (1938), directed by Julien Duvivier and scripted in part by Walter Reisch.

Desiring to lead European film, Mussolini, who defended Austrian sovereignty against Hitler until 1936, viewed the success of the Viennese Film with some envy, and hoped to emulate and reinvent the Austrian melodrama style for Italian cinema. Several co-productions shot in Vienna and Rome with Austrian-Italian blended narratives followed, including the highly praised *Tagebuch der Geliebten* (*The Affairs of Maupassant*, 1935), which RKO Hollywood intended to remake as a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn. The Hungarians aimed Viennese Film at their own variations of the Austro-Hungarian mythos, and the artificial German imitations moved the romantic melodrama to working class venues and used the form to propagandize and co-opt Austrian culture and history. Despite the opulent remounting of Viennese Film that only Hollywood studios could afford, its successes were not always guaranteed. *The New York Times* critic Fred Nugent observed that »it is unfortunate we should have seen [Hollywood's] *Escapade* before we had an opportunity to admire *Masquerade in Vienna* the Viennese Film that Metro [MGM] copied in 1935 when it sought an introductory vehicle for Luise Rainer. *Escapade*, we now realize was a rather bad imitation.«

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Modern Times (1936)

Jan-Niklas Jäger

dir. Charles Chaplin; prod. Charles Chaplin; screenplay Charles Chaplin; photography Ira H. Morgan, Roland Totheroh; music Charles Chaplin. 35mm, black/white, 87 mins. Charles Chaplin Productions, distrib. United Artists.

Modern Times is a 1936 comedy by Charles Chaplin that fuses slapstick and melodrama into one of the best-known satires about industrial capitalism. The last film to feature Chaplin's famous Tramp character, it was the comedian's first feature-length work to deal with a topical subject: the Great Depression, which Chaplin uses as the backdrop for the Tramp and his companion's (the »Gamin,« played by Paulette Goddard) quest for steady jobs, which they believe to be the steppingstone to the desired financially secure middle class existence.

Modern Times depicts the Tramp as »a victim of industrialization and the Great Depression« (Stokes 252). In a personal note, Chaplin describes the film's two main characters as »the only two live spirits in a world of automatons«—a hint at the story's core dichotomy: humanity and machinery. »Both [characters],« he continues, »have an eternal spirit of youth and are absolutely unmoral. [They are a]live because [they] are children with no sense of responsibility« (Chaplin qtd. in Robinson 487). Since Chaplin portrays the world through the Tramp's eyes, the audience shares his ability to see it from a child-like, seemingly naïve, viewpoint without any cynicism. Chaplin's stance evokes that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who postulated that inequality was a product not of nature but of society. »Man, in the state of nature,« Rousseau wrote, »can have no need of remedies« (12). A child untouched by society would have no need, either, but by imagining a man whose innocence remains untainted, Chaplin shows us how a civilization gone wrong could affect such a being. Ultimately, the suffering of the Tramp is an allegory of the suffering of humanity »in the state of nature«: Reduced to its plot, *Modern Times* is a series of setbacks for its two main characters, who are not able to find and keep a place in the overtly industrialized



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

capitalist society the film portrays, no matter how good their intentions are or how hard they try. The hardships they endure are systemic in nature, but their unyielding optimism, enabled by their somewhat naïve perspective and zest for life, keeps them from despair. Chaplin's depiction of humanity, when faced with the inhumanity of industrial capitalism, evolves into a sentimental humanism: *Modern Times* may be considered an expression of his belief in the good of humanity *vis-à-vis* insuperable obstacles. The human potential untouched by a society reduced to the accumulation of capital is found within the innocence of the weak, who prove their strength even in the face of failure.

François Truffaut divided »Chaplin's body of films [...] into a concern with two figures: the vagabond and the most famous man in the world« (qtd. in Insdorf 29). He then connected these two figures with specific questions that their respective images raise. The question raised by the vagabond is »Do I exist?« The most famous man in the world asks, »Who am I?« (29). The subtle difference is the latter's sense of his existence, even though he lacks the ability to pinpoint it. The vagabond, in contrast, feels like a nonentity. Everywhere he goes, he seems out of place. Nowhere is his predicament felt more harshly than in the industrial coldness of the dystopian factory scene that opens *Modern Times*: The Tramp is an assembly line worker overwhelmed with the sheer speed of the machinery that allows him not even time to scratch his nose. Trying to keep up with the work, he jumps on the assembly line and is swallowed by the machine. The film presents machinery both as the material extension of industrial capitalism and as the antithesis to humanity. The Tramp's inability to keep up with it stems from the fact that he is a living being: He falls behind when he sneezes or when bothered by a fly. Life keeps getting in the way of the accumulation of capital. After meeting the Gamin who, like him, lives »no place—anywhere,« the Tramp starts aiming for more than mere survival. After making fun of a middle class couple whom they observe—the happiness on display obviously striking them as absurd—he asks the Gamin: »Can you imagine us in a little home like that?« A dream sequence follows that unrealistically portrays a middle class home as a land of milk and honey, and from here on the rise to the status of the bourgeoisie becomes their new goal. It is telling just how unrealistically the dream sequence is staged. Like children, they play act a fantasy scenario because they do not know what an actual middle class existence looks like. Where satire normally betrays innocence by exaggerating the characteristics of what it aims to criticize, Chaplin rather satirizes the bourgeoisie by leaving his characters' innocence intact, thus revealing how alienating bourgeois illusions of happiness can be for those left out. Later, the film's most memorable slapstick scene is introduced when the Gamin greets the Tramp by exclaiming enthusiastically: »I've got a surprise for you. I've found a home!« She then leads him to an old wooden cottage. »It's paradise,« he says upon entering it. He then closes the door, after which a timber beam loosens and hits him on the head, as if telling him that it surely is not »paradise.« In the next few minutes, acts as harmless as sitting on a chair kick off the demolition of almost the whole cottage, but the couple refuses to acknowledge that their »paradise« is make-believe at best. »Of course it's no Buckingham Palace,« the Gamin says while repairing the collapsed roof with a broom—the disparity between »reality« and the characters' perception of their new home could hardly be greater. It is a sad scene, portraying the delusions of people reaching for a life hopelessly out of reach, and the situation is derived from the bleakness of their shared existence in poverty. And yet it consists exclusively of jokes. The fact that the chosen form of comedy is slapstick, which rests on the gule-

lessness of characters stumbling into a situation of violent mishap, helps turn tragedy and comedy into tragicomedy with a melodramatic streak.

The opposites at work here are included in the common sense understanding of the sentimental provided by the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (OALD): »connected with your emotions, rather than reason« (»sentimental«). It is surely not reasonable to behave as optimistically, and as oblivious to outer circumstances, as the Tramp and Gamin do, which exhibits an uncommon dimension of sentimentality within the scene. Both its comedic and tragic elements rest on emotionality. However, the viewer's perception of this emotionality differs greatly from that of the characters. The characters are freed from reason, which enables both their unrealistic attitudes and the comedy that arises from them. For the audience, however, it is much harder to disregard reason in the perception of what is happening on screen. Whereas the classical melodramatic approach favors emotion over reason to enhance its emotional impact, *Modern Times* rather uses the viewer's reason, which enables them to recognize the tragedy beneath the comedy, to enhance its emotional impact. Chaplin subverts sentimentality by making the very ability it lacks an essential part of its equation. The OALD's second definition for »sentimental« further supports Chaplin's »popular« subversion of melodrama: »producing emotions such as pity, romantic love or sadness, which may be too strong or not appropriate; feeling these emotions too much.« It is indeed questionable whether the feelings produced by the cottage scene are appropriate. But rather than an inappropriately intense feeling of »pity, romantic love or sadness,« Chaplin approaches sentimentality in a way that leads to inappropriate laughter. It is worth noting that Chaplin viewed »love, pity and humanity« as »the kindest light the world has ever known« (22). His subversion of the sentimental is by no means an attempt to deny or sabotage the sentimental dimension of his films. His audiences laughed at the Tramp's misfortunes not out of malice, but because the pity and sadness they feel for him makes them recognize their own humanity in his antics—which then enables them to discover the humor that lies between the emotional poles of life. After all, the possibility of leading a good life is the main motivation for the Tramp: a character so universally loved because he came to represent every human being to ever feel so out of place that they began to ask themselves—*Do I exist?*

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Bewitching Kisses (*Besos brujos*, 1937)

Laura Podalsky

dir. José A. Ferreyra; prod. Alfredo P. Murúa; screenplay Enrique García Velloso; photography Gumer Barreiros; music José Vázquez Vigo. 35 mm, black/white, 73 mins. Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos, distrib. Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos.

Marga Lucena (played by Libertad Lamarque), a successful nightclub singer, is tricked by the family of her upper class fiancé, Alberto (played by Florén Delbene), into believing that he has betrayed her. Throwing away her dreams of marrying him and settling down, Marga leaves her comfortable life in Buenos Aires for a job at the Guaraní Café Concert, a rough-and-tumble bar in the interior province Misiones. During her first performance, she enchants Don Sebastián (played by Carlos Perelli), a wealthy rancher who, with the bar owner's help, abducts Marga and takes her into the deep woods, hoping to win her over. Trapped in a feral landscape, Marga resists Sebastián—never realizing that Alberto is in pursuit.

A tale of virtue, vice, and emotional extremes, *Besos brujos* is a notable film for a variety of reasons, starting with its production history. Along with *Ayúdame a vivir* (1936) and *La ley que olvidaron* (1938), *Besos brujos* was one of the first Argentine films to achieve commercial success in both foreign and domestic markets. All three films were directed by Afro-Argentine director José A. Ferreyra for Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos (SIDE), a new production company built on the commercial success of entrepreneur Alfredo P. Murúa's »Sidetón,« an optical sound system known for its »low costs, high quality, and ease-of-use« (Peña 58; Kohen). In these early productions, SIDE tested out a viable commercial formula with the help of a seasoned director who had made thirty-two films between 1915 and 1935 (Couselo 131-46). Frequently set in Buenos Aires' *arrabales*, or slums, Ferreyra's films blend »melodrama with a humanist commitment to represent a marginalized social class« (Peña 24).

Another recurrent aspect of Ferreyra's oeuvre was the tango. Film scholar Fernando M. Peña argues that Ferreyra's early-period films gave »cinematic expression to the poetry of tango which is, by definition, working-class and melancholic« (24; see also Couselo). Less melodramatic than mournful, the song form represented a »state of the soul,« or *un sentir porteño* (»a Buenos Aires way of feeling«, for Ferreyra (Peña 25). This



attention to sentiment coexisted with his concern for urban environments and visual details, with several of his silent films shot on-location in the city's interior, which has led critics to see his early films as a form of proto-neorealism (Couselo 63).

Ferreya's more stylized sound films like *Besos brujos*, filmed mostly in studios, offered »a more cosmopolitan« type of melodrama that was »original, exportable«—capitalizing on the tango's international success and showcasing a modern Argentina (Aimaretti 10). The abovementioned trilogy served as the perfect vehicle to turn Libertad Lamarque, an internationally known tango performer, into a full-fledged trans-media star—following in the footsteps of Carlos Gardel and his mid-1930s films with Paramount, themselves perhaps influenced by Ferreyra (Peña 45-47, 58).

Unlike Ferreyra's other two films with Lamarque, as analyzed by Matthew Karush, *Besos brujos* is not focused on class conflict per se but rather on a (moral) conflict between old and new ways of life. Alberto's mother and Don Sebastián symbolize antiquated forms of socioeconomic power in urban and rural environments, respectively. A rigid matriarch in a stylish Buenos Aires apartment, Alberto's mother despises Marga and insists that he marry someone of his »rank,« preferably his cousin Laurita. A man from the countryside, Don Sebastián exemplifies an older form of virile masculinity, using his economic position and his physical dominance to impose his will on Marga. The film contrasts the selfish motivations of these two characters with the virtuous love of Marga and Alberto, who symbolize new and emergent ways of life. Marga is a wildly successful nightclub singer who has overcome her seemingly modest origins. While she epitomizes a new socioeconomic mobility, Alberto represents a new form of masculinity. While tied to the countryside as an *estanciero*, an owner of a large property, he is as comfortable in a tuxedo in Buenos Aires as he is riding horseback through the jungle pursuing Marga. Produced by an up-and-coming entrepreneur who found success in new culture industries, *Besos brujos* utilized its protagonists to promote the new urban bourgeoisie's embrace of changing socioeconomic opportunities while upholding an existing moral code and gendered norms (Kohen 268; Aimaretti 4).

Marga and Alberto's modeling of new ways of life comes at a cost, of course, and, in true melodramatic fashion, they must prove their virtue. Following melodramatic conventions (Williams 65-67; 69-72), the film foregrounds scenes of sacrifice, and the two protagonists repeatedly seem to arrive too late for reconciliation. After hearing Laurita's lies (about being pregnant with Alberto's child), Marga immediately runs away, leaving her dreams of wedded bliss behind (literalized in a cutaway to her crushed bridal crown on the ground). When he finds out, Alberto rushes to find her, enduring the harsh conditions of the jungle, and ultimately the life-threatening bite of a venomous snake before being found, serendipitously, by Don Sebastián. Just as he brings Alberto back to their hut in an effort to save him, an oblivious Marga almost escapes by stealing Alberto's horse. The couple's ongoing suffering functions as proof of their virtue. This is particularly evident in the final scenes, where Marga, having returned to the hut, discovers a wounded Alberto. In order to convince Sebastián to cure him, Marga lies, rejecting Alberto and feigning love for Sebastián. Once healed, Alberto decides to leave, willing to give up the woman he loves as long as she is happy. But, just in the »nick of time« (Williams 69-77), Marga sings her final tango—»Tu vida es mi vida« (»Your life is my life«)—revealing her undying devotion to him, at which point the newly selfless Don Sebastián lets her go.

These dizzying plot turns and rapid character reversals point to the contradictions that the film tries to contain. As noted by film scholar María Aimaretti, even while upholding patriarchal norms, the film gives voice to female subjectivity—and a desire made perceptible in the *mise-en-scène* in the lush and verdant interior—through Marga's impassioned musical performances, including the title song that she sings to Sebastián (17, 20-25). Even while affirming male dominance, *Besos brujos* repeatedly showcases Alberto's pain and the ecstatic suffering of Sebastián. As Marga sings out her love for Alberto in the final sequence, numerous close-ups display Sebastián's agonized expression as he discovers her true feelings. The film ends abruptly, as Sebastián cedes the woman he loves to his more urbane, but equally courageous, rival.

Besos brujos' efforts to materialize the characters' seemingly transcendent emotional depth coexist in tension with the film's fascination with surfaces—most particularly with production designer Juan Manuel Concado's art deco interiors and the accoutrements of urban modernity featured in the initial scenes in Buenos Aires (Gómez Rial 273). Film historian Héctor Kohén argues that SIDE's films generally drew on the visual style of U.S. comedies that would have been »recognized by and acceptable to Latin American audiences« as a commercial tactic (275). While that may be true, *Besos brujos*' use of multiple planes of action and complex staging—abundant flowers in the foreground of Marga's apartment, open latticework in the middle ground separating Alberto's living room and dining room, boughs hanging overhead as Marga baths in a river—exceed that norm and lend the film a Sternbergian feel.

Historian Matthew Karush offers one explanation for this melding of melodrama, tango, and art deco interiors. For him, such efforts to »harmoniz[e] cinematic modernism with local authenticity« allowed Argentine audiences to »enjoy music and cinema that was rooted in the local context but was just as modern [...] as those imported from the North«—and, at the same time, to fantasize about upward mobility (116, 132). Although this may be true in ideological terms, *Besos brujos* does not exemplify Miriam Hansen's notion of early cinema as a form of vernacular modernism on a sensorial level. Rather than capture the emergent sensorium of modern life, the film encourages audiences to feel good about the triumph of new ways of being in the world that are, nonetheless, anchored to older moral codes and gendered norms.

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Heimat (1938)

Alexandra Ludewig

dir. Carl Froelich; prod. Carl Froelich, Friedrich Pflughaupt; screenplay Harald Braun; photography Franz Weihmayr; music Theo Mackeben. 35mm, black/white, 98 mins. Tonfilm-Studio Carl Froelich & Co., distrib. UFA.



Melodramas were *en vogue* in the years leading up to World War II, when even newsreels blurred the lines between fact and fiction and added plenty of sentimental hooks to move audiences

(Ludewig 2016, 34). At the time, UFA produced numerous cinematic feature films responding to this melodramatic turn, one of them *Heimat*. In his adaptation of Hermann Sudermann's play *Heimat* (1893), director Carl Froelich cast Zarah Leander in the role of the female protagonist Magda. Magda has experienced a meteoric rise to stardom as a singer in the United States under the pseudonym Maddalena Dall'Orto. Eight years earlier she had fled her home after an affair with the dubious bank director von Keller (played by Franz Schafheitlin), by whom she became pregnant and who then abandoned her to fend for herself in Berlin. To spare her father the shame, Magda did not return to her native village of Ilmingen but left Germany for the U.S.

At the height of her international career abroad, the celebrated singer feels largely rehabilitated and returns to her hometown for a music festival, if only out of homesickness. But »it is easier to leave than to come back,« as Magda knows. She soon faces opposition and hostility for she has become too »Americanized« in the eyes of some (Schulte-Sasse 18). Magda has turned into an American diva who now generates cultural anxieties by presenting herself as a strong female personality with an emphatically erotic appearance and a sense of sexual self-determination in small-town Germany. The song she performs, »A Woman Only Becomes Beautiful through Love,« is about female desire and sexuality.

In the provincial milieu of her birthplace, all of this initially appears out of place (Vaupel 62), and so does her extravagant appearance, her makeup, and the elegant wardrobe, which are further accentuated in the film language by the three-point lighting typical of Hollywood close-ups. She stands in stark contrast to the traditions of her homeland; her plunging necklines, figure-hugging dresses, coquetry, foreign stage name, and her cabaret songs performed with biting irony further deepen the gulf between the German province steeped in tradition and the wider world full of unknown dangers and seductions. In these moments of juxtaposition, one is likely to forget that Froelich's *Heimat* is shot in black and white, as Magda seems to radiate such colorfulness.

Magda's father, the despotic retired colonel Leopold von Schwartz (played by Heinrich George), opposes her unconditional re-admission into the local community after he learns of her extramarital motherhood—unless she marries von Keller, the biological father of her child. In fact, the banker himself is also interested in reconnecting with the now affluent artist as he is in a dire financial situation and is seeking to avert the discovery of a fraud. When Magda recognizes the base motives and dishonest traits of her former lover, who now wants to give their child up for adoption, she refuses to marry him. In a private argument between father and daughter, von Schwartz threatens that as an officer's daughter she must understand that he has given von Keller his word of honor that she would marry him, otherwise »neither of us [...] will leave this room alive.« Magda's refusal results in a murder motif reminiscent of that in Lessing's drama *Emilia Galotti* (1772). However, in the moment of high drama the father faints before he can carry out the murder with which he wanted to save his dubious sense of honor. Parallel to this dramatic climax, von Keller is questioned by the police, whereupon he commits suicide. After this dramatic turn of events, nothing stands in the way of the reconciliation between father and daughter. Magda's performance of Bach's aria »Buß und Reu« during a mass in the local church becomes the vehicle to bring grandfather and granddaughter together. In a most melodramatic scene, von Schwartz is supposedly overcome by the primal force of blood ties for his granddaughter, who proudly introduces the gifted artist to him on stage as »my mummy.« The rapprochement of grandfather and granddaughter prepares the teary family reunion during which von Schwartz's authority is confirmed as head of the new extended family and Magda is accepted back into the community.

By the end of the film, all antagonisms and conflicts have been resolved not least by the power of music. As an artistic expression of both Germanness and repentance, this cathartic turn was almost universally intelligible. Magda's desires and hopes probably resonated with contemporaneous audiences, as the roles ascribed to women were changing drastically at that time in National Socialist Germany (Wiggershaus 7-9). Despite the right to vote, emancipatory tones, and propagated cosmopolitanism, many women were only featured as minor characters, as mother and housewife, after their marriage. »Being a woman means being a mother« (Groote 23). Even though Magda conveniently escapes this domestication through the death of the impostor, her career is secondary after her return to the bosom of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. »Returning home to the Reich« is her destiny. Depicted is the quintessence of home, a world with traditional laws and customs, inscribed in the rituals of its microcosm, the family (Koonz 210). Magda's decision to return to her homeland shows that ostentatiously the pull of blood and soil is stronger than the lure of American glamor. Even in the face of the provinciality and hostility in her village, Magda has to admit to herself, »This nest is my home.« Magda's reintegration is paradigmatic of other prodigal sons and daughters in German cinema at the time (most notably Luis Trenker's *Prodigal Son*, 1934) who temporarily prioritized the pursuit of individual fulfilment over family and community. But like Magda, they too can be successfully re-integrated if they repentantly admit their mistakes and submit to strong father figures and a patriarchal moral code. However, if this unification cannot be achieved peacefully, the film also sanctions violence. Threats and coercion are tolerated as legitimate means when it comes to punishing or eliminating outsiders in the German empire. The references to the proud militaristic traditions as well as references to betrayal, necessary interrogation, to standing at attention, the necessity of having to defend someone with one's blood, and life as a struggle with necessary defeat and victory, are a part of this not-so-subtle subtext.

Set in the late 19th century, the film does not attempt to modernize Sudermann's story to explicitly fit the context of the 1930s and 40s. However, the problems that were current in the small town in 1885, the conflict between the individual and society, the narrowness and restrictions of expectations in the family and home village, as well as the lure of mobility as an alternative to confinement, remain relevant in the context of the 1930s. The authority figures of society have a clear message: Militarism is good for order (Strzelczyk 129). Thus, at the Court Ball, dialogues like the following are programmatic: »Whoever wants to cultivate the ideal goods of the nation should join a warriors' club . . .«—»But not everyone is lucky enough to have been a soldier.« It's all about duty and discipline and order, because »there must be authority.« »Honor« and steps to rehabilitate a »disgraced family« to »right wrongs« are highly respected. These are all resonant militaristic, racist, and similarly ideological tones in years of increasing domestic as well as foreign political aggression and self-righteousness. Marching tunes, parades, dashing uniforms, the poor but honorable officer, trumpet calls for roll call, guards, posts, the need to report are all familiar to the audience of 1938 from their reality at the time. The nationalistic tones of the film are also highly topical, when discrimination is shown against »an American« and racist comments about people of color are made. Moreover, purist ideology is foregrounded in statements such as »Bach belongs to a German singer.« Indeed, Froelich's melodrama *Heimat* is by no means free of National Socialist propaganda and anti-Semitism—the latter in the portrayal of the failed banker—and this Nazi-conform subtext was probably the reason why the film was distributed with the rating »state-politically and artistically valuable« and decorated with prizes at the time of its appearance. The film's legacy can be gleaned from its use in Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* trilogy (women are shown crying at the movies while watching the plight of Froelich's Magda) to comment on the continuity of shared troubles and melodramatic predispositions in Germany over time (Ludewig 2011, 140).

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Gone with the Wind (1939)

Heike Paul

dir. Victor Fleming; prod. David O. Selznick; screenplay Sidney Howard; photography Ernest Haller; music Max Steiner. 35 mm, color, 238 mins. Selznick International Pictures, distrib. MGM.

Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1936 novel by Southern writer Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* has been as spectacularly successful as it has been controversial. The film was, first and foremost, conceptualized as an adaptation of the novel, and was to remain faithful to the text with »fetishistic reverence« (Leitch 138). Film producer David Selznick demanded to »not vary anything from the book. The book is law; the book is the Bible« (qtd. in Leitch 128). As a result, however, *Gone with the Wind* turned out to be the longest feature film that Hollywood had yet released, heavy on dialogue and sensationally colorful—melodramatic eye candy in times of the Great Depression. The 238-minute film premiered on December 15, 1939, in Atlanta, in »a citywide extravaganza,« and was meticulously documented by Herb Bridges in a photographic essay (Wiley 6). One critic quipped sarcastically: »The inaugural showing of *Gone with the Wind* was the biggest event in Atlanta since Sherman burned down the city« (Wiley 5).

While around 300,000 people flocked to Atlanta's streets for the film's premiere, only white people were invited as guests in a firmly segregated city, and African American members of the cast were discouraged from attending the first screening of the film they helped make (Dickey 28). Even as Hattie McDaniel was the first African American to receive the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress (one of the film's eight Oscars, alongside two honorary awards), she was not allowed to sit with the cast during



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the ceremony but was instead seated at a table to the side. Whereas the NAACP, among other groups, protested the film from the very beginning, calling for its boycott, *Gone with the Wind* would become one of the most successful films of all time. Its success confirms, once more, Toni Morrison's contention that American slavery is a »playground for the imagination« in American literature and culture, serving here as the picturesque backdrop for the melodramatic unfolding of *white* romance. Selznick is on record for wanting »to make sure that the production of *Gone with the Wind* would give no offense« to African American viewers (Dickey 29) and for emphasizing that he was »sensitive to the feelings of minority peoples« (Selznick). The film, full of racist stereotypes and white supremacist tropes, clearly defies such lip service.

Gone with the Wind narrates twelve years in the life of Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh)—portrayed as a somewhat idiosyncratic version of the white Southern belle—shortly before, during, and after the American Civil War (1861-65). The film begins in 1861, on the eve of war. The female protagonist lives near Atlanta, on Tara, a plantation owned by her family, with her Irish-born father, her mother, two sisters, and enslaved African Americans laboring in the house and on the fields. Tara is introduced during a scenic sunset as the epitome of a pastoral idyll. Scarlett's infatuation with a man from a neighboring plantation, Ashley Oakes (Leslie Howard), is one-sided, and when he becomes engaged to Melanie Hamilton (Olivia de Havilland), Scarlett is heartbroken. She then meets Rhett Butler (Clark Gable), who mocks and flirts with her. Out of spite, Scarlett marries Melanie's younger brother, Charles, and is soon thereafter widowed when he dies of pneumonia while away at war. Not given to the role of mourning widow, and prone to create social scandal, Scarlett is sent by her mother to the Hamilton residence in Atlanta. In the city, she reencounters Rhett Butler, who is now a blockade runner for the Confederacy. As the war escalates and the South is increasingly under siege, Scarlett finds herself assisting as an Army nurse and taking care of Melanie, who is giving birth. With Rhett's help, Scarlett, Melanie, the baby, and Prissy (played by Butterfly McQueen), an enslaved woman, manage to escape the city under fire during the Atlanta Campaign. However, upon her return to Tara, Scarlett finds the place deserted and mostly destroyed. Her mother has died, and her father is delirious, and he, too, will eventually die in an accident.

In the film's highly politically biased rendering of the Reconstruction Period, it is the former Southern elite who, following the war, must engage in a monumental show of strength to rebuild their homes and infrastructure, while also fighting off carpetbaggers from the North trying to take advantage of the postwar crisis. Ashley returns from the war unharmed and, although they share a passionate kiss, once again rejects Scarlett. In order to be able to pay the Reconstructionist taxes placed on Tara, Scarlett seduces business owner Frank Kennedy, the fiancé of one of her sisters. Their marriage is depicted as Scarlett's business venture, and she succeeds in establishing a lucrative lumber business (which at one point employs convicts in a chain gang). Kennedy dies after a retaliatory skirmish that has him, Ashley, and Rhett engage in a nearby shantytown with a group of men who had molested Scarlett. Quite timely, Rhett proposes to Scarlett, and she, now twice widowed, agrees to marry him. They soon have a daughter, Bonnie Blue, whom her father adores. Scarlett still has a crush on Ashley and rejects Rhett's advances. In fact, she refuses to have sex with him to avoid further pregnancies. When Scarlett and Ashley are found by Ashley's sister in a friendly embrace, rumors run wild. Late at night, Rhett, highly intoxicated, kisses Scarlett against her will and

carries her to the bedroom. The next morning, he apologizes and takes Bonnie with him to live in London. Upon his return (Bonnie had missed her mother), Scarlett reveals to him that she is pregnant. Yet, during another fight between the two of them, she falls down a flight of stairs and consequently has a miscarriage. Soon thereafter, Bonnie tragically dies in a horse-riding accident, while Scarlett's most loyal friend, Melanie, dies from pregnancy complications. Paradoxically, it is only when Ashley is widowed that Scarlett lets go of her infatuation for him and professes her deep love for Rhett. The latter, however, now rejects her, leaving her and Tara to live in Atlanta. The film closes melodramatically with a desperate Scarlett vowing to win him back.

The film has been instrumental in the production and perpetuation of the myth of the »Old South,« along with a trivialization of its system of chattel slavery and a disavowal of the brutalities of that system through melodramatic means. Not coincidentally, it is often linked to the ominous *Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D. W. Griffith, based on a novel by Thomas Dixon, to whom Margaret Mitchell repeatedly expressed admiration and profound gratitude. Whereas Dixon and Griffith certainly share responsibility for the Ku Klux Klan resurgence following the film's release to mass audiences in both North and South, Mitchell and Selznick have contributed to the romanticization of the Southern way of life and cultural imaginary that has thrived, in one way or another, to this day. Throughout the film, the antebellum South figures as a »paradise lost«: a place and time irretrievably destroyed by the Civil War, and the object of the white protagonists' deep, unfulfilled yearning. The film's opening lines anticipate such nostalgia in no uncertain way: »There was a land of cavaliers and cotton fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind.«

This sense of loss and suffering permeates the film, generating a prototypical, powerful version of the Southern »lost cause« myth, with clear white supremacist leanings. Notions of loss and suffering are never once attached to the bodies of enslaved black people. While placing the trauma firmly with white subject positions, the film features African American characters—Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel; in the film, we never learn »Mammy's« name), Pork (played by Oscar Polk), and Prissy—only in scenes of servitude: at times competent, often inept. All three are depicted as loyal slaves, serving at the pleasure of the white characters, even after slavery has been officially abolished. The myth of the »happy slaves« (Ahmed) creates scenes of comic relief that are interspersed in the grave drama of white Southern man- and womanhood. Film critic Donald Bogle has identified dominant cinematic African American stereotypes in the film and credits *Gone with the Wind* with a »romanticizing of black realities« regarding its anachronistic servant figures (76). Malcolm X recalls seeing *Gone with the Wind* as a teenager and remembers scenes when Prissy is shown as a caricature, a silly woman unable to fend for herself and given to distortions of the truth. »I was the only Negro in the theater,« he writes, »and when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug« (38). Shame, disbelief, and anger, rather than sentimental fellow-feeling, characterize the dominant approach to the film today, as its racial politics have been rigorously criticized. In 2020, HBO added an extended introductory preface by film scholar Jacqueline Stewart, augmenting the earlier preface that read: »*Gone with the Wind* is a product of its time and depicts racial and ethnic prejudices that have, unfortunately, been commonplace in American society. These racist depictions were wrong

then and are wrong today. To create a more just, equitable, and inclusive future we must first acknowledge and understand our history. This picture is presented as it was originally created.« Stewart affirms these lines and goes one step further, problematizing the stereotypical representations of enslaved black people in the film by contextualizing them in the racist discourses that the film merely rehashes: in American culture at large, and in Hollywood in particular. Yet, Stewart describes *Gone with the Wind* as »a film of undeniable cultural significance« and »an enduring work of popular culture that speaks directly to the racial inequalities that persist in media and society today.«

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Casablanca (1942)

Kay Kirchmann

dir. Michael Curtiz; prod. Hal B. Wallis; screenplay Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, Howard Koch; photography Arthur Edson; music Max Steiner. 35mm, black/white, 102 mins. Warner Bros., distrib. Warner Bros.

Written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article attempts to take a fresh look at one of the most famous, most analyzed, and most quoted melodramas of all times, taking its starting point from this current global experience. *Casablanca* goes through the peculiar time structure of crises in general (Doane), against the backdrop of another global crisis, namely that of World War II—that of extended waiting, waiting for the crisis to end. In doing so, the film combines the basic melodramatic structure of affectual postponement with a political allegory of the circumstances of the specific time of its origin (Harmetz 102-16): more precisely, the waiting for the U.S. to enter the war, the waiting for a possibly accelerated end of the war as a result of military engagement, and the waiting—on the part of the many refugees—for options of returning home or a route to permanent exile. As several reviewers have already noted (Palmer 44), the film's famous ending also marks the departure from the (superficial) political neutrality that the two protagonists Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) and Capitaine Renault (played by Claude Rains) had displayed up to that point. At the same time, this development also provides a commentary on the impossibility of political neutrality in times like these. Rick's decision to let his regained lover Ilsa Lund leave the country with her husband, the Czech resistance fighter Victor Laszlo (played by Paul Henreid); Rick's shooting of the German Major Strasser (played by Conrad Veidt); Renault's subsequent protection of Rick; and, last but not least, Renault's demonstrative tossing of the bottle of Vichy mineral water into the airport wastebasket—all these actions metonymically represent



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a departure from the political paralysis of the two countries represented in *Casablanca* by Rick and Renault: Resistance France and the United States.

At the beginning of the film, however, there is little sign of this atmosphere of departure. Despite all the superficial amusement in its rooms, Rick's Café Americain is one thing above all: a waiting room for the thousands of refugees who fled to North Africa due to the war, and who are eagerly waiting there for a transit visa to Lisbon, from where they can travel to the U.S. And it is precisely these two things—transit papers, which finally come into Rick's possession after the murder of two German couriers, and airplanes, as symbols of escape from the waiting room—that set the film's plot in motion and also frame the film as a whole. Just as the plane taking off with Ilsa and Victor at the film's end embodies the recovery from paralysis, *Casablanca* also opens with the sound of a plane landing, raising the hopes one of the couples waiting in Rick's café that it might be a transport plane for refugees. This hope is shattered, however, when the camera reveals the Nazi symbols on the wings: It is the plane that takes Major Strasser to Casablanca to investigate the murder of the two couriers (Nichols 58). Thus, Rick's café initially remains a pure transit space, a »non-place« in the sense of French cultural anthropologist Marc Augé (1995), and it is unquestionably no coincidence that Augé has also written a book about *Casablanca* (2009). A place where time does not really want to pass. Not »as time goes by,« but rather »my watch has stopped,« the latter being Sam's answer to Rick about what time it might be in New York. A place where people bridge the waiting time with fleeting affairs, gambling, and alcohol, with music or learning English for the longed-for day of departure. That this is a global phenomenon and problem is made clear by the deliberate display of internationality among both staff and visitors in the Café Americain. In addition to the Moroccan employees, the Americans Rick and Sam, the French, and the Nazi Germans, there is also the Austrian waiter, Carl (played by S. Z. Sakall); the Russian bartender, Sascha (Leonid Kinskey); the Belgian croupier, Emil (Marcel Dalio); the Italian bar owner, Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet); the older German and young Bulgarian refugee couples—and, of course, the Swedish Ilsa Lund and the Czech Victor Laszlo. The ensemble of characters does not only prove to be a genuine expression of a global melodrama but also reflects the internationality of a cast in which only three speaking roles were filled by U.S.-born actors (Francisco).

As the German philosopher of art Bazon Brock has pointed out, there is a waiting with and a waiting without expectations—the latter of which he calls »time sickness.« While for most patrons at Rick's café it remains undecided whether their expectations will be fulfilled, Rick's waiting is a chronic one—without any future perspective, neither political nor emotional. Steve Neale has identified the sentence »it comes too late« (8) as the temporal signature of melodrama, while Rick adds a »not yet.« The classical obstacles that lovers in melodramas are confronted with, as is well known, are of a familial, social, cultural, or medical nature, which bring about the postponement of love's happiness or its ultimate failure. However, the abrupt termination of the liaison between Rick and Ilsa in Paris with the return of Victor, who was believed dead, was warranted by the political circumstances of the era. Rick and Sam's futile waiting for Ilsa's arrival at the Paris train station is already *pars pro toto* for the later waiting in Morocco. In *Casablanca*, then, »it's too late« and »it's not over yet« apply at the same time—a single empty parenthesis in which Rick is trapped. If the end of the Parisian period is marked by the futile wait for Ilsa, the reunion of the two in Casablanca also

immediately initiates another episode of waiting, when the drunken Rick hopes for Ilsa's return in the empty café at night. In many other less prominent scenes, *Casablanca* repeatedly shows shorter phases of waiting, and mostly in relation to the classic melodramatic triangular constellation of Rick, Ilsa, and Victor. Ilsa waits for Rick in his room while Victor arrives downstairs at the café. Victor waits in the café until the police looking for him have passed by. Ilsa and Victor wait for Rick's decision regarding the transit visas. Finally, Victor still must wait on the tarmac until Rick has revealed his true intentions to Ilsa. Thus, the postponement of political and erotic decisions incessantly infuses the film's plot and temporal levels until, in the finale, the time sickness of »chronic waiting« is at last brought to a two-fold closure by Rick. His famous lines—»We'll always have Paris. We didn't have, we, we lost it until you came back to Casablanca«—are obviously meaningless as a spatial statement, as Ilsa has never been to Casablanca before. But they certainly lead to the center of the film's temporal paradox: Rick had to wait for Ilsa in the paralyzed present of the »non-place« of Casablanca, so that Paris could indeed finally become the couple's past and, at the same time, their placeless future.

Freed from the »not yet« through his ultimate acceptance of »it's too late,« Rick overcomes his own paralysis, and thus paradigmatically opens himself up for action that is again politically motivated, as he and Renault decide to join the Free French troops in Brazzaville. When Michael Palmer states that »Rick's Café Americain is not merely the gathering place for all these refugees who dream of escaping to the United States« but that it »is, in a sense, the United States, which must enter the war if the enemies of freedom are to be defeated« (45), ironically, it is actually abandoning the café that enables Rick's rediscovered patriotism. And as »Casablanca« literally means »white house,« it could also be said that following the tropes of Anglo-American imperial discourse the U.S.-American Rick has to venture further into Africa's »heart of darkness« (Conrad) in order to return to his personal »White House« at some point—but not yet.

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Mashenka (Машенька, 1942)

Maria Belodubrovskaya

dir. Iulii Raizman; screenplay Evgenii Gabrilovich; photography Evgenii Andrikanis, Galina Pyshkova; music Boris Vol'skii. 35mm, black/white, 72 mins. Mosfilm, distrib. Artkino Pictures.

Mashenka is a love story of an ordinary Russian woman, Masha (the name Mashenka, of the film's title, is a diminutive), and an ordinary Russian man, Aleksei. Masha (played by Valentina Karavaeva) works at the post office at a provincial train station. She meets Aleksei (played by Mikhail Kuznetsov) in May 1939, during an air raid drill. Aleksei, a taxi driver and aspiring engineer, gives her a lift home and invites her on a date to which he never shows up. When Masha discovers that he is sick, she dedicates herself to his care, only to find out that he sees her as nothing but a friend. Yet, when Aleksei suggests that she help him prepare for entrance exams to engineering school, she agrees. Soon Aleksei says that he is in love with her, but she does not know whether to trust him. Indeed, at a party that Masha throws to celebrate Aleksei's exam success, he meets Masha's more attractive friend, Vera (played by Vera Altaiskaia), and by the end of the evening Masha finds them sharing a kiss. Masha and Aleksei part ways. In November 1939, the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union begins, and Masha, who had been training as a medic, is placed at the Finnish battlefield. One day at an outpost, she accidentally runs into Aleksei. He is also on the frontlines, as a member of a tank crew. Aleksei is on his way to Leningrad for a twelve-day medical leave, but, having seen Masha working tirelessly, he decides to forego his leave. He leaves a letter to Masha, who had already left the outpost, revealing what she means to him. At the end, after Aleksei is wounded in a daring solo attack on machine gunners, the two cross paths again. Masha never received Aleksei's letter, but she knows of its content from others. Under war conditions, letters are read and passed on orally, soldier to soldier, as the likelihood that they would reach the intended addressee is low. Masha is now certain that Aleksei loves her, and they promise to look for each other in the future.

The film clearly is a melodrama: It deals with an unhappy love of a rather bland-looking woman with a heart of gold. Since Aleksei is not an ideal love interest but a deeply flawed man, Masha's love is selfless and surprising for the audience throughout the film. Aleksei is vain, pretends to have read Marx, yet quits school, values money over education, does not volunteer to go to war, socializes with questionable charac-



ters, and takes advantage of Masha's feelings when he asks her to help with his studies. The film portrays him as more attractive than Masha, and some of his friends even mistake Masha for his teacher. We are meant to feel badly for Masha's unreciprocated devotion to an unworthy man, and we are asked to admire her resolve to walk away from the relationship when Aleksei proves fickle and her reserve when she meets him again months later. The film is also melodramatic in its absence of a happy resolution. Though the couple is successfully formed, Masha and Aleksei say goodbye to one another again at the film's end. Having just committed to each other, they are immediately absorbed into a military conflict much bigger than they are, and the war is deadly enough to make their ultimate reunion unlikely.

Superficially, the story of the film follows what Katerina Clark has identified as »the master plot« of socialist realism, the core approach to storytelling practiced in the Soviet Union since the 1930s. The master plot follows a character's progression towards gaining socialist consciousness. However, as opposed to the majority of socialist-realist narratives, Masha, the protagonist, arrives in the film already fully formed, and it is Aleksei who gains consciousness. Thus, the reason the overarching storyline is employed in *Mashenka* is to make the romantic partner worthy of the female protagonist and hence to have the master plot serve the melodrama. Another unusual feature from the perspective of socialist realism is that *Mashenka* lacks an older, wiser Communist Party member—a stock character of Soviet cinema—who can guide the hero's transformation. Instead, it is Masha's love that is the instrument of socialist education in the film. Masha is serious and ideologically settled, but she is not a Party member. In fact, she admits to Aleksei that she had only started reading Lenin and had never tried Marx. Yet, she is a dedicated Soviet citizen: When at work she is handed a telegram that reports only eighty-three percent plan fulfillment, Masha scolds the customer sending the telegram: »When are you going to reach one hundred percent?« At one point, her girlfriends call her »professor,« because, as opposed to them, she thinks only about her studies. Through the logic of the film, it is Masha's convictions as a Soviet citizen that give her love a socially transformative force. And yet, socialist rhetoric is deployed in the service of melodrama.

Other than these subtle and humorous references to plan fulfillment and to Marx and Lenin as well as the obligatory portrait of Stalin that hangs on an office wall, the film is remarkably devoid of political themes. As *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther wrote in his review of the film upon its 1942 U.S. release, »Considering all the grim and gripping pictures which have come along from Russia recently, it is somewhat surprising to encounter a pleasant and affecting Soviet film about love—just plain love—between two people« (Crowther 10). This lack of either specifically »Soviet« or political content was deemed problematic by Soviet censors when the film was in production. One censor complained that a chance encounter between two lovers was a device not appropriate for Soviet cinema (Fomin 90), and another said it would have been much better if Aleksei was a positive character from the start (»Obsuzhdenie stsensarii *Mashen'ka*« 3). These critics attacked the film for being a melodrama, because melodrama, or any plot focused on personal relationships, was considered too Western—that is, too individualistic—to be officially supported under Stalin.

Yet, the film was made and became a great success. It stayed on Moscow's screens for at least a year and a half and was very popular among Russian troops on the German front. In 1943, director Iulii Raizman, screenwriter Evgenii Gabrilovich, and actress

Valentina Karavaeva all received the Stalin Prize, the most important official recognition a film could receive at that time. Why? The film's adherence to the socialist-realist master plot, with an exemplary Soviet citizen converting a failing Soviet citizen into a hero, made the film acceptable. That the vehicle of this conversion was love, and not a Party representative, was likely forgivable due to the general relaxation of filmmaking norms following Germany's attack on Russia in June 1941. However, the film's biggest and most irresistible asset was the figure of Masha. Authenticity, warmth, gentle demeanor, resilience, and humanity all make Masha an irresistible character. Karavaeva's perfectly pitched performance made *Mashenka* not only an unlikely woman's picture to emerge out of Stalinist Russia but also a masterpiece of film portraiture that goes far beyond any confines of socialist realism or Soviet cinema.

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Children of Paradise (*Les Enfants du paradis*, 1945)

Chiara Tognolotti

dir. Marcel Carné; prod. Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinéma; screenplay Jacques Prévert; photography Roger Hubert; music Maurice Thiriet, Joseph Kosma. 35mm, black/white, 195 mins. Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinéma, distrib. Pathé Consortium Cinéma.

The entire film appears to be embodied in one sequence towards the end of the film's first act (*époque*). The spectators share the point of view of an excited audience in the popular Théâtre des Funambules, situated on the Boulevard du Temple in 1840 Paris. The famous mime Jean-Baptiste Debureau (played by Jean-Louis Barrault) is on stage with one of his early successes, *Le Palais des mirages* ou *L'Amoureux de la lune*. In the previous sequence, Garance (played by Arletty), the woman Baptiste loves madly, welcomes the courting of the actor Frédéric Lemaître (played by Pierre Brasseur), as the mime's extreme shyness prohibits his chances of becoming Garance's lover. Now, while performing Pierrot on the stage, the artist looks up lovingly at Garance, who is standing still, interpreting the role of a statue, and offers her a luxuriant bunch of flowers. As the charming, motionless woman remains indifferent to Pierrot's glance, he falls soundly asleep. Soon after Harlequin/Lemaître steps in, and with only a seductive glimpse he brings the wonderful statue back to life. She promptly gets down from the pedestal and runs off with him. Upon his awakening, Pierrot can do nothing but despair for his love's loss.

Baptiste/Pierrot's love for Garance/the statue is but an illusion, a *mirage*, as goes the title of the pantomime. As a new Galatea, the statue comes back to life and departs arm in arm with her Pygmalion, leaving Pierrot in his sorrow. Garance first becomes Lemaître's mistress, then that of the rich Count Édouard de Montray (Louis Salou).



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Baptiste continues pursuing his dream of unattainable love but ends up reluctantly marrying the actress Nathalie (Maria Casarès), who loves him dearly. Several years later, Baptiste sees Garance again. She is still attached to the Count, yet she has not forgotten the mime and every night she attends his show, sitting incognito in a box of the theater. They meet again for what will be their only romantic night. The Count is shot by the outlaw and amateur playwright, Pierre-François Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand), Garance's lover of old who is jealous of her ties with de Montray. In the end, Nathalie, Baptiste, and Garance will split up forever, conscious of the intensity of the attraction they share but cannot realize.

Shot in the Studios de la Victorine in Nice between 1943 and 1944, when France was still occupied by German troops, *Les Enfants du paradis* was produced by Pathé under extremely difficult conditions and shown in Paris in March 1945, a few months after the liberation, with war still underway. The film represents French cinema's desire to create a national vision in competition with Hollywood, relying on Marcel Carné's masterful directing, Jacques Prévert's writing, and the acting of stars such as Barrault, Arletty, and Brasseur (Sellier; Forbes; Jeancolas; Driskell 2012). The plot fluidly blends historical figures (besides Debureau, there are Lemaître and Lacenaire) and fictional characters and events (Garance, the Count, and their sentimental intrigue) that stand out from theatrical life on Boulevard du Temple, among a crowd of acrobats, jugglers, fire-eaters, and popular theaters mostly dedicated to pantomime, restored in great detail by Alexander Trauner's set design (he was Jewish and Léon Barsacq acted as his front).

Les Enfants du paradis is deeply rooted in the French cinema of the thirties. The collaboration between Carné and Prévert marked that decade with alluring and mysterious shades swaying from noir to *mélo*, in such pictures as *Drôle de drame* (1937), *Le Quai des brumes* (*The Port of Shadows*, 1938), *Hôtel du Nord* (1939), and *Le Jour se lève* (1939), and further up to *Les Visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoys*, 1942). Much of the visual style of these works is echoed in *Les Enfants du paradis*: Sparkling passions in working class Paris and ambiguous figures of the slums (especially in Lacenaire's character) resume the motif of the lyrical dimension of a sad daily life—typical of «poetic realism»—and underline its melodramatic tone in the iconographic and narrative theme of impossible love (Vincendeau 2018). What significantly changes, in comparison to the films of the thirties, are the features of the characters. Instead of the sterling male figures conforming to strict patriarchal rules represented in prewar pictures, shy and silent men like Debureau/Jean-Louis Barrault now make their appearance, kindly refusing their forerunners' loud behavior (Sellier; Burch and Sellier). Moreover, female characters attain an unusual degree of emotional autonomy. While Nathalie is locked into the domestic stereotype of a mother and wife designed to self-sacrifice, Garance leaves herself open to the freedom of desire—even though Arletty's disputed star persona, accused of collaborationism because of her relationship with a German officer, reflects in some respects her character's ambiguity (Vincendeau 2000; Driskell 2015). Compared to previous films by Carné and Prévert, the storytelling in *Les Enfants du paradis* seems to disintegrate: The rhythm slows down, and the flow of the events is almost lost in a lazy *mise-en-scène* that spreads the characters' deeds in the timeless dimension of a stage drama. Thus, the plot of *Les Enfants du paradis* mixes theatrical affections with those of the characters' lives, until it makes them indistinguishable. Therefore, the contiguity of illusion and «reality» is the picture's red thread that interweaves two motives that are preeminently melodramatic: impossible love and extreme passion. The characters, like theatrical masks, play out

their drama aware of moving towards a well-known ending, within the stage's unvarying space and time. The theme of life as theater, then, emphasizes the *mélo* style: The characters' awareness of merely rehearsing a script, written once and for all, echoes the melodramatic motif of a tragic and predictable destiny, making the film yet more intense.

A few years later, Jean Renoir and Max Ophuls again combine theater, life, and cinema. At the end of *Le Carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*, 1952), Camilla chooses to renounce the »real life« and live on stage, the only place where she can be happy, through becoming another person, as the camera literally leaves the theater and thus reveals the artificial nature of the story to the audience. In one episode of *La Ronde* (1953), Jean-Louis Barrault and Isa Miranda play an actor couple who are unable to live together without resorting to the dramatic lines they use onstage. The whole picture is a vivid and clear reflection on the artificial nature of filmic representation. Renoir and Ophuls' pictures display their characters with ironic detachment, acquainting the audience with the deception of what they are looking at, as the artificiality of the theatrical world reflects on filmmaking and reveals its fictional nature. Carné, on the contrary, stays inside the false universe of representation: He does not disclose its workings, for he stops short of the threshold of the stage. In *Les Enfants du paradis*, the cinematographic device does not expose the fiction that innervates it, and instead remains upright and firmly inside the borders of a genre: a perfect world that chooses to fully accept the *mélo*'s extreme and absolute affections in order to move its audience to tears.

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Nosotros los pobres (1948)

Matthew Bush

dir. Ismael Rodríguez; prod. Ismael Rodríguez; photography José Ortiz Ramos; music Manuel Esperón. 35mm, black/white, 115 mins. Producciones Rodríguez Hermanos, distrib. Clasa-Mohme.

There may be no other film more closely associated with Mexico's long history of cinematic melodrama than *Nosotros los pobres*. Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico's most prescient and prolific commentator on Mexican melodrama, called *Nosotros los pobres* the height of Mexican melodramatic cinema (1994, 144)—and it was not only a smashing success in its day but has also displayed impressive longevity. *Nosotros los pobres* is a mainstay of television broadcasting and was for many years Mexico's leader in box office earnings (Mora 81). Beyond its broad popularity, *Nosotros los pobres* epitomizes much of what has come to be known as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, a period spanning from approximately 1935 to 1955. As Monsiváis observes, this era of Mexican film is typified by, among other elements, an idealization of rural life and a moralistic taming of characters in urban tales, a celebration of machismo and noble poverty, state censorship and public morality ordained by the Catholic Church, and the use of stereotypical characterization in the service of formulating a national imaginary for the cinematic spectator (2008, 67-68). *Nosotros los pobres*, *Ustedes los ricos* (1948), and *Pepe el toro* (1953) form a trilogy directed by the enormously productive Ismael Rodríguez, centered on the character Pepe »El Toro« (played by Pedro Infante). The Pepe el Toro trilogy illustrates many of the largely conservative traits of Golden Age Mexican film that thrilled early- to mid-20th century audiences and continues to serve as a point of reference for contemporary Mexican filmmakers.



Nosotros los pobres' plot is imbued with forbidden romance, hidden identities, late-recognized virtue, and the eventual triumph of justice over villainy—indeed, some of the core features of melodrama. The film tells the tale of Pepe el Toro, a carpenter in a Mexico City neighborhood, who cares for his niece, Chachita (played by Evita Muñoz), who believes that Pepe is her father and that her mother, Yolanda (played by Carmen Montejo), is deceased. In fact, Pepe's sister Yolanda was banished from home after bringing dishonor by becoming pregnant out of wedlock, a shock that leaves her mother (played by María Gentil Arcos) paralyzed. Pepe raises Chachita as his own daughter, keeping her origins secret as the young girl jealously guards Pepe from other women so as not to soil her mother's memory—or so she would believe. Pepe, however, carries on a secret romance with Celia, played by Blanca Estela Pavón—Pavón and Pedro Infante being an iconic couple in Mexican cinema until the former's untimely death in a 1949 plane accident. Problems ensue when Pepe is robbed of the money he had received from the lawyer Montes (played by Rafael Alcayde) as a down payment for a project. While it was Celia's stepfather, the marijuana-addled Pilar (played by Miguel Inclán), who stole the money, Pepe is accused of theft and forced to work as a handyman for a woman who is a loan shark. When his new employer is found murdered, Pepe is accused of the crime, prosecuted by Montes, and put in jail.

Celia takes up work with Montes, offering him romantic favors hoping that he might help liberate Pepe but to no avail. With Pepe incarcerated, his mother and Chachita are left to fend for themselves. After having their possessions taken from them in retribution for Pepe's supposed crimes, they have to live with Celia's family. Eventually Pilar attacks Pepe's mother, who saw him steal Pepe's money, leaving the paralytic woman hospitalized. When Pepe learns of his mother's condition, he escapes prison to visit her at the hospital just before her death. Yolanda, who suffers from tuberculosis, is in the same ward and is reunited with Chachita just moments before Yolanda's passing. After being found by the police at the hospital, Pepe is returned to prison, where he encounters the actual murderer of his former employer and beats him to confess his crime. Ultimately, Pepe is liberated, and the film offers a happy ending as he and Celia are united, able to care for Chachita and raise a child of their own.

Monsiváis notes that *Nosotros los pobres* typified a form of emergent urban melodrama in Mexico that celebrated rural values like honor (1994, 148) while educating a broad audience about a new form of citizenship in urbanized society (2008, 86). This perspective is consistent with his understanding of Golden Age Mexican melodrama as a means through which the masses »accept invented costumes, customs, the joy of living without privacy, a singsong voice tone, [and] unpretentious, unrefined speech« (1994, 148; my translation). Monsiváis thus suggests that spectators imitate the screen and reproduce an urbanity provided to them by the film industry. In the broader context of Latin American melodrama, this top-down perspective is contested in the analyses of Jesús Martín-Barbero, albeit with regard to the contemporary *telenovela*. Martín-Barbero questions if the success of melodrama in Latin America is linked to a search for social recognition and an acknowledgement of a »primordial society« built upon familial and close-knit social relations through which the masses see themselves represented. Within Martín-Barbero's analysis, melodrama is not projected upon a docile spectator to whom culture is dictated, but rather to an active participant in the construction of cultural identity because »what gives the culture industry force and the stories meaning is not simply ideology but culture and profound dynamics of memory and cultural

imagination« (227). For Martín-Barbero (226) as well as for Hermann Herlinghaus (57), Latin American melodrama offers up a cultural anachronism through which subaltern cultural practices contest a capitalistic reification of time and social relations.

While *Nosotros los pobres* can certainly be read from a subaltern studies perspective, it is evident that it also upholds a series of hegemonic cultural and moral values. Importantly, as Elena Lahr-Vivaz has noted, the melodramatic social unity of the film is forged through its musical numbers and accompaniment. The film's musical score helps drive home Chachita's pain in lamenting the loss of her mother, and she is consoled that she is not alone in the valley of tears, thus clinging to religious faith in the absence of familial unity. Emotive musical accompaniment stirs melancholic affect, connecting the audience with a broader moralistic sense of belonging beyond the film. Such a scene illustrates Monsiváis' postulation of melodrama as a form of social catechism in which »theological reason« doles out suffering—and in the pain of others, a sense of pertinence to a group, be it familial or national, is fomented (1994, 152). A similar moralizing pattern is also on display in the film's representation of alcohol and drug consumption. The characters La Guayaba (played by Amelia Wilhelmy) and La Tostada (played by Delia Magaña) are neighborhood drunkards who, while offering comic relief, illustrate wanton tendencies through their general gossip and vagrancy as well as through their mistreatment of Pepe's mother in a festive scene central to the film. Of course, no other character is more abusive to Pepe's mother than Pilar, the noted marijuana addict in the film, and his abuse of the paralytic woman is presented as if it were a psychedelic freak-out in which hallucinations of prying eyes merge Pilar's Catholic guilt for his theft with the consequences of his illicit substance abuse.

Nosotros los pobres also presents a largely stereotypical take on gender roles, common to Mexican melodramas of the era in which contemporary and historical identities were cemented at »the level of the family as the basic unit of the social structure« (Noble 101). Celia is largely portrayed as a stereotypically pining domestic character, yet she demonstrates feminine agency beyond the confines of the home by taking on work to help Pepe. Similarly, while Pepe exhibits many stereotypically macho characteristics, he is »at once active male, and passive sexual object; at once violent and able to cry; at once virile father and suffering/sacrificing father/mother« (Slaughter 35-36). It is perhaps due to such complexities in the ostensibly static characterization of *Nosotros los pobres* that the film has achieved such staying power. Without question, *Nosotros los pobres* is a melodramatic standard in Mexican cinema. It reveals the melodramatic mode in all its dynamism. There are stock characters but also evolutions, however gradual, in its conceptualization of gender. There are clichéd representations of citified environs and innovative visual effects in the aforementioned psychedelic sequence and musical numbers that fuse Pepe and Celia across space and time. Accordingly, *Nosotros los pobres* provides both a lasting example of a melodramatized approach to the cultural forces that shaped Mexico's urban growth in the early 20th century and an appeal for a nostalgically imagined mode of social morality.

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Chains (*Catene*, 1949)

Lucia Cardone

dir. Raffaello Matarazzo; prod. Goffredo Lombardo; story Libero Bovio, Gaspare Di Majo; screenplay Aldo De Benedetti, Nicola Manzari; photography Mario Montuori; music Gino Campesi. 35 mm, black/white, 90 mins. Titanus-Labor Film, distrib. Titanus Distribuzione.

Combining the Neapolitan *sceneggiata* tradition of musical theater with the international language of melodrama, *Catene* goes past the regional dimension to bring the heart of Naples to Italian cinemas. The opening shot of *Catene* looks like a postcard of the Gulf of Naples, with the sea and the commanding presence of Mount Vesuvius evoking an unplaced threat. The camera pans to the left to include some children playing, and then, in a downward movement, frames the swerving car and the accident that sets the whole plot in motion. The music heralds the looming drama, alternating poignant and melancholic tones (echoing old Neapolitan melodies) with more clearly marked and disquieting rhythms, associated with the vehicle's breakneck speed and the damage that would take it to Guglielmo's (played by Amedeo Nazzari) garage. It is a twist of fate because the person at the wheel is Emilio (played by Aldo Nicodemi), who recognizes that the mechanic's wife, Rosa (Yvonne Sanson), is his one-time fiancée. The woman, now married and the mother of two children, had not spoken of her first love to her husband and so is now exposed to blackmail by the malicious Emilio, who threatens to reveal her secret. Tormented by the requests of this man who has reappeared from the past, she decides to meet him to convince him to leave her alone. However, she neither succeeds nor can she stop Guglielmo's assault as he surprises her with her presumed lover and kills him. Guglielmo flees to the United States to escape the accusation of murder. He is eventually arrested and brought back to Italy. Rosa is willing to do anything, even to confess to adultery in court, and thereby be cruelly shamed, if only to save her husband from prison and her children from the misfortune of growing up without a father. Guglielmo, who believes she is guilty, will not listen to reason and repudiates her. Only at the very end, when he discovers the truth almost by chance, is Rosa's name cleared, and she is taken back into her husband's arms.



This brief summary is sufficient to understand how much the impassioned story of *Catene* amalgamates the colors of melodrama with the atmospheres of the *sceneggiata* films created and produced by Elvira Notari a few decades earlier (Bruno). The film pioneer from Naples brought the tradition of the Neapolitan popular spectacle *par excellence*—the *sceneggiata*—to the screen in the 1920s, with its primitive love stories, cruel jealousy, and lightning-fast stabbings, often taking the stories for her films from the texts of famous songs. Moreover, even in a silent cinema setting, the moments dedicated to musical performances, the heart and soul of the *sceneggiata*, played a significant role in prompting the public's emotions (Tomadjoglou). In *Catene*, we observe the strong reference to this genre in the American sequence, when Guglielmo shares the joyless Christmas of his fellow émigrés, far from home, and is accompanied by the melancholy notes of *Lacreme napoletane* (*Neapolitan Tears*) sung by Roberto Murolo. The camera follows the performance of the song and frames the singer and different characters in turn. Closely tied to the melodramatic storyline, Guglielmo's suffering blends with that of the others: Those Neapolitan tears become the sign of a collective condition. It is certainly a theatrical solution to add to the compassion for the lead actor's fate. However, seen another way, it is an endeavor to boost the very weak realism of the plot, conjuring up the old fortunes of Neapolitan cinema and the appreciation aroused in the community of Italians abroad, many years before, by Notari's *sceneggiata* films. At the same time, with their humble and ill-fated existences, the lead characters in *Catene* reflect the new trend in film at the time, open to the reality of the lower classes and the postwar hardships of the »Italian School of the Liberation,« to use Bazin's definition of neorealism. The instinct of director Matarazzo (Bagh et al.) and screenwriter Aldo De Benedetti, who deftly picked up on the public's tastes (Bruni 203-25), gave rise to an all-new, doubtlessly spurious, but nonetheless impactful *pastiche*, which has been defined, somewhat disparagingly, as »*neorealismo d'appendice*« (Aprà and Carabba). Melodrama, with all its communicative strength as well as some neorealist undertones, thus finds itself at the basis of a process of dissemination—and of reduction and negotiation at the same time—in the living body of popular spectacle (Cardone 2012, 26-29).

While the phantom of realist cinema acts in the background, the beating heart of the storyline is entirely melodramatic, developing around the character played by Yvonne Sanson, who with *Catene* became the unrivalled choice to play the heroine in dark love stories. Rosa is upset by the appearance of her old lover, whom she has never completely forgotten, and she seeks to ward off his doggedly insistent requests seductively evoking the sweet memories of a past that has returned vividly to her mind. This is shown in the birthday party sequence, when the joyful group of friends and family members is disrupted by the entrance of Emilio. The camera stages one of the most effective melodramatic topoi, the »violated banquet« (Brooks 29), and shows Rosa's smiling face transform into a mask of unease and fear. Welcomed at the table by the blissfully ignorant Guglielmo, the villain sits next to the female lead and asks the musicians to play an old song: »Torna« (»Come Back«). Latching onto the melody sung by Franco Ricci is a flashback of memories of one-time lovers, in a montage sequence of seven cross-faded, silent frames. The lovers are depicted in various romantic moments, up to their last kiss, on a railway platform, as Emilio leaves on the train in a soldier's uniform. The recollection ends with the powerfully melodramatic image of the train wheels fading into the distance, before cutting back to the present, and the

two of them sitting next to each other, with Emilio sneakily taking hold of Rosa's hand. The gesture, from which the woman does not recoil, is noticed by her son, Tonino, who begins to look at his mother with hostile eyes. It is the tiniest of failings on Rosa's part, who is otherwise steadfastly devoted to Guglielmo; nevertheless, it shows the female character's ambiguity. Rosa is not guilty of adultery, but she is not innocent either, because, despite being a wife and mother, she has not forgotten the romantic love story with Emilio, so different from the arrangement offered by her husband. Indeed, *Catene* removes passion from the marital bonds so much so that there is almost a fraternal relationship between the spouses without the slightest hint of any sensuality—both call Guglielmo's mother *mamma*.

The opposition between *eros* and *agape* (Rougemont 60-68) is evidently at work in the popular melodrama, too, generating two distinct iconographic lines (Cardone 2004, 190-99). Belonging to the first, *eros*, are the frames *en plein air* of the youthful years and the shots in which Rosa looks worried at Emilio's reappearance, for example during the Saint's Day festival. On this occasion, the end of the meeting with the man is sealed by a firework explosion, which drowns out the picture, alluding to the protagonist's inner turmoil. Instead, the second line includes those frames reserved for the marital space, which are characterized by punitive impulses, as shown, for example, by the dramatic close-up of Rosa in her bedroom as she recalls Emilio's threatening words. The camera records the woman's anguish by framing her behind the bars of her marriage bed, which becomes the visible symbol of her condition. While there is no doubt she is trapped by her old fiancé's blackmailing, she is imprisoned most of all by the ambivalence of her desire, impressing the signs of an agonizing passion on her face and body.

As such, her image is likened to that of the Virgin Mary: Indeed, in the numerous close-ups reserved for her, Sanson adopts the pose of the grieving Mary. The use of holy images is functional to the melodramatic rhetoric, to the tendency, typical of the genre, to say the unsayable, to unashamedly act out the basic emotions (Brooks 41). *Catene* reaches its dramatic climax just before the ending, showing Rosa on her bed of pain, her face shattered by her torment, the light drawing a sort of halo around her head. Eventually, Rosa is allowed back into the domestic space, the camera providing a clearly religious image as a feigned happy ending. The shot arranges the spouses and their children like a Holy Family, quite a frequent motif of pacification in melodramas. Nevertheless, the triumph of marital love does not cancel the persistent shadow of Rosa's exuberant passion, as she sobs uncontrollably and cannot contain her emotions. The woman's muffled sobs open a thin, but deep, fracture in the heart of the family, the very moment when it seems to have been mended. With her arduously disciplined desire, on a knife's edge between the dream of love and married life, the figure of Rosa starts a run of melodramatic heroines, the undisputed protagonists of that popular cinema which would air from Italian screens in the 1950s. Matarazzo builds his family melodrama by insistently bringing the contradictions of marriage to the screen, disguised beneath a conventional morality and persuasive iconography, and so for almost a decade wins the enthusiastic consent of an audience thirsty for tear-jerking stories.

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Tokyo Story (東京物語, *Tōkyō Monogatari*, 1953)

Alexander Knoth

dir. Yasujiro Ozu; prod. Takeshi Yamamoto; screenplay Yasujiro Ozu, Kogo Noda; photography Yuharu Atsuta; music Takanobu Saito. 35mm, black/white, 134 mins. Shochiku, distrib. Shochiku.



At the time of *Tokyo Story*'s release, Yasujiro Ozu had already directed forty-five movies and had consolidated his status as Shochiku's most famous director. Until his death in 1964, he produced at least one feature every year and helped build up the studio's reputation in the field of drama (Choi 36). Often referred to as the director of »home dramas,« Ozu established himself as a renowned creator of so-called *gendai-geki*, or films about contemporary life. *Tokyo Story* falls into the subcategory *shoshimin-geki*, which deals with the daily routine of the lower middle class. Those movies are characterized by a humanistic touch as well as a social critique of changing postwar society in Japan. Ozu once declared *Tokyo Story* as »one of my most melodramatic pictures« (4).

Ozu was profoundly influenced by Hollywood silent movies. These marked his first contact with cinema, and he was eager to imitate the modern U.S.-American style of that period (Raine 105). It was especially his early, prewar films, like *Days of Youth* (1929), *Walk Cheerfully* (1930), and *I Flunked, But . . .* (1930), that mirrored a Western lifestyle that Japanese society was gradually becoming exposed to during the Showa era. In terms of cinematography, lighting, storyline, editing, gags, and body language, Ozu copied the morality tales of Hollywood films and borrowed heavily from the comedies of actor and producer Harold Lloyd (Bingham 49-50). Although his films shifted from the proletariat to the upper middle class, and from lighthearted comedies to excessive sociopolitical fables that culminate in mature and universal stories of human life, it is important to understand that Ozu maintained a steady catalogue of principles both in front of and behind the camera. Under the credo of repetition and difference, themes and constellations reappeared and formed a distinctive style: »stereotyped social images, instantly recognizable to Ozu's audience, became the basis of his patient exploration of domestic conflict and social change« (Bordwell 39). These reoccurring images were produced by a small group of selected actors, screenwriters, and cinematographers with whom Ozu worked almost exclusively. Ryu Chishu and Setsuko Hara became prominent faces and actors of archetypal characters, often associated solely with Ozu roles. In that way, Ozu

promoted something akin to the classical Hollywood star system by typecasting his movies (Phillips 159). For jointly written screenplays, his lifelong friend and collaborator Kogo Noda was an important asset (Desser 49). Ozu's tailor-made scripts adapted the prominent images of actors and created a chorus of films that featured the same casts and storylines. *Tokyo Story* is no exception to this. Moreover, the backdrop of familial constellations and the development of archetypal figures echo Thomas Elsaesser's seminal definition of the Hollywood melodrama thus making Ozu's style comparable to Western productions.

Tokyo Story tells the story of Shukichi (played by Ryu Chishu) and Tomi (played by Chieko Higashiyama), who depart from faraway Onomichi to visit their grown-up children in Tokyo. The film contrasts the behavior of their children (Shige, Koichi, and Keizo), who are too busy to spend time with them, with that of their widowed daughter-in-law (Noriko), with whom they maintain a close relationship. The film's major subject is the loss of the family unit. In Ozu's words: »Through the growth of parents and children, I described how the Japanese family system began to disintegrate« (4). The motif of travel from a rural area to Tokyo stretches back to Ozu's *Dreams of Youth* (1928), the high expectations in younger generations and parental disillusionment is seen in both *The Only Son* (1936) and *Early Summer* (1951), and the general premise of the script is an imitation of an American feature film, Leo McCarey's *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1931). *Tokyo Story* thereby echoes and combines many of Ozu's earlier films.

A loose family structure is presented in travel sequences and picturesque destinations: »Here Ozu and Noda present an episodic, leisurely survey of the extended family, structured around journey that link Onomichi, Tokyo, Atami and Osaka. Variety is created by shift from one picturesque locale to another and by the gradual revelation of every family member's routines, both at home and at work« (Bordwell 329). The episodic narration is connected through so-called pillow shots. These shots can either hold a contemplative function or mark a temporal or spatial transition between two sequences. David Desser points out that »instead of a direct cut between scenes, Ozu often finds »intermediate spaces.« [...] Such spaces are sometimes called »still lifes« and, like the still lifes in classical paintings, are often devoid of human figures. Ozu achieves a particular poignancy in many of his still lifes by highlighting the paradox of humanity's presence by its absence« (10). Desser's notion of paradox is the same as Elsaesser's definition of the visual metaphor. The setting does not only serve the structure of the film—which, in this case, would be the spatial or temporal transition—but is also sentimentally charged and loaded with symbolic meaning. The lifeless and deserted image points to the emotions of the protagonist, a method also used in Hollywood melodrama (Elsaesser 53).

In a famous scene during the parents' stay in Atami, the pillow shot unfolds its full effect. Shukichi and Tomi sit side by side on a quay wall, enjoying the scenic view of the sea. The night before, the couple realized that Atami is not to their liking. They also feel homesick for Onomichi, yet they decide to leave for Tokyo. They witness that their children have changed, and the idyllic atmosphere is darkened by Tomi's suddenly feeling faint, which foreshadows her death. Before Ozu cuts back to Tokyo, he prolongs the sequence with one of his many corridor shots, showing the interior of the hotel's hallway and another view of the sea from inside. After ten seconds, a change of scene occurs, and factory chimneys come into view. This clearly marks a transition: The plot has translocated from Atami back to Tokyo. The pillow shots emphasize the

contrast between Atami's pastoral landscape and the hectic big city, »between the old and young, the archaic and modern« (Bingham 52)—and, on another level, represent the alienation between parents and children as a result of divergent lifestyles.

Another trademark of Ozu's films can also be seen in the aforementioned scene: his distaste for cinematic exaggeration, or »Anti-Cinema« (Yoshida 29). When Tomi struggles to get up on the wall, the idyllic scenery is not disturbed by any cinematic tools. The music continues playing soothing sounds and does not reflect the action. Departing from Elsaesser's idea that music in melodrama serves as a third dimension to address the protagonist's problems (45), Ozu refrains from using music to underline the tension. Instead, he continues to convey a sacred atmosphere, which brings the audience to nearly forget the incident. Unaccented presentation and elliptic storytelling omit crucial plot points and are essential to Ozu's depiction of everyday life. While Hollywood productions are usually »tied to the dramatic, the action-packed [...] in the interest of moving the plot along,« Ozu's films rather consist of »series of moments, cumulative in their power and their emotional effect« (Desser 5-6). Important elements of the plot are deliberately placed outside the viewer's perception or are only insinuated. *Tokyo Story*, for example, does not show the stopover in Osaka during the parents' trip to Tokyo. In the beginning they talk about visiting their son Keizo there, but neither Osaka nor the encounter is shown on screen. Ozu instead skips directly to Tokyo with another sequence of transitory pillow shots. Elsaesser acknowledges elliptic narration as a part of the melodrama: »The feeling that there is always more to tell than can be said leads to very consciously elliptical narratives, proceeding often by visually condensing the characters' motivation into sequences of images which do not seem to advance the plot« (52). Furthermore, Ozu withholds characters' backstories, which makes it difficult to analyze them as psychologically motivated. His style refuses to convey any sentimental codes through dialogue, and the cryptic acting steps back behind a more complex system of meaning.

The morally motivated character described by Elsaesser in his work on melodrama is also present in *Tokyo Story* (45). The film is didactic rather than moralistic. Growing up can be a disillusioning process that can result in disappointed expectations. Children leave home and start their own families. Disappointment is part of life and puts the idealistic idea of a harmonious family to the test. Ozu depicts the cycle of birth, coming of age, and death. This continuity becomes visible in the first and last sequence of the film. From 2:15:32 to 2:15:54, Ozu shows a ship passing by the Onomichi Bay, just like he did at the very beginning: a symbol of the continuity of life. Tomi is dead, but life continues. He underlines this method again through pillow shots. They show objects of everyday life, which remain fixtures regardless of the human actions around them. Donald Richie identifies this structure as the motif of reoccurrence: »In most Ozu films the structure presumes this ›return‹ and it is this which makes the final reels of these pictures so compelling. The idea of the ›return‹ (like the idea of the circle) is something which all of us find emotionally compelling« (Richie 1974, 12). Indeed, this effectively encapsulates the message of *Tokyo Story*: Time passes and people are forgotten. In this sense, Ozu relies on the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*—»paths of things«—to bring the audience to feel the sadness of life. In one of the last scenes, Noriko confesses to Shukichi that she sometimes forgets her dead husband. Shukichi comforts her, saying this is natural and that she must find another man. He hands over Tomi's watch as a symbolic act. Here, an unusual cut renders a sense of sentimentality.

Noriko cries and is touched by the gesture. The sequence unfolds without any of the prologues that previously established tone or provided setting through pillow shots. Rather, Ozu directs us straight toward Noriko's emotional outburst. This melodramatic highlight of *Tokyo Story* is deepened further by way of the children's choir somberly concluding the scene.

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House of Ricordi (Casa Ricordi, 1954)

Louis Bayman

dir. Carmine Gallone; prod. Raymond Froment; screenplay Agenore Incrocci, Furio Scarpelli, Vittorio Nino Novarese, Leonardo Benvenuti, Luigi Filippo D'Amico, Carmine Gallone; photography Marco Scarpelli; music Renzo Rossellini, feat. Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Giacomo Puccini, Gioachino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi, Riccardo Zandonai. 35mm, Technicolor, 110 mins. Diana Cinematografica, distrib. Compass Film.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

One issue among the many raised by the abundant variety of contributions to this book is that melodrama can mean different things in different times and places. In Italy, this ambiguity is even inscribed in the dictionary, which gives the word two distinct definitions. *Melodramma*—especially when shortened, often with a hint of disapproval, to *mélo*—refers to the kind of popular dramatics that form the proper subject of this book. But *melodramma* is also another word for *opera lirica*—opera—a term originating in the 16th century public spectacles that combined music with drama. As several recent studies into the particularities of Italian melodrama have shown, including my own *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama*, and John Champagne's *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama*, this ambiguity is more than just a linguistic quirk. Indeed, we could say that if there is any unifying character to be found in such a varied term as melodrama at all, then this conjunction with opera might provide the key to unlocking it.

This proposition is nicely encapsulated by the 1954 film *Casa Ricordi*, a particularly successful example of *cineopera*, an Italian film genre that features as many performances of opera music as possible within its plot. The film tells the history of the legendary Ricordi sheet-music publishing house, the Casa Ricordi, which the film credits with the creation of a national operatic tradition (with an emphasis on the recording over the live performance, which surely has some relevance to its own status as fil-

med opera). A period drama shot in lush Technicolor, it begins with the establishment of the company in 1807 and spans the musical and political history of 19th century Italy, as founder Giovanni Ricordi (played by Paolo Stoppa) builds up a successful family business that he eventually passes down to his son (Renzo Giovampietro) and then grandson (Andrea Checchi). The film proceeds through vignettes that feature composers including Rossini (played by Roland Alexandre), Donizetti (Marcello Mastroianni), Bellini (Maurice Ronet), Verdi (Fosco Giachetti), and Puccini (Gabriele Ferzetti). Rossini must reconcile the fame he owes to Ricordi with the fact that he has stolen the heart of Ricordi's sweetheart, Isabella (Märta Torén); maestro Donizetti meets his match in Virginia (Micheline Presle), the equally self-absorbed prima donna, as they rehearse for the premiere of his ultimately best-known work, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832); Bellini is kept apart from the woman he loves by a jealous housekeeper; Verdi suffers a creative crisis in response to the innovations of his contemporary Richard Wagner; and Puccini falls in love with Maria (Danièle Delorme), a beautiful, ailing *Parisienne*, while seeking inspiration before the premiere of his *La bohème* (1895). Despite the presence of various divas and muses, the focus of the film remains male, characterized in the romantic image of impetuous genius. This provides an intriguing counter discourse to conventional ideas of gender that would position rational mastery over one's emotions as an integral masculine virtue, for the dramatic weight of *cineopera* depends on the male protagonist's artistic sensitivity in eliciting emotion. But it also tells us something about the relationship of opera to melodrama itself. The stories act as vehicles to incorporate more than thirty excerpts from operas, which might be played in performances on the on-screen opera stage, or sung by characters at home or in public on the street, and also heard as orchestral versions on the soundtrack. This intermingling of extra- and intra-diegetic music imbues the dramatic world with music, at the same time that operatic performance gives expression to, and is made intelligible by, intimate feeling.

The dramatic narratives that connect the musical performances not only concern the nature of artistic inspiration, they are predominantly melodramatic, meaning that the film alternates between the public spectacle of the opera house and the melodramatic expression of private emotion. One particularly climactic example comes in the film's central episode concerning Vincenzo Bellini. A curtain falls to rapturous applause on the premier of his final opera, *I puritani*, but the film cuts to the composer who lies dying at home—his fatal illness caused, according to a doctor, by the cloying jealousy of his keeper, Luisa (Myriam Bru), who has denied him visitors, including the opera's prima donna Giulia (Nadia Gray), to whom Bellini feels an attraction that is mutual. Feeling guilty for having isolated him, Luisa races to the theater in a horse-drawn carriage to fetch Giulia, but by the time they reach him he has died.

Thomas Elsaesser has identified the attraction of melodrama in its »musicality,« by which he means emotional expressivity, and here it is literally so (74). The scene plays out to the overture from Bellini's best-known work, *Norma*, whose dramatic crescendos occur simultaneously with the thunderous storm outside. The music governs the scene's pace, foregrounding the rhythms that guide the character action as Bellini in his dying agony stumbles around the room repeatedly calling out »Luisa!« intercut with scenes of her too-late dash. Bellini repeats her name with a breathy intonation that constitutes a lyrical performance of the shifting registers of desperation. His gestural acting has him clutching the room's furnishings and the staircase, emphasizing their status as a stage set. Most prominent of all is the music itself, which crashes in

to announce the emotional depth of the sequence. As a form of narrative drama, the scene's overt theatricality indicates (rather than detracts from) the sincerity of expressive sentiment. It is an operatic approach to dramatic recreation, distinct from 19th century ideas of the well-made play and contemporary Hollywood conventions.

This shows how the artistic sensibility underlining Italy's operatic melodrama sees no contradiction between performance and authenticity. After Bellini dies, the film moves to 1848, with the Milanese people in revolt against the occupying Austrian troops. The melodramatic expressivity moves from the pathos of tears to the excitement of action and adventure. The battle for national liberation—the historical movement known as the *Risorgimento*—is performed in as gleefully operatic a way as any other sequence in the film. The camera remains in a fixed longshot on the hastily assembled street barricades, as if it is all happening on an opera stage, while the music to Verdi's *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* accompanies the grapeshot and cries of hurrah. For Italian audiences in 1954, such a scene could not but bring to mind the occupation of Italy by Nazi Germany. For anyone unaware of the analogy, the story moves to the rivalry between the patriot Verdi (played by Fosco Giachetti, who after the war faced accusations of fascist sympathies) and the German Wagner—a competition overcome when Verdi sees the effect his music has on the peasant folk, dramatizing the role of a popular Italian collective united by a common land and cultural tradition as they overcome a German threat. Heroic, idealized, operatic, the lush historical fantasies of *cine-opera* provided a melodramatic reimagining of reality. Italian film historian Vittorio Spinazzola has pointed out that their »magniloquent image of a sublime and blinding passion« appealed more to a mass audience fresh from the »nightmares of war« than the contemporary and internationally better-known social critiques of neorealism (57; my translation). Authenticity is not equated with realism but access to an untutored, communal, and deeply held emotional expressivity.

The melodramatic basis thus given to opera is part of a search for a nationally unifying art whose ideological purpose is achieved by its widespread emotional appeal. *Casa Ricordi* ends on a wistful note with Puccini and the populist, folk-inspired music of *verismo* opera at the dawn of the 20th century. It thus stops conveniently short of fascism, insisting instead on a cultural tradition that less problematically unites folk with nation. It is once again melodrama that enables this populism, by establishing the primacy of feeling as an immediate, overwhelming, and yet simple guarantee of sincerity over the calculating dishonesty of oppressive malefactors. Intertwined with opera, this melodrama proffers forms of sentiment that can transcend class barriers and communicate across history. Melodrama confers upon the music, as it also does upon the enterprising family (as embodied by Ricordi and his sons) and on the common classes of Italy itself, a popularizing emotionality whose expressivity is as moving as it is accessible.

Melodrama is a variable, hybrid form—one that from its very name contains dualities, being a grafting of the ancient Greek words for music and drama. The peculiarities of Italian *melodramma*, and the specificity of its affinity for opera and melodrama, imply a series of dualities that could be posited as important to melodrama in general. *Casa Ricordi* dramatizes these dualities—specifically those between *mêlo* and opera, music and drama, performance and authenticity—as not in conflict with each other, but mutually supportive. Principal among them is the interior nature of sentiment and the outward orientation of its expression, suggesting that the overriding purpose of

melodrama, in all its meanings, may in the end turn out to be this: the artistic problem of eliciting and representing—or, perhaps better, the aesthetic requirement of expressively exalting—feeling.

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The Night of the Hunter (1955)

Christian Krug

dir. Charles Laughton; prod. Paul Gregory; screenplay James Agee [and Charles Laughton]; photography Stanley Cortez; music Walter Schumann. 35mm, black/white, 92 mins. Paul Gregory Productions, distrib. United Artists.

Charles Laughton's only directorial work is a stark black-and-white melodramatic fairy tale set in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The plot involves a self-proclaimed preacher and serial killer, Harry Powell (played by Robert Mitchum), who learns of a large sum of money hidden by a fellow prisoner. After his cellmate's execution, the Preacher insinuates himself into the widow's family. He marries and kills Willa (Shelley Winters), then pursues the orphaned siblings Pearl and John on their flight through poverty-stricken West Virginia. The film frequently adopts the perspective of the children as they journey (with the money hidden in a doll) through a dream-like, and overtly Freudian, landscape. Eventually, they are taken in at an orphanage run by devout Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish). After a final standoff with her, the Preacher is defeated and sentenced to death.

The Night of the Hunter is a close adaptation of Davis Grubb's eponymous novel (1953), whose »swift pace, scenes of terror and suspense, and broadly delineated characters« in turn evoke prose melodramas by Charles Dickens, specifically *Oliver Twist* (Couchman 48). The film also references two other major subgenres of 19th century British stage melodrama, the Gothic and the domestic. While it borrows several of their generic features, the film's crucial debt to melodrama lies elsewhere: Laughton's film partakes of a melodramatic modality (Christine Gledhill) that traverses genres and media and works at sensitive cultural and aesthetic boundaries. This may also explain



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why audiences originally found it difficult to label and categorize *The Night of the Hunter* when it opened to lackluster reviews, but why its cultural prestige has steadily grown since, as it continues to fascinate and engross audiences.

Reviewers and critics have often puzzled over Laughton's eclectic mix of genres and styles. These include »the kind of bucolic romance associated with the silent cinema, America as the Arcadian paradise of D. W. Griffith, combined with all the shadows that can be thrown by German expressionist lighting« (Combs qtd. in Callow 61). The film accommodates them in a loose serial structure of set pieces: A tight-knit community in the beginning is represented in terms of the Southern Gothic. When the Preacher stabs Willa to death, the film uses expressionist high-contrast images to transform their attic bedroom into a cathedral of light and long shadows. Her corpse on the bottom of the river is rendered as an uncanny pastoral painting; the dream-like journey of her children on the river is shot as a 1940s deep-focus fantasy film, replete with emblematic animals in the foreground; and the Preacher pursuing them as a cut-out cardboard figure is taken from shadow theater. In formal terms, this arrangement is reminiscent of Victorian melodrama's structure of »situation and incident« (Tetzeli). As a mode of articulation, however, melodrama allows the film to explore the interplay of the media, genres, and styles it incorporates.

The film opens with the head of one of the most beloved stars of D. W. Griffith's silent films, Lillian Gish, superimposed onto a starry night sky. A corona of children's heads listens intently as she recounts, directly into the camera, the biblical tale of false prophets in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). This highly stylized montage addresses the audience as »children« as well; it follows the film's title song, a lullaby (»Dream, Little One, Dream«), and, in several scenes, the film employs low camera angles and props built to scale to approximate a child's perspective of innocence and wonder—tinged with glimpses of knowledge. In François Truffaut's memorable phrase, the film resembles »a horrifying news item retold by small children« (120). As with other set pieces, this opening montage is submitted to Brechtian strategies of *Verfremdung* (Laughton worked closely with Brecht just before the latter testified to the House Committee on Un-American Activities and fled the U.S.). In fact, the film consistently undercuts its affective strategies by means of defamiliarization and alienation. Immersion is offset by modernist self-reflexivity, and sunscreens, windows, and barn doors double as quasi-cinematic screens. And while Robert Mitchum's over-the-top portrayal of the Preacher approximates a child's nightmare, it also epitomizes an ironic and even camp »acting in quotation marks« (Couchman 177), a presentational feature that draws attention to its own artifice. The film thus highlights melodrama's ability, as a modality, to work at the juncture of the representational and presentational, of affect and distancing.

The Night of the Hunter consistently pushes against the boundaries of 1950s narrative film. For example, storytelling continually interrupts the cinematic flow, and the film is punctuated by suggestive tales whose epistemological statuses are very much in question. Who recounts the biblical tale in the beginning—Lillian Gish's star persona or Rachel Cooper? Is the audience invited to share Gish's sentiments—or does her character utilize them to bring impressionable children (literally) »in line« (they will later follow her like a gaggle of geese)? The film explores such ambivalences, and, by not alleviating the tensions that arise in the process, as Jonathan Goldberg has argued (2016), a melodramatic modality can gain its productive force. Similarly, when the Preacher first

appears to the children, the modes of storytelling, theater, and meta-cinema intersect with unsettling effect. In the scene, John tells a Freudian family romance to his sister. He performs in front of their bedroom wall, which is brightly lit from a streetlamp outside. When his tale involves the arrival of some »bad men,« the Preacher's shadow is suddenly thrown onto the wall, eclipsing John. To a burst of melodramatic music, the children's bedroom stage is revealed to be part of a larger apparatus—the house as camera obscura—and the mode shifts from presentational theater to proto-cinema. The film anticipates this crucial moment with an »impossible« shot from within the bedroom wall that effectively collapses the gaze of the camera and the screen as the latter anticipates the projection (Krug 78-81).

The film enlists such moments of formal transgression to explore the ontological status of its characters. Critics usually point out that in this scene the Preacher's shadow symbolizes the »law of the (new) father« for John, while the rest of the film has been read in conventional Freudian terms as an Oedipal struggle over the mother's body (symbolically represented by the doll with the hidden money [Hammond]). However, its melodramatic modality furnishes the film with a generative force that results in more unsettling epistemologies: Now that his powers of storytelling have been amplified by the dispositif of cinema, John's psyche may have »projected,« or generated, the Preacher—and with it, the rest of the film (a similar point is made even more explicitly in Grubb's bestselling novel).

The Night of the Hunter also questions easy character classifications by subtly undermining the values associated with them. The Preacher has »LOVE« and »HATE« tattooed on his fingers, and when he uses them to perform yet another tale—the ostensible conquest of Good over Evil—he visually demonstrates that both are in fact intricately intertwined. His final confrontation with Rachel Cooper, during a long night where she is protecting her »flock« of children with a shotgun while the Preacher sits menacingly on the fence of her property, is set up as a Manichean struggle of Good and Evil but culminates in the two sharing verses in a joint hymn. The affective pull of music undoes any easy distinctions between characters—this is »melo«-drama in the etymological sense, and as modality, but not primarily in terms of genre expectations. Even religion no longer serves as a simple yardstick—both characters profess Christian beliefs that are improvised to suit their respective needs.

The Night of the Hunter thus continuously dramatizes categorical slippages: between moral categories conventionally used to classify characters; between the actors' star personae and their respective roles (itself a feature of early 19th century stage performances); and, most conspicuously, between type and specificity. While the film invites audiences to locate the action in 1930s West Virginia, where Grubb's novel is set, neither time nor place are clearly identified in the film and the setting remains curiously generic. Gilles Deleuze briefly discusses the dream-like sequences of *The Night of the Hunter*, as the children glide in a state of suspended animation in their boat on the river, as examples of a »»societizing« [mondianization]« (59), when agency is depersonalized and transferred from the characters to the world surrounding them. A similar tension exists between »realistically« delineated »characters« and generic types, and it is here that the generative force of the melodramatic mode becomes most apparent. The film threatens to collapse individuated characters into predictable types (arguably John's final fate), while it also spawns a succession of characters based on melodramatic templates. »Character,« remarks Callow, »becomes a kind of conjuring trick« (65-66). For

example, by reproducing the same formal arrangements (an arrest, a trial) in which John encounters two successive father figures, they become simultaneously different and the same to him. The result is a traumatic inability to distinguish between them at the end of the film.

Set during the Great Depression, but shot during another crisis, the Cold War and McCarthyism (Hammond), *The Night of the Hunter* stages paranoid or schizophrenic moments between typecasting and assertions of individuality—a theme famously elaborated on in another black-and-white noir film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), just one year later. What is arguably at stake in *The Night of the Hunter*, and where the film's social and political significance may lie, is the larger question of whether individual identity positions (a child-like sense of imaginary selfhood) can be maintained in harsh and unforgiving social conditions, or whether they will have to be assimilated into generic social types. Melodrama's potential lies in dramatizing such moments.

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All that Heaven Allows (1955)

Elisabeth Bronfen

dir. Douglas Sirk; prod. Ross Hunter; screenplay Peg Fenwick; photography Russell Metty; music Frank Skinner. 35 mm, color, 89 mins. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.

If, in the opening shot of *All That Heaven Allows*, the bell tower of Stoningham informs us that it is 12 o'clock noon, then it does so to signal that we are entering the story at a moment when Cary Scott's life is about to change. At first, the young man pruning the heroine's trees on this bright autumn day looks like an extra. Only when her friend Sara turns down an invitation for lunch does Cary ask her gardener, Ron Kirby, to join her instead. Although he has been working for her every spring and autumn for three years, this is the first time she takes note of him. She is newly widowed; her children Kay and Ned visit only on the weekend. When Ron presents her with a twig from her golden rain tree, telling her that it only thrives in a home where there is love, he awakens feelings in her that have been dormant. This sudden attraction to him forces her to notice the emotional void in her life. The visual transition to the next scene makes use of the twig he gave her. Cary has now placed it in a vase on the vanity table where she is powdering her face. In the mirror we see her gaze longingly at it until the voices of her children interrupt her reverie. The subsequent *mise-en-scène*, visualizing the affective conundrum at the heart of melodramatic imagination, is quintessentially Douglas Sirk. As Cary gets up, the camera moves toward the mirror, capturing a reflection of her embracing Kay on the threshold to her bedroom, with Ned standing just behind her. As the camera pans toward the mirror, the vase falls out of our frame of vision. The sentimental bond between Cary and her children is not only presented as a framed mirror image. It also wipes out any non-maternal desire.



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The plot line follows the structure of a heterosexual feminine daydream. During the evening, Cary finds herself pursued by several suitors. Harvey, a long-standing friend of the family, who has accompanied her to the country club, proposes to her after escorting her home. Although he offers companionship, she turns him down. In a previous scene, the womanizer Howard had assaulted her on the terrace of the club, proposing a clandestine affair. Firmly rebuking him, Cary had immediately disengaged herself from his unsolicited kiss. Implicitly, she has already chosen the man who gave her the love twig, yet she will require a long period of deliberation before she can make this decision public. When soon thereafter she visits the forlorn mill next to Ron's nursery, she imagines how it could be transformed into a home and, although she is drawn to his radical independence, she hesitates. It is not just her children and friends who pose an obstacle. She is herself uncertain whether she has the courage to follow her own desire. Finding a copy of *Walden* in the home of Alida, one of Ron's friends, Cary softly reads aloud that »the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,« as though this were a message explicitly to herself.

As Sirk has explained, Thoreau's manifesto of nonconformism »is ultimately what the film was about« (Halliday 113). His melodramatic version of what it means for his heroine to no longer keep pace with her neighbors' investment in the notion of bourgeois prosperity, and, instead, to march to the beat of a different drummer, is, in turn, negotiated in relation to the two homes available to her: encapsulating, as they do, two incompatible worldviews. To mark the next narrative turning point, the camera returns to the bell tower of Stoningham. Now it is 6 p.m. on a wintry Saturday and Ron has asked Cary to hurry over to the mill. He has completely refurbished it, including a cozy fireplace and an enormous window looking out over the pond at the edge of the woods. The snowstorm which we see through the wooden boxed panes serves as the backdrop for her initial refusal of his proposal. She is afraid that because of class-based social conventions, this marriage will put her into an impossible situation. When, that same evening, realizing the overwhelming power of her desire, she decides to accept Ron after all, the couple once more stands in front of the window. As though it were a movie screen, what we now see behind it is a snow-covered landscape illuminated by the pink light of dusk. Their prospective happiness is perhaps only a Technicolor fantasy.

Her children's plans for their mother's future, in turn, involve a diametrically opposite notion of domesticity. Ned formulates his vehement disapproval of this marriage in terms of her obligation to remain in the family house to honor the memory of their father. During their altercation, he is standing behind the screen of the fireplace which, throughout the film, is never once lit. The iron-wrought partition not only stands for what has come between them but also indicates that the sacrifice he demands of her screens off her passion, effectively locking in all she desires. In line with the dramatic code of the women's weepies, we remain almost exclusively with Cary in her attempt to think through her conflicted emotional state. Yet specific to Sirk is that these self-reflections are presented in relation to the bourgeois home, with all its constricting furniture, which Cary inhabits,—the framed windows through which she looks out at the world, the mirrors that reflect the dilemmas she must solve. In the most cruelly ironic scene of the film, Cary's decision to put an end to her love affair out of maternal duty is debunked as a self-delusion. When her children arrive on Christmas morning, both bring with them news that will radically change her domestic situation. Kay has become engaged and Ned is about to go abroad on a scholarship. The very

house which, weeks earlier, stood for their father's legacy, has become an unnecessary luxury that Ned suggests they sell. Cary's desperate recognition that »the whole thing has been so pointless« is underscored by the gift of a TV set that is meant to substitute for the loss of the very family in the name of which she had been persuaded to give up Ron. While the salesman explains that by simply turning the dial she will have all the company she needs at her fingertips, the camera pans toward the TV screen until all we see is her reflection, framed by a red ribbon to the left and a Christmas card to the right. Cary's look of bemusement is devastating.

Though it was hugely successful at the box office, *All That Heaven Allows* garnered no critical attention when it came out. Instead, it was feminist film criticism in the 1980s that rediscovered it as a particularly salient example for the way the melodramatic heroine acts out the painful contradictions between social conventions and personal desires. As Laura Mulvey has noted, the film's heightened sentimentality is not only predicated on the way the story is told strictly from Cary's perspective, so that she emerges as the privileged point of identification. Her irreconcilable dilemma is never fully resolved, as if having »a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction« (Mulvey 79). If the impossibility of a fulfilment of the heroine's fantasies serves to challenge women's restricted position in postwar American society, this critique is not intended to radically change society. The feminine corrective to the constraints of domesticity is conceived in traditional terms of caring maternal compassion. Yet if the focus on the heroine's point of view through the *mise-en-scène* privileges feminine attributes like intuition and emotion, the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder discovers in this a utopic touch. As he notes, on screen »women are always reacting, doing what women are supposed to do, but in Sirk they think.« He adds: »It's great to see women think. It gives one hope.« For him, Sirk had discovered in the melodrama a cinematic form of feminine philosophy.

Any critical reevaluation of Sirk's film hinges on how one chooses to read the ambivalent resolution, predicated as this is on the logic of a second chance. After Cary, in the course of her deliberations, has succeeded in removing all mental obstacles to her reunion with Ron, she drives to his mill. The sunlit winter landscape we see through the window of her car in a rear projection anticipates a happy ending. Yet as Sirk has noted, while the studio loved the title because they thought it meant you could indeed have everything you wanted, »I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy« (Halliday 140). When Cary finds the door to the mill closed, she again hesitates and, rather than waiting, drives away again. Ron, coming home from a hunting trip sees this. In his excitement, he loses his step and falls down a ridge. A shot of his unconscious body, lying in the snow, segues to that of the bell tower, so as to signal a final narrative turning point. It is midnight and Cary is home alone, pacing up and down next to the unlit fireplace, when Ron's friend Alida arrives to tell her about the accident. At the mill, Cary finds Ron fast asleep on the couch. If, when she initially consented to their marriage, she was still uncertain whether it could work out, her decision to stay is now deliberate. With Thoreau one might say, she needed to lose Ron in order to *re*find him. She needed to realize the self-estrangement ingrained in her notion of maternal duty. As she explains to Alida, she had let so many people come between them »and the strangest one of all, myself.« Though her chance of happiness is now slimmer, given that it is unclear whether Ron will fully recover, this anagnorisis does not come too late—but rather just in time.

Ron wakes up the next morning. The brightly lit snow-decked landscape opening out toward the pond serves as the backdrop for an exchange of vows. Still half asleep, he mutters, »you've come home,« and Cary responds by reiterating his interpellation. »Yes, darling, I've come home.« The window, once again, functions as a screen within the screen, offering up a framed image of the anticipation of happiness: a potentiality of happiness within limits. The fact that Cary's return to Ron requires his injured body reinstalls her as the heroine in a narrative of care. Her romantic desire and her maternal duty have now converged. The contradiction is such that she is empowered by this seemingly selfless gesture. Leaning over his wounded body she asserts herself. It is up to us whether we break out in tears, or in nervous laughter, or whether we begin to think.

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The Word (*Ordet*, 1955)

Amanda Doxtater

dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer; prod. Tage Nielsen; screenplay Carl Theodor Dreyer; photography Henning Bendtsen; music Poul Schierbeck. 35 mm, black/white, 126 mins. Palladium, distrib. Film-Centralen-Palladium.

Ordet is one of the late major works by Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer. Based on a 1925 play by the same name, written by Kaj Munk, *Ordet* tells the story of a prosperous farming family led by the curmudgeonly widower, Morten Borgen (played by Henrik Malberg). Borgen



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

professes a life-affirming faith in the Christian God and a profound love for his three sons: Mikkel (played by Emil Hass Christensen), the eldest, married to Inger (played by Birgitte Federspiel), who is pregnant with the couple's third child; Johannes (played by Preben Lerdorff Rye), the middle son, a theology student who after an undisclosed trauma at school believes he is Jesus Christ resurrected; and Anders (played by Cay Kristiansen), the youngest. Anders falls in love with Anne (played by Gerda Nielsen), the daughter of Peder, the tailor (played by Ejner Federspiel), who believes in a more fundamentalist version of Christianity and forbids the marriage. As the two stubborn patriarchs, Morten and Peder, quarrel over the match, Inger undergoes a difficult birth and loses her child. Although she initially appeared to have survived, she also dies. *Ordet's* climactic resolution still moves audiences today. In an eight-minute-long sequence, Inger's corpse lies in an open casket when Inger's daughter, Maren, prompts Johannes (who at this point no longer believes himself to be Jesus) to ask God to bring her back from the dead. Miraculously, Inger awakens, stirs to life, and once again embraces her husband, converting Mikkel to her own loving faith and reconciling the two families.

Ordet was perhaps Dreyer's greatest critical and popular success, winning multiple awards on the international film festival circuit: including a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, a Bodil Award for Best Danish Film (the Danish equivalent of an Os-

car), and a Golden Globe. Effectively, the film secured Dreyer's position as Denmark's most distinguished *auteur* and a filmmaker of a particularly »austere« form of art cinema (Neale). Even today *Ordet* regularly gets voted onto »best film« lists by cinephile journals like the BFI's *Sight and Sound*, alongside two of Dreyer's earlier features in his melodramatic repertoire, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1929) and *Day of Wrath* (1943).

Various strands of critical acclaim for *Ordet* and its miracle combined to elevate it to the status of an art film. As Paul Schrader argues in his 1971 study, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, this is the film in Dreyer's oeuvre that most intently employs »transcendental style,« thus confirming Dreyer as an »artist with spiritual intentions« (143). The film's formal innovations—extensive long takes and flowing, ethereal dolly shots; stylized acting and slow, deliberate pacing—further enhanced its status as a formalist, or modernist, work that foregrounds cinema as a medium, in experiments that draw out and make perceptible tensions between form and content, and narrative and non-narrative elements (Bordwell). C. Claire Thomsen has discussed Dreyer's use of long takes and the sensation of extended duration in *Ordet* in relation to slow cinema, while also showing Dreyer to be equally versatile at speed.

But Dreyer's austere provocations to formal and spiritual reflection are also passionate and emotional. *Ordet* agonizingly elicits our identification with Inger and those who grieve her: The film's miraculous reconciliation elicits tearful relief in the face of implausibility. The film demands again and again that the spectators contend, lovingly, with the very material corporeality of its filmed bodies. When Mikkel kneels beside Inger's open casket, sobbing, his father attempts to comfort him by saying, »Mikkel, her soul is with God. It's not here any longer. Surely, you see that?« To which Mikkel weeps in reply, »But her body. I loved her body, too.« Art cinema alone is not enough to account for the persistent, and undertheorized, melodramatic impulses in Dreyer's work, nor for the way in which formal estrangement and strong feeling coincide in the film.

Ordet is emblematic of what I call *art melodrama*, a film genre and critical category that is an iteration of the melodramatic mode inflected by art cinema. Art melodrama explicitly combines, on the one hand, melodrama's privileging of the expressive potential of the suffering human body, emotion, and spectacle, with, on the other hand, art cinema's claims to ambiguity, aesthetic distance, media consciousness, reflexivity, authorial subjectivity, and formal experimentation. As a composite, essentially hybrid form, art melodrama marries sensibilities commonly deemed antithetical to one another: popular and elite, mainstream and independent, obvious and ambiguous, feminine and masculine, passive and active, conservative and experimental. Art cinema alternately draws the spectator toward immersion in the fictional world, and more decisively estranges them from it than other forms of melodrama.

At times, art melodrama reworks recognizable tropes of popular melodrama for an art cinema context: for instance, heightening and dramatizing the interrelationship of expressivity and reflexivity more overtly than other iterations of the melodramatic mode, such as the domestic family melodrama or the action film. The hyper-idealized representation of motherhood in *Ordet*, which draws on elements of maternal melodrama and the woman's film, is a case in point. The very visibly pregnant Inger inhabits the farmhouse as goodness incarnate, a fantasy of maternal plentitude and aestheticized, instrumental suffering. Inger suffers and dies so that a community can be healed. But Dreyer also unsettles this disembodied allegory by drawing explicit attention to Inger's embodied, lived experience. This can be spectacular, as in the equi-

site physical pain of a graphic childbirth sequence, or also plodding, as in the case of foregrounding the weight of quotidian domestic labor, care, and reconciliation. The slow pace of the film makes Inger's labor palpable: She fills pipes, makes endless cups of coffee, reminds slightly soured old men of the goodness of their sons, meets children as they return from school, and advocates for young lovers.

Similarly, *Ordet* reimagines elements of male melodrama, as theorized by Thomas Schatz and Tom Lutz—this time by rewriting gendered scripts about how male bodies are allowed to show emotion. In contrast to the emasculated father figures in postwar American cinema like Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), released the same year as *Ordet*, the stolid Borgen men are feminized to a degree. Their chins quiver as they cry and mourn, and they openly care for one another, thus nuancing the film's conventional depiction of patriarchy. Johannes also expands the film's representation of masculinity. His slow, stylized movements and speech mark him as quasi-hysterical, a quintessential manifestation of melodrama's aesthetics of embodiment (Brooks). Overwhelmed at the sight of Inger's corpse, he swoons. Typical of Dreyer's art melodrama, empathy for Johannes is inextricable from the reflection prompted by the relatively rare sight of a male body gone limp with emotion.

The resurrection sequence in which *Ordet* culminates is an art melodrama miracle *par excellence*. Art cinema's ambiguity and accentuated duration coincide with the pathos of melodramatic time. Fundamentally a nostalgic, conservative mode, melodrama often elicits pathos by exploiting a desire to return to an earlier moment of lost innocence. Symbolically, the miracle of Inger's resurrection achieves the gloriously impossible return to an undifferentiated maternal state. The funeral sequence itself operates according to the temporal logic of what Linda Williams calls a »paroxysm of pathos« (58) in her theorization of how American melodrama employs a dialectic of pathos and action for emotional effect. Melodrama produces climactic, tearful release by prolonging resolution—by, for instance, cutting to action sequences—and thereby temporarily denying the spectator the satisfaction of either a happy *just-in-time* rescue or the release of a *just-too-late* rescue, when tears flow in surrender to time's inevitable forward progression.

Art melodrama typically subordinates action to pathos, but *Ordet's* miracle sequence is also a rescue sequence. Dreyer earlier established resurrection as a possibility through a conversation between Johannes and his niece, Maren (played by Ann Elisabeth Groth Hansen), about mothers in heaven. Consequently, when grief and lack of faith compel Mikkel to threaten to close the lid of Inger's coffin and commit her body to rot in the ground—before Johannes can resurrect her—the spectator becomes nervous. Art cinema's long takes and deliberate, lugubrious, and stylized delivery of lines and movement all extend and accentuate the paroxysm of pathos. Mikkel's desperate, final act is just barely deferred again and again, as various parties slowly enter and take their time paying their respects. When Johannes appears, at last, after having been lost for days, Maren implores her uncle to »Hurry!« and the *just-in-time* resurrection-rescue succeeds—and the stilled clock, placed conspicuously on the wall opposite Inger's casket, is again started up. *Ordet's* miracle reveals melodrama's penchant for implausible endings and wish-fulfillment, coinciding with art cinema's ambiguous temporalities. We can think of this as a shared disregard for Hollywood's continuity editing and narratives propelled by psychological motives.

Throughout his career, Dreyer sought to raise film to the status of the other arts, and he viewed this as antithetical to making melodrama. Dreyer began his long career working at the Danish powerhouse pop-culture studio, Nordisk Films Kompagni, in the 1910s, during what has been called the Golden Age of Danish melodrama. When he left the studio, it was purportedly because Nordisk's profitable mass culture constricted his artistic freedom. Dreyer never openly embraced melodrama during his lifetime. The term held too great a stigma for him. Consequently, Dreyer's art melodrama is a product of continuing to experiment with melodramatic forms—which he was both repulsed by and attracted to—under the auspices of art cinema. More recent art melodrama *auteurs*, such as Lars von Trier, would come to embrace the genre more openly, and even ironically, as in the brutally sacrificial miracle of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), the first film in his Golden Heart trilogy (1996-2000).

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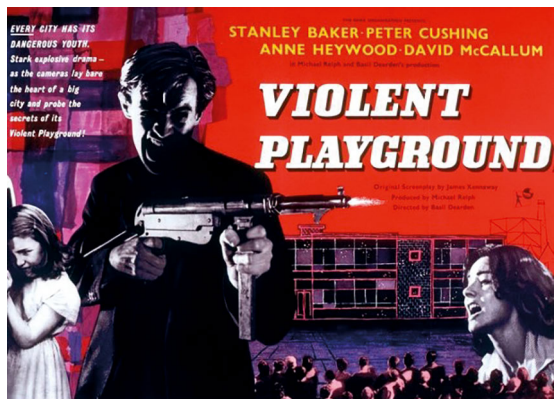
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Violent Playground (1958)

Christian Krug

dir. Basil Dearden; prod. Michael Relph; screenplay James Kennaway; photography Reginald Wyer; music Philip Green. 35mm, black/white, 106 mins. Rank Organisation, distrib. Carlton Films.

Violent Playground is a British »social problem« film of the 1950s, a commercially and critically successful group of films now overshadowed by the better-known New Wave films of the late 50s and early 60s. These films addressed, and attempted to solve, »social problems« that seemed to threaten the ideological fiction of an affluent and consensual society in postwar Britain. Director Basil Dearden and producer Michael Relph had already dealt with racial conflicts amongst dock workers (*Pool of London*, 1951) and would go on to focus on racism faced by immigrants (*Sapphire*, 1959) and the laws governing homosexuality (*Victim*, 1961). The topic they returned to most often in their films, however, was class-inflected discussions of juvenile delinquency (*The Blue Lamp*, 1950; *I Believe in You*, 1952; and *Violent Playground*). Specifically, *Violent Playground* poses the question of whether a new generation of unruly working class youths can be successfully integrated into the social-democratic vision of a homogenous and affluent post-industrial Britain. In Marxist terms, the film enquires into the »reproduction of the relations of production«—a suggestive phrase, since this movie is both obliquely and centrally concerned with (blocked) commercial and sexual (re)production (Krug). The film projects this question onto the interplay between its two main protagonists, juvenile liaison officer Jack Truman (played by Stanley Baker), a former CID detective and now the representative of a newly professionalized welfare state, and Johnnie Murphy (David McCallum), the 16-year-old leader of a youth gang controlling the playground of a large housing estate for working class families in Liverpool. Reminiscent of 19th century domestic stage melodramas, the film »solves« its symbolic blockages paradigmatically, by re-shuffling its cast of characters so that the roles of »father« and »mother« (both conspicuously absent in this film) are reassigned, and heterofamilial structures reaffirmed: Truman not only sends



Johnnie to prison, but also falls in love with Johnnie's sister and then takes his place in the Murphy family as a new ersatz-dad to his younger siblings.

For all their ostensible social realism, British social problem films frequently rely on the conventional patterns and affective configurations of melodrama. On its release, reviews considered *Violent Playground* »an exploitation melodrama in the clothing of documentary realism« (Chibnall 148), and a trade publication, *Kine Weekly*, aptly referred to the film as a »sociological melodrama« (Burton and O'Sullivan 222). Dearden and Relph's films highlight melodrama's entanglement with realist traditions—still all too frequently simply considered its ›other.‹ For example, Johnnie is responsible for petty crimes that escalate quickly: He soon sets fire to warehouses (the film's suspense plot follows the arson investigation), and the last third of the movie features a tense hostage situation with Johnnie threatening to shoot a classroom full of children with a machine gun. This steady escalation is both an example of the film's melodramatic »mode of excess« and, at the same time, is anchored ›realistically‹ in contemporary sociological discourses whereby criminal acts invariably follow a logic of progression that cannot be controlled by the criminals themselves: Unless they are stopped, their behavior will inevitably spiral out of control. And while the film is based on actual policy enacted in 1949, and shot, on location, in the semi-documentary style of Dearden's *The Blue Lamp* (1950), these locations (a church, a school, an upper class hotel, or a working class playground) are highly selective emblems charged with a surplus of meaning. Characters similarly veer towards emblematic types (aptly called ›Truman,‹ ›Mary,‹ and ›Heaven‹), their bodily acts ripe with somatic meaning—and the film's overt didacticism turns out to be emotional and affective, rather than cognitive and rational. The film also borrows directly from American teen melodramas, specifically Richard Brooks' hugely successful *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Demonstrating melodrama's transcultural adaptability, such intertexts are given a very specific British inflection: Johnnie obtains the submachine gun from a guitar case carried by ›Slick,‹ a youth dressed in the fashion of popular American crime films. At the film's specific historical juncture, this gun clearly conflates two threats—that of an encroaching Americanized popular culture and that of the recent past, since for a contemporary audience, Slick's MP 40 was readily identifiable as the standard weapon used by the Wehrmacht in World War II.

A melodramatic mode thus organizes the diverse elements of the film—its social and documentary realism, its ideological concerns, and some set pieces lifted straight from 19th century domestic melodrama—and furnishes them with a new aesthetic articulation. It also advances the sentimental politics of the film: In *Violent Playground*, supposedly intimate and personal ›feelings‹ are organized according to specific moral values and ideological norms and are recast as social and public (Krug). Questions of ›shared‹ or ›public feelings‹ are all of central importance in the film, which didactically teaches its characters (and audience) how to ›feel right.‹ Juvenile Liaison Officer Jack Truman, for example, starts off feeling too little; he is unable to emotionally connect to children or women, and cannot even properly ›read‹ emotions. In a series of lessons, he is literally being taught how to decode tears, develop empathy, and attain emotional maturity. By the end of the movie, his character combines the compassion demanded by a social worker with the strictness of a policeman. In the process, ›Truman‹ has also become a ›true man‹—with his rough masculinity tempered (Chibnall 148), he nostalgically evokes an early Victorian masculine ideal of bourgeois respectability achieved through discipline and emotional regulation (Krug).

As part of its sentimental politics, the last third of the movie also sets out to affectively interpellate both the film's public and audience. *Violent Playground* invites sentimental responses—pity, compassion, empathy—through displays of suffering. Again, this is done in a didactic fashion, and the setting is quite appropriately a classroom—school literally functions as an (affective) ideological ›apparatus‹ in the movie. In a series of shots in tight framings, filmed from just inside or just outside the huge classroom windows, Johnnie displays a series of terrified young hostages to a schoolyard full of parents, police, and mass media, threatening to kill the children. The windows serve as picture frames for this affective staging of intense emotions, as an interface for their projection onto the ›public‹ below—and as obvious metaphors for the cinema screen. This procession of bodies in distress is intercut with close-ups of faces from the masses of crying mothers, their faces full of anguish and despair. The film takes great care to establish their social inclusiveness, and the schoolyard, doubling for the cinema audience, becomes a model for a national community united through shared suffering. Fifteen years earlier, representations of war facilitated such community building. Now, the movie employs a working class juvenile delinquent, Johnnie, to do the job.

The film's sentimental politics and its melodramatic mode also ›affect‹ its ending. *Violent Playground* offers a bourgeois-familial solution to the problem of juvenile delinquency: According to Sergeant Truman, society simply misses ›a lot of Mum and a little bit of Dad.« In an effortless ideological sleight-of-hand, a policeman-turned-social-worker becomes a symbolic father. Having learned to feel right, the reformed ›true man‹ is inscribed into a sentimental myth that generalizes ›family‹ and ties patriarchy to the (post)industrial nation. It turns out that Truman descends from a lineage of shepherds, and the very last shot of the film shows him taking a mixed race child (aptly referred to as ›Sonny‹) by the hand and guiding him through the industrial wastelands of Liverpool, symbolically incorporating him into the national family—an extended patriarchy of a ›multi-ethnic Britain.«

While Johnnie has no place in Dearden's liberal vision for Britain, his emotive performance lingers on. Clearly intended as an identificatory figure for a British cinema audience that got progressively younger throughout the 1950s (*Violent Playground* was considered one of Britain's earliest teenpics, and David McCallum was lauded as the ›British James Dean« [Burton and O'Sullivan 220]), Johnnie and his gang represent an emerging ›structure of feelings‹ which this film only barely manages to contain—for now. Ten years later, Johnnie's gun-toting doppelganger, played by Malcolm McDowell, will return to school in Lindsay Anderson's *If* (1968).

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Hiroshima mon amour (1959)

Axelle Germanaz

dir. Alain Resnais; prod. Samy Halfon; screenplay and dialogues Marguerite Duras; photography Sacha Vierny, Takahashi Michio; music Giovanni Fusco, Georges Delerue. 35mm, black/white, 91 mins. Pathé Entertainment, distrib. Cocinor.

In a 1960s interview, Alain Resnais was asked if in *Hiroshima mon amour* he had deliberately introduced »transgressive« ideas—of interracial love, female sexuality, adultery—to decry France’s prevailing social norms. His response was candid: »This is not a social problem film, it is a sentimental film« (Ravar 214, all translations are mine). Indeed, *Hiroshima mon amour* is not only a cinematographic inquiry about the meanings and conditions of modern life after World War II, but it is also a deeply sentimental account of love and intimacy in the Atomic Age.

Set in Hiroshima in August 1957, twelve years after the United States bombed the city, the film follows the short-lived love story between *Elle* («Her,« played by Emmanuelle Riva), a French actress appearing in an international film about peace, and *Lui* («Him,« played by Eiji Okada), a Japanese architect involved in city politics. As *Elle* prepares to return to Paris, the couple embarks on a twenty-four-hour affair, punctuated by a prolonged series of intimate and painful dialogues about their lives, loves, and war traumas. Born from the collaboration of New Wave director Alain Resnais and New Novel author Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* stages a melodramatic love story between two anonymous modern subjects. Their names are, in fact, irrelevant to the storyline: They are made to be no one and everyone at the same time. The lovers are casualties of their social realities (past and present), their affective states, and a new geopolitical situation they inhabit: the postwar world, or, the Atomic Era. Their romance, seemingly trivial and static, triggers, in reality, a slow geographical and psychological odyssey for both characters. As we follow the couple through the serpentine streets, hotel staircases and hallways, and into the empty bars of Hiroshima, a grander story of universal loss and trauma emanates from their brief encounter. While the movie, gen-



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erally regarded as an art film, is not a typical Sirkian melodrama with colorful imagery, heightened action, and a Manichean worldview, it nevertheless rests on a set of melodramatic tropes acute to the postwar moment. The movie deploys dramatic speech and music, centers on suffering subjects, and introduces the »double temporality« typical of melodrama, representing »too-late-ness« at the same time as it conveys the hope of its circumvention« (Frank 541). Furthermore, it is—seemingly despite Resnais' original intentions—a powerful social critique of the postwar world, and in particular of nuclear proliferation. Finally, it is, as one irritated reader of *The New York Times*' 1960 review of the film bluntly puts it in a brief op-ed, »sickeningly sentimental and romantic« (Perrota 363).

The opening of *Hiroshima mon amour* is phantasmatic. The film begins with a close-up of two naked bodies gently moving. They are locked in a soft embrace, caressing each other, while being covered with what seems to be falling ashes of nuclear fallout, then glitter, then »rain, dew, or sweat, whichever is preferred« (Duras 15). As Elle begins to speak about what she has seen of Hiroshima, we see archival photos and footages from Akira Iwasaki's 1946 documentary, *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, recorded right after the blast and soon after censored by the Japanese Army and U.S. forces. We see ruins, scorched bodies, deformed objects. We see victims, with their skins burned, opened, scarred and hear about their progenies, born with or developing malformations. We also see Resnais' own shots of the reconstructed city, its inhabitants, and its strange flourishing atomic tourism. Elle's lyrical declamation about the extraordinary suffering that has engulfed Hiroshima, emphasized by Giovanni Fusco's score, only heightens the emotional reception of those sensational images. By weaving together glimpses of the romantic embrace with brutal images of Hiroshima, the audience is rendered spectator of both the lovers' erotic act and the horrors of nuclear war, and the effect is unnerving. Indeed, the fifteen-minute opening sequence is built on conflict, unease, and awe. As Elle recounts her memories of news reports on the bombing of Hiroshima, Lui ritually interjects, not only to negate her experience of the bombing, but also, ultimately, ours. Lui says: »You saw nothing, in Hiroshima. Nothing,« and Elle replies: »I saw everything. Everything.« In a later conversation Elle states: »I have always cried on the fate of Hiroshima. Always.« To which Lui replies: »No. What would you have cried on?« The drastic incomprehensibility of each other's life stories and war traumas, along with the incommunicability of what happened in Hiroshima, is at the core of this postwar love story.

Resnais makes use of the melodramatic mode to offer his audience ways to cope with postwar social issues and the »extraordinary« feelings they give rise to. In particular, this is done through nuanced and affective representations of the war, forms of radical subjectivity and realism, a haunting dramatic music score, and a focus on tragic love stories during and after the war between wounded characters. As an audience, we are left disconcerted by the hopeless love depicted on screen. The characters are themselves but spectators of their conditions, and it is as fellow spectators that we identify with their feelings more than with their actions. Through melancholic music and vivid flashbacks, we are made to feel Elle's torment at the loss of her first love, a German soldier stationed in her hometown, Nevers. We are made to feel her distress at his sudden murder, then at her own social death as she is publicly shamed and ostracized by her community for falling for the »enemy.« Likewise, we are made to feel Lui's guilt as he reveals that he is the only member of his family to survive the atomic bomb. »What luck,« Elle tells him after hearing that he was dispatched by the Imperial Army when the city

was razed to the ground, to which he bitterly answers »Yes.« We are made to feel his desire as he pursues her throughout the city, seeking to fulfill his need to love and be loved unconditionally. And we feel their despair toward a world seemingly bound for self-annihilation: »It will happen again,« Elle says. »Two hundred thousand dead. Eighty thousand injured. In nine seconds [...]. It will happen again.«

The characters' respective concern with memory is also a core theme of this melodrama. During the central scene of the film at a tearoom by the Ōta River, Elle recounts the story of her forbidden love with the German soldier and realizes that she is slowly forgetting him. She suddenly screams, breaks down, and buries her face in Lui's hands. He listens carefully, (re-)collects her story, and even enacts her fading memory as he once speaks for the German lover. Another key scene of the film towards the end is also poignant for its representation of memory—or of its failure to do so—and the dislocation and solitude provoked by the war: Late at night, Elle enters a bar called the Casablanca (note Resnais' nod to Michael Curtiz's 1942 → *Casablanca* about another melodramatic wartime love story embodied by another iconic cinema couple). Lui follows from a distance, then finally sits at a table opposite her. Their looks never detach, yet not a word is uttered. An unknown man sits by her side and engages in a series of flirtatious questions to which she absently nods. Lui, still lost in her eyes, smokes alone, accompanied only by his shadow on the adjacent wall—the silhouette, so stark, so salient, emphasizes a sense of fragmentation and isolation. Then suddenly, he lifts his gaze to the ceiling: His eyes widen, and his mouth slightly opens. He appears in shock, as if he was, at this exact moment, witnessing the drop of the bomb twelve years earlier. However, this can only be a futile reenactment of an event he himself did not experience, but which he knows through collective memory. He then drops his head and slowly raises his gaze, safely sinking it back into hers. This fleeting moment exposes Lui's own haunting trauma, consummating loneliness, and the salvaging bond he experiences with Elle. These two scenes testify that the acts of forgetting and remembering are equally excruciating for the postwar subject. How does one manage the unbearable personal pain that comes with the vital duty to remember the collective, traumatic past?

Hiroshima mon amour engages with important epistemological and existential questions about memory, identity, affect, and intimacy at the dawn of a new geopolitical era. Resnais relies on the melodramatic mode to not only bring the unspeakable, the unimaginable, and the repressed into the realm of representation, but also to dissect it—viscerally and poetically. As Christine Gledhill notes, melodrama disentangles the intricacies of the social world and »organises the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and contradictions of a newly emerging secular and atomising society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms« (228-29). As such, *Hiroshima mon amour* is an investigation into the ways both World Wars have shattered and reorganized modern subjects' affective, moral, and sociopolitical spheres. In the end, the film is a plea for peace and human understanding. It never pretends that communication and connection are easy. On the contrary, it is acutely aware of the immense difficulties such potential dialogue can engender. Nonetheless, the international love story at the heart of the film—itsself a product of transnational cooperation—argues for human understanding and compassion. In the aforementioned interview, Resnais spoke more about the hopes he had regarding the impact of his film. He wished it would encourage spectators to remember Hiroshima's fate, and, most importantly, to love: »There is [in the film] something of ›hurry up and fall in love, life is short, enjoy it terribly, really, we only have little time« (Ravar 216).

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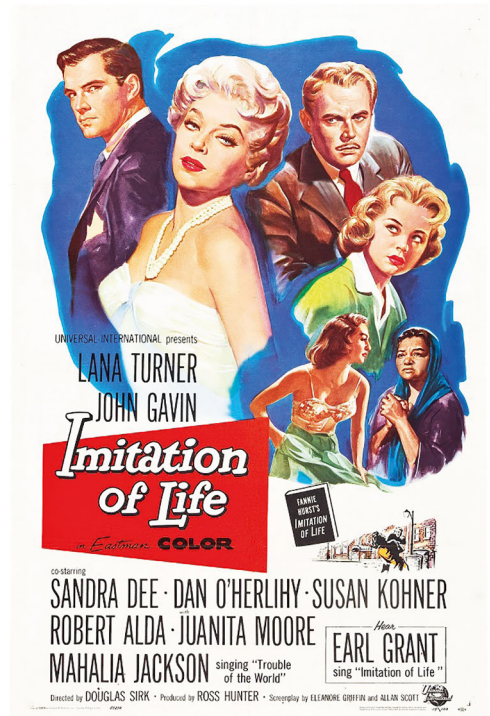
Imitation of Life (1959)

Karin Esders

dir. Douglas Sirk; prod. Ross Hunter; screenplay Eleanore Griffin, Allan Scott; photography Russell Metty; music Frank Skinner. 35mm, color, 125 mins. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.

As a most versatile text, *Imitation of Life* has circulated through U.S. culture for many decades both captivating and haunting the American imagination. Based on Fannie Hurst's triumphantly successful serial novel *Sugar House* (1932), it was turned into a book one year later and adapted into film by John Stahl. In 1935, Sterling Brown's critical assessment in *Opportunity* targeted the racist elements of the text and triggered public debates among Black intellectuals, clergy, and audiences alike. Langston Hughes' satirical adaptation *Limitations of Life* premiered in Harlem in 1938; both Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) devised intricate intertextual ties, citing, refuting, and transforming the earlier sources. In 1959, director Douglas Sirk, who had emigrated from Nazi Germany, rearranged Hurst's novel and crafted a stylish Technicolor box office hit, yielding Universal Studio's greatest profit ever. Since the 1930s, *Imitation of Life* has generated recurring critical attention. Scholars have approached the text as a site of cultural contestation where deep-seated contradictions concerning race, gender, class, and sexuality become excessively obvious and yet are glossed over by a sophisticated *mise-en-scène* that draws attention to the fine-tuned colors, magnificent costumes, and posh settings.

Imitation of Life centers on the relationship between two single mothers, one Black and one white, and their respective daughters. In Hurst's and Stahl's versions, the two widows, after years of struggle, set up a multi-million-dollar pancake empire. Even



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though their fortune is based on Delilah's recipe and skill, the white characters cash in the profits, while the Black woman is restricted to a position of devoted domestic. Moreover, she is turned into a public advertising image, painfully reminiscent of the *Aunt Jemima* brand which so successfully commodified the mammy stereotype. As a »surrogate and enabler« (Morrison 51), her character makes possible the white woman's emancipation and success.

Sirk's version relocates the story to the spectacular world of theater and film. Again, the Black woman, Annie Johnson (played by Juanita Moore), has to perform maternal work whereas Lora Meredith (played by Lana Turner) gives up most of her family life as she relentlessly pursues her acting career. Even though *Imitation of Life* starts out as a film about the two mothers, quite imperceptibly it turns into a film about Annie's fair-skinned daughter, Sarah Jane, who is able to pass for white. Describing his specific focus in a 1972 interview, Sirk said: »The only interesting thing is the [Black] angle: the [Black] girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville« (qtd. in Sirk and Hallyday 130).

This strand of the plot must be read in the context of U.S. American legislation. Way into the 1980s, many U.S. states applied the principle of hypodescent which created the idea that every person who has a Black ancestor is »naturally« Black. Feeding into collective racist fantasies, the »one-drop rule« made it illegal for people of color to identify freely with various ethnic groups and, above all, barred them from white spheres of privilege and personhood. Light-skinned African Americans who tried to »pass« were considered counterfeit or pseudo-whites who used their skin as a camouflage. As Werner Sollors put it, this anti-Black principle »makes one part of a person's ancestry real, essential, and defining, and other parts accidental, mask-like, and insignificant« (249).

While *Imitation of Life* increasingly concerns itself with Sarah Jane's experiences, showing the irritated, appalled, and brutal reactions to her attempts to pass, it both employs and bends the formula of classical family melodrama. Designed as an emotional center full of heartbreak and tears, the split between mothers and daughters so crucial for countless women's films is given a new twist here. After Sarah Jane ran away from the shared household of the two women who want her to choose a respectable career as a teacher for Black children, she instead tries to blend in with her white colleagues and customers in a shoddy vaudeville playhouse—in another town, under a different name. Her mother Annie, who had her traced down, secretly slips into the theater and observes her show. Through her eyes, the spectators see Sarah Jane in her tight-fitting costume, suggestively dancing and lolling about, serving champagne to the men. For her, the imitation of life as an imitation of white (people) seems to be the only way to overcome racial demarcations. Yet the film presents her as an improper mirror image (not »legitimately« white) of the successful Lora Meredith (»properly« white) who has made it in the legitimate theater world.

After the show, in her daughter's dressing room, the prototypical tensions of the maternal melodrama are played out—the daughter wanting to live her own life, the mother not wanting to let her go. However, *Imitation of Life* goes beyond the well-established severing of symbiotic family ties and explores the racist violence these filmic characters have to endure every day but still cannot fully grasp. In order to advance in white society, Sarah Jane must not only deny her pedigree and her past but also

her name, her language, her life. Passing thus becomes a form of social death. This four-minute dressing-room scene plays out the cruelty and intense pain of the two characters who have to individually carry the burden of an anti-Black system. In defending herself against her mother's love, Sarah Jane defends herself against the terrorism of the world, as Fassbinder put it (245). In pulling all the registers of emotional involvement, this scene forcefully engages its spectators with the moral dilemmas brought about by racist structures. And yet, the film still manages to go beyond the personal and give a glimpse into the political realm, even if in a highly stylized manner.

Heart-broken, Annie moves back home and is about to die. Her life-long companion, Lora, seems completely surprised to learn that Annie had a life of her own as a cherished member of the town's Black community and that she has saved enough money for a grand funeral complete with white horses, a carriage, and all her friends. The funeral scene in its emotional, visual, and aural indulgence becomes the pinnacle of the film, and it introduces a political dimension that is quite singular for Hollywood melodramas. It begins in a large church, with Annie's flower-draped coffin, an immense crowd of her community members, her few white companions, and a sizeable gospel choir with Mahalia Jackson singing »Trouble of the World.« Her performance of this gospel brings in an expressive element of Black culture that was for the most part excluded from Hollywood entertainment. Moreover, Lora as well as her daughter and white friends seem to get lost in an all-Black crowd. Instead of listening to Jackson's poignant singing, they are frozen in static and rather impassive poses, perhaps indicating the awkwardness of being the odd ones out. The next shots show the congregation slowly moving forward with hundreds of Black people lining the streets while policemen guard the procession. This sequence can be read as an allusion to the marches of the civil rights movement. In this extremely rare occasion with countless Black extras imposingly marching down the street, the film undoubtedly creates a strong political vision. Black people are claiming public space and public dignity. When Sarah Jane belatedly turns up at the funeral and throws herself onto the coffin, she seems to reach out not only to her late mother but to the community at large. However, in its drive towards closure, the film's last shot shows her firmly in the grip of her white surrogate family, numbing her desperate crying.

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Oyster Girl (蚵女, Ke nü, 1963)

Pei-yin Lin

dir. Hsing Lee, Chia Lee; prod. Henry Kung;
screenplay Chi-pin Chao, Chngbo Liu;
photography Hui-ying Hua; music Ming-tao Lu.
35mm, color, 106 mins. Central Motion Picture
Company, distrib. Central Motion Picture
Company.

Oyster Girl is the earliest postwar color »healthy realism« film from Taiwan, produced by the state-owned Central Motion Picture Company (CMPC). In 1963, the CMPC director Henry Kung started to promote this genre that projects an ideal version of Taiwan in line with the »New Life Movement« that the Nationalist Party (KMT) inaugurated in 1934. The New Life Movement was guided by Confucian philosophy, aiming to cultivate moral virtues such as propriety, justice, and honesty. Although Kung claimed the inspiration was from Italy's postwar neorealist films, the CMPC's »healthy realism« was actually, and perhaps also ironically, closer to Soviet socialist realism, in which positive heroes and bright plotlines are prerequisites so that the films are instructive and help reinforce the ruling party's stability. Thus, healthy realism is a contextually specific and ideologically embedded genre, expected to consolidate the nascent KMT's political legitimacy in Taiwan. As this type of film often contains melodramatic elements, such as familial love and romance, scholars have referred to it as »melodramatic realism« (Berry 76) or a »film movement inclusive of various genres« (Hong 75).

Hsing Lee's collaboration with the CMPC on its »healthy realism« project was not coincidental. In 1958, Lee had already directed the popular Taiwanese-dialect comedy film *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan*, regarded by some as a Taiwanese version of Laurel and Hardy films. Lee established his own production company in 1961 and made the acclaimed film *Our Neighbour* (1963), which inspired Henry Kung to advocate



»healthy realism« focusing on the brightness of life. *Oyster Girl*, co-directed by Hsing Lee and Chia Lee, and *Beautiful Duckling* (1965), which Hsing Lee directed alone, are both representative works, sanguinely exploring quotidian life in Taiwan's countryside. The somewhat negative portrayal of poor émigré mainlanders living in a ghetto in *Our Neighbour* is replaced in *Oyster Girl* by hopefulness conveyed through its portrayal of the KMT regime's impressive modernization in Taiwan. The fishermen association's success in the oyster's varietal improvement and the elected township mayor's eagerness to offer help are both salient examples. As for *Beautiful Duckling*, the film highlights the diligence and good nature of a duck-raising farmer and his adopted daughter, despite their adversity.

After *Oyster Girl*, Hsing Lee directed *Four Loves* (1964) and *My Silent Wife* (1965). Both melodramatic films were adapted from the tear-jerking stories by the popular romance novelist Qiong Yao and contain »healthy« messages. The former demonstrates that education is important for the disabled, which sat well with the KMT's modernization blueprint. Lee made his third Qiong Yao film, *Where the Seagull Flies* (1974), before refocusing on realist topics in the late 1970s. *He Never Gives Up* (1978), *The Story of a Small Town* (1979), and *Good Morning, Taipei* (1980) led him to win the Golden Horse Award for Best Feature Film, considered the Taiwanese Oscar, for three consecutive years, unprecedented in the history of Taiwanese film.

Thus far, scholars have tended to focus on state intervention in Taiwan's film industry (Liu), or the concept of realism in »healthy realism« films (Chen). Although a few scholars have paid attention to the co-existence of this specific kind of realism with sentimental spectacles (Berry and Farquhar; Chiang; Lin) and remind us to treat »healthy realism« as neither straightforwardly propagandistic nor entirely commercially oriented, the mixture of both elements in Hsing Lee's *Oyster Girl* warrants closer scrutiny, particularly because of the tension between its »healthiness«—the success of government-led modernization—and the melodramatic elements that center on its female characters.

Set against the backdrop of a Taiwanese fishing village, the melodramatic plot of *Oyster Girl* primarily revolves around the romantic love between the heroine, Ah-lan (played by Mo-chou Wang), and her impoverished fisherman boyfriend, Jinshui (Chia-chi Wu). Ah-lan works hard as an oyster girl to support her alcoholic father and young brother. She hopes to marry Jinshui, but Jinshui is seldom around, as he works on the fishing boat aspiring to save money before proposing to Ah-lan. Ah-huo is interested in Ah-lan, and this irritates his girlfriend, Ah-chu, who picks a fight on the oyster farm with Ah-lan. Jinshui and Ah-lan plan their marriage, but Ah-lan's father demands a huge dowry payment. In order to raise the money, Jinshui has no alternative but to leave for deep sea fishing. Ah-lan soon finds herself pregnant with Jinshui's child and is sent to stay with the aunt of her friend Ah-juan in another village, in order to avoid gossip about her extramarital pregnancy. One day, Ah-huo almost sexually assaults Ah-lan. Fortunately, Ah-chu appears and rescues Ah-lan, foreshadowing the two girls' reconciliation. Later, Ah-lan encounters a difficult childbirth, but Jinshui returns in time and donates blood to save her. The film culminates buoyantly, with the marriage of Ah-lan and Jinshui, the new village head establishing a co-op, and Ah-lan joining other oyster girls on the sea to celebrate their life through shared song.

While *Oyster Girl*'s uplifting ending makes it a perfect »healthy realism« film, its co-optation of melodramatic elements, and their transposition into the context of Tai-

wan's rural modernization, provides food for thought. Savvy audiences would detect that, linguistically, the film is hardly a »realist« one, as the main characters—including the oyster girls and other villagers—speak Mandarin, whereas they would in reality speak Taiwanese dialect. This unmasks the irony of the term »healthy realism,« as a film that is overly optimistic is unlikely to be real. *Oyster Girl*, in this regard, presents a peculiar case of melodrama. Its *melos*, the use of sound, lends weight to the KMT's language policy—in which Mandarin is the only officially sanctioned »national« language—rather than to the film's sentimentality. The voice-over and the film's theme song further demonstrate that the use of sound in *Oyster Girl* corresponds seamlessly to state ideology. The voice-over, narrated by a male voice in standard Mandarin, at the beginning links Ah-lan's image to the oyster. It suggests that Ah-lan's disposition is as strong as oyster shell, and her tender and pure heart is like oyster meat. The theme song, presented sometimes as a chorus and sometimes in the form of a symphony, is always accompanied by impressive scenes showing myriad oyster boats in long or panoramic shots with farmers happy about their harvests.

Oyster Girl's »healthiness« is not based solely on the progress made by the local government. It is also associated with the gender-specific moral codes. The heroine, Ah-lan, for instance, is expected to be a loyal daughter, a caring sister, a diligent oyster girl, and, most importantly, a chaste young lady. This is enhanced in the film by minimizing Ah-lan and Jinshui's physical interactions with each other and replacing them instead with largely symbolic scenes. Ah-lan and Jinshui's romance is signified by their chasing each other on the beach, and their mutual passion is represented by the seaside bonfire and their smirks in their own room after spending a night together. When Ah-lan finds herself pregnant, her father, a figure of patriarchal order, scolds her. Ah-lan's shame is shown through close-ups of her face. The compassionate Ah-juan suggests Ah-lan should go to another village to stay away from the gossip, further confirming that Ah-lan's pregnancy is »disgraceful« and must be contained.

Paradoxically, throughout the film, Dr. Su seems to be the most supportive of Ah-lan, as he convinces her to keep her child if she loves Jinshui. Dr. Su's prioritization of love can be understood as a triumph of feeling over moral norms. However, he later becomes the township's mayor, devoted to helping the village economy boom, and is also the person who resolves Ah-lan's complicated childbirth. This suggests his advice for Ah-lan is not necessarily because he truly believes in love. Rather, his pro-life and progress-oriented outlook can be interpreted as an example of the state's medical and economic modernization. Two additional examples further demonstrate how the melodramatic elements, such as personal desire, are suppressed for the sake of the film's »healthiness.« One is the relationship between Ah-juan and Guo Mingshun, a technician in the local fishing association. In this relationship, amorous feelings are diluted as Ah-juan is depicted as an admirer of Guo, who strives to improve oyster breeding and increase production. The other is detectable in the rivalry between Ah-lan and Ah-chu, which turns into a gang fight among the oyster girls on the farm. It ends with the girls being taken to the local health station for treatment. In all, the women-related melodramatic scenarios—including the three romances, Ah-lan's unexpected pregnancy, and Ah-lan and Ah-chu as love rivals—are either suppressed by the patriarchal order or public gossip or tinted with the KMT's technological and medical advances in postwar Taiwan. If we take the primary female protagonist, Ah-lan, as the epitome of a state-endorsed regime of health, then the happy ending in which she

gives birth and marries Jinshui indicates a self-content laboring life and bright prospects for the village. All in all, *Oyster Girl* is a melodramatic »healthy realism« film, with its »healthiness« lying most centrally in its thematic optimism and use of *melos*: oyster girls' singing, voice-over, and dialogue in Mandarin Chinese. Melodramatic and healthy elements are not incompatible, but the former are often curtailed and appropriated into making the film's gendered vision of a state-orchestrated modernization.

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A Patch of Blue (1965)

Simon Dickel

dir. Guy Green; prod. Pandro S. Berman;
screenplay Guy Green; photography Robert
Burks; music Jerry Goldsmith. 35 mm, black/
white, 105 mins. MGM, distrib. MGM.

Guy Green's *A Patch of Blue* is an adaptation of the novel *Be Ready with Bells and Drums* (1961) by Australian writer Elizabeth Kata. Set in the United States in the early 1960s, the era of the civil rights movement, it depicts the romance between Selina D'Arcey (played by Elizabeth Hartman), a poor blind white woman, and Gordon Ralfe (Sidney Poitier), a middle class sighted Black man. While *A Patch of Blue* is structured along the categories of race, disability, and class, its main conflict is focused on the impossibility of interracial love within a racist society.

The film was nominated for five Academy Awards, and Shelley Winters won the Oscar for best supporting actress for her role as Selina's mother, Rose-Anne D'Arcey. Rose-Anne is a sex worker who lives with her father, Ole Pa (Wallace Ford), who suffers from alcoholism, and her daughter, Selina, in a one-room apartment. Selina has received no formal education, does not know Braille, and hardly ever leaves the apartment. She is responsible for the household chores and has a typical job for blind people, stringing beads. When her employer Mr. Faber (John Qualen) guides her to the nearby park where she then spends her days, she soon meets and befriends Gordon. This character counters dominant stereotypes of Black men in the 1960s. It is reminiscent of that of John Prentice, the protagonist of → *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), the role Poitier played two years after *A Patch of Blue*. The melodrama evolves from the opposition between their growing mutual love and society's hostility and strict rules. It is not only Selina's white racist family that rejects her feelings for Gordon; his Black brother Mark (Ivan Dixon),



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too, supports dominant ideologies when he repeatedly points out the impossibility of this love. Employing a melodramatic mode, the film negotiates this conflict and encodes Selina and Gordon's love as morally superior to society's racism and ableism. The title of the film, *A Patch of Blue*, refers to a memory Selina shares with Gordon. She tells him that blue is the only color she remembers from her childhood when she was sighted; and this memory of blue stands out against the black-and-white film stock. Selina does not understand that Gordon is Black before her mother tells her so by using a racist term. In this scene, she is shown with a happy face because she considers Blackness as something positive, as her only childhood friend was a Black girl. It is suggested that in her mind Gordon's Blackness positions him closer to her own outsider status as a woman with a disability. Accordingly, the film depicts their falling in love as happening outside the realm of the visual. Their collaboration when stringing beads in the park, accompanied by Jerry Goldsmith's score, is a metaphor for their romance. Their hands, rather than their faces, are shown in close up, and their mutual understanding is visualized through showing their movements—Selina's selecting and offering the beads, and Gordon's taking and stringing them—which become more and more synchronized through the music that imitates the sound and rhythm of the beads.

In his 2009 monograph, *I Can See Now: Blindheit im Kino*, Stefan Ripplinger argues that throughout film history cinema has used blindness as a trope to reflect on the relation between film as an art form based on the visual sense and blindness, a condition defined by its absence. *A Patch of Blue* calls for an extension of his observation. Going beyond the theme of blindness as such, it uses the visual medium of film to make a statement about the relation between race, visibility, and perception (Dickel and Potjans 206-10). The negative reactions of the other characters, such as Selina's mother and Gordon's brother, clarify that love between a Black man and a white woman provokes hostile reactions in the American society of the 1960s. This conflict is negotiated through the trope of blindness: Selina is depicted as the only white character with an ability to perceive Gordon's humanity beyond his Blackness because she is blind and does not see the color of his skin. As a consequence, the film endorses the ideology of color-blindness as a strategy to overcome racism. Color-blindness—the ideology that claims racism would come to an end if we would only stop acknowledging racial differences—has been debunked by many critics, among them Howard Omi and Michael Winant, who argue that it serves a conservative agenda and affirms racial hierarchies rather than dismantling them. The film implicitly introduces a different perspective on color-blindness by depicting the love of a white blind woman for a Black sighted man. By the time Gordon wants to tell Selina that he is a Black man and that his Blackness stands in the way of a possible marriage, she already knows he is Black and tells him: »I know everything I need to know about you. I love you. I know you are good and kind. I know you're colored [...]. And I think you're beautiful.« Gordon is surprised and states: »Beautiful? Most people would say the opposite.« Selina's reply—»Well that's because they don't know you«—suggests that an end of seeing race would make people understand that racial difference is unimportant. Perceiving the Black man through Selina's senses, white sighted viewers are led to value his virtues and flawless character independent from the color of his skin.

The film portrays the perception of race as solely dependent on the visual sense, even while it addresses the relevance of the auditory sense in attributions of social position. The auditory sense, however, solely refers to class attribution. One example

is a sequence when Gordon corrects Selina's wrong use of grammar, which indicates her lack of a formal education. Gordon's perfect grammar and rich lexicon, in turn, do not signal Blackness for Selina. Even though racism is the reason for the movie's central conflict, the film reproduces ableist persuasions in its depiction of a blind female character. The film treats Blackness and blindness as parallel categories, which is already suggested by the line on the film poster: »A man . . . a girl . . . captives in their own worlds, finding escape in each other . . .« The film's depiction of Selina serves as a further example of Georgina Kleege's critique of filmic representations of blindness. She observes that throughout the history of film, »the movie blind [...] are timid, morose, cranky, resentful, socially awkward, and prone to despair« (45). *A Patch of Blue* resonates with common filmic stereotypes of blind women as angel-like, passive, helpless, and dependent. These stereotypes correspond with her dark sunglasses, which are commonly used in films as a visual marker of blindness.

In *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Linda Martín Alcoff, who rejects the ideology of color-blindness, points out that sedimented racist perceptual habits are one reason for the persistence of racism. Like Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and George Yancy in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Alcoff addresses the bodily dimensions of racism by critically building on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. All three discuss how people's racist perceptions turn into sedimented habits. Racialized people, in turn, have difficulties in maintaining their body schema, because the white gaze turns them into »an object among other objects« (Fanon 89). Even though *A Patch of Blue* brings this relationship between the significance of the visual sense and racism to the viewer's attention, it is doubtful whether the film's didacticism has the potential to make white viewers aware of their own racist perceptual habits. Through equating blindness with color-blindness, it offers a simplistic solution without tackling the full dimensions of racism. One has to keep in mind, however, that the film was produced in the mid-1960s, when the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Production Code prohibited »miscegenation« on screen. In light of the limited possibilities of addressing interracial romance effected by the Production Code, *A Patch of Blue* succeeds in positively portraying the love between Selina and Gordon. The white able-bodied characters, in turn, are depicted as having evil intentions, such as forcing Selina into sex work. What is more, it is Selina's own mother who is responsible for the accident that caused her daughter's blindness—she damaged Selina's eyes when she threw acid at her jealous husband who walked in on her having sex with another man. In the end, Selina departs to attend a school for the blind. She accidentally leaves a valued present from Gordon in his apartment, which suggests that the two lovers will meet again, get a chance to overcome society's obstacles, and might even have a chance for a shared and happy future.

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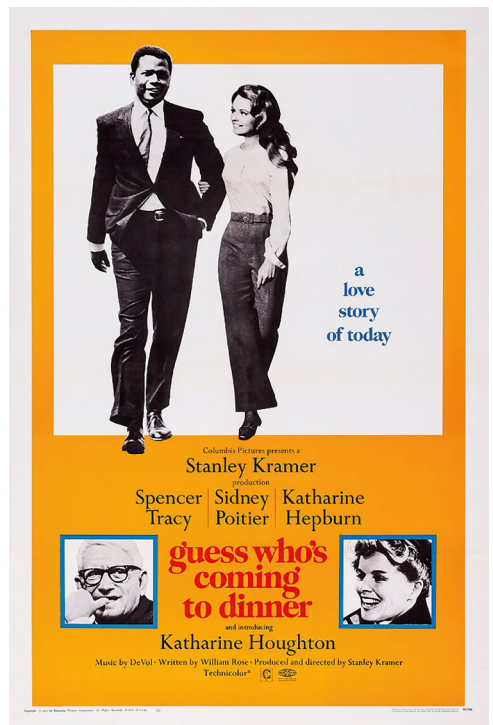
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Katharina Gerund

dir. Stanley Kramer; prod. Stanley Kramer; screenplay William Rose; photography Sam Leavitt; music Frank De Vol. 35mm, color, 108 mins. Columbia Pictures, distrib. Columbia Pictures.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner negotiates interracial romance as a family affair. Its production and release coincided with the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared the prohibition of interracial marriages unconstitutional. The film ultimately became a box office hit—even in the U.S. South, where it was initially met with protest. The film uses a »classic family melodrama structure« (Willis 49) to contain its contentious subject matter and it relies on melodrama »as the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has ›talked to itself‹ about the enduring moral dilemma of race« (Williams xiv). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* eventually turned into »the most popular interracial text of its era, and arguably of the late twentieth century« (Courtney 187).

The film's star-studded cast includes Sidney Poitier in one of his signature roles as well as legendary Hollywood couple Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy in their last film appearance together. The fact that Tracy died shortly after filming, and Hepburn's later acknowledgement of the couple's not-so-secret romantic relationship, contributed to melodramatic discourse surrounding the cultural text itself. Critics, however, have not only singled out the performances by Hepburn and Tracy for praise but have also pointed out the film's many flaws, including its improbable yet predictable plot elements, its reliance on stereotypes, and its evasive take on crucial social issues such as structural racism and racial prejudice. Author, critic, and activist James Baldwin, for instance, tauntingly summarized the film's message: »We can conclude that people



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have the right to marry whom they choose, especially if we know that they are leaving town as soon as dinner is over« (78).

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner begins with the arrival of Joanna »Joey« Drayton (played by Katherine Houghton) and her fiancé, Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier), at San Francisco International Airport. Joey returns from Hawaii, where she fell in love with her husband-to-be, whom she brings along to meet her parents. John Prentice, a widower and significantly older than Joey, is presented as the perfect son in law: a doctor and medical expert of international standing, who is also »charming, good-looking, mannerly, and brilliant« (Bogle 195). This character epitomizes the screen personality that Sidney Poitier—the first black actor to win an Academy Award for a leading role, for *Lilies of the Field* in 1964, and by then a superstar—had established for himself. Navigating the culturally vexed terrain of the anxieties and fantasies attached to white womanhood and black male sexuality in the cultural imaginary of the U.S., John and Joey mostly keep an »appropriate« distance from each other. They are only once shown kissing, and merely as a reflection in the rearview mirror of a taxi under the scrutinizing gaze of the driver. The central conflict around interracial love and »miscegenation« is determined by a heteronormative, reproductive logic (with several characters explicitly considering the future of the children that supposedly result from John and Joey's marital union). At the same time, the film offers a highly sanitized image of the romantic couple that is mostly devoid of hints of intimacy or expressions of sexual desire. Joey explicitly tells her mother that they did not have sex because »he wouldn't.« Despite his impeccable reputation and demeanor, John still poses a »problem« for Joey's parents, Matt and Christina Drayton (played by Tracy and Hepburn), as they are confronted with the limits and potential hypocrisy of their ostentatiously liberal worldview. Over the course of the day—Prentice has to catch a flight to New York the very same evening—the Drayton family, a cast of minor characters, and finally Prentice's parents (played by Beah Richards and Roy E. Glenn Sr.), who have flown in from Los Angeles, debate the situation from various angles and in different constellations in a setting reminiscent of a chamber play. Despite their initial surprise and skepticism, both mothers rather quickly side with John and Joey, while the fathers oppose their marriage plan. In overtly didactic fashion, the film focuses mostly on convincing the father-of-the-bride (and, by extension, the audience) to give his blessing, without which—as Prentice had previously assured the Draytons (and viewers) behind his fiancée's back—he would not marry Joey. John, however, also confronts Matt Drayton with his professed liberal convictions, and marks Joey's colorblindness as a product of her upbringing: »Well, you made her, Mr. Drayton. I just met her in Hawaii.« In his final verdict, the family patriarch has been persuaded and »sums up the young couple's dilemma as »a pigmentation problem,« reducing the matter to a language of color that avoids histories of exploitation and privilege nonetheless evident in his hilltop mansion with seemingly all white interiors and all black servants« (Courtney 195). With Tracy's death, this scene gained additional melodramatic force as it constitutes the beloved actor's last words on screen.

As much as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is preoccupied with interracial love, it negotiates its central issue mostly within the hermetic space of the Drayton home and is largely detached from its historical context and specific setting. In fact, it »reduce[s] the scope of the civil rights movement, and the turbulence surrounding it, to a manageable form in a tightly circumscribed terrain where meaning promised to emerge

from private negotiations« (Willis 7). The most explicit references to the black liberation struggle are articulated by Tillie (played by Isabel Sanford), the Draytons' maid, whose depiction draws on stereotypical Hollywood images of domestic servants such as Mammy in → *Gone with the Wind*. She vehemently opposes the interracial relationship and the presence of the Prentices at the Draytons' dinner table. She comments on the situation, for instance, by stating that »Civil Rights is one thing« but »this here is something else,« and—protective of Joey—threatens John: »You bring trouble. You'll know what »Black Power« means!« When in the last scene Matt Drayton introduces Tillie as a »member of the family« and ushers her into the living room to listen to his monologue alongside everyone else, the film once more uses the rhetoric of the family to gloss over structural inequalities. The film's final line, directed at Tillie, reassures not only patriarchal authority, but also the established racial and social hierarchy: »Well, Tillie, when the hell are we going to get some dinner?«

Not only does the film marginalize the black liberation struggle, but one could even argue that it is not primarily concerned with integration, interracial love, nor the young couple's prospects. John and Joey are merely passing through, and the origins of both their romance and future are imagined outside of the continental U.S. They are assigned a rather »transcontinental or global identity« (Warren 152)—and with the imminent departure of John and Joey to New York, and then on to Geneva, they are a temporary presence in the microcosm of the Drayton residence, as well as of U.S. society at large. At its core, the film probes »the limits of racial tolerance that liberally minded white and black Americans possess« (Warren 146), and, as Andrea Levine holds, could even be regarded an »interracial romance« in name only that, upon closer inspection, is actually »far more preoccupied with delineating relationships between black and white men« (367). More specifically, it is the aging white father whose masculinity, racial identity, class status, and liberal mindedness are at stake, but whose normative and discursive power is ultimately (re)affirmed. »The entire story articulates a pedagogical project that aims to remind Matt Drayton of what he really believes in« (Willis 50), and most characters and plot elements are put into the service of this project.

Relying on the melodramatic mode, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* contains questions of racial (in)equality within the domestic sphere and its strictly gendered roles and spaces. Predictably, it turns structural issues into matters of personal conviction and, more importantly, feelings. It also preconditions its happy ending on the approval of white male authority as well as on the interracial couple's future being conveniently located outside the U.S. Its very title and its iconic black star have been turned into a popular (and often nostalgic) shorthand for narratives of racial reconciliation and integrationist agendas that forgo any significant challenge or »substantive change to the »white« world or to »white« culture, and especially to white privilege« (Willis 5). What Sharon Willis has termed the »Poitier effect« therefore continues to serve »as a defense, or a compensatory gesture, averting or deflecting the possibility of a kind of critical thinking that would involve a serious reciprocal interracial exchange« (5).

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Dark of the Sun (1968)

Ivo Ritzer

dir. Jack Cardiff; prod. George England; screenplay Randal MacDougall; photography Edward Scaifer; music Jacques Loussier. 35mm, color, 101 mins. MGM, distrib. MGM.

The colonial melodrama is one of the most multifaceted varieties of the melodrama genre. It is primarily related to adventure films and Westerns, which in their semantic polarization and syntactic affect-rhetoric—like Hollywood's genre cinema as such—can be understood as genuinely melodramatic forms of expression (Altman; Williams). In contrast to Westerns and adventure films, however, the colonial melodrama is not so much an allegorical narrative as it is a historical genre that infuses meaning into the geopolitical conflicts of the Global South from before, and especially during, decolonization and the struggle for independence (Bratton et al.). Here, the films visualize exotic fantasies in which white Europeans and North Americans act out their affective intensities in »foreign« locations. The characters do not openly represent colonialist interests, but they nevertheless appear with a paternalistic gesture that subordinates the alterity of the »foreign« to their own identities.

In the aftermath of worldwide decolonization processes beginning in the 1950s, the colonial melodrama has turned the spaces of the »Third World« into a new »frontier« and contact zone, where conflicts between »nature« and »culture« are enacted. After early paradigmatic examples such as Henry King's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952), John Ford's *Mogambo* (1953), and John Huston's *The Roots of Heaven* (1958), finally Jack Cardiff's *Dark of the Sun* (1968) became the genre's defining apotheosis. Based on Wilbur Smith's 1965 novel of the same title, the film relates the turmoil of a conflict in the Congo, where, after Belgian colonial powers withdraw, a group of international mercenaries encounter European settlers and African insurgents. Under the leadership of ex-British officer Curry (played by Rod Taylor), the mercenaries receive the order to save the diamonds stored in Fort Reprieve as well as saving the Europeans living there from marauding coup plotters. These plotters display extreme brutality, and the white settlers fear not only for the diamonds, but also for life and limb—and, as the story often goes, for the sexual integrity of their wives.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

As a unique interpretation of the captivity narrative in Westerns and adventure films, where fantasies of »racial mixing« and the conquest of white women by the »wild« Other are acted out, *Dark of the Sun* rather shifts focus. A decolonial critique of capitalism and its greed figures prominently. While Curry and the former Wehrmacht soldier Henlein (played by Peter Carsten)—modeled after the historical figure Siegfried »Kongo-Müller«—do not feel obliged to the Congolese people, having their minds set on diamonds, Curry's best friend Ruffo (played by Jim Brown) is a Congolese man educated in the U.S. and now fighting for peace in his home country. Towards the end of the film, Ruffo is murdered by the greedy Henlein. The real villain, therefore, is among the mercenary unit itself. In the end, Henlein is lynched by Curry, who resigns his command and assigns a Congolese officer to complete his mission. Thus, the genre's semantics and ideology have come full circle as the former colonial powers withdraw from Africa. The colonizer must give up political and symbolic omnipotence, both of which are lost over the course of the narrative. This reminds us of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which diagnoses a comparable reversal of the prevailing conditions: »You can see it's the end; Europe is springing leaks everywhere. What then has happened? It simply is that in the past we made history and now it is being made of us. The ratio of forces has been inverted; decolonization has begun« (27). *Dark of the Sun* is about the twilight of colonialism, its proverbial death song.

Its meaning making and affective appeal are defined by hysterical contradictions. The term *hysteria* in this context refers to those repressed affects that reappear converted as histrionic symptoms. In the semantics of colonial melodrama, the Western and adventure film are overfulfilled. They no longer tell the tale of »the birth of a nation,« but of »the loss of a continent.« Africa is »lost« for the former colonizer, a loss now acted out in the colonial melodrama in a symptomatic and contradictory manner. Watching the characters of *Dark of the Sun* therefore means watching death at work. And yet, the film's heroes are the European mercenaries, who are characterized as fighters for the good. The mercenaries do not participate in any (post-)colonial genocide, but, on the contrary, try to prevent it. Herein lies the contraction of *Dark of the Sun*. On the one hand, the film rejects colonial violence. On the other hand, it legitimizes the mercenaries' violence as heroism. This contradiction originates in the motivation that brings the mercenaries to action in the first place. For *Dark of the Sun* by no means affirms the vision of a European sense of entitlement and superiority (the »white man's burden«). Instead, the film tells of the agony of the »old school« mercenary. *Dark of the Sun* thus creates a world that is determined by capitalist-imperial exploitation, a world that the mercenaries challenge. Cardiff's film characterizes them as living anachronisms: the last of a dying breed for which there is no longer any room in the opaque system of transnational economic entanglements. *Dark of the Sun* shows colonial history as a »male melodrama« (Mercer and Shingler 98) about aging individualists inevitably doomed for extinction in the face of the new globalized world order. Cardiff marks the protagonists' realization of their obsolescence as hysterical. The virile performance of heroic action could thus be read as a symptom of colonial loss. With the Hegelian stylization of the mercenary, an overcompensation of the threatened loss is performed; while at the same time it is pronounced even more clearly as an anachronistic remnant.

In contrast to the classic family melodrama, which temporarily externalizes internal psychological conflicts through expressive *mise-en-scène* (Elsaesser), the colonial melodrama, epitomized by *Dark of the Sun*, operates in a mode of permanent aesthetic

exaltation. Unusual and singular for its time is not only the drastic depiction of violence, including a notorious sequence in which Curry is attacked by Henlein with a chainsaw. Jack Cardiff—cameraman for Powell and Pressburger as well as for legendary color films such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), and *The Red Shoes* (1948)—renders *Dark of the Sun* psychedelic experimental cinema. He sets out to treat everything visible as artificial design. Instead of conjuring facts, he lets visions and ideas dominate. Instead of faithful reproduction, he chooses deformation. Through Cardiff's lens, the African bush appears emphatically artificial, presented in highly saturated green with bleeding bodies blazing in the brightest red. Everything and everyone in color: unreal, delirious, mythical, referencing the magic of life, of sensitivity, of passion.

The ideological semantics of the (post-)colonial fantasy should not, as always when it comes to cinema, be overestimated. Often cabals and conflicts seem to be but occasion for *emotion*; the omnipresence of violence but a source of *motion*. In *Dark of the Sun*, the scenes »we encounter, without any trace of representation (copying or imitating)« are all about »the dance of masks, the cries of bodies, and the gesturing of hands and fingers« (Foucault 348). Rather than putting the audience in a voyeuristic position *vis-à-vis* the narration, the colonial melodrama is in itself exhibitionist. It does not primarily aim to immerse its audience in the world projected by the film, but it first and foremost offers the potential to enjoy audiovisual attractions. Instead of narration, it is spectacle that dominates.

In its insistence on the exhibition of effects—but also through the use of stock characters, and with emphasis on action instead of empathic drama—the colonial melodrama reminds us of cinema's roots in circus, variety, and vaudeville as well as of early »ethnographic« films of an exotic quality, not to mention the notorious ethnological expositions in colonial culture.

The melodramatic effects of spectacle do not hold diegetic function in this context; rather, iridescent audiovisual stimuli subvert mechanisms of empathy and identification. Despite their narrative integration, the attractions remain aesthetic surplus, unproductive and irrational energy. The experience is not realized through decoding characters. The activation of imagination and memory seems to be suspended by the colonial melodrama through evasive affective expression and sensual, dreamlike perception. In other words, in *Dark of the Sun* the media form itself becomes hysterical. The aesthetic of attraction syntactically acted out leads less to a discourse of nostalgia than to the localization of the film in the present tense of its self-sufficient spectacle. This can hardly be absorbed, and thus an atopy of images and sounds emerges, exceeding causality, coherence, and continuity. From this perspective, cinema would be myth: »a genuine myth, that is, a lie which tells the truth« (Fiedler 399).

Instead of the discursive message of melodrama, it is its potential for affect that is of interest. Melodrama is, in fact, not a moral institution that emphasizes intensity over alienation. It instead raises questions of difference and repetition, of the subversion of knowledge: that is, meta-ideology and meta-politics. Melodrama is always the possibility of images conquering meaning, the physical conquering the psyche, the material conquering the idea. It is where the screen suddenly renders the invisible visible, where the semiotic merges into the poetic. Melodrama is where myth triumphs, where the unreal is nothing but reality. Melodrama is itself a black sun: a lie, twenty-four times a second, and therefore nothing but the pure truth.

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Love Story (1970)

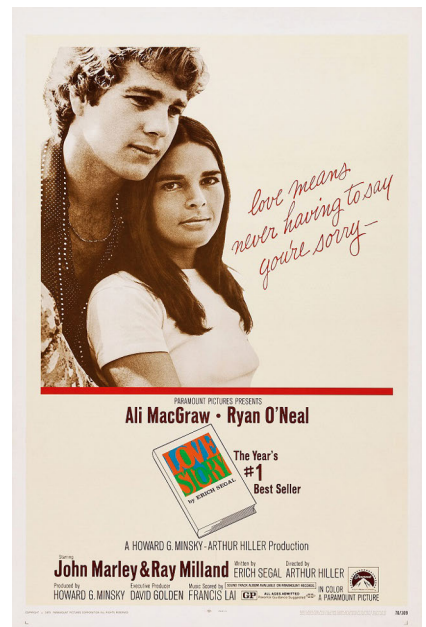
Heike Paul

dir. Arthur Hiller; prod. Robert Evans, David Golden, Howard G. Minsky; screenplay Erich Segal; photography Richard C. Kratina; music Francis Lai. 35mm, color, 96 mins. Paramount Pictures, distrib. Paramount Pictures.

The most successful film of 1970, and perhaps of the decade, *Love Story* created quite a stir in its day and time. It was the highest grossing film of the year, coined a fashion style—the »college girl look« (Reid) or »Ivy-League look« (Adams), modelled on the clothing of actress Ali McGraw—and popularized Francis Lai's elegiac Oscar-winning title melody, which has since become one of the most memorable tunes in film history. Moreover, *Love Story*'s somewhat surprising mega-success led to immediate stardom for its two leads, Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw. With its popularity extending far beyond the United States, *Love Story* undoubtedly qualifies as a global melodrama made in Hollywood.

Love Story's first line already anticipates its end, as Oliver Barrett (played by Ryan O'Neal) speaks in the off and utters the film's famous words: »What can you say about a twenty-five-year-old girl who died?« The dead girl (or woman, rather) is Jennifer Cavillieri (played by Ali McGraw), Oliver's wife, who has just passed away. The film chronicles their life together—from their first encounter at Harvard's Radcliffe Library, their courtship and wedding, their college years at Harvard, and their post-college life in New York City, where both of them work odd jobs and Oliver pursues a career as a lawyer. Just when things are looking up for them, Jennifer is diagnosed with a fatal blood disease.

Erich Segal, writer of both the film's screenplay and source novel, studied at Harvard during the 1950s and 60s. Although viewers are led to believe that the film features a contemporaneous setting, it instead conjures the 1950s more than the late 60s or the year of its release. In fact, the film is rather escapist with regard to the times of its production. The war in Vietnam, the countercultural revolution (except for a mildly



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

experimental, non-religious wedding ceremony), the civil rights movement, and the women's movement—all of this is left absent from the film, projecting an environment of peaceful affluency, or, at least, of social mobility, with a tinge of nostalgia. Hence, the melodrama functions as part of a »significant political retrenchment,« and all the more so when viewed in contrast to films such as *Easy Rider* or *Alice's Restaurant*, both of which were released a year earlier (Kendrick).

As an institution and as a brand, Harvard University constitutes a background for much of this film about two kids who fall in love. Al Gore and Tommy Lee Jones (the latter playing a minor role as Oliver's roommate), both of whom were Segal's classmates at Harvard, were named by the writer as models for the character of Oliver. The iconic campus—a setting of a great many films, more comedy than melodrama—conveys to the love story an aura of respectability, while also making use of product placement. Oliver, for instance, wears his Harvard jersey at his hockey games, and both lie under a blanket with a big »H« after their first lovemaking. That's not to forget Jenny's legendary plaid mini-skirts, colored tights, knit sweaters, scarfs, and camel coat, all of which she models on the Harvard Yard. The institutional setting, like the temporal framing, projects good times, youth, and innocence—then, »Harvard was *Harvard*, and nobody had yet pointed out the unseemliness of its being also a branch office and officers' training school for the military industrial complex« (Callenbach).

The obstacle to love that this melodrama seeks to overcome is a seemingly insurmountable social divide. Oliver Barrett IV is heir to his New England family's estate and is expected to follow family tradition by becoming a lawyer. His father, Oliver Barrett III (played by a stiff Ray Milland), is well-connected and wants his son to excel. However, his stoic and authoritarian manners are dismissed by his son. Jennifer Cavillari, in turn, is an Italian American student from a lower class background. Her mother has died and her father runs a pastry shop. While Oliver calls his father »Sir,« Jenny calls hers »Phil.« She studies music, plays the cembalo, and plans to do a study abroad in Paris on a scholarship program. The film clearly presents American society as a class-based (not classless) society. As Jenny puts it: »Ollie, you're a preppy millionaire, and I'm a social zero.« This observation does not, however, lead to a critique of inequality and social division as such, but rather serves to produce the dramatic momentum that drives the plot. Opposites attract, and in their initial verbal sparring, Jenny is witty and sharp, while Oliver, more of an athlete than an intellectual, is impressed by such eloquence. When Oliver and Jenny visit his parents and announce their wedding plans, they do not find the approval of his father, who instead asks his son to wait until after graduation. Oliver rejects this suggestion (which comes with a threat) and chooses to live *with* Jenny and *without* his father's financial support. It is only when Jenny is diagnosed with a terminal illness and Oliver wants her to have the best treatment that he borrows money from Oliver Barrett III, without letting on the reason. Whereas their love seemed able to overcome all social obstacles, it cannot beat leukemia. This is the film's final melodramatic twist. Only after Jenny is dead does Oliver Barrett III learn what the money was for, and the film concludes with a hint at reconciliation between father and son.

Apart from its straightforward, almost generic, plot (as generic as its title), *Love Story* has also been critically examined for not being a romantic love story at all, but as being first and foremost a film about a father-son relationship. Mark Spilka has convincingly shown how, in the film and even more in the novel, Jenny merely func-

tions as mediator for the dysfunctional father-son connection, and how her death is a sacrificial one that brings father and son back together—»over her dead body,« so to speak. »Love means never having to say you're sorry«—yet another famous line from the film—is uttered first by Jenny, addressed to Oliver after a fight (a fight about Oliver's father, in fact, and about making amends). The line is repeated at the end of the film by Oliver, however, who directs it toward his father. Oliver's pain and loss, it is suggested, have made him a mature adult who can at last move beyond adolescent rebellion and eventually be a suitable heir of the Barrett fortune. Reading *Love Story* as a different kind of story of love and rejection highlights the film's focus on transgenerational rather than social difference—how to bridge it, and, ultimately, how to preserve the patrilineal status quo in turbulent times of change.

Upon *Love Story*'s fiftieth anniversary in 2020, scholars and critics returned to the film to assess its status and reception (Blair). While there still lacks significant appreciation of its aesthetic merit, the film's cultural impact is nonetheless highly estimated. It has been noted that »Jennifer,« for example, became one of the most popular names for baby girls following the film's release, a trend that prevailed throughout the 1970s (Levy). *Love Story* bears semblance to both *Love Affair* (1939) and its remake, *An Affair to Remember* (1957), where fate strikes the female protagonist not with fatal disease but with a tragic accident that constricts her to a wheelchair. In turn, *Love Story* has influenced generations of college films and television series, including those in the chick-lit and chick-flick modes. Besides these resonances in the semi-melodramatic genre, and on a somewhat lighter note, *Love Story*'s parodies are countless as well. They have appeared in *The Simpsons* and *The Carol Burnett Show*, to name but two. Starring next to Barbra Streisand in the screwball comedy *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), Ryan O'Neal himself teases the film's emblematic line. When Judy Maxwell (Streisand) quips, batting her eyelids, that »love means never having to say you're sorry,« Howard Bannister (O'Neal) briefly pauses, before responding: »That's the dumbest thing I ever heard.« Parody, being »repetition with a difference« (Hutcheon), always affirms the canonical status of its object. Hence, being a target of criticism, satire, and parody has only reiterated *Love Story*'s place as a household name and cultural icon.

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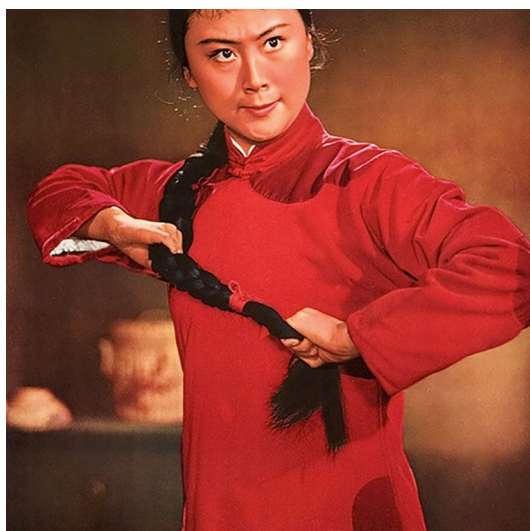
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The Legend of the Red Lantern (红灯记, Hongdeng ji, 1970)

Shuangting Xiong

dir. Cheng Yin; screenplay China Peking Opera Company. color, 112 mins. August First Film Studio.

The revolutionary model opera *The Legend of the Red Lantern* was one of several model theatrical works, known as *yangbanxi*, produced during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), as part of the state-sponsored collective theatrical productions to answer Mao Zedong's call for continuous revolution. Due to its enormous critical and popular success, *The Legend of the Red Lantern* became the first model theatrical work to be made into a film for wider promulgation and emulation, being released in 1970. Set during the second



Sino-Japanese War, the opera centers on a family of revolutionaries, the Li family, working with a network of underground communists to guard and pass on secret codes, using a red lantern, in order to win the fight against the Japanese. In the most dramatic moment, which occurs mid-narrative, the Li family is revealed to share no actual biological relation. After the father and grandmother are executed by Japanese forces, the granddaughter, who has now come to realize she is not related to them by blood, willingly chooses to carry on their fight and continues the revolution in their wake.

The Legend of the Red Lantern relies on many key aesthetic features of the melodramatic mode, including excessive emotionalism, familial intimacy, moral polarization, stylized performance, and the use of music to intensify emotions displayed both on stage and screen. Melodrama has held profound impact on Chinese cinema since its inception. Scholars have attributed the formation of early Chinese melodramatic films to both Hollywood melodrama and China's own melodramatic tradition, including traditional opera and popular romantic genres that flourished in urban areas in the early to mid-20th century (Berry and Farquhar; Zhang 2005, 2018). Once it had taken hold in Chinese culture, melodrama, and especially family melodrama, became highly adaptable across genres and media, and remained a central part of Chinese early

cinema in the 1920s, realist cinema in the 30s and 40s, and socialist realist cinema in the 50s and beyond. *The Legend of the Red Lantern* illustrates the culmination of what I call »revolutionary melodrama« in 20th century China—that is, melodramas that seek not to resolve social injustice at the level of personal or familial concerns but to rather effect social change.

The pairing of »revolution« with »melodrama« may seem paradoxical, because melodrama, as extensively theorized in Euro-American film studies, has been identified as a quintessentially bourgeois form—known for being particularly adept at capturing social injustices (e.g. of race, gender, class) produced by capitalist modernity but disinterested in changing the status quo (Williams 1998; Gledhill; Berlant). However, many scholars have also noticed the revolutionary potentialities of the melodramatic mode »to dichotomize swiftly, to identify targets, to encapsulate conflict,« as well as its affinity with leftist politics (Gaines 59; Anker; Gerould). The intensified suffering and victimhood of the oppressed and the innocent featured in melodrama make a moral imperative out of overthrowing the forces of oppression.

The revolutionary potentialities of melodrama were particularly pronounced in the case of 20th century China, given that the subjugation of the Chinese people under both Western and Japanese colonization and a traditional patriarchal system produced pervasive suffering and victimization. Even prior to a full-fledged and politically committed left-wing cinema movement, many progressive filmmakers in Shanghai in the 1920s and early 30s sought to use the medium of cinema for social reform as well as for the propagation of Enlightenment ideals of equality and freedom (Zhang 2018; Yeh). The left-wing cinema of the 30s was predominantly preoccupied with the representation of the suffering poor and marginalized in the semi-colonial metropole of Shanghai. Committed to the awakening of mass political consciousness, many of the iconic left-wing films experimented in various ways with montage to shore up the contrast between the innocent, yet powerless, oppressed class, and the evil and all-powerful oppressor. The political and affective effectiveness of the melodramatic form was duly noted by critics and dramatists during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), known in China as »the War of Resistance against Japan.« One dramatist has commented on the similarity of War of Resistance dramas to melodrama, stating that both maximize emotional appeal to a mass audience through moral polarization and typified characterization that »portrays two antagonistic sides as typical characters, one as the invincible ›hero,‹ and one as the evil ›villain« (Peng 138). In the many land reform dramas staged in Communist base areas in the late 1930s and 40s, the landlord replaces the Japanese as the embodiment of evil, and Manichean class struggles are fought and won by the persecuted peasantry. Revolutionary melodrama therefore takes »the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent« (Williams 62) a step further, to call for action, propel social change, and make revolution.

The moral fungibility of the melodramatic form, as noted by Christine Gledhill, that »any body can fill the place of victim and oppressor« (2018, xxii), makes this aesthetic form obtain a high level of adaptability and translatability to fit different revolutionary goals in changing historical conditions. *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, produced at the height of the Cultural Revolution, relied on similar moral polarization to achieve its political and affective efficacy. Moreover, the stylized performance and emotional intensity featured in the film functioned to move and transform its audiences, so that

they, too, would model themselves on these revolutionary heroes. The dramatic moment of revelation in the film presents a case in point.

The sudden revelation of the actual identity of this adopted family forms one of the film's most significant climaxes. The camera intercuts between Granny Li and Li Tiemei to highlight the strong emotional response of both characters, one telling and one learning the truth of how this family with no biological connection came to be formed. Granny Li reveals to Tiemei that the Li family's three generations are not related but have chosen to form an adopted family in the face of the extreme circumstances of a failed workers movement. Li Yuhe becomes the adopted son of Granny Li, whose husband is killed during the brutal suppression, and together they have saved and raised the orphaned Tiemei, whose biological parents were also massacred in the strike. What accompanies granddaughter Tiemei's transformation from an innocent child to a resolute revolutionary with proper class consciousness is the grandmother's constant touching and caressing; both function therapeutically to ease traumatic shock. Granny Li then sings an aria to urge Tiemei to carry on their family legacy and continue the revolution, a mission Tiemei gladly accepts. Affective bonds and intimacies between grandmother and granddaughter in the film's diegetic world are thereby vital to the continuation of the revolution.

In his insightful study on Cultural Revolutionary opera films and the realist tradition in Chinese cinema, Jason McGrath points out that the productions of these opera films marked the culmination of a formalist shift in Chinese cinema, in which highly stylized performance and melodramatic narrative modes replaced earlier mimetic cinematic realism. Both melodramatic performance style and the performance style of traditional Chinese operas are non-mimetic and non-realist, characterized by their punctuation of the flow of motion into discrete semantic units so that the audience can »read« it (McGrath 359-60). Granny Li and Tiemei's intimate gestures are posed and held for an extended period of time, allowing the audience ample time to read and appreciate their emotions and intimacies as something that contains meaning and truth, or, to use Peter Brooks' classic phrase, as »the true wrestled from the real« (2). It is this demand of the melodramatic mode »to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality« (Brooks 2), as McGrath points out, that resonates so perfectly with the Maoist aesthetics of a revolutionary romanticism that contends art should depart from surface reality to depict a higher, more idealized reality—to reveal the truth hidden beneath reality.

The revolutionary truth is revealed in *The Legend of the Red Lantern* as much through ideological indoctrination as it is through felt affect. Just as emotional bonds and intimacies between the grandmother and granddaughter ensure the continuation of the revolution in the film's diegetic world, the heightened affective power of revolutionary melodrama is supposed to mobilize the audience to model themselves on revolutionary heroes and to continue the revolution. Numerous reports in the 1970s of how *The Legend of the Red Lantern* moved to tears countless audience members, including Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, may seem to have corroborated the affective and political usefulness of this specific opera film. Most importantly, time and again Chinese citizens have reenacted key moments from the opera, performing their parts as revolutionaries, and faithfully carrying out Mao's call to perpetuate the revolution. Identity, performance, and revolution thus become inseparable.

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Ariana (אריאנה, 1971)

Sigal Yona

dir. George Ovadiah; prod. Michael Shvily;
screenplay George Ovadiah, Michael Shvily;
photography Ya'ackov Kallach; music Haim
Zur. 35mm, black/white, 90 mins. Shoval Film
Production, distrib. Shoval Film Production.

Ariana is the first Israeli-produced film by Iraqi-born filmmaker George Ovadiah, a box-office success that launched his career as Israel's most prominent and prolific melodramatist. Ovadiah directed over a dozen commercially successful films in pre-revolutionary Iran before immigrating to Israel in 1970. *Ariana* followed his first transnational co-production, the Iranian-Israeli film *The Desired One* (*Ha-Nehsheket*, 1967). Film scholar Hamid Naficy regards him as a pioneer in the »hybridized film type,« which results from the migration of Arab and Jewish Iranian *filmfārsī* talent and narrative forms to Israel (172). As Naficy recounts, Ovadiah imported not only Iranian crews and casts, but also a set of formal and narrative practices from his earlier work in Iran. In particular, Ovadiah's Iranian melodrama *What Is My Guilt* (*Gonah-e Man Chist*, 1965) is an influence on *Ariana* (173).

The Iranian *filmfārsī* has been described by historian Pedram Partovi as a category of popular contemporary social melodrama about family and class conflict, often punctuated by heightened emotion and use of musical »interludes,« and occasionally relieved by comic moments (4). Indeed, these characteristics are evident in Ovadiah's hybridized work, which also borrows elements from the dominant local Israeli *bourekas* genre. The *bourekas* films were mostly comedies revolving around the ethnic tensions between Ashkenazi (of Eastern and Central European descent) and Mizrahi (of Middle Eastern and North African descent) Jews, which emerged after the mass immigration to Israel in the 1950s. The *bourekas* films characteristically attempted to solve these tensions through a romantic pairing between a Mizrahi man and an Ashkenazi woman (or vice-versa). Cultural critic Ella Shohat points to the symbolic and purposive essence of this pattern, describing *bourekas* films as operating within a »framework of a teleological structure leading to a grand finale in which marriage and family unity come to symbolize the continuity of the Jewish people« (116).



Courtesy of the Late Michael Shvily Collection

This teleological structure is also reproduced in *Ariana*, which is divided into three acts. The first act begins with a series of shots introducing the affair between Kochava (Rachel Terry), a naïve young woman, and Gabriel (Yitzhak Shilo), a wealthy attorney. When she becomes pregnant by him, he shamefully distances himself from their relationship. Kochava then finds care and support from her friends, the grocer Aboud (Arye Elias) and his wife Zohara (Tova Pardo). Kochava passes away after giving birth to her daughter, whom she has named Ariana. The film's second act echoes the scenario of infatuation, pregnancy, and abandonment, as it tells the parallel story of the adult Ariana (Dassi Hadari), who has been raised by Aboud and Zohara. Ariana falls in love with Gadi (played by pop singer Avi Toledano), the son of her adoptive father's wealthy client, the oddly comical Arthur (Avraham Ronai). When Arthur learns about his son's romance, he successfully enacts a ploy to separate the couple. In these two acts, along with the film's third act, *Ariana's* structure closely aligns with Peter Brooks' account of the melodramatic mode, an account that traces the mode's origins back to the 19th century French novel. *Ariana* is premised on a dualistic moral framework of virtue and villainy, in which Gabriel and Arthur both exemplify classic melodramatic villains whose actions must be driven out (Brooks 33). Additionally, both the first and second acts end with an apparent temporary »triumph of villainy« (Brooks 29), and only the film's climactic third act entails a »drama of recognition« (Brooks 27). This third act features a court trial in which the film's narrative threads are brought together and resolved. When Aboud learns that Ariana is pregnant, he sues Arthur's family. Gabriel reappears in the role of the family's defense lawyer, as the two generations gather in court. The tribunal scene is a recurrent melodramatic motif identified by Brooks, and, as he suggests, the judges must publicly recognize the committed misdeed, upon which the »enigmatic and misleading signs« should be clarified (31). Gabriel is the first to publicly regret his wrongdoing, and Arthur follows by exposing his own ploy to separate Ariana and Gadi. These twin recognitions pave the way not only for the melodramatic reestablishment of the film's moral order (Brooks 42), but also for a »grand finale« that reaffirms the *bourekas* genre's typical structure.

Much of the character design also relies on the conventions of the *bourekas* genre. The characteristic alignment of class with ethnicity is emphasized by the two conflictual father figures incorporating their respective »other« language into their Hebrew dialogue (Aboud also speaks Arabic, and Arthur Yiddish). Relatedly, the Mizrahi working class characters are portrayed as warm, affectionate, expressive, and grounded. The scenes that involve Aboud and Zohara are shot on location in the coastal city of Jaffa, in an area that was at the time largely inhabited by immigrants. By contrast, the bourgeois Westernized Ashkenazi characters are portrayed as materialistic, self-important, and at times socially awkward or childishly spoiled. To this end, scenes featuring Arthur and his family are set mostly in the overly large spaces of their home. The depiction of their lavish and fanciful domestic lifestyle is not only consistent with *bourekas* conventions, but it also provides comic relief in the vein of *filmfārsī*. In one scene, for example, the characters drink tea in aristocracy-themed porcelain cups, referring to it as »French coffee.«

The musical interludes comment on and enhance the film's unfolding tale, while further incorporating *bourekas* conventions into *filmfārsī* melodrama. Ovadia also extends his hybridization by using musical interludes drawn from Greek, Arab, and Jewish popular traditions. The opening song serves as a precursor to the film's tempo-

ral circularity. Sung by Avi Toledano (who is yet to appear as Gadi), the song's narrator expresses his love for Ariana through the emblems of the never-changing natural order. The second act begins as Arthur plans to throw a party for his son and asks Aboud to find an »orchestra« for him (adding a violin hand gesture). In a manner characteristic of the *bourekas* genre, Aboud misinterprets his intention and shows up with an Arab music ensemble. Led by Syrian Jewish musician Moshe Eliahu, the ensemble performs one of his signature compositions, »Haleluya Ve-simchu Na.« This uplifting song blends elements from Jewish liturgical chants with Arab musical tradition and, moreover, incorporates both Biblical and Modern Hebrew to express transpersonal gratitude and collective unity—a sentiment suggestive of the central role of interethnic romance in the *bourekas* genre. Gadi and Ariana then meet and dance together. In a later scene, they go out to a club. The Greek folk song played there, »Dirlada,« performed by Cypriot bouzouki player Trifonas Nikolaidis, contains an additional verse. Sung by Gadi for Ariana, and thus recalling the film's opening song, this additional verse heralds the beginning of the parallel storyline in the film's second act.

As Naficy rightly notes, the ethnic tensions that formed the backbone of the *bourekas* genre were also present in its critical reception (173). Upon the release of *Ariana*, the Eurocentric criticism of the time attributed the ostensibly negative characteristics of its melodrama to the »backward culture« of the Orient. A review published in the prominent daily *Davar*, for example, states: »The substandard cinema had inherited the tradition of the Victorian melodrama and nurtured it in different ways [...]. If there are any remains, they can only be found at the area of the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf« (Har-Nof, my translation). Rather than a fossilized relic of a bygone era, Ovadiah's film emerges as a dynamic site of circulation and customization. By and large, *Ariana* is illustrative of the melodrama's transnational and transcultural mobility and adaptability, as it forms a rich, hybridized work, in which various narrative and aesthetic traditions merge and overlap.

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Insiang (1976)

Thomas Morsch

dir. Lino Brocka; prod. Ruby Tiong Tan; screenplay Mario O'Hara, Lamberto E. Antonio; photography Conrado Baltazar; music Minda D. Azarcon. 35mm, color, 95 mins. Cinemanila, distrib. Film Development Council of the Philippines.

Lino Brocka's films are rooted in the Philippines' commercial genre cinema of the 1970s and 80s, a popular film culture dominated by melodrama, comedy, horror, and action. However, a number of this controversial director's films not only moved beyond the conventions of genre cinema, but also opposed many implicit and explicit rules of film production in his country and tested the limits of censorship during the Marcos era (1965-86), a time of economic decline for many Filipinos following the prosperous 1950s.

Like his contemporary Ishmael Bernal, another prominent director of the »New Filipino Cinema« (Lumbera), he was able to survive, and even thrive, within a restrictive system while opposing it at the same time (Lent 14): a balancing act made possible in part by the international recognition both directors gained early in their careers. At the same time, their somewhat controversial status is emblematically illuminated by the paradox that the fertile »Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema« (Vasudev 18; David) coincided with a twenty-two-year period of oppressive dictatorship.

Following the commercial and critical success of Brocka's 1975 film *Maynila, sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*), a gritty drama depicting crime and sex work in the Philippines' capital, *Insiang* rather turned to a more intimate setting. The film tells the tragic story of the eponymous protagonist (played by Hilda Koronel), a young woman living with her mother and her mother's younger boyfriend in Tondo, a district in the vicinity of Manila's harbor and home to some of the city's largest and poorest slums. The film combines elements of a rape revenge plot with a grim realism in the depiction of urban poverty on the one hand, and a melodramatic structure orchestrating the story's elements, in effect merging popular genre, neorealism, and melodrama, on the other. Like the career and oeuvre of its director (which includes ambitious art films as well as trivial genre movies), *Insiang* embodies the generic and cultural hybridity that is, in more than one sense, a prominent characteristic of Philippine cinema (Capino 33-39).



Courtesy of the Film Development Council of the Philippines

Already the choice of protagonists renders *Insiang* a film that joins realism and melodrama in an unexpected manner. The protagonist, Insiang, is a hardworking, demure, and obedient young woman who is exploited by her resentful and abusive mother, Tonya (played by Mona Lisa). For Tonya, her daughter is a living reminder of her deadbeat husband who left her without any support for his child. While the trope of the abandoned mother is a stereotype of global sentimental culture, it is very much the dire reality of many Filipinas' lives, born out of a culture-specific mix of the Catholic Church's rejection of birth control, machismo culture, and the deeply rooted notion that children are obliged to care for their parents and are therefore a necessary investment into one's future well-being (Thomson; Aguilar; Bautista).

Brocka, however, moves beyond this stereotype by assigning this narrative trope to the older generation, the mother, and by focusing instead on Insiang, the obedient daughter, who is at risk of experiencing a similar fate. Aggrieved by her circumstances of living as a single mother, Tonya seeks comfort in the relation with a younger man, Dado (played by Ruel Vernal), who also sexually pursues her daughter. The dutiful and self-sacrificing daughter is another stock character in Asian cinema and television, providing a masochistic point of identification for the audience. She is doubly victimized as Dado not only rapes her while she is unconscious, but her mother furthermore takes his side and blames her daughter for the sexual transgression. Tonya needs to believe her lover's claim that it was Insiang who seduced him in order to sustain her own fragile happiness. With the failure of Insiang's subsequent plan to sleep with her repressed suitor, Bebot (played by Rez Cortez), and to entice him to take her away from Manila, her ensuing strategy takes the narrative to the next melodramatic level. She now sexually seduces Dado, whom she hates, manipulating him to fall madly in love with her, stirring his desire to make him more and more careless, until the mother finally discovers the betrayal, as she catches her lover and daughter in the act and kills Dado in a fit of rage.

Leslie Fiedler argued that in the melodramatic fantasy of the sentimental American novel, the Manichean opposition of good and evil is articulated through the opposition between the woman as the embodiment of the Divine, morality, and chastity, and the man as the embodiment of temptation, phallic destruction, and sexual aggression (50-53). *Insiang's* narrative takes this ubiquitous trope of sentimentality into a new direction by letting the female victim lose her moral standards in an act of revenge on her male tormentor—to her own harm as much as to her family's detriment, which becomes evident in the affective abyss of the film's final scene. Insiang visits her hardened mother in prison, who refuses her daughter's tearful plea for forgiveness, yet who bursts into tears herself when she watches her daughter leave. The desolate ending leaves both characters unreconciled, guilt-ridden, and unredeemed, with only the spectator experiencing emotional catharsis through witnessing their shared suffering.

What separates *Insiang* from the tradition of melodrama is its social realism, a more general tendency of Philippine cinema and art during the Marcos era as well as of many of Brocka's films (Beller 117-62; Guillermo). The film's claim to realism is already evident in Brocka's decision not to sacrifice the naturalistic depiction of the Tondo slum for the kind of »parabolic image space« that Hermann Kappelhoff (25; 35-38; 234-36) has singled out as a characteristic of cinematic melodrama: that is, an image space, overcharged with meaning, that effaces any trace of the real in favor of a stylized canvas that reflects the characters' inner states and emotions. Rather, Brocka retains the

material qualities of the locale and lets the spectator experience the heat, the tightness, the overcrowding, the makeshift housing, the impending violence of the slum.

Beyond its realist representation, it is also the film's engagement with the country's political and social realities that sets it apart from the dominant tradition of melodrama. *Insiang* serves, including its bleak ending, as an »affective map« (Shaviro 6) of the country's political landscape. The drama of a »broken family« (another consistent trope of Philippine cinema and social life) as well as the personal power relations that are at the film's core have even been interpreted as symbolizing the political circumstances of the mid-1970s. In this reading, the submissive and vulnerable Insiang is an allegory of the true Philippines, while the malicious Dado symbolizes the Marcos regime that put the Philippines under martial law in order to extend its reign and exploitation of the suffering masses, with Tonya standing in for those who supported the Marcos regime for opportunistic reasons and personal gain. And finally, »Insiang's ineffectual boyfriend Bebot is a reminder of the Philippines' former colonial masters, such as the United States, who supported the strongman in power instead of intervening« (Clark 5). It is this interweaving of the personal and the political, of the melodramatic with the social fabric, that makes *Insiang* an outstanding example not only of the so-called third cinema (Pines and Willemen), but of global melodrama in general. In a uniquely interesting way, *Insiang* attests to the fact that melodrama is, contrary to long-standing belief, »not the opposite of realism but in ongoing engagement with it« (Gledhill and Williams 10).

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Amar Akbar Anthony (अमर अकबर अँन्थनी, 1977)

Rama Srinivasan

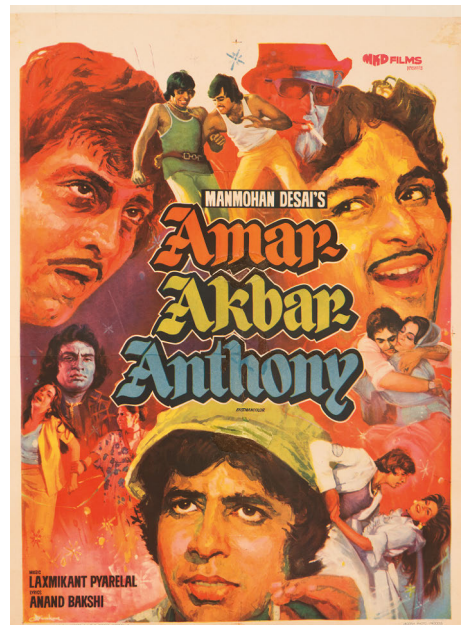
dir. Manmohan Desai; prod. Manmohan Desai;
screenplay Prayag Raj; photography Peter Pereira;
music Laxmikant-Pyarelal. 35mm, color, 184 mins.
M.K.D. Films Combine, distrib. Shemaroo Video.

Amar Akbar Anthony (AAA) is a social drama film from a decade that had perfected what was later celebrated as the *masala* format. Directors such as Manmohan Desai and Prakash Mehra were best known for creating these genre-blurring, highly successful films. In AAA, this metaphorical spice mix (comedy, action, drama, romance) meets one of India's foundational narratives: partition-related trauma and the challenges of maintaining communal harmony.

Unlike later films where communal harmony was presented as preferable to the deadly consequences of sectarian violence (*Krantiveer*, 1994; → *Bombay*, 1995; *Zakhm*, 1998; *Dahek*, 1999), AAA opted for positive reinforcement where there is,

as such, no real inter-community conflict on-screen. The message is delivered through loaded dialogues that draw on several registers and fantastic twists, designed to convince the viewer to take a leap of faith. It unabashedly commits to the idea of divine retributions and rewards, bizarre coincidences, and over-the-top emotions. Although the film does not shy from milking poignant moments, the *masala* format ensures a brisk journey through a gambit of emotions, life in a nutshell.

The narrative starts with Kishanlal (played by Pran), whose confrontation with his smuggler-boss, Robert (played by Jeevan), leads to a sequence of events that tears his family apart. His ailing wife, Bharati (played by Nirupa Roy), has left him a note informing him of her decision to commit suicide and, thereby, reduce his challenges. In order to save what is left of his family from Robert's goons, Kishanlal temporarily leaves his children unattended in a public park, leading his antagonists away on an elaborate car chase that ends in a non-fatal crash. By the time he returns, the three sons are separated and have been taken in by three good Samaritans.



Courtesy of Andy Rotman

Meanwhile, Bharati has changed her mind after losing her eyesight in a freak accident that she interprets as divine retribution for the sin committed by even considering suicide. She is led to believe that the car crash had actually killed her husband and children. While she settles down into a life of selling flowers to devotees of all faiths, Kishanlal embraces a life of crime as a result of this family tragedy. As part of his revenge, he abducts Robert's daughter, Jenny (played by Parveen Babi), who also serves as a placeholder for his own sons. At various points in the film, he narrates the tragic circumstances of this family separation with the preface: »22 years back, on 15th August, the day of (our country's) independence [...].« This opening functions as a reminder to the audience that the story is also a metaphor for partition—the great tragedy that unfolded in the midst of a celebration. Bharati, a play on the country's name in Hindi, is also Mother India, who suffers several blows onto her corporeal self. While the older son, Amar (played by Vinod Khanna), retains his name and religious identity in his new life, the other two, Akbar (played by Rishi Kapoor) and Anthony (played by Amitabh Bachchan), are adopted into the faiths of their new guardians and grow up as Muslim and Christian, respectively. Of the three, only Amar refrains from invoking his religion in conversations and, instead, stands in for secular authority and the rule of law as a police officer.

The film underlines the majority community as the norm and rule enforcer where those belonging to minority faiths are marked by a difference that borders on stereotyping. Akbar is a romantic *artiste* who sports garish clothes and spouts poetic phrases in Urdu—dominant stereotypes associated with the affable Muslim man of Hindi films. Anthony, on the other hand, is a flamboyant troublemaker with coarse language and a weakness for alcohol, fitting the popular image of a working class, Christian man in Mumbai. The opening credits, which roll well into the 24th minute, frame the scene where the three men are brought into contact again through an interconnecting web of surgical tubes, set-up for a blood transfusion Bharati requires. From here on, Akbar and Anthony regard her as a mother and each other as blood brothers. Anthony tries to draw the aloof Amar into the brotherhood without much success as if to underline that a natural affinity already exists between Abrahamic faiths. Hindus, the film seems to suggest, need to be persuaded to join this universal brotherhood, a task that requires a leap of faith.

Melodrama is a perfect vehicle of the film's central conceit: Those who regard each other as brothers *could* in reality be brothers without any knowledge of their shared ancestry. This sentiment is both the entire story and the subject of countless encounters. For example, Anthony asks Bharati, now a flower seller, for a blossom he would present to a »big daddy« (an authority figure such as a cop or a judge) but, in a twist of fate, ends up at Kishanlal's den and presents it to his real father instead. Since the audience is privy to the family history, it would likely chuckle at such encounters thinking, »if only they all knew [...].« But, through these clueless characters, the filmmakers could also be referring to the film's audience—a majority of Indians who are ignorant of their own shared history of syncretic cultures that were disrupted but not fully erased by the experience of colonialism.

AAA is, in many ways, a testament to postcolonial India. It invokes partition obliquely since it was still a taboo to speak of the great tragedy. Melodramatic films since the 1950s (*Awara*, 1951; *Waqf*, 1965; *Naseeb*, 1981; *Coolie*, 1983) have invoked partition through metaphors of separated families, abandoned wives whose chastity could no longer be

vouched for, and orphaned children who were left to deal with the consequences. In 1977, the orphans of partition had become adults and those who had taken over from the British had been corrupted by power, resembling, in many ways, the colonists themselves. Robert, a Christian man, is an anglicized, exploitative boss, and Kishanlal emulates aspects of Robert's personality when he assumes his new life as a successful smuggler. But the former is also a human being with a family that the latter has deprived him of. The film does not allow the audience to empathize with this near-desperate father but offers them, instead, another version of Christianity—the priest who adopts and cares for Anthony represents the best of what the faith has to offer.

AAA asks its audience to not associate faith with individual actions and offers examples of worthy and corrupt individuals from every community. Along with Kishanlal, there are many Hindus—including the woman Amar falls in love with—who have succumbed to a life of crime. Akbar has his own struggles with the shady father of his girlfriend, Salma (played by Neetu Singh). Anthony is, in turn, engaged in bootlegging alcohol before he is redeemed by his love for Jenny.

The plot undoubtedly advances a patriarchal narrative, where the course of the post-colonial nation is represented only through the lives of three men who belong to different faiths and pursue different life trajectories. Although the women are mostly appendages to the main plot, AAA is still intriguing in its gender politics. In contradiction to essentializing tropes that represent Muslim women as oppressed and Christian women as sexually promiscuous, Salma is shown as an independent professional, a doctor, and Jenny, an emancipated woman, is presented with dignity and respect. Salma and Jenny do not subscribe to patriarchal prescriptions on securing parent/guardian approval before considering marriage, although Akbar insists that Salma's father bless their union.

The unkindest cut is reserved for the Hindu women. Apart from the ever-suffering mother (India), there is Laxmi (played by Shabana Azmi), a sly thief, who is rescued and then ensconced in the domestic space by Amar. Laxmi's quick transformation, depicted through her choice of clothes, fits well with the dichotomy Priti Ramamurthy has drawn between the tropes of a modern girl and the New Woman in Indian cinema. The New Woman is educated, cultured, agential—representative of a »nationalistic feminism«—but she must stay within the domestic space. The Hindu woman is conceived as the »soul of the nation« (Chatterjee), while Hindu men, who needed to contribute to economic progress, were free to adopt aspects of western culture and modernity.

Coming as AAA did, after the end of a well-chronicled period where democracy was suspended and, in a decade marked by outbreaks of sectarian violence, it will not be a stretch to assume that the film was designed to remind the audience of their shared history and the need to preserve freedom, religious tolerance, and inclusivity. The last song (»Making the impossible, possible«), which plays out during an extended climax, underlines the leap of faith postcolonial India had taken in forging a secular political society. This politics of love over hate also resurfaces in some unexpected ways. The song, »Tayyab Ali: Enemy of Love,« where Akbar decries Salma's father, has, for example, been appropriated by queer pride events. Prominently featuring sexual minorities, a song that shamed intolerance against love and those in love worked quite organically with the overall message of communal harmony.

The film still resonates today with Indians who seek to preserve India's inclusive ideals (Bhatia). The two brothers do not return to the religion at birth but, rather, through their marital choices become firmly entrenched in their adopted community. Filmmak-

ers had not, it appears, considered the possibility of inter-faith marriages. The idea that religious communities should lead parallel and harmonious lives is still widely shared, as a recent survey by the U.S.-based Pew Research Center underlines (Evans and Sahgal). A majority in every community in India reportedly seeks harmonious relations but are against cross-community unions. As a decidedly patriarchal text, AAA may not have all the solutions for an India where a significant number of people would be open to blurring the social boundaries by forging intimate relationships across communities—except perhaps, an unlikely queer song that can be used to shame any and all.

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The Smoking Fish (*El pez que fuma*, 1977)

Sophie Dufays

dir. Román Chalbaud; prod. Abigail Rojas, Mauricio Walerstein; screenplay Román Chalbaud, José Ignacio Cabrujas; photography César Bolívar. 35mm, color, 120 mins. Gente de Cine, distrib. Video Games de Venezuela.

Frequently claimed by critics as the best Venezuelan film ever made, *El pez que fuma*, Román Chalbaud's fifth feature-length film, was produced in the midst of the Oil Boom era and has since become a potent metaphor for the decadence at the height of Venezuela's economic splendor. The film takes its title from the name of its main setting, a bordello-cabaret in the outskirts of Caracas, run by La Garza (played by Hilda Vera). Along with the centrality of the cabaret and its characters, both the didactic aspect of the narrative schema and the signifying use of sentimental popular songs (bolero and tango songs, most diegetically performed at The Smoking Fish) are highly recognizable ingredients of Mexican Golden Age melodramas, especially the cabaret melodrama as typified by Emilio »Indio« Fernández's *Salón México* (1948) and *Víctimas del pecado* (1950).

Chalbaud's personal admiration for Mexican Golden Age cinema can be traced from the very beginning of his training as a filmmaker, both in his assisting Mexican director Víctor Urruchúa's two Venezuelan features in the early 50s and in his own first feature-length film, *Caín adolescente* (1959), based on his play of the same title. The social content of this first film focused on poverty and urban migration, molded through typically melodramatic characters, climaxes, gestures, and settings, including the cabaret (see Paranaguá 165; Alvaray 43). More generally, »the connection between Mexican melodrama and its Venezuelan counterpart« has largely influenced the emergence of Venezuelan cinema since the 1940s (Alvaray 35). More than mere imitations of the Mexican model, Chalbaud's films demonstrate an ability to appropriate classical melodrama, reinventing it based on certain Venezuelan cultural conventions—from a reflexive and ironic, yet also nostalgic, perspective.

Such appropriation is manifest from the opening sequence of the film, in which La Garza and her lover, Dimas (played by Miguel Ángel Landa), together with the other inhabitants of the brothel, celebrate the arrival of new mattresses while, in a street down the hill, the old ones are burnt in a bonfire encircled by dancing children from



the neighborhood. This sequence sets out a series of didactic contrasts, dramatic ideas, eccentric characters, and excessive emotions that the film will subsequently develop in allegorical and melodramatic ways. Among the contrasts, we find the opposition between new and old, between material comfort and misery, and between the bordello set upon a hill and the surrounding urban area. The image of the bordello's cashier peering through his telescope brings out the notion of controlled space. The »cripple« guarding the cabaret's entrance is a clue to the eccentricity of many characters, while excessive gestures and feelings are introduced through the disproportionately hysterical exaltation expressed for the new mattresses. Combining all these narrative, formal, and emotional features, *El pez que fuma* merges the tradition of 1940s and 50s Mexican cabaret melodrama with another trend of Latin American cinema: namely, the use of allegory, especially as systematized in 1960s Brazilian *Cinema Novo* (Rodríguez).

But even before this first sequence, the credit song—a bolero track, »El preso« (»the prisoner«)—synthesizes the melodramatic and allegorical operations of the film. The recurrence of the song in the last sequence and its lyrics confirm the notion of fate as well as the principles of symmetry and repetition, that structure the plot, the spiral line of which is simple. It begins with the arrival of young Jairo (played by Orlando Urdaneta) at the bordello—who has been sent by Tobías, La Garza's former lover, now in jail. First hired as a handyman, Jairo gains La Garza's trust and ends up struggling with Dimas for her sexual favors and the right to administrate the brothel, which amount to the same thing. The two procurers' ascents are symmetrical, and Dimas follows Tobías' fate. The song »El preso« therefore not only predicts the similar destiny of La Garza's lovers and suggests an association between the spaces of the jail and brothel, but furthermore crystallizes the complex role of songs in the film, linked to their cultural and intertextual meanings as well as their affective functions. This 1951 song, recorded by emblematic Puerto Rican singer Daniel Santos, operates as an underlying reference to melodrama as a cultural mold in Latin America (Martín-Barbero)—a reference posteriorly popularized by Luis Rafael Sánchez's 1988 novel, *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos*.

Indeed, more than an illustration of the characters' feelings or thoughts, and beyond their didactic function as commentary on action in a Brechtian way, the songs in *El pez que fuma* »work as a source of dramatic energy. The use of music is a constant stroke of inspiration, an appeal to the complicity of a public well acquainted with the familiar repertoire« (Paranaguá 169). First intermittent, the songs become more and more frequent until they reveal themselves as the motor of the plot in the last part of the drama, when Jairo betrays Dimas, and La Garza is killed by an accidentally fired bullet. During these last twenty minutes, songs follow each other almost without pause, replacing dialogue and highlighting music's dominant role in the narrative dynamics, portrayal of characters, and discursive functions of the film as well as its communicative strategy based on shared cultural clues and affective power (Piedras and Dufays 2019).

The construction of La Garza's character—strongly connected to old boleros and tangos—also showcases Chalbaud's singular appropriation of the Mexican tradition of melodrama. An independent, self-made woman—famously stating »I haven't had men, I've had meters of men, kilometers of men, motorways of men«—she is a new version of the »devouring woman« and, as such, a descendent of Mexican star María Félix. But she is also capable of compassion and motherly feelings. In sum, La Garza appears as

a matriarch, a new kind of mother, the mother-owner of the sex workers and, allegorically, of the country (Rodríguez). She is a complex character who synthesizes and subsumes the polarized archetypes of classical Mexican melodrama: overcoming the stark distinction between the mother and the prostitute and claiming a power equal to that traditionally reserved to the *macho*. Alvaray estimates that she »embodies a new kind of empowered female subjectivity that, nonetheless, is nullified in the end when she is accidentally shot« (46).

Her death and the subsequent vigil are underlined by an emblematic song—the classic 1935 tango »Sus ojos se cerraron« (»she closed her eyes«), composed by Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera—interpreted by a singer-prostitute called »La Argentina.« The aesthetic and dramatic excesses of the sequence—with repeated slow-motion shots of her body falling—are at once emphasized and given reflexive value through this tango track, which works as an intertextual reference to the more classical tradition of melodrama. The song's melodramatic theme of deceptive appearances crystallizes the symbolic meaning of action in the film, both at large and specifically in the hyperbolic final scene when the vigil gives way to the habitual festive ambience and La Garza is replaced by a younger prostitute. Contrary to traditional melodrama, here the plot does not offer any moral resolution: La Garza's death is not interpreted as a result of her lack of moral convention. However, the songs do indeed provide the means for a moral critique of the society represented by the cabaret community. Along with »El preso« and »Sus ojos se cerraron,« the songs in *El pez que fuma* are melodramatic and allegorical tools, participating in Chalbaud's project to denounce the corruption of a Venezuelan society defined by power struggles in which sex serves solely as exchange value. Yet the songs also transport a nostalgia for an era in which it was possible to dream of true love and to believe in moral values—those values embodied by traditional melodrama. Summing up, in its nostalgic and reflexive appropriation of old tangos and boleros, *El pez que fuma* represents one kind of inflection of classical, especially cabaret, melodrama in 1970s Latin American cinema.

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An Unmarried Woman (1978)

Florian Mundhenke

dir. Paul Mazursky; prod. Paul Mazursky, Anthony Ray; screenplay Paul Mazursky; photography Arthur J. Ornitz; music Bill Conti. 35mm, color, 124 mins. Twentieth Century Fox, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox.

United States film production in the 1970s was characterized by a massive transformation as a new generation of directors, producers, and actors took hold under the name »New Hollywood.« However, New Hollywood was not only a group of ambitious younger filmmakers but was also characterized by new values, morals, and self-image. In particular, the upheavals of 1960s counterculture (student marches, Vietnam protests, the civil rights movement, women's movements) were not only carried along, but were also negotiated, by artists through film. In addition to Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, and Steven Spielberg, Paul Mazursky became known as part of this new wave. The film *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) cleverly and eloquently interrogated problems of equality, polyamory, and sexual needs in relation to the institution of marriage by focusing on two couples.

A mere ten years later, the radicalism of New Hollywood had largely exhausted itself. Some protagonists had retired, while others, like Spielberg and Lucas, turned to blockbuster cinema. It was at this point that *An Unmarried Woman* premiered. Mazursky realized the film in 1978, after his greatest artistic success, *Harry & Tonto* (1976). The story is simple: Erica Benton (played by Jill Clayburgh) has been with her husband Martin (Michael Murphy) for seventeen years in a picture-perfect marriage with a traditional division of gender roles. He works as a stockbroker; she has a part-time job in a gallery and takes care of their teenage daughter, Patti (Lisa Lucas). They live in a fancy apartment on the Upper East Side in New York City, and their biggest worries are that



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

their chosen vacation spot might be fully booked or deciding who gets to pick the place for Sunday dinner. All of this changes abruptly when, over lunch, Martin announces that he will leave his wife and daughter to move into an apartment with a much younger woman whom he has known for a year. Erica's reactions range from frustration and sadness to anger and recklessness. After a period of self-reflection, she meets and eventually falls in love with the British painter Saul Kaplan (Alan Bates).

Mazursky's film manages the tightrope walk between ironic lightness, on the one hand, and threatening crisis, on the other, in an extraordinarily delicate manner. His film does not choose the path that the hugely successful *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) took in showing the demise of a marriage like clockwork, from first conflicts to a court verdict over child custody; nor is it a portrait of an emancipated woman fighting against the immorality and seductibility of men. The film is first and foremost about Erica Benton, played with almost documentary precision by Clayburgh. Erica is in every scene of the film, and she gains more independence and freedom with every laugh, every tearful outburst, every argument that she has. With this, the film almost perfectly executes what Alison Bechdel asks of movies in her popular test (Selvaraj 2020). The film features many female characters (daughter Patti and Erica's four friends), who meet regularly, argue, and laugh with each other. They talk a lot, but not exclusively, about their relationships with men, as they also discuss jobs, children, and vacation plans.

It is thanks to Paul Mazursky's sometimes trivial, word-heavy style—often reminiscent of Woody Allen—that the film is neither a revenge thriller (like *The War of the Roses*, 1989) nor an academic copy of *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). It is precisely its matter-of-factness and lightness that makes the film a typical melodrama of New Hollywood. According to Annette Kuhn, the achievement of this movement is to no longer only present women as victims, rivals, or conspirators, as in many films of the 1930s to 50s (e.g. in film noir), but to present them as round characters with relationships, occupations, worries, fears, hardships, and joys (151-71). With this in mind—according to Kuhn and Mellen—the women's film (not only as a genre *about* women, but primarily as a genre viewed *by* a female audience) gains a new quality that is no longer a representation of the problems of gender roles, but of the opportunities, self-confidence, and hopes of gender identity. The film also explicitly shares this with comparable New Hollywood films such as *Wanda* (1970), *A Woman under the Influence* (1974), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975), *Harlan County, USA* (1976), and *Julia* (1977).

If one were cynical, one could say that Erica does not actually suffer, since she keeps the apartment, continues to live with her daughter, and receives alimony from Martin. She even gains new insights and freedoms that at no point threaten her existence. But it is precisely the sincerity of this development and the way of dealing with the main character, who is not overloaded with problems, that makes the film so unpredictable and suspenseful—even if there is no grand finale. As critic Dennis Schwartz remarks: »Even if the Clayburgh character is rich, healthy, attractive, smart, and has supportive friends, when she's on her own it's still a tough scene for a single woman to overcome, and this film proves that is so despite the new type of feminism in the air giving women more choices and freedom.« By putting the main character (and her self-reflection) at the center of the film, it represents a new kind of melodrama: one not focused on social circumstances, the relationship, or the demands and challenges other people bring forward, but rather a melodrama about the sometimes light, sometimes hard burdens of embracing free choice in life decisions. As Peter Hanson remarks: »To get a

sense of why essayist/novelist Tom Wolfe christened the 70s 'The Me Decade,' look no further than *An Unmarried Woman*, one of the deepest dives into feminine psychology any mainstream American filmmaker has ever attempted. Although the movie nominally tells the story of a woman trying to find love again after her husband leaves her, the real goal of the picture is to let one individual express her personal angst.« More positively worded, it can be said that the film's rigid focus on Erica indicates the openness of her new situation, her agency, and the rationale behind her decisions, making it an overly unpredictable, personal, but, above all, straightforward film.

In terms of aesthetics, three things are striking. First, unlike many films of the time, Paul Mazursky uses New York City not just as a backdrop but as a specific socio-cultural location with distinct characteristics. This includes not only focusing on the popular views and well-known buildings but also incorporating smaller restaurants and nightclubs, side streets and jogging tracks, into the film. Secondly, while the film is made relatively independently with a smaller budget, costumes, décor, and especially the friendly and upbeat music by Bill Conti (who had just achieved world fame with *Rocky*) round out character portrayal and plot development. Last but not least, the rhythm of the storytelling makes a critical difference to similarly themed films. Robert C. Gumbow wrote in a contemporaneous review: »I am won over by its crisp, crackling competence, the literate wittiness of its script, Mazursky's sensitivity to pace in the editing of both image and music, and his powerful economy of characterization.« The film takes some time to develop its story. Many scenes do not have a loaded meaning in the sense of a classical narrative, but show Erica lingering and dancing to music, listening to the psychiatrist, or walking through the park with Saul. In this way, a special trust and empathy is established for the viewer that makes the film a lifelike and credible experience. *An Unmarried Woman* was a moderate success at the box office and received three Academy Award nominations.

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The Marriage of Maria Braun (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, 1979)

Werner C. Barg

dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder;
prod. Michael Fengler; screenplay
Peter Märthesheimer, Pea Fröhlich;
photography Michael Ballhaus;
music Peer Raben. 35mm, color,
115 mins. Albatros Filmproduktion,
distrib. United Artists.



The melodramatic entanglement of characters had already been a central element in German director Rainer Werner Fass-

binder's early films. In *Katzelmacher* (1969), the appearance of the Greek guest worker Jorgos (played by Fassbinder himself) upsets the power structure of a young gang in a suburban Munich neighborhood. Jorgos is met with jealousy and xenophobia when he begins a love affair with one of the young women in the clique. In *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1972), Fassbinder tells the love story of a German woman and another guest worker. The older cleaner, Emmi (played by Brigitte Mira), falls in love with the younger Moroccan, Ali (played by El Hedi ben Salem), triggering racist reactions among neighbors and family members. Here, Fassbinder uses the melodramatic construction to show a cycle of exploitability of emotions. After exclusion comes exploitation. In order to regain recognition, Emmi gladly takes on the additional, yet thankless job of babysitting for the family next door, and Ali is called upon by the neighbors as a strong handyman for all needs in the household, without, of course, compensation.

The German-born U.S. director Douglas Sirk had perfected the melodramatic narrative principle of *mésalliance*—that is, the depiction of relationships between (socially) unequal partners disdained by the society around them and put under high social pressure—in films such as → *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Fassbinder, for whom Sirk was a key role model, transferred Sirk's concept of melodrama from the U.S. upper class milieu to the everyday reality of ordinary people in West Germany in his films of the early 1970s. He employed the melodramatic concept toward building biting critique of the petit bourgeoisie. However, through character studies of his protagonists, most of whom yearn for a different life, Fassbinder also revealed the psychological injuries inflicted on people by the structures of the authoritarian conditions shaped by

the deplorable traditions of German history. In *Händler der vier Jahreszeiten* (*The Merchant of Four Seasons*, 1972), for example, Fassbinder condenses central motifs of his socio-critical underpinnings of cinematic melodrama in the portrait of a man whom people had not always treated kindly: emotional coldness, social and intellectual narrowness, the exploitability of feelings, war trauma, longing for another life, combined with experiencing a true »great love.«

All of these motifs can be found in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*. This film—with which came the international breakthrough for both Fassbinder and the leading actress, Hanna Schygulla—allowed Fassbinder to establish himself as a recognized European *auteur* filmmaker. *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* marks the beginning of the so-called FRG trilogy, in which Fassbinder tells the stories of three women's fates in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s, completed by *Lola* (1981) and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (1982).

During the hail of bombs in World War II, Maria and Hermann Braun (played by Klaus Löwitsch) have but half a day and one night left to spend together after their wedding, before Hermann must return to the front. At the end of the war, Maria looks for her husband among the returnees at the train station. But he is never among them. Maria takes life into her own hands, waitressing in an »off-limits« bar run by the U.S. Army. A returned comrade-in-arms of Hermann informs Maria that her husband was killed in action. She begins a torrid love affair with a U.S. soldier, Bill (played by George Byrd), and becomes pregnant. Hermann then returns and surprises Maria while she is in the middle of an erotic moment with Bill. Full of guilt, but also in order to prove her true love to Hermann, Maria slays Bill. During trial before a military court, Hermann unexpectedly takes responsibility for the bloody deed and goes to prison for it. After having aborted her and Bill's child, and at the dawn of the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* (»economic miracle«), Maria builds a career as private assistant to Oswald (played by Ivan Desny), a factory owner who also becomes her lover. Maria tries to keep her professional and private life separate in this affair, and to remain self-determined and independent in both spheres. In doing so, her plan is to acquire wealth in order to be able to present Hermann with a »new life« after his return from prison. However, Hermann follows his own agenda and rejects the new life that Maria longs for and offers to him. After prison, he leaves her to become a »new man.« In the final scene, following Oswald's death, the two fatefully entangled characters are finally united in Maria's villa. Oswald's will is opened. Maria considers herself the sole heir but is surprised to learn that he has also bequeathed half his factory's assets to Hermann. The two men had made a pact behind Maria's back. Shortly afterwards, there is a gas explosion in the villa, cruelly ending Maria's life, and thus putting an end to her marriage. Fassbinder's film leaves open whether Maria truly did not notice the smell of gas when she lit a cigarette in her kitchen, or whether she committed suicide because she felt betrayed by the two men who loved her and was disappointed in her own intention to lead a self-determined marriage, materially independent from her husband.

Die Ehe der Maria Braun tells the story of a woman who yearns to live together with her great love but is not able to fulfill this longing due to historical circumstance. In Fassbinder's film, melodrama and the portrayal of history are combined in a sophisticated way, providing a dramaturgical pattern still used today in countless so-called docudramas in the context of »history television« and to great public effect. Historical television-film events have boasted powerful audience ratings in Germany, for exam-

ple, where more than eleven million viewers tuned in to watch *Die Sturmflut* on RTL, and more than twelve million to see the 2012 docudrama *Dresden* on ZDF. Yet Fassbinder's melodramas differ from these television products, especially with respect to the director's tremendous intuitive feeling for not simply shooting his melodramatic stories in conventional ways, but for really *telling* them through the formal means of film. Fassbinder himself explains: »I believe that in film it is not enough to simply think up something that is worth telling, because that is only half the battle. That's why I think the atmosphere and composition of films are so important otherwise you'd just have to take some clever sociological books and implement them somehow [...]. But those are truisms« (Pflaum and Fassbinder 17).

The sociological »truism« contained in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* is the fact that many women, left to their own devices after the war, built or established something for themselves, or at least wanted to do so—but their efforts were thwarted when the men returned, as they restored the old, traditional distribution of gender roles. Fassbinder asks what this does to women, but also to men. Maria makes herself unassailable by trying to control every situation and dominate in it. This way, she intends to escape the exploitability of her feelings. In the development of his main character, Fassbinder shows that this behavior costs strength and that Maria pays for the growing material fulfillment of her desires with growing emotional coldness. She reacts increasingly domineering. Her facial expression is rigid, the makeup makes her appear more and more mask-like, statuesque. Fassbinder also elegantly refines the pictorial design of earlier films in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*: »We made images that constrict, that give people so little air that I have the feeling that you can only fight this constriction with very brutal means. So even there I find the images important, and the movements with which something is told« (Pflaum and Fassbinder 17).

In *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, Fassbinder does not excessively use the principle of the constricting camera perspective, in which the characters are framed by door frames, windows, or scenery elements in the *mise-en-scène* and appear restricted in their range of movement, as done, for example, in *Angst essen Seele auf*. However, Fassbinder narrates the conflict that Oswald gets into through his connection to Maria and Hermann by, for instance, constricting image tableaux. Furthermore, Fassbinder and cinematographer Michael Ballhaus use camera movement within scenes more sophisticatedly and brilliantly than in earlier films, finely choreographed to the spoken word, through parallel and travelling shots of individual characters to expose their reactions to the scenic action. This way, sometimes supplemented by the editing of the image, Fassbinder creates revealing scopic discourses that help the audience to better understand characters' behavior in particular scenes: for example, when Maria stands before the military tribunal. As Fassbinder throughout his life saw himself as a political filmmaker, he also employs image-sound montage in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* as part of commentary on postwar West German history. For example, in two scenes clearly separated by time, he allows the dialogue of two news reports be drowned out by original quotes from German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, so that the audience is encouraged to parallel the auditorily presented political discourse on the rearmament of West Germany with the growing emotional coldness of the film's protagonist.

At the very end of the film, portraits of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany's Chancellors Adenauer, Erhard, and Kiesinger—who had been in office before the film's making—are faded in as negative images, in a kind of epilogue. The

image of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany's Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, in office at the time of the film's production, changes from negative to positive. Furthermore, by omitting the SPD reform Chancellor, Willy Brandt, from his montage, Fassbinder provides a predominantly negative commentary on the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. The epilogue is preceded in the film's final scene by an image-sound montage in which the reunion of Maria and Hermann is accompanied by audio commentary of the legendary 1954 World Cup match between Hungary and West Germany. The explosion of the house, which signifies the end of Maria's longing to live out her great love, is accompanied by the frenetic exclamation of sportscaster Herbert Zimmermann: »Over, over, over—over!—The game is over—Germany is world champion.« A Germany of callousness and materialism: as Fassbinder's melodrama shows, one that was never Fassbinder's Germany.

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Ticket of No Return (*Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, 1979)

Stefanie Diekmann

dir. Ulrike Ottinger; prod. Tabea Blumenschein, Ulrike Ottinger; screenplay Ulrike Ottinger; photography Ulrike Ottinger; music Peer Raben. 35mm, color, 107 mins. Autorenfilm-Produktionsgemeinschaft, distrib. Basis-Film-Verleih.

Bildnis einer Trinkerin is the memorable first part of Ulrike Ottinger's Berlin trilogy, a project she would continue with *Freak Orlando* (1981) and → *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* (*The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press*; 1984). The three films are connected by a programmatical-ly eclectic and anti-naturalistic mode of representation, a penchant for theatricality, and a strong affinity to the tableau vivant. (In all these aspects, they are much closer to French avant-garde cinema than to the majority of German films of the 1970s and 80s). They are also marked by a certain ambiguity of gender roles and gender relations (most notably in *Dorian Gray*) and the introduction of very attractive and enigmatic protagonists.

If *Dorian Gray*, the third film in the series, is dominated by the presence of Veruschka von Lehndorff, model, muse, and icon of the 1960s and 70s, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* is largely dedicated to the striking and highly stylized persona of Tabea Blumenschein, model, muse, icon, and fashion designer in her own right and one of the key figures in the West Berlin avant-garde and underground circles of the 1970s and 80s. The collaboration between her and Ottinger, who cast Blumenschein in several of her early films, started before the Berlin trilogy and is constitutive for films like *Die Betörung der blauen Matrosen* (1975) and *Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin* (1977). However, although cinema was at its center, this cooperation included much more: notably costume and fashion design, various sorts of roleplay before the camera, photo shootings, social events, as well as an ongoing exchange with many avant-garde artists and designers from the Berlin scene like Claudia Skoda, Peer Raben, Magdalena Montezuma, and others.

In recent years, the importance of that scene and its role in the cultural and art history of the city has been an object of increased interest, documented by exhibitions like *Claudia Skoda—Dressed to Thrill* (Kulturforum Berlin 2021) (Bommert), with



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a number of photographs by Ottinger from the late 1970s, and the exhibition on Tabea Blumenschein as a fine artist (Berlinische Galerie 2022). The films from that period, always a part of Ottinger retrospectives in cultural institutions all over the world, are therefore complemented by an ongoing exploration of a larger field of artistic practices and figures, all part of a near-mythical period before the rediscovery (and, some say, commodification) of Berlin after the fall of the wall.

The Berlin of *Bildnis* is decidedly pre-fall: a dark, derelict, hermetic place, which is both backdrop and environment to the quest of Ottinger's nameless heroine (Blumenschein) who, at the beginning of the film, decides to purchase a 'Ticket of no Return' to the divided city. »Aller—jamais retour«: this, the heroine's only explicit pronouncement throughout the film, is followed by a sequence filmed at Tegel airport and another announcement, now in the form of a voice-over that tells everything there is to tell about the following interaction between the protagonist and the city of Berlin: »She« (described as »a woman of great beauty, ancient dignity and raphaelite harmony«) has come to this place to pursue a passion, and one passion only, namely drinking. If this also implies that she will drink herself to death, the possibility is not made explicit; but some of the following scenes (falls, tumbles, moments of absence) certainly point in that direction.

In terms of melodrama, it is important that *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* starts at a moment when conflict and narrative are already over. The protagonist who arrives in Berlin in a spectacular attire, appears neither broken nor agitated nor in any other particular state but essentially calm, although slightly melancholic. There may have been drama (a loss, a conflict, a rupture), and there may have been states (of love, hatred, despair, desertion), but if »She« remains without a name, she also remains without a backstory and, therefore, without a backstory wound that would make her more accessible to the spectators of the film: »The white protagonist of *Bildnis* is not introduced in terms of her biographical specificity—we are never given a single concrete detail about her past—but rather in terms of what might be called her ›mission« (Silverman 47). In her strange and self-contained presence, the heroine of *Bildnis* is closer to certain screen personae of the 1920s and 30s: the detached, inaccessible characters played by actresses like Gloria Swanson and, a few years later, Marlene Dietrich (especially in films by Josef von Sternberg like *Morocco*, *Dishonored*, *Shanghai Express*). In the same line, her drinking spree is presented as a project that is carried out calmly, coolly, and systematically; excessive, maybe, but never to a degree that would affect »her« attractiveness and the essential *ennui*. (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who certainly knew how to appreciate both melodrama and stardom, loved *Bildnis* and declared himself to be the film's biggest fan [Rickels 13]).

Bildnis proposes a concept of melodrama that differs in several aspects from the well-established idea of a »tale [...] of sound and fury« (Elsaesser). In the first place, there is very little drama, if by »drama« we are to understand the actions of a protagonist who makes a spectacle of herself or articulates her state of mind via the expression of rage or lament. In the second place, while *Bildnis*, as a film, is neither quiet nor withdrawn (there are several noisy characters and noisy scenes), the protagonist herself certainly is. Not much of a talker and even less of a weeper, joker, fighter, she prefers to sit by herself, detached both from her surroundings and from her own persona, rarely without a glass (which is sometimes replaced by a bottle), never looking for attention but always a striking presence against the bleak backdrop of yet another location in Berlin.

In Ottinger's very visual cinema, the spectacle is not in the behavior of the heroine but in her looks and attire. It is also in the settings, scattered all over West Berlin, that essentially walled-off city which, in the late 1970s, offered a unique backdrop to the story about the beauty who came to town to drink herself to death. Many scenes in *Bildnis* are filmed against a view of the Zoo, the Tiergarten, the Westhafen, the Wannsee, and the Spree. However, at no point do these scenes create the impression of openness or escape, so frequently associated with the outdoors in films from → *Applause* to → *All That Heaven Allows*. Instead, the very literal enclosure of West Berlin may be imagined as the very reason why »She« chose that city as her final destination; and an aspect of claustrophobia is clearly present in Ottinger's *mise-en-scène* of urban landscapes and locales. (»The essence of loneliness presented in the guise of the city,« as the film critic Norbert Jochum wrote in *Die Zeit*). The melodrama, for the longest time the no. 1 spectacle of the interior, is thereby transposed to a different environment which, nevertheless, still functions along the parameters of containment and isolation.

Against the exquisite seediness and gloominess of Berlin, the protagonist's attire appears all the more memorable. Dressed to drink, dressed to die, dressed as if her wardrobe had been designed to hold herself together as long as possible, the protagonist, in her make-up of white (face), red (lipstick), and black (eyeliner and eyebrows) will change from one extraordinary item into the next and is never seen in the same dress twice. These dresses, all designed by Blumenschein herself, are evocative of grand entrances and even greater exits: Theatrical, operatic, and always extravagant, they have the effect of keeping the possibility of drama present, although no dramatic encounter ever takes place. And while the protagonist's wardrobe seems to imply a certain promise (of a scene that will live up to the ensemble of lacquer, silk, veils, and sculptural designs), it may just as well be reminiscent of affective states and dramatic intensities that lie in the past and will not be revived in the film. The detached, almost ironical attitude towards any signs of emotional outburst is particularly visible in a scene, in which »She« (dressed up in a multi-piece suit of yellow lacquer, complete with hat and gloves) spends some time drinking at a corner table in a café, before she and her temporary drinking companion both throw the content of their glasses against the café windows that face the street. If their following expulsion from the premises is no surprise, the action itself remains all the more enigmatic: unmotivated by an event or exchange, a gesture that explains nothing about the heroine who immediately returns to her attitude of detachment and disinterest.

The sense of stillness and deadness that marks the ending of famous film melodramas from the 1950s like Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) or → *Imitation of Life* (1959) is present in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* from the beginning. In this regard, the film resembles some of the more radical *auteur* portrayals of women protagonists at the end of their journey like *Sue* (1997) with Sue Thompson or *Shit Year* (2010) with Ellen Barkin. As far as its affective economy is concerned, Ottinger's first Berlin film is evasive and hard to grasp: a heroine who appears aloof and unresponsive, a series of encounters which remain largely inconclusive, a dramaturgy of purposefully disconnected scenes, a decidedly anti-psychological approach to characters and interactions, and an ending that is both uncompromising and unexplained. This is not a weepie nor is it a film that encourages identification, compassion, or complicity with the protagonist. As a matter of fact, the self-sufficiency and single-mindedness of Blumenschein's character suggest that »She« may not be in need of any spectators, neither within nor outside of the film.

Notwithstanding the brittle and experimental quality of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, the film was very well received by the press (although some comments betray a certain confusion). It was also an important step in what would become the most outstanding career of a woman filmmaker in German avant-garde cinema, with a large body of work, both documentary and fiction, both in and outside the cinema, continuously developed over the following decades. In contrast, the trajectory of Tabea Blumenschein, who returned to the screen in a number of smaller parts (one in Ottinger's *Dorian Gray*) and tried her hand at several film projects of her own, was far more uneven: never a duplication of her most famous role but much closer to the experience of precarity that looms at the edges of *Bildnis* without ever coming fully into view.

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Babylon (1980)

Nathaniel Weisberg

dir. Franco Rosso; prod. Gavrik Losey; screenplay Franco Rosso, Martin Stellman; photography Chris Menges; music Dennis Bovell, Aswad. 35mm, color, 95 mins. National Film Finance Corporation, distrib. Kino Lorber.

»This is my fucking country lady. And it's never been fucking lovely.« These words come from a beat-up garage in Thatcher-era South London. Beefy (played by Trevor Laird) and the Ital Lions, an upstart sound system based in Brixton, have just been told to »fuck off back to your own countries« by a white neighbor. This sentiment would echo nearly four decades later in Trump-era America. Re-released in the U.S. in 2019, *Babylon* was lauded for its timely relevance in the context of a race-baiting U.S. president who had recently told Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley to »go back« to their own countries. First released in 1980, a time when dub and reggae were central to West Indian identity in Britain, *Babylon's* plot portrays the Lions' attempt to face off against a rival sound system led by the renowned Jah Shaka. They haggle with producers, argue with parents and partners, and spread posters advertising the contest on street corners. The film's emotional and dramatic thrust, however, arises from the plot's margins. The resistance the Lions face from corrupt police, racist employers, and bigoted community members provides the stage for a series of conflicts over the meaning of home and moral virtue within an oppressive system. This struggle is epitomized by the film's protagonist, Blue (played by Brinsley Forde), whose steadily building inner turmoil leads him to stab an abusive National Front neighbor after the Lions' clubhouse refuge is defaced and destroyed.

Babylon's transatlantic cultural resonance was not foreordained. The film depicts the struggles faced by young Black British men under early Thatcher-era systemic racism. *Babylon's* characters speak in a blend of patois and London slang, and its scenes



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

display a hyper-localized world of pool halls, railway underpasses, and abandoned houses. Consequently, the film failed to find a U.S. distributor in 1980, deemed either too controversial or culturally and linguistically unintelligible for American audiences. The New York Film Festival declined to screen *Babylon*, predicting it would be racially inflammatory, while *Variety* wrote that »cautious handling would seem advisable in markets where [the depiction of] a bunch of young rebellious immigrants as ostensible ›heroes‹ could be viewed as provocative« (Newland 100).

By 2019, such squeamishness had faded for many. Re-released in the U.S., *Babylon* was lauded in popular publications including *Pitchfork*, *Vice*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Rather than suppressed, its depictions of anti-Black racism and police violence were deemed critically relevant. As sociologist Gary Younge demonstrates, narratives of racial injustice tend to move in a unidirectional cultural current from America to Europe (Younge). *Babylon* itself had already been dismissed in the U.S. Its modern reception therefore defied the logic of inward looking and self-prioritizing American disinterest. The film's re-release and reception cease to appear unlikely, however, when viewed in the context of an altered cultural landscape that has shifted toward acknowledging discourse of race and resistance as global phenomena.

Babylon was filmed in 1979, five months after soon-to-be Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sympathized with voters whom she said were afraid that Britain would be »swamped by people with a different culture« (Thatcher). As such, the film was initially viewed through the insular lens of existential fears surrounding the fate of the British nation—incorporated into melodramatic white moral panic surrounding Black »criminality« and »un-assimilability.« Blue's stabbing a racist neighbor, Beefy's head-butting white hanger-on Ronnie (Karl Howman) for »talking Black,« and the beating of an older white man all dramatized a post-imperial anxiety in which moral legibility was inscribed onto the threatened white body as a metaphor for national decline. The British Board of Film Classification's decision to give *Babylon* an X rating was justified by the rationale that young Black viewers could feel »confused and troubled« by its depictions of institutional and public racism, a racially paternalist logic sustained by the notion that young Black Britons were »inherently emotional« and inclined to rebel »at the slightest provocation« (Nwonka 18). Reviewers interpreted the film as an »alarming [...] portrait of seething frustration waiting to explode« (Newland) and a demonstration of »anti-white prejudice« showing »how piteously difficult it is for a white to enter this world« (Walker). Through such emphasis on white alienation, victimhood, and loss of virtuous innocence, Black realism became white melodrama.

It is only by extracting *Babylon* from overwrought operas of post-imperial decline that its melodramatic aspects can be understood as real, both emotionally and politically. *Babylon* calls for the moral recognition of its characters' innocence, repeatedly invoking »sympathy for the virtues of beset victims« struggling against a racially unjust system (Williams 42). Blue, for instance, is fired from his job as a mechanic, with his boss telling him »I don't like monkeys who get too clever in my garage.« The Lions' celebration of Lover Boy's (Victor Romero Evans) engagement is interrupted by bottles thrown from the balcony of National Front goons. The film's institutional critique of racist policing is framed in a conventionally suspenseful manner: Just when Blue appears to have escaped the car chasing him, it inches out again, and the white men beating him are only revealed as policemen when they tell him to »get it right, son. We

stopped you, you done a runner.« Blue's innocence is juxtaposed with the officers' immorality. His protest—»I ain't done nothing«—is futile.

The Lions' ability to claim »home« spaces is similarly at the mercy of the hostile environment in which they live. When their clubhouse is destroyed, with »GO HOME« and Nazi symbols plastered on the wall, it serves as a denial of both their legal status as British citizens and their power to carve out symbolic spaces of community. Likewise, the audience is invited to commiserate with the Lions' collective sense of despondency and anger as a white woman bursts into the garage where the crew has been euphorically dancing to »Warrior Charge,« the film's anthem, a track recorded by Brinsley Forde's reggae group, Aswad. Blue is dejected as the woman declares: »This was a lovely area before you came here. Fuck off back to your own countries.« If a melodramatic mode of excess and appeal to moral recognition characterized the scene's descent »from ecstasy to agony in one fell swoop,« as *Rolling Stone* wrote, this by no means denies its verisimilitude (Fear).

Yet, to characterize Blue and the Lions as victims only would be misleading. If in conventional melodrama the victim-hero tends to accept a fate that the audience is instructed to reject, *Babylon's* characters inspire resistance through action rather than through passivity. Blue would rather get fired than reconcile himself with his boss' plea of »Look...you know what the system is.« And Beefy has to be restrained by Ronnie and Blue from stabbing the National Front neighbor after Lover Boy's engagement party. Of particular importance is the film's climactic scene. In the midst of battling Shaka, Blue sings »We Can't Take No More of That« and shouts »Stand firm!« as the police break down the dancehall's doors. His defiance is instructive, this attack on »home« too much to bear when placed in the context of the »brutality, hypocrisy, [and] the same immorality« perpetuated by »four hundred years« of British imperialism.

It is this element of the film's didactic emotional landscape that translated most directly into its contemporary American reception. *Babylon's* relevance was repeatedly affirmed by reviewers, described as a »present-day metaphor for [...] aspects of Donald Trump's White House« (Bradley) and a »still timely *cri de coeur*« (Fear). In an interview with *Vice*, Brinsley Forde was more explicit, declaring that »the similarities are still striking« and »the problems of bigotry, poverty, and class still keep us on the same treadmill« (Ransome). Such identification could be interpreted as bleak and timeless. White Britons histrionically lamenting the downfall of their once great nation found a successor in ethno-nationalist Trumpian rhetoric.

Yet *Babylon's* resonance in America was more amplification than echo. Both the construction of racist discourse and the resistance against it, seen in 1987 by historian Paul Gilroy as coinciding »so precisely with national frontiers,« were now understood as global (46). Viewed outside the prism of white anxiety and national declinist drama, the film's complex portrayals of victimhood and innocent suffering, relationships with »home,« and psychological alienation could be considered on their own terms, and thus as calls for transnational solidarity. Ironically, *Babylon's* adaptation of conventional melodramatic techniques to convey emotional, moral, and lived reality can only be fully acknowledged once the film is removed from its melodramatic political framing. Unlike previous British »social problem« films, *Babylon's* conclusion provides no explicit pathway to reconciliation. Instead, the sounds of »Warrior Charge« and police sirens compete as Blue refuses to flee the dancehall—singing »we can't take no more of that« and »you can't fool the youth no more.« The police smash down the doors. Blue's fate is left unclear.

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Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press (Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse, 1984)

Katharina Sykora

dir., prod., screenplay, photography Ulrike Ottinger; music Peer Raben, Patricia Jünger. 35mm, color, 150 mins. Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion, distrib. Basis-Film-Verleih.

Ulrike Ottinger's film *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* was considered an important work in the rising German Women's Film Movement, which came into being in the 1960s. However, unlike most of her female colleagues, Ottinger did not dramatize everyday problems of women through realism, but rather created artistic allegories to exemplify wide-ranging political power structures (Meyer; Kuzniar). This placed her in the group of the *auteur* filmmakers of the New German Cinema (Hansen) and the international avant-garde.

Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press is part of the so-called Berlin trilogy, which Ottinger started in the late 1970s, showing urban landscapes of the German metropolis as backgrounds of her narratives. Aesthetically, these films and their protagonists are montages of »realistic« and fictitious components. They ostentatiously show their construction and deconstruction as ongoing melodrama. This creates a meta-level that invests the film's characters and story with excessive theatricality, exuberant emotions, and permanent metamorphoses. The internal emotional conflicts of the conventional melodramatic personae are turned inside out: They emerge as ruptures on the surface of Ottinger's figures and as ongoing narrative discontinuities. Hereby the melodramatic structures of genre, medium, gender, and colonialism become visible as driving forces both in film and society at large.

At first sight, Ottinger's *Dorian Gray* seems to adapt the main character of Oscar Wilde's eponymous novel. It turns out, however, that Ottinger's film has two protagonists of equal power and similar descent: Dr. Mabuse, the female manager of a global



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press imperium, owes her name to the male figure of Norbert Jacques' novel *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1921), which became famous through Fritz Lang's expressionist film adaptation (1922). Like her predecessor, Dr. Mabuse (played by *nouvelle vague* star Delphine Seyrig) is a ruthless and brilliant villain, greedy for power and willing to perfect her worldwide media manipulations. She not only wants to find a person whose scandalous life she can exploit for her magazines and TV shows, but she herself seeks to create such a figure, make it famous, and then destroy it as it pleases her. This Faustian endeavor finds its perfect counterpart in the naive, narcissistic Dorian (played by the famous fashion model of the 1960s, Veruschka von Lehndorff), whose character is an allegorical surface composed of cinematic, literary, and artistic references. On the walls of his modernist apartment hang photos of his »ancestors,« which happen to be portraits of Hollywood movie stars. His personality is a mere accumulation of hollow facets of art and culture. Every day he attends courses in art history and literature, or philanthropic meetings, all of which have no impact on him. The protagonists of Ottinger's film seem to complement each other perfectly. But after a period of symbiosis, Dr. Mabuse and Dorian Gray start an agonal combat for who will kill whom.

One of Dr. Mabuse's strategies to capitalize on Dorian is to pair him off with a beautiful actress, arrange for an erotic encounter, release sex photos of them to the global press, and then follow their melodramatic break up and Dorian's end. To initiate the first meeting of the future couple, Mabuse invites Dorian to an opera in which the young woman has a leading role. This scene inaugurates an interlacing of theatrical and diegetic space, of cinematic and historic time, and of nature and culture. The melodrama on stage functions as a mirror of the power relations between Dorian and Dr. Mabuse (Mueller; Sykora). The setting itself is telling: The stage is not a built architecture but instead consists of different natural environments. A painted frame showing paradisiacal scenes adopted from the symbolist world of 19th century artist Gustave Moreau has been put in front of a seashore or desert. The theater lodge in which Dorian and Dr. Mabuse sit is a curved cave in a bizarre rock face. The opera they watch is historically situated in the times of early colonialism, when the Spanish king conquered the Canary Islands and enslaved the indigenous people while the inquisition proselytized or killed them. The infante de la Cerda, however, falls in love with Andamana, the beautiful princess of the island, and would have lived there happily forever if the inquisitor would not have destroyed their unruly bliss. Furthermore, the opera's three main characters are played by the same actresses who also play in the film (Seyrig, Veruschka, and Blumenschein): The melodrama on stage, therefore, affects the characters in front of it in the same way that Ottinger's film affects the film's actual audience. With the actresses transcending the theatre frame and entering into the filmic space and vice versa, and with the natural and the theatrical space being both stage and frame, content and context, the cinematic mechanisms of naturalization and artificialization become visible. This does not necessarily dissolve the audience's emotions but perhaps even heightens their delight: Breaking up the programmatic invisibility of realistic cinema's construction, the frame uncovers melodrama as a mode that at once stirs strong emotions and imparts aesthetic knowledge to the beholder.

The theatrical »mirror scene« shows how denaturalization and reflexivity are at work in every scene, setting, and figure of Ottinger's film. But while the framing makes the melodramatic structure of the movie visible, the opera scene also suspends affirmative gender roles, »enlightened« media criticism, and one-sided postcolo-

nial reasoning. Both protagonists are double gendered: Delphine Seyrig as Madame Mabuse being both the female performer and personification of a male villain, while Dorian represents the perfect male Dandy impersonated by a real-life female fashion model. On the other hand, Tabea Blumenschein and her alter egos are embodiments of hyper femininity. As versatile figures, they fit in variable historical frames and comply with any international audience addressed by Dr. Mabuse's media. Ottinger's film thus shows global melodrama and global media as congenial power instruments that create perfect fake characters and fake news. These are then distributed worldwide via print, TV, and film through special agents for each country whose selling success is surveyed by a central computer lab. Therefore, Dr. Mabuse's supranational media empire cannot only destroy her creature Dorian but also homogenizes cultures and undermines the distinction between true and false.

Ottinger's film would remain within binary structures if the agonal combat between Dr. Mabuse and Dorian Gray did not disperse in an infinite hall of mirrors. After several mutual murderous attacks, they both mount several comebacks as their own revenants. In the course of their killings and revivals they seem to gradually adopt some of the other's traits. At the end of the film, Dorian shows us the journal of Dr. Mabuse, with the headline: »Dorian Gray Dead.« He seems to have become the master of his own eternal narrative and persona, which is by no means truer than that created by Dr. Mabuse. Therefore, his »last words« in the film are the same as those of his former master: »Operation Mirror can begin.« And we might add: With the rewinding of the film and the next screening of *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press*, »operation melodrama« can start again and again. Here and everywhere in the world, before any kind of audience (Gledhill and Williams 2018).

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The Official Story (*La historia oficial*, 1985)

Carla Marcantonio

dir. Luis Puenzo; prod. Marcelo Piñeyro; screenplay Aida Bortnik, Luis Puenzo; photography Félix Monti; music Atilio Stampone. 35mm, color, 112 mins. Historias Cinematográficas Cinemania, Progress Communications, distrib. Almi Pictures.

The Official Story—which has itself become *the official* film for representing Argentina's emergence from the harrowing Dirty War (1976-83)—is a premiere example of melodrama functioning to both unearth and codify a nation's history through recourse to the personal and affective spheres of the family. During the Dirty War, thousands of people were detained, tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared. The film, released only two years after the war's end, captured the national moment through melodrama. Luis Puenzo, director and co-screenwriter, wrote the screenplay in secret, and had plans to shoot his film clandestinely had the junta not ended.

The film tracks the story of a schoolteacher, Alicia (played by Norma Aleandro), who begins to suspect that her adopted daughter, Gaby (Analia Castro), is the child of a *desaparecida*, and that her own husband, Roberto (Héctor Alterio), might be complicit not just with the baby's abduction, but with the regime itself. The story meticulously tracks her transformation from steely woman with tunnel vision—unaware of the devastating events happening around her—into a softer, more receptive woman, willing to place her own family on the line to do the »right thing.« At the same time, the film eschews a black-and-white solution, aptly and hauntingly depicting—in fact, foreshadowing—just how impossible it would become for the nation to extricate itself from the trauma that, by 1985, it was just barely waking from. Through the evasion of narrative resolution, the use of dramatic irony, and the coding of settings with character and analogies of home and homeland, the film presents the personal story as the national story in a gripping, impactful way.

Though melodrama sometimes aims to resolve its narrative conflicts by the film's end—»putting things back in their place«—it also aptly engages viewers' emotions by



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

exploiting the wish for a return to how things »used to be,« only to elicit tears at the recognition of that impossibility (Neale). *The Official Story* opts to end at this height of pathos: It closes on an image of Gaby rocking back and forth, as if sitting on the rocking chair of time, her nuclear family left uncertain, and her own destiny unresolved. The filmmakers could not have predicted how long the country would continue to reel from the violence that had torn families apart. And yet, in this one image, overlaid with the soundtrack of a children's song introduced at the film's start by five-year old Gaby herself—»en el país de no me acuerdo/doy dos pasitos y me pierdo« (»in the land of I don't remember/I take two steps and I get lost«)—the destruction of the social fabric and the evisceration of collective memory are heartbreakingly made tangible, melodramatically so.

Melodrama is a medium that often nods toward irony—and the first, heavy-handed irony of the film is that Alicia is a teacher of history. The Spanish title, *La historia oficial*, maintains a dual meaning that its English translation fails to capture: *historia* means both story and history. She is a punctilious teacher who sticks to history as it is recorded in textbooks, hence the »official« of the film's title. As the film progresses, however, Alicia comes to terms with the reality of the official history unraveling around her. The newspaper clippings about the disappearances, which her students pin to the classroom's blackboard, eventually make their way into Alicia's purse: signaling a shift from her original rejection to her acceptance. Alicia, therefore, here echoes the predicament of a better-known »Alice« who follows the rabbit and enters a world that should be the stuff of fearsome fantasy—though in Alicia's case, it is not. The film, like the beloved children's story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, thus also announces itself as political allegory. Melodrama shares with allegory the penchant for probing the surface of reality in search for a deeper meaning (Brooks). Throughout its sentimental story of a mother looking for her daughter's true origins, *La historia oficial* excels at quietly weaving together clues and codes that implicate the various entities that colluded in orchestrating the horror that befell Argentina during the military junta. Some of this ciphering surely arose out of necessity: Although the junta was removed in 1982, the reprisals against those who spoke against it, or aimed to illuminate the atrocities it perpetrated, continued for years to come.

The wish for a »re-birth of the nation« that, like the film's protagonist, eventually embraces the truth, is coded in the setting of the classroom that conjures the literary and historical figureheads who epitomize a spirit of Argentine rebellion and independence (especially Juan Moreira and Mariano Moreno). The first of the characters to embody this fighting spirit in the narrative's present tense is Ana (played by Chunchuna Villafañe), one of Alicia's childhood friends, who single-handedly stands in for those victimized by the military regime. Ana has returned to Buenos Aires from exile to speak the truth: she was detained and tortured, then released and forced to flee. In like manner, the film presents us with an array of characters who in one way or another are implicated with the military junta: the general, the businessmen, the Americans, the priest, the wives who protect their husbands and their social status.

In melodrama, the home is a central character—a space of innocence that must be protected against tyranny. In this case, the home is where we gradually see truth enter to shatter the veneer of the happy nuclear family. First, it is Ana's testimony—told in Alicia's living room when a joyous evening suddenly turns somber. She tells Alicia about how she was kidnapped and then tortured. This exchange plants the first seed of

doubt regarding Gaby's parentage (the film's making coincides with the time the truth commissions in Argentina had just been formed).

In a later scene, a magician at Gaby's birthday party performs a disappearing act and seemingly tortures a white dove as children scream in horror, thus reminding the audience of the tragedy that befell Gaby's biological parents. This is one of many scenes that incrementally introduce the cruel realities of the socio-political landscape into the heart of Alicia's home. Over the course of the film, public and private spaces eventually collapse, culminating in Roberto's unbridled explosion. The violence he has tacitly supported is made manifest in the closing scenes of the film when the placid surface of the home shatters, just as the glass does when he strikes Alicia.

If Ana's visit to Alicia's house marks the start of the unraveling of the nuclear family from within its own home—a proxy for the nation itself—then the final step toward its eventual collapse occurs when Gaby's would-be-grandmother, Sara (played by Chela Ruíz), sits in the couple's living room with her protest sign tucked next to her, and Roberto is forced to meet face-to-face with the reality of what he has been a willing accomplice in: the destruction of other people's lives, other people's families, other people's homes. Like the newspaper clippings that eventually make their way into Alicia's purse, this moment marks Alicia's resolute act of acceptance and courage as she puts her own family's future on the line in service of truth. Alicia first encountered the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo on the streets, as if by surprise, and retreated away from the protests. These scenes were shot on location in the streets of Buenos Aires: these were actual protesters. In this way, the film invests in documenting and preserving the images of those fighting for the memory of a lost generation and for the restitution of their family members. Melodrama provides the film with the affective tissue for connecting fiction to reality, and for engaging an international audience in the act of witnessing a sliver of the injustices perpetrated. The audience understands these injustices, however, not just from their exposure to this history—but also, like Alicia learns, from the heart.

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Where Is the Friend's House? (خانه دوست کجاست, Khane-ye dost kodjast, 1987)

Lorenz Engell

dir. Abbas Kiarostami; prod. Ali Reza Zarrin; screenplay Abbas Kiarostami; photography Farhad Saba; music Amine Allah Hessine. 35mm, color, 83 mins. Farabi Cinema Foundation, distrib. Facets Multimedia Distribution.

Where Is the Friend's House? was filmed in 1987 in the remote village of Koker, in northern Iran. The film, like many melodramas, is primarily about futility. More precisely, it explores the temporal structure of vainness. In doing so, it simultaneously investigates the rules of melodrama itself. This is especially, but not only, true of its temporality. A genre, if one follows Stanley Cavell, is just that: the negotiation among the films of a genre about the rules that constitute that genre (Cavell 1978, 29-36; Cavell 1982; see also Engell 2019). Every film that participates in this negotiation belongs to the genre. It does not matter, however, what substantial or functional characteristics it shows from a conceivable list of features or from a more orthodox definition of genre that, however, always seems lacking.

Narrated in a strictly linear fashion, the film—which was awarded the Bronze Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival and led to high acclaim for its director, Abbas Kiarostami—unfolds a very simple plot of just over twenty-four hours. At the village school in Koker, Iran, eight-year-old Ahmad Ahmadpour has accidentally pocketed the notebook of his friend Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, who sits next to him in class and lives in the neighboring village of Poshteh. In order for Mohammad to do his homework, Ahmad now has to bring the notebook to him in the afternoon. Ahmad must first sneak out of his house, then evade the surveillance of the omnipresent elderly people in his village, and finally ask his way through the completely unknown, labyrinthine village to get to his friend's house. Until darkness falls, Ahmad does pursue his quest. In the end, however, he fails. All the effort was in vain. But unlike in other melodramas, here the sense of futility is given yet another twist. Overnight, Ahmad com-



pletes the assigned homework in Mohammad's notebook, which he brings to school the next day and thereby spares his friend the threat of expulsion.

Despite its simplicity and linearity, the film exhibits a highly idiosyncratic temporal structure, full of diversions, changes in intensity, condensations, and lapses. It is characterized, first of all, by duration: by sheer persistence without acceleration, frequently in one-shot sequences. Dialogues and individual events are seen and heard for as long as they last, without jumps in time. The passage of time as a coherent continuum therefore stands out, as does the seclusion of individual actions. The washing of laundry in the courtyard, Ahmad's way up the stairs to the upper floor and back down again, or the grandfather's narration of his being disciplined by his father and later his foreman at the construction site: All of this is presented in full extension without any abbreviation. This gives the film a thoroughgoing slowness. Only in the one-shot sequence, says André Bazin, do we experience the real extension of events in time and time itself (41-52).

According to Bazin, the same applies to simultaneity. The simultaneity of two processes can exclusively be experienced in the uncut one-shot sequence, because it can show two processes at one time in the same image. In contrast, edited synchronization always means that two incidents that take place at one time are shown one after the other. In this case, synchronicity is a conclusion we are brought to by means of montage. Not so in the one-shot sequence, where it becomes immediately apparent. Simultaneity hence forms the second feature of the temporal arrangement in Kiarostami's film. While the mother does the laundry, Ahmad does his homework in the background. While the old man rants, Ahmad runs to get his cigarettes (again unsuccessfully, as the old man has them and only wanted to humiliate Ahmad).

Mostly, though, Ahmad is just there: watching while something happens. Repeatedly we see his face in close-up, more or less expressionless, completely occupied with the mere registration of what is. This passivity, endurance, and experience to which Ahmad is subjected forms another basic trait that allows us to see in Kiarostami's film a melodrama. His persistent willingness to act is based on what he undergoes, what he hears and sees, and is also entirely infused with it. Ahmad is thus an observer, and in this he does not so much represent us, the spectators, in the image, but rather doubles the camera that makes the image and can never be seen. In the image, the figure appears here as a metonymy of the camera. Like the camera, Ahmad moves incessantly and always aims at something, but is at the same time completely receptive and passive, and this is precisely what creates his possibility of action in the first place.

Then again, as a third feature of the film's time structure there are the countless interruptions and distractions that repeatedly divert Ahmad from what he is up to: not because he is unfocused, but because he is helplessly at the mercy of the authoritarian command of adults, especially his mother and grandfather. Instead of continuing to walk, he has to go out for cigarettes. Instead of being able to do his homework, he has to give the baby a bottle and fetch the laundry. He must hand over his notebook so someone can take notes, and he waits to get it back. These interruptions are complemented by the odysseys he is repeatedly sent on in the strange village of Poshteh. Here, one is reminded of the time structure, episodes, and interruptions in Vittorio di Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948; another film that discusses melodramatic structures and is therefore a melodrama). In general, *Where Is the Friend's House?* is deeply indebted to the aesthetics of Italian neorealism in the postwar period.

This is also evident in a fourth feature: repetition. Right at the beginning, the teacher repeats everything he says several times, as do all other characters up to the old carpenter towards the film's end. Ahmad also takes three attempts to—unsuccessfully—explain to his mother that he has to bring Nematzadeh his exercise book. The household chores are repeated. Ahmad runs to Poshteh and, due to a mistake, back to Koker, and then again to Poshteh. In addition, many things are also doubled or multiplied in space. For example, there are two carpenters, the boastful one and the melancholic one, and Nematzadeh is the name of half the village. Last but not least, there are two exercise books—in which there is incessant leafing, back and forth and back again. Cesare Zavattini named repetition—which, after all, profoundly characterizes everyday life and its routines—as a domain of neorealism, which would be eradicated in American film in favor of the straightened and accelerated story.

A fifth element of the time regime, then, are sudden accelerations and the gradual increase of time pressure. The route between Koker and Poshteh is always shown exactly the same in its course: Even on the third journey it is unabbreviated—up the hill, along the crest of the hill, down again on the other side, branching off into the olive grove, past the animal cages into the neighboring village, back and back again. But in spite of this strenuous course, Ahmad is able to keep up his pace. He mostly hurries when he is not standing and watching. The more the film progresses and time runs out, the more Ahmad hurries. When the old carpenter, who finally leads him to his friend's house (but, because it is already dark, Ahmad does not dare to enter), is so unbearably slow, Ahmad becomes seriously impatient and runs away—again in vain. And finally—as the last important temporal element of futility—the »too late« must be mentioned: Several times, Ahmad is a little too late to meet his friend, or someone who Ahmad thinks might lead him to him.

Towards the end, when it gets dark, contours—and with them reified matter—retreat almost completely. Only the beautiful and differentiated light and shadow of the window ornaments on the walls of the village remain: that is, images of pure projection, small insular light effects without semantics. But even they still reveal, like things, their »madness« and history: The old carpenter made them, a long time ago.

That leaves perhaps the most impressive image of the film. This image also occurs twice, almost identically. It stands out because it is the only image with a musical background. It shows the beginning of the path from Koker to Poshteh, steeply uphill in Z-shaped, zig-zag serpentine, which Ahmad chases up (Ishagpour 67). The Z, the Zigzag, says Gilles Deleuze, is the beginning of everything—not the Big Bang. It is the flight of the fly (and the way of Ahmad)—but also the lightning, the fulguration between singularities, the invisible remaining points not marked as such at all. It is the sudden lighting up of the connection of the »dark preceding potentialities,« says Deleuze (disc 3, chap. 26). As thought and as creation, it is the beginning of a possible world.

Where Is the Friend's House? is the first part of Kiarostami's so-called Koker trilogy. The second part, *Life, and Nothing More*, sets out in 1992 after the devastating earthquake in the region to search for the two main actors of our film, the Ahmadpour brothers. Here, too, the search will be in vain. In this respect, the central theme of *Where Is the Friend's House?* is continued. At the same time, however, guiltlessness, fate, and entanglement are also explored, and the negotiation of what is a tragedy in the dimensions of the cinematic universe is taken up. This attempt, however, also ends not in the downfall that stands at the beginning but in affirmation. Finally, in 1994, comes

Through the Olive Trees, which—with the Ahmadpour brothers reappearing—is about the shooting of a film in Koker after a devastating earthquake (Engell 2014). However, this film is a comedy. Like all comedies, it combines the negotiation of what a comedy is with the levelling of hierarchies (here: of film and reality). In doing so, it succeeds in the characteristic distancing of humor, not through reflection and superiority, but through dislocation and distribution, through repetition and deviation, and again through the back and forth, through the zigzag between singularities (Engell 2010).

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Little Vera (Маленькая Вера, Malen'kaia Vera, 1988)

Oleksandr Zabirko

dir. Vasilii Pichul; screenplay Mariia Khmelik; photography Efim Reznikov; music Vladimir Matetskii. 35mm, color, 135 mins. Gorky Film Studio, distrib. Gorky Film Studio.

Little Vera is a late Soviet melodrama, widely renowned as one of the key movies of the Perestroika era. The film's female protagonist, Vera (played by Natalia Negoda) is an emancipated teenager with bright makeup and a trendy hairstyle who is rebelling against her parents, against the men in her life more generally, but also against the grinding poverty and the dull routines of the Soviet way of life.

Advertised as a film about youth rebellion, *Little Vera* shocked the Soviet audience with its painstakingly naturalistic approach as well as its unprecedented amount of violence, nudity, and sex. The film's release in March 1988 marked the ultimate collapse of the Soviet censorship system. Only two years earlier, during the »Leningrad-Boston TV conference,« a Soviet woman, Liudmila Ivanova, coined the proverbial »There is no sex in the U.S.S.R.,« meaning the complete absence of sexual content on TV and in other media. Indeed, even in the foreign films broadcasted in the Soviet Union sexual scenes had always been carefully erased by censors. Unsurprisingly, the explicit sexual images helped *Little Vera* to become a commercial hit both in the U.S.S.R. and in the West, where Natalia Negoda posed nude for the *Playboy* and told her story to *People* magazine.

However, as Roger Ebert aptly noticed in his review on the release of *Little Vera* in the U.S., the film's real fascination comes not from the sex (which is sweaty and passionate but hardly erotic) but rather from its portrait of everyday life in the Soviet Union. Set in the rotting port city of Zhdanov (now Mariupol, Ukraine), the film's opening scene presents an urban skyline dominated by ugly, standardized apartment blocks in front of a gigantic steel plant. Zooming in on one of the apartments, the camera shows the daily chores of Vera's grumpy parents, whose conversation is eclipsed by the energetic beats of the pop song »This Is Not Enough« (performed by Sofia Rotaru).



The story gains momentum when Vera's parents find US\$20 in her bag and start a fight about their daughter's going off the rails (in Soviet times, possession of foreign currency was a criminal offense). The parents threaten Vera with Viktor (played by Aleksandr Negreba), her older brother, who had left to be a doctor in Moscow and is now summoned back to talk some sense into his little sister. Unimpressed by these threats, Vera goes to an open-air disco, where she meets handsome and smart Sergei (played by Andrei Sokolov). A fight between rival gangs and the subsequent police raid bring Vera and Sergei together and their relationship takes off. However, Sergei is arrogant and awfully rude to Vera's father, Nikolai (played by Iurii Nazarov), an aggressive drunkard, who is frustrated with his life and is always looking for a fight. The drama culminates when Sergei defies the family rules and Nikolai stabs him with a kitchen knife, causing life-threatening injuries. The young couple faces a dilemma because to testify against Nikolai would mean to send him to jail and to leave the family without a breadwinner. Vera can no longer cope with the situation and tries to commit suicide with pills, but she is saved by her brother and Sergei. While Viktor returns to Moscow and Sergei reconciles with Vera, none of them notices that in the meantime Vera's father has died of heart failure in the kitchen.

The mode of a chamber play, suggestive music, and the excessive emotionality anchor *Little Vera* firmly in the tradition of Soviet melodramatic cinema. However, the popular Soviet melodramas of the 1970s, such as *Stepmother* (1973) and *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979), foregrounded the family as the site of affective discourse without confronting the political and social exigencies of the Soviet reality (First 21). A product of Perestroika, *Little Vera*, on the contrary, targets both the Soviet society and the communist ideology with its sarcastic criticism, but it also subverts some conventional patterns of melodramatic plots to re-define notions of the public and the private.

For instance, the threat of an unplanned pregnancy, a frequent companion of melodramatic love affairs, loses its dreadful aura, as Vera merely pretends that she is pregnant to quarter Sergei as her future husband in the parent's cramped apartment. Instead of focusing on the loving couple's coming to terms with the pregnancy, the film thus makes the housing shortage in the Soviet Union one of its central themes and offers a setting, in which none of the characters can count on a single moment of privacy. Against the backdrop of such inadequate (yet typical) housing conditions, *Little Vera* shifts its focus to the realm of intimacy, where sex functions not as a pinnacle of romantic love but as an activity devoid of intersubjective and emotional involvement (Shcherbenok 141). Finally, the film also inverts the traditional gender roles by portraying Vera as the one who takes the lead in the relationship with Sergei. This inversion, however, remains flat and all too obvious, making the very idea of female emancipation a balancing act between involuntary humor and intentional sarcasm. In a variation of a typical scene of serenading a woman at a window, the film shows Vera in a boyish pose in front of Sergei's house, shouting her lover's name, until Sergei finally shows up and climbs down the ladder.

The Soviet world turned upside down is ultimately represented by Vera's parents, Nikolai and Rita, played by two stars of Soviet cinema, Iurii Nazarov and Liudmila Zaitseva. Their typical roles were staunch party officials and flawless heroes of labor; in *Little Vera*, however, they turn into a violent, alcoholic father who flies into ugly, xenophobic rages and a frustrated, whining mother who is unable to accept that her daughter has a life outside of the home. Both place their hopes in Viktor who somehow

managed to escape the stagnant backwater of the provincial town and built his life in Moscow. Yet Viktor's victory is an illusion: He is, in fact, a broken man, tired of his wife, family, and work. Viktor's pathetic »How I hate you all!«, thrown into the face of his family, resonates with Vera's confession »This is supposed to be the best time of my life, and I want to howl.«

The film's defeatism and hopelessness effectively counterbalance the aspirations of the Perestroika era, which placed the hopes for a better life in political reforms and social changes. *Little Vera*, on the contrary, offers a metaphysical message that is accessible only on the level of symbols. The name of the film's protagonist, Vera, which means »faith« in Russian, is obviously burdened with symbolical meaning. The constant lack of even a »little faith« culminates in the scene of a family picnic on the beach: A storm suddenly comes up and as the family prepares to leave, Vera (and »vera«) is nowhere to be found. While the aimless youth is not capable of producing a »faith« of their own, they treat the »old faith« of the parents with bitter irony. For example, in an erotic interlude on the beach, Vera and Sergei interrupt their lovemaking to discuss their aims in life, and Vera says sarcastically, »In our country, we have but one aim: communism.«

However, the dark pessimism of *Little Vera* does not only result from the political or social situation in the late U.S.S.R. but rather from the film's virulent economy of emotions, where everything turns into feeling and where every feeling acquires the rank of value. Ultimately, even abuse and domestic violence receive a sentimental touch: for instance, when Vera's father shares a sweet memory of how his daughter used to put him to bed, when she was a child (meaning, of course, that he was too drunk to make it there on his own). Yet it is precisely the combination of violence and sentimentality that made *Little Vera* one of the taboo-breaking movies of the 1980s. After *Little Vera*, a growing number of films on previously tabooed subjects, such as crime, prostitution, and domestic violence, began to appear on the screen in the U.S.S.R. and later in the post-Soviet countries.

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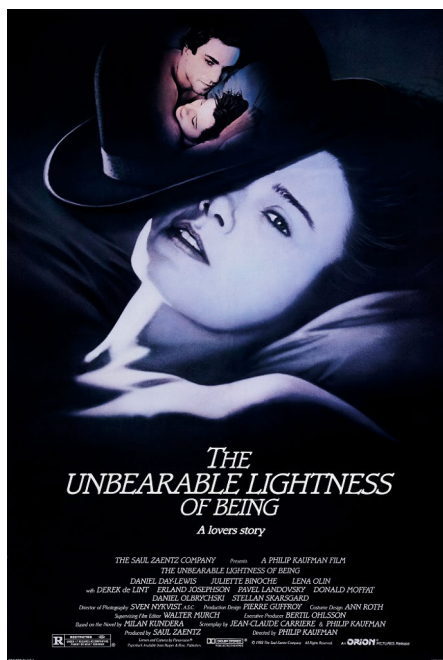
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The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1988)

Sandra Folie

dir. Philip Kaufman; prod. Saul Zaentz; screenplay Philip Kaufman, Jean-Claude Carrière; photography Sven Nykvist; music Mark Adler. 35 mm, color, 171 mins. The Saul Zaentz Company, distrib. Orion Pictures.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is based on the 1984 eponymous novel by Milan Kundera. Because of its dominant heterodiegetic narrator, the novel was initially said to be »un-adaptable« (Cattrysse 222). In their screenplay, however, Philip Kaufman and Jean-Claude Carrière replaced the narrator's »I« with an »eye« (Insdorf 24). Thus, they effectively reimagined the readers of an intellectual novel that is neither character- nor plot-driven as viewers who are to be drawn into the atmosphere of the film. The film's focus is on the love triangle between the brain surgeon and womanizer Tomas (Daniel Day-Lewis), the provincial but intellectually curious waitress Tereza (Juliette Binoche), and the Bohemian, free-spirited artist Sabina (Lena Olin), rather than on the narrator's philosophical musings on the Prague Spring and its aftermath. In an interview, Kaufman said that they »had to find a thread« and that they »chose the lovers' story—not just a love story but all the different variations on love« (James). The decision to explore social and political forces through the dynamics of a triangular relationship—a theme to which Kaufman would return in *Henry and June* (1990) and *Quills* (2000)—made the film an intriguing intertext for Berengar Pfahl's 2007 adaptation of Wei Hui's bestseller → *Shanghai Baby* (1999). The film revolves around a love triangle in 1990s China, another socialist country at a time of upheaval. In the opening sequence, the main character, Coco (a female counterpart of sorts to Tomas), names *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as her favorite movie, which not only anticipates and complements the quotes from Kundera's novel that already exist in Wei Hui's book, but also explicitly calls for a comparison with Kaufman's film.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Despite its literary origins and popularity in Europe, the film was a U.S.-American production primarily geared towards an American audience. This is particularly evident in the supposedly »Czechoslovakian« accents performed by the international cast. According to Kaufman, it was Miloš Forman who offered him the project. With family members living in Prague, Kundera's plea for sexual and political freedom seemed too risky a venture for the Czech filmmaker to take on. Due to the tense political situation, Kaufman was unable to film in »authentic« locations, and therefore shot most of the exteriors in Lyon. For added authenticity, he consulted with the Czech New Wave filmmaker Jan Němec, who lived in Prague in the late 1960s (Insdorf 14). European cinema was clearly an inspiration for Kaufman. For instance, he employed a *cinéma vérité* style—even incorporating archival footage of the 1968 Russian invasion of Prague, taken by Němec. Other elements include a tendency towards long takes and a distinct comedic lightness (Cattrysse 228-29): »I wanted to begin in a comedic way, as some of the Czechoslovak films around '68 did. *Loves of a Blond*, by Milos Forman, who had been one of Kundera's students at the Prague National Film School, comes to mind. There should be lightness at the beginning, which was one part of the Prague Spring« (Kaufman qtd. in James).

The film indeed starts in a very »light« manner: The viewers look at a shabby wall in an apartment building, partially illuminated by warm sunlight, and hear the ringing of church bells, pigeons cooing, laughter, and love moans. The following title card—»In Prague, in 1968, there lived a young doctor named Tomas«—is accompanied by a cheerful violin concerto, *Pohádka (Fairy Tale)* by Leoš Janáček, suggested by Kundera himself. Both the textual and acoustic levels are reminiscent not only of fairy tales but also of silent films and, thus, the medium's past. Early Hollywood talkies also come to mind, such as → *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which similarly opens with an unrolling script—»There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South [...] Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow«—and sentimental music. Kaufman's alleged fairyland, however, is Czechoslovakia and its »socialism with a human face,« as one character so eloquently puts it. Alongside Victor Fleming's controversial adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's Southern Civil War epic, as well as numerous other classic Hollywood melodramas such as → *Casablanca* (1942) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was included in the American Film Institute's »100 Years . . . 100 Passions« list of the top one hundred greatest heterosexual love stories in American cinema.

Although not a melodrama in the strict sense, the film's hybridity of genre—it »begins like an erotic comedy, turns into a political tragedy, and ends in a domestic pastoral« (Insdorf 14)—is held together primarily by its melodramatic »mode of excess.« First, we follow the love story of Tomas and Tereza, who meet by chance when the former has to substitute for a colleague during an operation in a small spa town, where Tereza happens to work as a waitress. Sometime later, Tereza shows up on his doorstep in Prague and—despite Tomas' bachelor rule of never letting a lover spend the night—she stays over. The two become a couple and eventually marry. However, the playboy Tomas continues his various love affairs, especially the one with Sabina, »the woman who understands him best.« She is depicted on the film poster, wearing a bowler hat from her grandfather's grandfather. Sabina transforms this »heavy,« masculine, and mandatory headgear of the past into a »light,« feminine, and perhaps even feminist symbol of the »liberated« Prague of 1968.

One evening, at a dance, Tomas laments that »morality has changed since Oedipus,« who gouged out his eyes out of guilt for a crime he unknowingly committed. Meanwhile, today's political leaders would use their willful ignorance of the atrocities committed during the »Stalinist winter« as an argument to stay in power. Tomas says that he does not really care about politics, but as he watches Tereza dancing with his colleague and, uncharacteristically for him, feels jealousy, this also seems to have an effect on his political conscience. Shortly after marrying Tereza and adopting their dog, Karenin, he publishes his thoughts on Oedipus in a newspaper article, in which he openly criticizes the communist government. In a similar way, Tereza's private feelings seem to turn almost imperceptibly towards political action. As she confronts Tomas, upset and crying, about his constant infidelity, the crystal glasses in the apartment suddenly begin to clink. The Russian tanks roll through the narrow streets of Prague and the city rises—both mirroring and rousing Tereza's passion as she desperately starts to photograph the oppressors and their acts of violence. Tomas' and Tereza's emotional reactions encourage the audience to empathize with political events that they may otherwise be emotionally detached from. Or, as Kaufman and Carrière stressed in an interview: They did not make a political film »but a love story into which politics intrudes« (James).

After the suppression of the Prague Spring, the couple, like Sabina before them, flees to Geneva, where their love triangle continues. The film's melodramatic »mode of excess« reaches another tipping point in an erotic scene between the women, which »transmutes sex to power, as Tereza usurps Tomas' command, »Take off your clothes« (James)—his signature line that recurs several times during the film. When Tereza asks the self-confident Sabina to be her nude model, the aspiring photographer becomes painfully aware of her own vulnerability. Hiding behind her camera, she gazes at Sabina's naked body while symbolically penetrating her with the loudly audible, rhythmic shots. At one point, Sabina appropriates Tomas' line, »Take off your clothes,« and starts photographing Tereza, who at first resists, ashamed of her nudity. The erotic tension slowly builds during this scene and finally erupts in a liberating fit of laughter. Afterwards, Tereza makes the decision to leave Switzerland, turning her »virtuous suffering into action« (Williams 66). In her farewell letter to Tomas, she writes: »I'm weak. I'm going back to the country of the weak.« As Rita Kempley aptly observes in her review, »the movie is held together by the constant tension between people and nations, the power of love and the love of power.« Tomas, »torn between the two women, as he is between East and West, anarchy and order« (Kempley), follows his wife back to Prague: an act that is simultaneously unexpected and unavoidable, transforming him from an initially »amoral Don Juan« into both a romantic and »a political hero« (Insdorf 15).

Because of his refusal to sign a retraction to his Oedipus piece, he can no longer practice his profession and ends up a window cleaner. This lack of perspective, however, does not diminish his erotic adventurousness, which eventually becomes unbearable for Tereza: »I know. I know. You've explained it to me a thousand times. A thousand times. There is love and there is sex and sex is entertainment, like football. I know, it's light. I wish I could believe you. But how can someone make love without being in love? I just don't know.« She wants to be like him, »insensitive« and »strong,« but fails in the attempt, learning that her awkward sexual encounter with a stranger may have been a set-up for blackmail. Consequently, the couple leaves Prague again. As politi-

cally suspicious subjects whose passports were confiscated upon their return, they run out of options, and eventually settle on a friend's remote farm in the Czech countryside. There, »in a kind of narrative respite which is vaguely reminiscent of the lovers' fleeting refuge in the icy wastelands of Russia in *Dr Zhivago*« (20/20 *Movie Reviews*), they spend a laborious but idyllic time together. Thus, the film ends as it began, in a »light« »space of innocence« (Williams 65). Just as the invasion of the Russian tanks before, now it is the death of their dog (likely the saddest scene of the epic-length film) that bonds the couple more firmly together, and this time for good. »Tomas, what are you thinking?« »I'm thinking how happy I am.« These are their last words on their ride home from a dance, before the desolate country road in front of them fades to white. And even though their death is »the saddest of endings, it's a happy ending« (Kaufman, audio comment on DVD).

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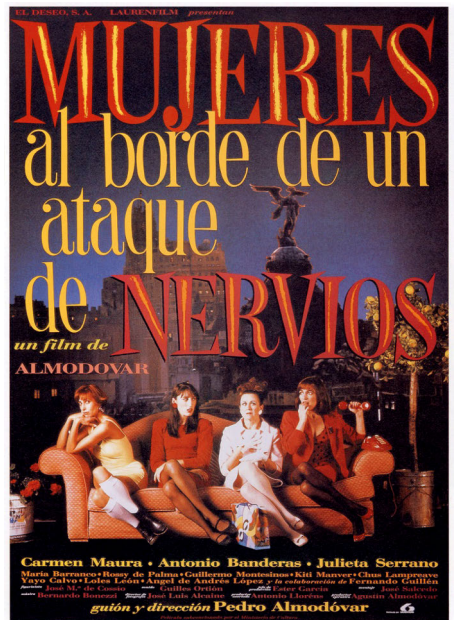
Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988)

Rama Srinivasan

dir. Pedro Almodóvar Caballero; prod. Agustín Almodóvar; screenplay Pedro Almodóvar Caballero; photography José Luis Alcaine; music Bernardo Bonuzzi. 35mm, color, 88 mins. Lauren Film, distrib. Lauren Film.

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios is an early, and to this day one of the best-known, works by Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar Caballero. Often considered a comedy due to Almodóvar's irreverent humor, the film clearly also qualifies as a melodrama in the postmodernist vein with its unique approach to the topics of desire, sexuality, and love (Deleto). Taking (uncredited) inspiration from Jean Cocteau's 1930 one-act play *La Voix Humaine*, which consists of one woman's monologue, the film is populated by various women who are in the middle of a meltdown, already beyond, or slowly approaching one. It surely fails the Bechdel test, created by Alison Bechdel in 1985, which measures female representation in film and television by evaluating whether women on screen speak about topics other than men. The women in the film—Pepa (played by Carmen Maura), Lucía (Julieta Serrano), Candela (María Barranco), and Paulina (Kiti Mánver)—stick mostly to conversing about the men who are the reasons for their breakdowns, current or past.

The protagonist, Pepa, a television actor best known for her role as the mother of a serial killer, is coming to terms with an abrupt break-up with her colleague, Ivan (Fernando Guillén). She desperately tries to get in touch with him and goes as far as stalking his ex-wife, Lucía, who has undergone psychiatric treatment, presumably due to her tumultuous marriage. Paulina, Ivan's new girlfriend, has already started showing signs of emotional distress. Pepa's friend Candela, on the other hand, has had an intimate encounter with someone arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist act, and she now worries about being charged as an accessory.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

The plot appears to perpetuate the old-fashioned sexist narrative of hysterical women being steered by hormones (Pepa has just discovered she is pregnant), only to subvert it by providing the reason for their suffering: The film understands nervous breakdowns as an appropriate response of those who are in abusive relationships. In one sense, Almodóvar created a film on the subtle and devastating effects of gaslighting—years before the term entered public parlance. If Pepa feels she is »going crazy,« it is a result of the constant manipulation she is subjected to. While she is coping with the news of her pregnancy, Ivan tries his best to avoid any kind of contact with her, but also urgently needs his belongings from her place. He leaves her multiple voice messages, combining his request with a dishonest reproach for ostensibly ignoring him as well as an assurance that there is no one else in his life. Pepa's journey is about coming to terms with this abusive pattern and realizing their relationship's end would signify freedom from an unrequited relationship with a narcissist.

Ivan's suitcase symbolizes her emotional baggage from years of manipulation and infidelity, and she is not about to hand it over to him without a conversation. She finally feels liberated after she literally tosses the suitcase into a garbage can on the street and therefore no longer needs the closure he belatedly offers towards the end of the film. Lest the symbolism of Pepa's decision to dump his emotional abuse is too subtle, the film also shows Paulina—who had observed Pepa's actions from her rear-view mirror—dragging his suitcase out of the trash. Her simmering rage serves as an early indication of the impending breakdown that she herself might eventually face.

Melodrama is an obvious vehicle for the film's plot, but Almodóvar uses it sartorially (Finch 185). When we first meet Ivan, for example, he is dubbing for the male protagonist in the 1954 American melodrama, *Johnny Guitar*. His voice holds the promise of an epic, heart-breaking romance. Later on, as Pepa dubs the voice for the woman in the same film—filling in the gaps left by Ivan, as it were—the passion he injected into the voiceover seems to break her heart all over again, drowning her, »in a bottomless well« (Deleyto 55).

Pepa's desperation is, in many ways, centered on the voice she longs to hear one last time—something she incidentally shares with Lucía. Ivan's ex-wife reveals that she regained her memory, but not her sanity, in a psychiatric home after she heard his unforgettable voice on television. On the significance of Ivan's voice, Deleyto writes that »it is not his own but that of Johnny,« and the female protagonist of *Johnny Guitar*, Vienna, holds the key to »not only Pepa's emotional state but that of most of the other women in the film« (55). When Pepa faints at the end of the dialogue between Johnny and Vienna, it is in response to the passion of the characters on screen, »as something provoked by artifice, something itself artificial and only textual« (56). Almodóvar's characters, according to Deleyto, do not speak like Spaniards, but rather as dubbed voices of American film protagonists (54). His interpretation of melodrama is closer to a parody of American melodrama films, where affected dialogue and loud colors serve the purpose of furthering the narrative. In other words, there is nothing organic about how the story in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* advances.

The parody also allows its author, that is, Almodóvar, several degrees of separation from the text. Does he endorse some of what comes across as blatantly sexist and inappropriate because of a belief that women who »know how to suffer« are more interesting (Forbes 131)? Or is he simply letting his characters be themselves and allowing the audience to observe them at a critical distance? These are not easily answerable questions.

According to Jill Forbes, »on the one hand [...] *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is a cleverly choreographed, slick and nicely observed comedy of manners with enough slapstick to keep most viewers smiling, and several fine performances. On the other hand, it has a profoundly reactionary side which is felt in the ambiguities of the authorial position, the unease experienced when the totally sympathetic heroine is maltreated by her creator by being placed in a false position« (131). The film is, similarly, insensitive to both Candela and Paulina. Carlos (played by Antonio Banderas), Ivan's son, repeatedly kisses Candela without her consent when she is in an extremely disturbed state, but she only half-heartedly reprimands him. Later, his mother observes that he really is his father's son. The »men will be men« joke resurfaces more than once.

Paulina, the »feminist« lawyer, is presented as fraudulent in that she disavows notions of feminist sisterhood and solidarity. And yet, it is possible to see the hostile, jealous »other woman« as slowly moving towards an emotional crisis due to her relationship with Ivan. In one sense, Almodóvar may be suggesting that even feminist women may be gaslit by manipulative men.

The director provides clues on where to locate his own positionality in a 2009 film, *Broken Embraces*, a self-referential text that satirizes the sets of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The film comes across as a therapeutic exercise, perhaps aimed at reconstructing the emotional undercurrents that textured the making of the 1988 classic. Almodóvar implies that it may just be a set of vague and allegorical recollections, since the director, here Mateo Blanco (played by Lluís Homar), has several gaps in his memory that other characters help fill.

Broken Embraces is also a tale of passion, infidelity, and jealousy, told with his trademark irreverent humor—a melodramatic sequel of sorts. The plot includes a jealous lover (this time a man) who schemes for revenge—again reminiscent of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. In the 1988 film, both Pepa and Lucía want to murder Ivan at different points in the story with the latter executing her plan without success. In the 2009 film, the »revenge« is executed by one jealous lover and abetted by another ex-lover, and it leads to Mateo losing his eyesight and his lover (played by Penelope Cruz) being killed. He is still grieving the loss of the woman he believed was the love of his life when a young man, who is secretly also his son, offers to help him connect the dots and eventually heal his wounds. It is, in some ways, evocative of Carlos in the 1988 film, who had no real relationship with his father and, yet, willingly helps Pepa fix the damage inflicted by the former.

Broken Embraces is about a writer and director who is likely more self-aware and melancholic about love and loss than the maker of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The analogy of emotional baggage is underlined heavily with the title of the film-within-a-film: *Chicas y maletas* (»girls and suitcases«). While in the 1988 film it was the women who came with emotional baggage, the »and« of this title suggests that Almodóvar himself had some issues to work through.

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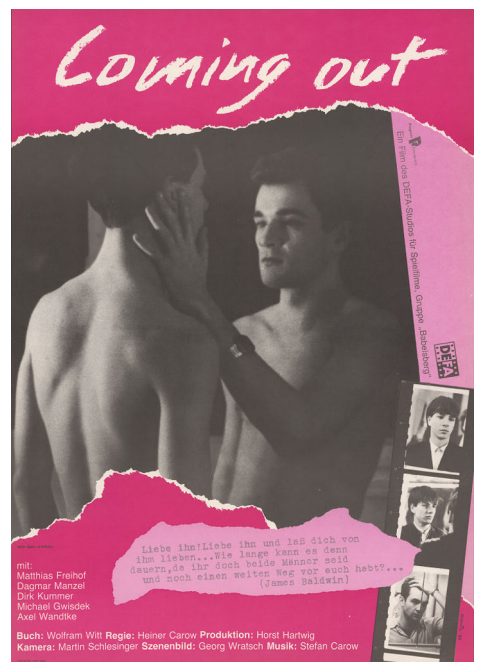
Coming Out (1989)

Thomas Preston

dir. Heiner Carow; prod. Horst Hartwig;
screenplay Wolfram Witt; photography Martin
Schlesinger; music Stefan Carow. 35mm, color, 113
mins. DEFA, distrib. Progress Film-Verleih.

Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989), released in cinemas the same day the Berlin Wall fell, is unique as the first (and last) East German film to place an unfolding homosexual relationship front and center. In doing so, the film challenges the social and institutional attitudes and conventions of a profoundly heteronormative East German society (Dennis). Its engagement with social questions of gay recognition and belonging is emotionalized, built upon a narrative of individual crisis, and is prototypical, therefore, of the melodramatic mode. As such, *Coming Out* also serves as an example of melodrama's historical role in democratizing recognition by expanding social sympathy onto hitherto unrepresented social identities (Williams). The fact that the film continued to resonate with the gay community in Germany well after the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) illustrates the film's ability to move across contexts—a testament to its emotional and critical power (Dennis; Frackman).

Coming Out embraces melodrama as a mode of storytelling, delivering a romantic drama full of twists and turns. We follow Philipp (played by Matthias Freihof), a high school teacher in Berlin, who meets and marries Tanja (played by Dagmar Manzel) early in the film. Marital bliss, however, is short-lived. After a surprise encounter with a friend from his childhood—Jacob (played by Axel Wandtke), whose significance to Philipp is left suggestively ambiguous—Philipp enters a prolonged daze, tuned out of the world around him in a sequence of scenes, signaling his internal disarray. Then, one evening he stumbles into a gay bar by chance and sets eyes on Matthias (Dirk Kummer), and, after another chance encounter, Philipp starts exploring his sexuality and



DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum / DEFA

eventually sleeps with Matthias. Soon afterwards, Matthias awkwardly discovers that Philipp is married when Philipp bumps into Matthias while he is out with Tanja, and he flees the scene in tears. Tanja is baffled, the truth comes out, and Philipp's life begins to unravel. His marriage falls apart, he loses contact with Matthias, and a hollow cruising hook-up with a Matthias-*doppelgänger* only worsens Philipp's anguish. When he does finally find Matthias again, his world truly comes crashing down: Not only has Matthias found someone new, but this someone is none other than Lutz (Robert Hummel)—one of Philipp's high school students!

Typical of the »melodramatic mode« (Williams) are instances of stylized *mise-en-scène* that atmospherically foreground emotion and illustrate melodrama's plasticity, visually complementing documentary components of the film. Actual spaces of congregation for the gay community in Berlin are dramatized through color, lighting, visual editing, and choreography of bodies that absorb us as viewers into the affects that saturate the scenes. Philipp's first visit to the gay bar glows with warmth. Bodies hold each other tenderly, dance partners swirl by the camera, and smiling faces abound. The cruising location in Volkspark Friedrichshain, on the other hand, where Philipp meets Matthias' *doppelgänger*, could not strike more of a contrast. The atmosphere is cold, dark, and transactional. Individual bodies glide like planets in orbit, gravitating towards potential partners in the backdrop, and the use of lighting and shadows, as well as bodies, lends the scene a clandestine hue.

Despite their atmospheric contrast, these spaces have more in common than is initially apparent. Both spaces, we learn, are linked by a shared anonymity. In the park, there are no names or introductions, and in the bar when Philipp goes looking for Matthias after splitting up with Tanja, the barkeeper, Achim (played by Michael Gwisdek), tells him: »Here nobody knows each other's names or where they live. Everyone here is alone« (all translations mine). This comes as a surprise, both for Philipp and the viewer—a moment that reflects upon melodrama's capacity to open up social questions through the emotional twists of individual fate. After all, what could it mean to *have to* remain anonymous, even in such an intimate, enclosed, seemingly safe space? The questions that Achim's statement raises about recognition in the GDR loom over the rest of the film and frame the resolution of Philipp's failed romance with Matthias. While Philipp's misfortune in love is driven by misrecognition and coincidence, it is subtended and exacerbated by the social conditions of the gay community. Philipp's too-late-ness when he finally finds Matthias is *also* a materialization of the heteronormative forces shaping his circumstances, and the necessity to remain anonymous gives the lie to the fantasy of equality under GDR socialism.

The film reaches its melodramatic climax when Philipp returns to the bar one final time after seeing Matthias and Lutz together in a previous scene. In typical melodramatic fashion, Philipp's inner turmoil and self-destructive impulses are externalized: He hurtles around the bar, dances manically, engages in mischievous behavior in his interactions with strangers, all before ruining a drag performance. Then, as Walter (Werner Dissel), an elderly patron, attempts to intervene, Philipp wrestles him to the ground, yelling insults at him in the process. The bemusement the audience may feel watching this sequence breaks into shame as the bar goes silent at the embarrassing and potentially injuring spectacle, with Achim about to throw Philipp out of the bar. But to everyone's surprise, Walter picks himself up and tells the crowd, »It was a misunderstanding, nothing more!«, and proceeds to shepherd Philipp onto a bench in the corner of the bar.

The ensuing sequence complicates melodrama's function as an »aesthetic realization of social forces embodied in individual energies« (Gledhill xvi). It goes beyond the parameters of the »private« and breaks into explicit historical and political commentary, all the while employing common filmic devices to melodramatic effect through the delivery of its critical blow. Walter puts Philipp's pathetic suffering into perspective, telling him dourly, »There's been worse,« and downs one schnapps after another while narrating the story of his one true love, lost in a Nazi concentration camp fifty years earlier. His monologue closes with a commentary on the ostensible success of socialism in eradicating forms of racism, the relative improvement of the situation for gay citizens, and at the same time the GDR's failure to address legacies of homophobia extending from Nazi Germany into a socialist present. This is the most explicitly political moment of the film, even if softened by its pandering to the GDR's self-understanding as a society of perpetual progress. Although such direct political address falls outside of the conventional boundaries of melodrama, the sequence is nevertheless melodramatically inflected in that it relies on sentimental audience response. Walter becomes a veritable socialist victim/hero: his righteousness is conferred by his suffering at the hands of the Nazi regime, his ability to tolerantly endure half a century of prejudice, and his forgiveness of Philipp for lashing out. Despite its ideological shading, his monologue's pathos nevertheless proves effective by affording a sense of urgency for his call for gay recognition, and thus illustrating melodrama's capacity to convey meaning as a »felt affect« (Gledhill xxii).

Seemingly moved by Walter's story—as the viewer is—to this dual recognition of how things *have* improved and how things *could yet* improve, Philipp projects a new position *vis-à-vis* his own situation in the subsequent final two scenes, characterized by an aura of self-assurance. When Philipp is subjected to the heteronormative prejudice of his workplace superiors at the school, he stands up to them in full view of his class—an act that, as the film shows us in a cutaway close-up shot, resonates positively with his likely closeted student, Lutz. The final scene then shows Philipp cycling serenely through Berlin before disappearing among the traffic as the credits roll. His seeming acceptance of himself does not mean, however, that we do not question his fate, especially considering the sense of isolation that this final frame punctuates. His suffering is not inevitable but a consequence of his social conditions, and thus we see the political power of melodramatic pathos as well as the complex negotiation between emotion and contemplation that it begets. Identifying with victimhood here involves acknowledging the inadequacy of socialist claims of equality, a message that Philipp's individual fate delivers powerfully to his audience.

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Living in Bondage, Part I (1992) and II (1993)

Alessandro Jedlowski

dir. Chris Obi-Rapu aka Vic Mordi (Part I), Chika Onukwafor aka Christian Onu (Part II); prod. Kenneth Nnebue; screenplay Okechukwu Ogunjifor, Kenneth Nnebue. VHS, color, 163 mins. Nek Video Links, distrib. Nek International Co.

Defining film genres in the southern Nigerian film industry Nollywood has always been tricky. Nollywood has tended to develop its own forms, combining elements from local narrative and aesthetic traditions as well as from international canons and trends. Within this context, the categories produced by international scholars did not always take into account local producers' and audiences' definitions (Haynes 2016; Okome). »More than most genres, melodrama takes different forms in different times and places, and developing the term in [the Nigerian] context would certainly not be to cram the Nigerian videos into some precise pre-existing model« (Haynes 2000, 22-23). While melodrama as a theatrical form has a specific history originating in 18th century post-revolutionary France, melodrama as a generic category has become a popular culture meta-genre that informs different narrative modes in literature, theater, and cinema all over the world. Peter Brooks' suggestion to move from the substantive (»melodrama«) to the adjective (»melodramatic«) seems particularly useful when looking at the example of Nollywood. The early Nollywood classic *Living in Bondage*, which, according to many, marked the commercial birth of the industry, is a perfect example in this sense, as the film can hardly be contained by any single generic category. Rather, the two-part film helped kickstart a number of narrative trends in Nollywood, all heavily infused with melodramatic elements.

Written in English but performed in Igbo, *Living in Bondage* tells the story of a young modern Nigerian couple, Andy Okeke (played by Kenneth Okonkwo) and his wife, Merit (played by Nnenna Nwabueze). Despite living a relatively comfortable life, Andy is jealous of his friends' economic success, in particular the achievements of his



old friend Paul (played by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor). His frustration leads him to accept his old friends' invitation to enter a cult, which includes dubious figures such as Merit's boss, Ichie Million (Francis Agu), and Chief Omego (Kanayo O. Kanayo). The cult is supposed to help its members become successful, but Andy quickly discovers that its secret practices involve violent money-making rituals and human sacrifices. In order to become a member, he is asked to bring his wife to the sacrificial altar. He tries to cheat the congregation by instead bringing a sex worker he picked up on the street, but she interrupts the sacrifice by deploying her Pentecostal beliefs against the sect's »satanic« practice and invoking the »blood of Jesus.« Andy is unmasked and told that without the sacrifice of his wife, he will perish. As a result, in the following sequence, Merit is sacrificed, and her blood is drunk by all members of the cult.

The central part of the narrative shows Andy's quick social and economic success: profitable deals, nice and expensive cars, lavishing parties, and beautiful women—all symbols of achievement on which the camera insists with lengthy long take shots. But Merit's ghost begins to haunt Andy, appearing to him each time he achieves a new success: during the ceremony when given the chieftaincy title, when he signs a sumptuous commercial deal, or when entering his house with his new wife. Andy loses his mind, is abandoned by his wife, and ends up living under Lagos' highway bridges, eating rubbish and food stolen from street markets. Just when his fate seems irreversible, an old acquaintance of Andy's recognizes him on the street and rescues him. His mental health is restored through prayer and evangelical exorcism, and he is allowed to start anew.

Living in Bondage was the first Nigerian film to put on screen the terrifying rumors of human sacrifice and blood thirsty cults populating Nigerian imagination at the time (Barber; Bastian), after the 1980s had been marked by rapid economic decline, social insecurity, military duress, and the spreading of the »occult economies« that had come to define neoliberalism in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff). The film was shot on a string budget of less than \$10,000 but involved several people with experience as technicians as well as actors in television series produced by the Nigerian national broadcaster, NTA (see Haynes 2016), or with stage experience connected to the Yoruba travelling theater (Barber). Both forms were imbued with melodramatic elements, along the lines of what Brooks calls the »logic of the excluded middle« (18), a narrative structure constructed around a system of radical polarizations and excessive, Manichean moral oppositions. They were marked by an »aesthetic of exhortation« (Adesokan) that provided moral lessons, but, above all, that questioned the audience's moral position in relation to the fictional drama unfolding before them (Jedlowski 2018). To these elements, *Living in Bondage* added what Brian Larkin describes as an »aesthetic of outrage,« which used »spectacular transgression, luridly depicted to work on the body, generating physical revulsion« (Larkin 186). And it featured a particular form of realism, in part due to the technical failures and budget limits that characterized early Nollywood productions. This »contingent realism« (Jedlowski 2017) made the film appear incontestably close to the audience's lived reality. In one of the sacrifice scenes, for instance, a lamb is slaughtered on Andy's head and his face is covered in real blood. In a scene at the end of the film, where Andy wanders around a city market, the limited production budget allowed for neither extras nor the standard procedures to isolate the shot from the real vagaries of urban life, and the scene is therefore shot as if an amateur filmmaker followed a person on the street: Passers-by look into the camera, some reacting with surprise toward Andy's unruly behavior. The film's audience is

thereby pushed to believe that Andy is indeed a real person whose life has accidentally been caught on camera.

These elements all became recurrent features in subsequent Nollywood releases and anticipated the emergence of more clear-cut local genres such as the Pentecostal-infused »religious films,« the »money making ritual films« (or »occult films«), and even the more recent, higher budget, more standardized Nollywood »horror movies« that attempt to refashion early Nollywood's obsession with witchcraft in more contemporary and internationally palatable ways (as seen in *The Figurine*, *Araromire*, and *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free*). *Living in Bondage* has thus contributed to shaping what might be defined as Nollywood's melodramatic imagination—something that can be meaningfully differentiated from the melodramatic forms that have emerged in Western traditions.

As many have emphasized (Brooks; Singer), melodrama entertains a particular relationship with the emergence of European modernity, and thus with a precise epistemological moment that melodrama itself »illustrates and to which it contributes« (Brooks 14). This epistemological moment is connected to the affirmation of Enlightenment philosophy, the emergence of secularism, and the decline of the Catholic Church's influence on European politics and culture. Within this context, melodrama is a narrative form that explores the »moral occult«—that is, »the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality«—but is not itself »a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth« (Brooks 5). When we look at Nigerian video films like *Living in Bondage*, this interpretation of melodrama's deep structures of meaning needs to be reformulated. As Ravi Vasudevan has suggested in relation to Indian cinema, »if we are to theorize the validity of the melodramatic mode in the Indian case, it must be in such a way as to reformulate the terms of the modernity within which melodrama emerges« (42)—and something similar can be argued in relation to Nigerian film. While it is undeniable that *Living in Bondage*, like many other Nollywood films, is deeply concerned with the ethical questions arising from the sphere of »the moral occult,« the reasons for this diverge from those that informed 18th century French melodrama and subsequent related narrative forms.

The birth of the Nigerian video market and film industry is deeply connected to the economic crisis that affected the country, and the sub-Saharan African region more generally, throughout the 1980s (Haynes 2016; Larkin). In many ways, for Nigerians, this crisis generated widespread disillusion toward the promises of welfare, wealth, and socioeconomic development represented by the idea of a post-colonial modernity. While melodrama in Europe emerged as a result of the dreams and anxieties generated by the newly rising modern era, in *Living in Bondage* and the early Nigerian video films it inspired, melodramatic narrative arose rather from the failure of the ideals that this same era attempted to universalize throughout the world. If European melodrama resulted from the affirmation of a new society, *Living in Bondage's* melodramatic imagination developed from the acknowledgment of the partial failure of the project for a new society (pointed to by political independence and the infrastructural projects of the Oil Boom era). This does not mean, however, that the principles of this project were radically abandoned or refused. The ideal of modernity persisted, but it began to be inhabited by the awareness of its limits, its fragmentation, its haunting opposites—the magical, the irrational, the violent. As a result, *Living in Bondage's* melodramatic imag-

ination did not emerge from the affirmation of the individual over the collective, nor the secular over the sacred. Instead, it sprang up from the affirmation of the religious over the secular, and the collective over the individual.

It is important to underline here that through the use of dichotomies like »collective/individual« and »religious/secular,« I do not intend to reproduce the mystifying dualisms that have been widely criticized in African studies. I refuse theoretical schemes based on an evolutionary conception of time (e.g. from collective to individual, from religious to secular), according to which the return of the »religious« and »collective« at the center of social organization would symbolize a backward step on a linear itinerary of progress. My intention, on the contrary, is to underline how, within a highly modern context such as in the case of Nigeria, the ideal of modernity itself can be progressively dissociated from the aspects often considered its key attributes: secularism and individualism. As much scholarship on African modernity has shown, and as a film like *Living in Bondage* aptly demonstrates, the large propagation of ethnic conflicts, occult practices, and Pentecostal beliefs in contemporary African societies represents neither the »end« of modernity on the continent nor its radical failure (Comaroff and Comaroff; Geschiere et al.). It represents, rather, the fact that, with the failure of a state-driven initiative of modernization, the ideal of modernity has become, if possible, more complex, more hybrid, and more plural than ever.

In this sense, if the European melodrama is »the drama of morality« (Brooks 20) the individual must play when entering the modern condition, *Living in Bondage's* melodramatic imagination represents »the drama of morality« that society has to face once the ideal of a linear, progressive modernity has collapsed. This is a fundamental difference, which constitutes, in my view, an important dimension of early Nigerian video films' narrative and aesthetic originality.

What is left of these specificities in today's globalized Nollywood is an entirely different matter, to which recent Nollywood studies scholarship has begun to provide tentative answers (Adejumobi; Ryan).

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Farewell My Concubine (霸王別姬, *Bawang bie ji*, 1993)

Michael Höckelmann

dir. Chen Kaige; prod. Hsu/Xu Feng;
screenplay Lilian Lee (Lee Pik-wah) and
Lu Wei; photography Gu Changwei;
music Zhao Jiping. 35 mm, color, 171
mins. Beijing Film Studio, distrib.
Miramax Films.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

If melodrama, as Christine Gledhill points out, »reveals the work of emotion and personality in social and political processes« (ix), then *Farewell My Concubine* by fifth-generation Chinese filmmaker Chen Kaige is an inverted

melodrama, as the fates of its protagonists are shaped brutally by their social and political environment. *Farewell* shows the »processes of individuation and [pseudo-] democratization« that took place in China during the 20th century, as traditional hierarchies were overturned by an encroaching modernity (x).

According to Zhen Zhang, some tropes of melodrama—such as that of the orphan—have a »global appeal« through synthesizing »existing cultural and aesthetic forms« (83). At the same time, localized forms of melodrama are subject to the »drive of Americanization« (Gledhill xviii). In *Farewell*, which was produced in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan for a Western (Euro-American) market, those tendencies overlap, as it combines Chinese narrative traditions with Western expectations in a global economy of emotions, of which the melodrama is a prime mode of expression.

Farewell was released in 1993 and won the Cannes Palme d'Or that same year. It tells the story of two Beijing Opera actors from 1924 to 1977, the year after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76): Cheng Dieyi (»Douzi«), played by late Hong Kong actor and pop idol Leslie (Kwok Wing) Cheung, and Duan Xiaolou (»Shitou«), played by mainland-Chinese actor Zhang Fengyi. They are joined by the former sex worker Juxian (played by Gong Li), Xiaolou's wife. Co-author of the screenplay was Lilian Lee, whose novel served as the basis. Film and novel take the titles of the opera *Bawang bie ji* (»The Hegemon-King Bids Farewell to His Consort«), written by the legendary Beijing Opera singer Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), the model for Cheng Dieyi (in 2008, Chen would release a biographical film about Mei, titled *Forever Enthralled*).

The opera is set in the 3rd century BCE and tells the story of Xiang Yu—the hegemon-king (*bawang*) of the title. Xiang contended with Liu Bang, the founder of the Han (202 BCE–220 CE), for hegemony over the empire. Xiang Yu is valiant and sentimental but also the victim of violent impulses, while Liu Bang is cunning but listens to his advisers, a key virtue of the ruler in Confucian political philosophy. Encircled by the forces of Han, Xiang is left only with his favorite horse and Consort Yu, who, on the eve of the final battle, performs a sword dance and cuts her throat at the end.

In the opera within the film, the foolhardy Xiaolou plays Xiang Yu, while the delicate Dieyi is Consort Yu. In traditional Beijing Opera, male actors performed female roles, which a Chinese audience would not take to be an indication of the actors actually being gay or queer. In the film, however, Dieyi has intense, yet unrequited homosexual desires for Xiaolou, a fact that has earned the film accusations of orientaling or exoticizing Beijing Opera. Dieyi's unfulfilled emotions result in excessive resentment for Juxian, which the film shows through exaggerated, melodramatic *mise-en-scène*—for instance, when Dieyi affectedly drops shoes in passing the barefooted Juxian, who has just left the brothel to marry Xiaolou, in front of the whole opera troupe. The terse, often wordless encounters between Dieyi and Juxian, amplified by the briefness of Chinese syllables and Dieyi's cold and unapproachable behavior, increase the melodramatic effect. Although Dieyi often appears egocentric and ruthless in those scenes, the sentimental depiction of his fate as a boy early in the film rouses the sympathies of the audience.

The film opens with Dieyi and Xiaolou entering a concert hall in full costume in their roles as Xiang Yu and Consort Yu in 1977, one year after the Cultural Revolution. After that, the film flashes back to 1924: A nameless woman brings her son (Douzi) to a Beijing Opera school, but the headmaster rejects the boy on account of the six fingers on his left hand. In an act of symbolic emasculation, the mother cuts off Douzi's extra digit with a cleaver, after which she leaves Douzi in the school. She never returns, thus placing *Farewell* squarely in the category of melodramas of orphanhood in modern China (Zhang).

Upon entering the school, the delicate and sensitive Douzi befriends the strong and boisterous Xiaolou. In depicting their training, the film delights in the violence the pupils have to endure at the school. Douzi's symbolic emasculation is repeated when he keeps inverting the lines of a female part: »I am by nature a girl, not a boy.« Shitou thrusts the headmaster's pipe into his mouth, after which he can recite the line correctly—with blood flowing melodramatically from his mouth. Douzi is also repeatedly abused by wealthy patrons: a former court eunuch and the opera aficionado Master Yuan (Shiqing), played by Ge You.

In the 1930s, Douzi and Shitou, having taken the stage names Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, become stars of Beijing Opera. However, while Xiaolou sees opera simply as a profession and Dieyi as a brother, the traumatized Dieyi escapes reality by merging with his role as Consort Yu and his love for Xiaolou. The conflict boils over when Xiaolou marries Juxian. Dieyi seeks solace in a dependency on Master Yuan, who is infatuated with Dieyi in his role as Consort Yu. Although Dieyi repeatedly threatens Xiaolou with ending their stage collaboration, they continue to perform together even under Japanese occupation (1937–45). However, when Dieyi performs for Japanese officers to free Xiaolou from prison, he is met with disgust and rejection by Xiaolou. Later, when Dieyi is charged as a collaborator after the Nationalists retake the city in 1945, Xiaolou and Juxian call on Master Yuan for help. However, Dieyi thwarts their efforts

by admitting his guilt in court, melodramatically smearing red ink (blood?) onto his lips. Dieyi is rescued last minute by the protection of high-ranking Nationalist officers.

After the Communist takeover in 1949, Dieyi and Xiaolou try to train a new generation of opera singers. However, they increasingly come into conflict with young students over the value of new, revolutionary opera as opposed to traditional opera. When the Cultural Revolution breaks out, all three—Xiaolou and Dieyi as opera performers, Juxian as a former sex worker—become targets of the Red Guards and their campaigns against »monsters and demons« of the »four olds« (old thinking, culture, customs, and habits). In one of the so-called struggle sessions conducted during the Cultural Revolution as public rituals of shaming and torture, Xiaolou denounces Dieyi, which causes Dieyi to turn against Juxian, decrying her as a »prostitute«—using the same expression that a former customer yelled at his mother in one of the first scenes of the film. After Xiaolou, under constant pressure and beating from Red Guards, declares that he does not love Juxian, the latter commits suicide.

The final scene shows Xiaolou and Dieyi performing the climactic scene of *Bawang bie ji* in the concert hall. When Xiaolou pokes fun at Dieyi for inverting his line »I am by nature a girl« again, Dieyi commits suicide with Xiaolou's sword. The suicide itself happens off camera—in a melodramatic *mise-en-scène*, accompanied by the shrieking and ever-growing sound of the *jinghu*, Dieyi draws the sword when Xiaolou turns away. When he turns back upon the clanging of the sword on the floor, and after casting a horrified glance at the scene, yelling »Dieyi!«, his eyes become teary, and in a soothing voice he utters the final words of the film: »Douzi.«

In contrast to more conventional melodramas, *Farewell* leaves many of its emotional and moral issues unresolved—thereby resonating with the history of China in the 20th century. There is no happy ending. Some critics have focused on the questioning of gender roles: As counterparts to the masculine Xiaolou, Dieyi and Juxian are focal points for reflecting the patriarchal structure of Chinese society. While Dieyi possesses male agency only outwardly, in a society that sees him as male, he is denied fulfilment. Likewise, Juxian—although much more strong-headed—lacks agency, highlighted by her loss of a child and a reduction to her previous status as a sex worker. However, the social and political revolutions of the 20th century only serve as accessories to the melodramatic and tragic lives of *Farewell's* protagonists. Even Beijing Opera is only an exotic backdrop, the actual performance only plays a role in the final scene of the film. Other critics have bemoaned the commercialized and »Westernized« style of *Farewell* in comparison to Chen Kaige's earlier films such as *Yellow Earth* (1984). However, as Chen has explained, he used *Farewell* to explore some deeply personal issues: He had criticized his father, a director himself, during struggle sessions of the Cultural Revolution, causing him great harm.

Critics may also take issue with Dieyi's homosexuality as pandering to orientalist stereotypes of »effeminate« Chinese culture. Indeed, the screenplay does seem heavy-handed and over the top for Chinese tastes and aesthetic conventions—which prefer to allude rather than to exhibit. However, rather than being an orientalist depiction of Chinese culture, *Farewell* simply shows three individuals locked in roles prescribed by both tradition and modernity, while trying to make moral sense of a »post-revolutionary world« in which »traditional imperatives of truth and morality« are collapsing (Williams).

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The Piano (1993)

Heike Paul

dir. Jane Campion; prod. Jan Chapman; screenplay Jane Campion; photography Stuart Dryburgh; music Michael Nyman. 35mm, color, 117 mins. Jan Chapman Productions CIBY 2000, distrib. BAC Films, Miramax Films.

The Piano, a settler-colonialist melodrama set in 19th century New Zealand, is an internationally acclaimed film—winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (awarded for the first time to a film by a female director) and of three Oscars. Initially considered an *auteur* film (Jane Campion was the creative mind behind the film as writer and director), *The Piano* successfully brought »antipodean cinema« (Moine 189) to screens worldwide and due to its sheer popularity quickly moved beyond the label of an »art film« (Simmons 149).

The film about a Scotswoman being sent to the colony with her young daughter (and her piano) has had a mixed and even polarized critical reception. On the one hand, it has been widely applauded as part of a global history of films by women and for women with its focus on a narrative of female emancipation. Feminist critics such as Denis Bauer, Pennie Pflueger, and Hilary Radner have appreciated Campion's depiction of female subjectivity and desire in what was described as a »feminist tale of resistance« (Bauer). The film is also seen indebted (unacknowledged by Campion herself) to Jane Mander's 1920 book *The Story of a New Zealand River* (Fox), whose author was a New Zealand journalist and novelist who later became an activist in the women's suffrage movement in the U.S. On the other hand, critics (mostly) from New Zealand, strongly criticized the film for its colonialist and racist depiction of the indigenous population of Aotearoa. For all its cinematographic dream-like atmosphere and enchanted alterity, the film bears obvious similarities to films in the colonial melodrama-mold and portrays Māori characters in racialized stereotypes. Both, seemingly incommensurable perspectives (feminist and postcolonial) have shaped the critical discourse around *The Piano* as melodrama.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

The protagonist, Ada McGrath Stewart (played by Holly Hunter) has been mute since she was six years old, expressing herself in a sign language that her daughter Flora (played by Anna Paquin) can translate—and through her playing the piano. Still, her voice opens and ends the filmic narration speaking from the off. Little information is offered about the father of her child when Ada is sent as a mail-order bride with her daughter to New Zealand to marry colonial landowner Alisdair Stewart (played by Sam Neill), a man she has never met. In her new home in the »bush,« she meets other British settlers, among them George Baines (played by Harvey Keitel), a neighboring farmer who seems to have »gone native«: He wears an incomplete *moko* (facial tattoo) and socializes with the Māori population in their language. In fact, Hendershot reads him as representative of a non-traditional, i.e. non-hegemonic, European masculinity (100). What unfolds is a dark love story that has been said to echo Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (for its Gothic elements and its evocation of 19th century Victorian literature; Hendershot; Pérez-Riu), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (for its feminist impetus; Pflueger), and John Huston's *African Queen* (for its colonialist underpinnings; Frey). In sum: »Campion's twentieth-century story of liberating passion both relies on and reproduces nineteenth-century western colonial mythologies of sex and race, the fundamental »relationships of power« (DuPuis 52), and thus the feminist and the postcolonial reading of the film are intertwined after all, in complex ways. Moreover, from the perspective of disability studies, the portrayal of Ada's muteness and mutilation »challenge[s] conventional representations of disability« (Molina 280) by envisioning different forms of language and communication (sight and sound) and thereby granting Ada a subject status and agency.

From the beginning, Alisdair, rigid and narrow-minded, cannot quite grasp the importance of the piano for his wife-to-be and her single-mindedness about playing it—and after her arrival he leaves it behind on the beach—it seems extravagant and out of place in the colony. After transportation has been organized (it is the Māori working for the white settlers who carry the instrument from the seaside to the house), George, who is intrigued by Ada's obsession with the piano, suggests buying it from Alisdair in return for a piece of land and piano lessons from Ada. Alisdair agrees, and Ada, outraged by this transaction (she writes on her notepad: »The piano is mine. It is MINE«), eventually complies as this is the only way for her to have access to her instrument. Her visits to George take a different turn, as he wants to watch and touch her while she is playing. Through sexual favors, he suggests, she can earn the piano back, key by key. During their »lessons,« little Flora has to remain outside and, used to being around her mother constantly, she becomes jealous of George, prompting her to insinuate to her stepfather that George does not play the piano when Ada visits. When Alisdair stops by George's house, he, unbeknownst to Ada and George, voyeuristically witnesses their sexual intimacy. Soon thereafter, Alisdair locks his wife and her daughter up, boarding the windows and bolting the door. When Ada tries to send a message with a piano key to George through Flora as a token of her affectionate longing, Flora takes it to Alisdair instead, who, enraged, cuts off Ada's digit finger. During her recovery and a delirious sleep, Alisdair finds Ada communicating with him, quasi-telepathic, discouraging his rape attempt of her and asking him to let her go away with George. In the end, George, Ada, and Flora leave, yet the film offers two different kinds of closure (Simmons 154-55): Ordering the piano to be plunged overboard as their boat departs, Ada willfully steps into a coil of rope tied to the piano that drags her down to the bottom of the sea with it. Her death seems imminent, signaling a tragic, melodramatic

ending to the tale of illicit love, now on the verge of becoming respectable. But then she struggles to free herself from the rope, eventually reappears on the surface, and is helped back into the boat. In the final ending, the three of them settle in Nelson, and the glimpses of their new life show Ada and her piano to have become thoroughly domesticated: she wears a prosthesis (made by George) for her missing finger, gives piano lessons, and practices speaking with a hood over her head. These disciplining acts question the idea of a »happy ending« and signify conventional domesticity and containment that are at odds with the earlier female liberation plot of the film. The latter, however, is compromised from the beginning, as it is predicated on the aesthetics and politics of colonization of »other« others, the indigenous people of New Zealand. The film does little to project an intersectional approach to its subject matter, instead, it relies on well-rehearsed colonialist formulas of romanticization (of nature: the New Zealand forest is cast as Gothic scenario) and infantilization (of people: the Māori appear mostly as child-like and lacking libidinal control).

Following the path of feminist interpretations, scholars have extrapolated from the intra-diegetic performance of the »Bluebeard«-fairy tale in a shadow play in the film and have pointed to a tradition of feminist re-telling of this story in the work of women writers (including Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter). In *The Piano*, »Bluebeard is not so much a story referred to in the film, as the film's underlying story« (Lovell-Smith 43) as the tale is seen to be reworked in *The Piano* as well—involving all standard features of said fairy-tale: captivity, violence, mutilation, and a (piano)key. Alisdair as a lesser Bluebeard chops off Ada's finger, as she has the »key« and sends it to George against his order. During the play, its make-believe effect generates strong responses from the Māori audience who (it is suggested) are so naïve as to take the violent proceedings on the stage at face value and make the performance end prematurely.

This is where the illusion of the film's narrative of female emancipation with its »surreal aura of emotional intensity« (DuPuis 57) ends as well, because the emancipation plot centered on Ada in the orbit of the white settlers clearly exploits the indigenous population, as »the film's sexual symbolism relies heavily on profoundly racist depictions of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand and on culturally coded, deeply racialized representations of their land. [...] In scene after scene, the Māori and their land have very little: independent meaning outside their metonymic representations of the white characters and their relationships« (DuPuis 52 and 66). U.S.-American critic bell hooks has similarly contested *The Piano's* feminism: »*The Piano* seduces and excites audiences with its uncritical portrayal of sexism and misogyny. Reviewers and audiences alike seem to assume that Campion's gender, as well as her breaking of traditional boundaries that inhibit the advancement of women in film, indicate that her work expresses a feminist standpoint.« This is not the case; instead, this melodrama »betrays feminist visions of female actualization« (hooks). This criticism of *The Piano* and at times also of melodrama *per se*, may be quite harsh, but it points to the political at the core of the aesthetic. After all, Campion's film is a melodrama about race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality, whose 19th century setting is imbued with allusions to Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular the »dark continent«-metaphor he reserved for the psyche of women. While the analogy of the unconscious and the undoing of what has been psychologically repressed with an unknown territory and its »discovery« qua colonization and re-settlement may make for spectacular cinematography, it also re-enforces the colonial gaze, this time through the »imperial eyes« (Pratt) of a woman.

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***In the Heat of the Sun* (陽光燦爛的日子, Yángguāng Càn làn De Rizi, 1994)**

Rui Kunze

dir. Wen Jiang; prod. Youliang Guo, An-chin Hsu, Ki Po; screenplay Wen Jiang; photography Changwei Gu; music Wenjing Guo. 35 mm, color, 140 mins. China Film Co-Production Corporation and Dragon Film, distrib. Gala Film Distribution Limited.



Officially released in mainland China in 1995, *In the Heat of the Sun* immediately caused controversy for its unconventional way of addressing historical memory and the experience of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). From an early 1990s perspective, the protagonist Ma Xiaojun (played by Wen Jiang) looks back at his younger self in Beijing of the 1970s and recalls the Cultural Revolution through a teenager's life in the privileged and protected environment of military family housing: hanging out with friends, street fights, and initiation to sexual matters. The film was criticized for its nostalgic portrayal of the Cultural Revolution—right around the time when Mao nostalgia was emerging in China.

In the Heat of the Sun stands in stark contrast to the Chinese films that appeared in the 1980s, films that denounced the injustice and brutal violence of the Cultural Revolution. Nick Browne identifies these films as political melodrama, in which »the political process is narrativized as a trial that occupies the thematic center in the way that the family conflict does in the family melodrama« (46). Different from the mimetic storytelling of the past in post-Mao political melodrama, *In the Heat of the Sun* features a double perspective of both the adult and teenage Ma Xiaojun, which offers a skewed version of what may have happened. Its foregrounding of the adult Ma's struggle to remember correctly, in particular, suggests the intervention of one's desire and emotion with memory, and hence puts into question »earlier depictions of the Cultural Revolution which have emphasized reliance on memory and especially on remembrance of its atrocities« (Braester 351). On the other hand, the film deploys in diegesis the melodramatic conventions of revolutionary spectacles and pathos within transnational socialist culture (film, music, and literature) during the Cold War, especially Soviet culture that survived the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s and continued to exist in Chi-

na for a long time as a legitimate source of foreign culture and entertainment. These salient melodramatic formulae celebrate pageantry and martyrology as aesthetics of masculine ideals and build dramatic clashes between suffering and saving, between solidarity and betrayal of victim, villain, and hero. By showing that these spectacles and pathos help shape the teenage Ma Xiaojun's self-perception, daily behavior, and ways of articulating his personal feelings, this film reveals a sentimental politics of Maoist China that is structured by the interpenetration of public ideology and private desires as well as the oscillation between fantasy and everyday life.

The teenage Ma Xiaojun (played by Yu Xia) enjoys unprecedented freedom in the early 1970s, when authority figures such as teacher and father are either denounced or constantly absent. Growing up in the highly militarized everyday life of the Mao era, Xiaojun fervently wishes for the outbreak of a Sino-Soviet war, from which he would surely emerge as a hero. His hobby of making keys and picking locks may appear less glorious, but he aggrandizes it by comparing the gratification at the moment of opening a lock to that of the Soviet soldiers conquering Berlin. In his fantasy, Xiaojun measures himself and his daily life against the military heroism exemplified in pageantry and martyrology—formulaic and hyperbolic spectacles repeatedly presented and promoted in socialist film, literature, and music. In the (locked) drawer of his father, a military officer, Xiaojun finds objects that satisfy his fantasy of a soldier hero: daggers, medals, military insignias—and two condoms, which the boy has no clue about. After waving the daggers as if in a combat, Xiaojun goose-steps to the mirror, decorating his sleeveless undershirt with the medals and insignias, humming the military anthem of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Looking at himself in the mirror, he first performs as a soldier in a parade and then as the protagonist in the 1964 film *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (英雄儿女), who sacrifices himself in the Korean War. With the theatricality of military pageantry and martyrology, Xiaojun acts out in the mirror his own fantasy of being a war hero. All this dissolves into mundanity and farce in the eyes of the audience and the adult narrator, however, when Xiaojun blows a condom into a small Zeppelin and imagines it bombing the enemy, while the condom flies slowly in front of a photo of his parents and then shrinks.

Military heroism, with its morally charged notions of friend and foe, however, is displaced, if not misplaced, in Ma Xiaojun's everyday life. In one impressive sequence, Xiaojun and his friends enter a street fight to avenge a friend, who was hurt by other teenagers when trying to protect a neighbor with mental disabilities. The sequence starts with Ma Xiaojun's gang searching for their foes to bring them to justice and ends with Xiaojun knocking out a teenager with a brick and beating him nearly to death with a metal stick. »The Internationale,« which was played each evening at 8:30 p.m. on the radio during the Cultural Revolution (Jiang 33) or sung by martyrs at the climactic moment of their sacrifice in revolutionary films or plays, serves as the background music of the whole sequence. If the street fight is choreographed to perfectly match the rhythm of »The Internationale« to produce pathos and heighten the mood, then the tension between the music's (*melos*) grandiose theme to fight for humanity and the visuals' senseless violence reveals precisely the melodramatic excess of Xiaojun's imagined heroism and the boys' self-righteous feelings. In contrast, the Soviet song »Moscow Nights,« in another scene, offers an alternative moment of friendship. Sitting on the rooftop against a dark blue summer night sky and singing the song in unison, the boys enjoy a sense of solidarity—not by fighting together, but by sharing their soft feelings through the song's lyrical mood.

The formulae of revolutionary spectacles and pathos in socialist culture offer individuals a way of organizing and articulating their feelings and, in doing so, operate at the intersection of private desires and public ideology. When Ma Xiaojun first invites Mi Lan (played by Jing Ning), the girl he desires, to meet his friends, he and his friend Big Ant (played by Hai Wang) reenact a scene from the 1939 Soviet film *Lenin in 1918*. In the film, Lenin's guard, Vasily, risks his life by jumping from the second floor to prevent a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Xiaojun and Big Ant make the dangerous jump to impress Mi Lan—by appropriating the revolutionary courage and sacrifice in the original scene to communicate their feelings and desires in gender relations. After Mi Lan has become the girlfriend of his friend Liu Yiku (played by Le Geng), Ma Xiaojun has a long dream, in which he and Mi Lan transform into a hotchpotch of characters derived from socialist Chinese and Soviet film and literature. Mi Lan addresses him as »comrade,« so they may fight together against enemies, who appear either in Nazi military uniforms or in the caricaturist image of Japanese soldiers, as often depicted in anti-Japanese Chinese war films. Xiaojun dreams of himself as Pavel Korchagin, the protagonist of Nikolai Ostrovsky's 1936 fictionalized autobiography *How the Steel Was Tempered* (translated into Chinese in 1942), while Mi Lan appears as Tonia, Pavel's teenage love who later sides with the bourgeois class. In the next scene, Xiaojun discovers that Mi Lan turns out to be the female assassin of Lenin in 1918, and he participates in executing Mi Lan, the traitor, even though he hysterically cries. The dream—absurd and chaotic as it seems—puts together some of the most popular melodramatic moments in the socialist culture of Maoist China, whose treatment of solidarity and courage, suffering and sacrifice, trust and betrayal, was predicated on »the moral universe of class struggle« (McGrath 350) and the just causes of revolution and patriotism. Ma Xiaojun's frustration, confusion, and desperation come from his failure to establish an intimate relationship with the girl he wants, but they are relocated and reformulated in terms of class struggle and war—with radical binaries of friend/foe, proletarian/bourgeois, and soldier/traitor. These binaries and their dramatic clashes in Xiaojun's dream, with their ideological implications and functions of social norms, bring to light a sentimental politics of socialism that is profoundly ingrained in the mode of the melodramatic.

As the adult narrator makes clear in the course of the film, his younger self's desires for both military heroism and Mi Lan intervene powerfully with his own memory. With its exploration of a teenager's growing pains in Maoist China, told by an unreliable narrator, this film presents a storytelling about the Cultural Revolution that is different from that of the post-Mao political melodrama and, in doing so, refuses to view the complicated history »through the single prism of political oppression« (Braester 356). It remains, however, debatable how to perceive the film's conspicuous reference to the formulaic revolutionary spectacles and pathos. Does the film reproduce the ideals and ideology of Maoist China? Or does it rather subvert Maoist and socialist aesthetics and politics by sarcastically recycling these melodramatic formulae? Treading the fine line between deploying and reprocessing revolutionary spectacle and pathos, this controversial film precisely demonstrates the ability of melodramatic formulae to trigger and accommodate various feelings, impulses, and interpretations—and it thereby attests to the power and vitality of the genre.

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Bombay (1995)

Annika McPherson

dir. Mani Ratnam; prod. S. Sriram; screenplay Mani Ratnam; photography Rajiv Menon; music A. R. Rahman. 35mm, color, 141 mins. Aalayam Productions, distrib. Aalayam Productions.



On the occasion of its 25th anniversary in 2020, Mani Ratnam's Tamil movie *Bombay* was re-reviewed almost as controversially as upon its first release in 1995. At the time, wounds were still fresh from the 1992-93 communal riots that had erupted in Bombay in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists. Based on charges of politicians' incitement to violence, as well as of police complicity and transgression, the subsequent events have also been described as an anti-Muslim massacre, and the film's depiction of these events continues to be contested in terms of its politics of representation. Questions of responsibility for the significantly higher Muslim death toll become inextricably linked to how the film's aesthetics are unpacked, and which elements of its complex genre configuration are highlighted and imbued with broader social and political meaning. Any interpretive endeavor is further complicated by the effects of censorship on the movie (Gopalan 24-36), as well as by reports and assessments that emerged only after the movie's release. Hence, the film's representational dynamics need to be assessed within the field of tension between local and national politics and with an eye to the various aesthetic traditions and popular tropes from which it draws. Its Madras-based writer-director, Mani Ratnam, has worked across various Indian film industries in several languages (Stafford). He has explored tensions between personal relationships and national(ist) politics in a range of films that link marriage plots to communal strife, secessionist politics, guerilla movements, or civil war, frequently depicting »winning combinations of desire and power« (Gopalan 14), most notably in the highly successful and controversial film *Roja* (1992), in which a couple's romance collides with the Kashmir conflict.

Reading *Bombay* predominantly through either the lens of romance, coded through the family melodrama that informs much of its first part, or mainly as a political commentary on the 1992-1993 riots, which dominate its second part, inevitably generates different interpretations of the film. Yet, it is the very mesh of genres and film traditions (including segments alluding to the »Muslim social«) interlaced with its own

aesthetic particularities (such as Steadicam scenes) that marks Ratnam's most controversial movie as »a cross-pollination of popular and art film« (Virdi 73). One of the key questions posed in this context relates to the film's position *vis-à-vis* secularism. This is indeed where the communalist politics are interwoven with the melodramatic, as it is in the inter-religious marriage of the Hindu man and the Muslim woman that the melodrama both unfolds and finds its limits.

While journalist Shekhar (played by Arvind Swamy) is not a devout Hindu like his father, he can be aligned with a patriarchal Hindu-normative social order. On return to his home village from Bombay, he instantly falls in love with Shaila Banu (Manisha Koirala) after having caught only a brief distant glimpse of her face when the wind lifts her *burqua*. While he courts her, she accidentally, but significantly, loses her veil as a marker of difference. Their southern village families, and especially the fathers, are portrayed in a manner aiming at satire but drawing heavily on stereotypes, such as Muslim fathers being prone to physical violence. Although Shaila Banu undergoes a visible cultural assimilation to her Hindu-normative surroundings once she reunites with and marries Shekhar in Bombay, an emphasis on the ostensible erasure of her difference risks perpetuating the equation of the woman with the community she represents (Virdi 75). Moreover, Sheila Banu is by no means portrayed as passive: Many scenes—including the first song-and-dance sequence—both narratively and visually emphasize her desire, agency, and decisions. She also affirms her Muslim identity when confronted by Shekhar's landlady. In the first part's detailed elaboration of the couple's romance, the newlyweds are shown to gradually connect both physically and culturally. The song-and-dance sequences of the popular cinematic tradition are marked by acclaimed composer A. R. Rahman's highly memorable music (with lyrics by Vairamuthu in the Tamil version and Mehboob in the Hindi version) and provide interpretive cues throughout the movie.

Ratnam's play with popular tropes, however, is mainly conveyed in the comic squabbles of Shekhar's and Shaila Banu's fathers over their grandsons Kabir Narajan and Kamal Bashir—one bearing a Hindu name combined with his paternal grandfather's, the other a Muslim name combined with his maternal grandfather's. When they meet at their children's Bombay residence, the grandfathers quite humorously outperform each other in their attempts to form the twins in their respective image. Shekhar's and Shaila Banu's approach to the matter of naming, in turn, symbolizes an attempt at syncretism to appease and compensate their families' erstwhile rejection of their union, which had only been mitigated by the birth of the grandchildren and their village families' fears for their lives after hearing about the first riot. However, their rather playful attempts to mix traditions and religions prove not only naïve but also almost fatal when the tensions in the city rise and culminate in the threat of the twins' immolation during the first clashes, which deeply traumatizes them. The lighthearted switching of signs of their respective communities that is alluded to in the song sequence when Shaila Banu places a *tikka* on her forehead and Shekhar dons a Muslim-connoted head covering thus takes a dramatic turn during the riots, when lives are taken solely based on stereotypically displayed markers. While the initial play with religious markers may signify a secularist overcoming within the family, the fact that Shekhar's father and Shaila Banu's parents die in the burning house during the second wave of violence indicates the futility of such an endeavor in the face of lethal sectarian ideologies. In various instances, supported by songs and intermedial refer-

ences from newspapers, radio, and television, the movie speaks to these ideologies as the real culprit behind the violence. Shekhar—a journalist aspiring to offer a balanced assessment—also blames fundamentalism but tellingly does not take sides.

Prefigured by the threat of the twins being doused with gasoline during the initial riots, it is Shekhar's ambivalent threat of self-immolation towards the end of the movie that brings about a decisive turn to halt the violence through the trope of the sacrificial male body (Vasudevan 230). However, he is not the only one to intervene and reason with the mob surrounding him. The *hijra* who protects and takes care of Kamal when the twins are separated during the chaos of the second wave of violence is another figure who attempts to stop the attacks in a parallel self-sacrificial gesture, as does a Muslim woman who, in turn, takes up the role of mediator to her community. Their visually intercut affective pleas lead to a final joining of hands across communalist lines of division that is superimposed onto images of the family's reunification. These gestures, however, can undo neither the violence nor the trauma caused by lethal sectarian violence. Yet, the nationalist melodrama culminates in emphatic appeals to Indianness on all sides, indirectly upholding the constitutional ideal of secularism while clearly demonstrating its unfulfilled promise and continuous precarity.

Critical responses to the movie's communal representations have condemned it for not taking a more decisive stance against the possibility of aligning Shekhar with Hindu hegemony in spite of his ostensible secularism and, even more so, for scenes highlighting Muslims as perpetrators. It is significant, though, that several references to building a Hindu temple in Ayodhya in the movie's first part mark Shekhar's father, local community leaders, and politicians as complicit and thus at least indirectly responsible for the ensuing riots. Some of these scenes, which uncannily foreshadow the violence, are mediated through Shaila Banu's perception. Based on techniques such as the »open image,« idiosyncratic takes, and the »stalking« camera, Gopalan even re-reads *Bombay* through the lens of horror (37-62). While Shekhar is depicted as searching for the truth, as when interviewing a policeman and pointing to the police's role in the killings, it is precisely in such references that censorship takes a toll on the film's representational politics. Whether one wants to praise its daring and, at the time rather uncommon, depiction of inter-religious love with scenes of marital bliss and happy family life, or rather to take it to task for its silences and omissions (either censorship-induced or resulting from stereotypical characterizations and aesthetic choices), the movie in any case ultimately conveys a strong plea for secularism.

Overall, the pathos-ridden final joining of hands in *Bombay* allegorizes a call for reigning the communities back into a family-bound social order. Weighed against its more playful, and sometimes comic, segments, which both expose and perpetuate stereotypes along communal and gendered lines, it is crucial to note that Shekhar and Shaila Banu's extended family cannot be reconstituted due to having lost grandparents in the violence. Thus, it may be less melodramatic excess than the real-life excess of continuous and state-sanctioned violence against Muslims that makes interpretive closure impossible for *Bombay* more than twenty-five years after its initial release.

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The Bridges of Madison County (1995)

Heike Paul

dir. Clint Eastwood; prod. Clint Eastwood, Kathleen Kennedy; screenplay Richard LaGravenese; photography Jack N. Green; music Lennie Niehaus. 35mm, color, 134 mins. Amblin Entertainment and Malpaso Productions, distrib. Warner Bros.

This realist melodrama is set in 1965 and tells the story of the four-day love affair between Francesca Johnson (played by Meryl Streep) and Robert Kincaid (Clint Eastwood), which takes place in Madison County in rural Iowa. Francesca, an Italian-born homemaker and mother of two, married to Richard (Jim Haynie), by chance meets Robert, a traveling photographer for *National Geographic*, who has lost his way while searching for a local covered bridge for a photo documentary. Francesca's husband and teenage children have just taken off for the Illinois State Fair, granting her four precious days of solitude when Robert stumbles into her life. After giving him directions to the Roseman Bridge, Francesca rides with him in his car and later offers him a drink and meal at her house. Following an evening at her kitchen table, both quickly fall in love with each other. The apparent lack of perspective for their budding love only seems to intensify their feelings. They cherish the little time they share, in an intimacy and understanding that both recognize as exceptional and fragile: »This kind of certainty comes but once in a lifetime,« Robert states in affirmation of the well-known topos of romantic love. He encourages Francesca to leave her family and come with him. She spontaneously consents but then refrains from this radical departure for the sake of her husband and children. She chooses her quotidian »life of small things« and remains bound to »the choices she made,« sacrificing her love for Robert and rejecting that all-American offer of a second chance that he holds out to her.

The film is a »progressive reworking of a rather conservative novel« (Metz 67) written by Robert James Waller, a somewhat saccharine book that initially prompted Streep to reject the film project, calling the novel »a crime against literature« (qtd. in



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Schickel). Critics mostly agree in their »good movie, bad book« diagnosis, and classify the film as »top class tear-jerking material« (Felperin). Steeped in the melodramatic repertoire of the kind that Roland Barthes laid out in *A Lover's Discourse*, the film effectively dramatizes the star-crossed lovers and their fateful encounter and transformation in an unlikely place. A less-than-glamorous Iowa of cornfields, mosquitos, and dry heat is temporarily turned into an affective landscape of romance and love. In fact, the film's libidinal exoticizing of Madison County was so successful that it gave a boost to regional tourism, turning a local attraction into a globally known destination, at least temporarily, and on the heels of the success of the 1992 novel (Kroll). Thousands of couples reenacted the roles played by Streep and Eastwood, celebrating anniversaries and marriage proposals while posing on the bridges of Madison County.

In the larger archive of melodrama, the film invites comparisons to two films in particular: David Lean's British melodrama *Brief Encounter* (1945)—Kauffman describes Eastwood's film as »*Brief Encounter* in Iowa«—and Douglas Sirk's classic → *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). *Bridges* also addresses small-town hypocrisy and the pressure to conform, a pressure primarily exerted on women. Like Sirk's widowed protagonist, Francesca is a middle aged woman who has a passionate affair with a man not her equal—and not her husband. Women of her age and social standing quickly become the objects of malicious small-town gossip (often by other women) in that day and time. In a side plot, the film introduces the case of Lucy Redfield, whose extramarital affair had been revealed, thus serving as a warning to Francesca. Lucy is ostracized and on the verge of being refused service at a local diner when Robert witnesses her humiliation.

The film has been credited with mild feminism. In the beginning, Francesca is clearly bored with her domestic routines and with performing labor that no one notices or appreciates. Hers is »the problem that has no name« (to use Betty Friedan's description of the unhappy housewife syndrome from her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in the vanguard of the women's movement), and her frustration comes to the fore with Robert's visit. It is to him that she confesses her disappointment in her life in the United States, a place she moved to as an Army wife, having met her husband in Italy. The promise of »America« has in many ways not been realized in a life that revolves around family and farm in rural Iowa. Long ago, she quit her job as a teacher to take care of the children and to please Richard. Robert's mobility, his experiences traveling the world, elicit her envy and admiration, but also her scorn. When Robert repudiates the American family model in favor of a life of individual freedom, she feels offended and belittled in her own existence. In many ways, Francesca and Robert personify the two Americas—one rural, one urban—and their divide. In addition to projecting a different way of being in the world, Robert's visit also brings to light Francesca's own foreignness in Iowa.

The subtle critique of patriarchy that the film offers, in plot and character constellation, is corroborated by its visual regime and spatial arrangements. The former is an angle that affirms Francesca's emergent subject position in her partial appropriation of the (male) gaze. First, she cautiously attempts to catch glimpses of Robert through cracks in the covered bridge, which he notices. Later, she observes Robert's naked torso through the bedroom window as he washes himself. In the visual regime of melodrama, such a gaze often reflects a woman's unfulfilled yearning but not here: Rather, Francesca is about to have an affair with the object of her desire (Metz 69).

The spatial order of the film is characterized by its domestic setting. Due to the need for discretion, much of their whirlwind romance takes place indoors, even as the seating order at the kitchen table becomes destabilized, along with everything else in Francesca's life. Initially, the Johnson family breakfast is shown at length to characterize Francesca's place at the table as mother and domestic servant for her husband and children. Walter Metz points out how the domestic order is changed when Robert takes her accustomed seat at the table, the seat of the homemaker (70). Both also sit in the places of Francesca's children, their postures relaxed, as she reveals her delight in his stories by slapping her knee.

The atmosphere in Francesca's kitchen becomes increasingly eroticized in the interaction between the two protagonists. One way in which this is achieved is by means of what Toni Morrison calls the »Africanist presence«—that is, references to black culture and blackness, and the use of their symbolic capital (often coded as sexually charged or transgressive) in affect-saturated white storytelling, as a plot device in the service of white character development. Asked about his travel experiences, Robert identifies Africa—the entire continent—as the most exciting place he has ever been, and he captivates Francesca by telling her about his African encounters, including some comic relief. A second instance of Africanist presencing is their night out. Hiding from the white locals, they choose a club where they will not be discovered: the Blue Note, a bar frequented by African Americans. The protagonists' whiteness allows them to cross the color line and hide their illicit affair among people who according to white stereotypes are less concerned with bourgeois morals. Furthermore, Afro-diasporic music—blues and jazz playing on the radio and live at the bar—provides the soundtrack to their melodramatic love story and sets the mood for their bitter-sweet intimacy. This pairing of animating sensuality and suffering is combined in the Africanist presence: Yet, even, or especially, in their transgressive behavior, Robert and Francesca enjoy their white privilege.

The film's signature farewell scene, after her family has returned, comes when Francesca and her husband are running errands in town. Robert, standing in the pouring rain before stepping into his truck, one last time beckons her to come with him. She remains seated next to her husband, fingering the knob of the car door. Both trucks sit at a red signal. When the light turns green, Robert still lingers, as if waiting, and when Richard honks, he turns left—and is gone. This melodramatic ending is a quiet one. Francesca stifles her sobs, which her husband appears not to notice. There is no theatrical scene of revelation, jealousy, betrayal, or regret. The routine life of the Johnson family simply continues as if nothing had happened. Francesca is as invisible to them in her suffering as she is in her care work. This ending has been read critically, as it calls upon a conventional maternal sacrifice that cuts short the arc of Francesca's emancipation.

The love story between Francesca and Robert is framed and contained by a narrative that relates how after Francesca's death in the 1980s, her children, Carolyn and Michael, find their mother's journals, the pictures Robert took of her, the cross necklace she gave to him, and details of her last wish—to have her ashes thrown from the Roseman Bridge. Dismayed, and even shocked, at first, they realize how little they knew their mother—and how little they cared—which prompts one critic to ask: »Why does a movie about such an interesting and beautiful woman's desires have to begin and end with her semi-unpleasant and aggressively ordinary children?« (Enelow 58). Still, Fran-

cesca's legacy—and her sacrifice, the film suggests—becomes a catalyst in the lives of her children, who are finally moved to question their own choices and commitments.

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Kikujirō (菊次郎の夏, *Kikujirō no natsu*, 1999)

Jana Aresin

dir. Takeshi Kitano; prod. Masayuki Mori, Takio Yoshida; screenplay Takeshi Kitano; photography Katsumi Yanagishima; music Joe Hisaishi. 35mm, color, 121 mins. Bandai Visual and Tokyo FM, distrib. Nippon Herald Films and Office Kitano.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

In his eighth film, television personality, director, and actor Takeshi Kitano departed from his previous style of dark and violent movies to tell a sentimental adventure story of a young boy trying to find his mother. On his journey, the boy is accompanied by a gambling low-level gangster from the neighborhood (forced into this task by his wife). During a meandering summer road trip, the unlikely pair encounters a variety of eccentric characters, leading to both comic and tragic moments. The film was released in 1999, at the end of what came to be known as Japan's »lost decade,« following the burst of the so-called bubble economy of the 1980s. This decade was characterized by rising unemployment and growing economic precarity, and it coincided with two tragic events that are today still remembered as »national traumas« in Japan: the Great Hanshin (or Kobe) earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo attacks in Tokyo in 1995 (Yomota 174). The Japanese film industry, however, had been on the decline long before this period of economic stagnation. After a peak in domestic film production in the late 1950s, the growing market for television and foreign films weakened the local film industry and led to the disappearance of many studios in the 1970s (Yomota 20-21; Gibbs 120). Whereas this impeded the commercial success of the domestic film industry, the waning influence of major studios also opened up new opportunities for independent filmmakers, who often entered the film business as outsiders (Gibbs 119-20; McDonald 11-12).

Many of these filmmakers took on gloomier subjects in this social climate of uncertainty, focusing on the »fringes of service sector capitalist affluence« in response to the »post-morak [...] sensibility of advanced consumer capitalism« (Standish 332-33). A common theme of these new movies was a crisis of masculinity, as the postwar

ideal of the nuclear family with a »housewife« and breadwinning »salaryman« husband became less sustainable for more and more people. This coincided with a revival of the popular genre of the *yakuza* (gangster) movie by independent filmmakers—yet one that took on bleaker, more cynical tones, depicting its characters not as driven by honor and moral codes but rather as »irreverent, unpredictable, and often melancholic ›losers« (Chaplin 367).

One director, who came to be primarily associated with these new *yakuza* films, particularly in the West, was Takeshi Kitano. He made his directorial debut in 1989 after over a decade as a comedian and television personality that had made him a household name in Japanese entertainment. After a string of violent and nihilistic films, Kitano directed two films at the end of the 1990s that instead marked »a tentative process of trial and error [...] to show human solitude and salvation« (Yomota 184): *Hana-bi* (1997), which introduced Kitano's works to Western audiences on a larger scale, and *Kikujirō* (1999).

Whereas *Hana-bi* retained the formal setting of a crime drama, with *Kikujirō*, Kitano approached a different genre. A tragicomedy about a chaotic summer road trip, it tells the story of Masao (played by Yusuke Sekiguchi), a young boy who lives with his grandmother in Tokyo. He has never met his parents. His father died young, and his estranged mother supposedly lives far away due to her work. When Masao's classmates leave one after the other for summer vacation with their families, Masao is left behind. As he visits his friends' houses and the deserted local football club, a growing sense of loneliness and melancholia settles in, which saturates the entire film's atmosphere. When Masao accidentally comes across a photo of his mother, he decides to leave home and visit her by himself in Toyohashi, a seaside town in Central Japan. After almost being robbed by a gang of local youths, he is offered help by a woman from the neighborhood. Upon learning of Masao's plan, she orders her husband, Kikujirō (played by Kitano), whose name both Masao and the audience only learn at the end of the film, to accompany him.

The film features tropes and themes associated with the melodramatic mode, most prominently the disruption of the family unit and the attempt to reunite or »repair« it as well as the clash between social norms and expectations with those living outside of these norms or failing to conform to them. At the same time, the film complicates the more conventional narrative trajectories of these themes. For example, unlike in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which Kitano named as an inspiration in a 1999 interview, the journey in *Kikujirō* does not conclude with a return to, or a reaffirmed appreciation of, the traditional family.

The theme of the disrupted or alienated family is represented in the motif of the search for a distant parental figure. This search, however, is not successful and culminates in the film's central dramatic moment, when Masao and Kikujirō finally arrive in Toyohashi, only to discover that Masao's mother has remarried and lives a seemingly idyllic middle class life with a house, garden, and new family. The scene does not only mark the loss of the imagined mother figure (who is assumed to await the eventual reunification with her son) but it also denies the simplistic story arc of Kikujirō eventually serving as a substitute father figure for Masao. Right before the encounter with Masao's mother, Kikujirō jokes that she might fall for him, and he would become Masao's new father. The confrontation with reality—that Masao's mother has in fact left him behind long ago and has started a new life—does not only dismiss this unlikely scenario but also seems to highlight the improbability of a positive outcome of

the characters' journey driven by both Masao's and Kikujirō's child-like naïveté. At the same time, the scene seems to reject a simple »redemption« arc of Kikujirō's character developing from a neglectful and irresponsible gambler to a loving father figure. Masao's disappointment and sadness are not easily mended by Kikujirō's attempts to console him and are almost overshadowed by Kikujirō's own pain and helplessness following this confrontation with reality.

In fact, many critics have pointed out that the movie's emotional journey is not only about Masao's search for his mother but at least as much, or even more, about Kikujirō himself (Gerow 164, 168). This already seems to be implied in the film's title, referencing the road trip as »Kikujirō's summer« (*Kikujirō no natsu*), not that of Masao. The encounter with Masao's mother prompts Kikujirō to visit the care home where his own estranged elderly mother lives on their way back from Toyohashi. However, paralleling Masao's failed attempt to reunite with his mother, Kikujirō eventually leaves the care home without having spoken to her.

A second recurring theme of the film—that of the social outsider—seems to tap into melodrama's concern with individuals in conflict with social norms. Throughout the story, the film juxtaposes two different sides of Japanese society. On the one hand, it depicts the orderly middle class life, which had served as an ideal during the years of economic growth, and which is embodied in the nuclear families of Masao's classmates leaving for seaside holidays in their cars, as well as the suit or uniform wearing hotel managers, taxi drivers, and paramedics forced to deal with Kikujirō's outbursts and antics throughout the film. Their frustrated yet polite, sometimes horrified, reaction to Kikujirō is the source of many of the film's comedic moments. On the other hand, the film depicts a different side of Japanese society: the tired lorry drivers, traveling artists, poets, bikers, and gangsters that Masao and Kikujirō encounter during their journey, and that Kikujirō belongs to as well.

However, the film does not unequivocally represent these characters' diversion from social norms as marked by conflict and suffering. The initial motivation for Masao and Kikujirō's journey and the absence of traditional forms of parental love and care—both characters' inability to connect to their mothers as well as Kikujirō's failure in functioning as a parental figure—produce emotions of disappointment, loneliness, and sadness. Yet, the two protagonists also encounter kindness and support from various »unconventional« characters they meet on the road: culminating in Masao and Kikujirō camping with an aspiring writer travelling the country who gives them a lift to Toyohashi, in addition to the two bikers from whom Kikujirō earlier in the film had stolen an angel-shaped bell in an attempt to console Masao. This drawn-out episode in the second half of the film seems to serve as the character's defiant attempt to construct their own makeshift version of the classic »family summer vacation« that Masao set out to find. He may be »motherless,« but he is not uncared for. In a series of typical summer activities and games turned on their head (dressing up as fish while fishing in a fishless pond; stealing watermelon from a nearby field), the film seems to both parody and ironically mimic standardized notions of family life, yet also offer the hopeful promise that companionship and affection can be found outside of this narrowly defined social institution.

The film makes use of a melodramatic mode of framing two central conflicts—the alienated family and the failure to conform to social norms—in a sentimental way aimed at eliciting sympathy and compassion. It does not fully resolve these tensions.

The film does not conclude with the reunification of the family, and Kikujirō does not undergo fundamental transformation from good-for-nothing outsider to responsible father figure. But neither does the film end in complete tragedy. Rather, it alternates between sad, melancholic moments and humorous, consoling, and hopeful ones—and refuses simple narrative closure to the very end.

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Water Drops on Burning Rocks (*Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, 2000)

Cornelia Ruhe and Thomas Wortmann

dir. François Ozon; *prod.* Olivier Delbosc, Marc Missonnier, Christine Gozlan, Alain Sarde, Kenzô Horikoshi; *screenplay* François Ozon; *photography* Jeanne Lapoirie. 35mm, color, 90 mins. Fidélité Productions, Les Films Alain Sarde, Euro Space, Studio Images 6, *distrib.* Haut et Court.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes is a Chinese box version of the melodrama. By intermedially referring to the genre classic *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which itself refers to Douglas Sirk's → *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), François Ozon's third feature film is a melodrama in its own right while at the same time providing metafictional commentary on the genre as a whole. It can thus be read as a postmodern and inter-sectional critique of melodramatic conventions.

The film is based on a play Fassbinder wrote in 1964 (Levergois). Ozon adapted it but kept the structure of four acts. In act one, Leopold (played by Bernard Giraudeau), an attractive man in his fifties, brings home and seduces twenty-year-old Franz (Malik Zidi). In act two, Franz has moved in with Leopold. Their relationship is based on an asymmetrical distribution of power, with the authoritative Leopold bossing Franz around and constantly criticizing him. In act three, Leopold is on a business trip when Franz's ex-fiancée, Anna (Ludivine Sagnier), shows up and Franz seduces her akin to his first meeting with Leopold. At the beginning of act four, Anna and Franz want to leave the apartment to start a new life together, when Leopold unexpectedly returns and inveigles Anna. Vera (Anna Thomson), Leopold's former partner, who underwent sex change surgery to become the woman she thought Leopold wanted, also drops by. Leopold initiates a foursome, but Franz is unwilling to join, and Vera soon realizes that it is not she whom her former lover is interested in. Franz, who has taken poison to escape the toxic relationship with Leopold, dies after a long conversation with Vera who admits she never managed to forget Leopold.

Fassbinder always owned his indebtedness to Sirk's classic (*Fassbinder*; see also *Handyside*), a film in which Cary, an elderly suburban widow, falls in love with Ron, her much younger gardener, causing turmoil both within her family and her larger social circle. While the chain of transmission is clear, the model has undergone significant variations along the way: Cary and Ron's alliance is socially unacceptable in Sirk's film, due to the age difference and the fact that he does not fit the conventions of her upper class surroundings. In *Angst essen Seele auf*, Ali and Emmi, Fassbinder's version of an unlikely couple, differ not only in age—she being the older one—but also concerning their ethnic background: He is a migrant worker from Morocco, she is a German cleaning lady. According to standards of the 21st century, Ozon's couple would be considerably less surprising. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, when the film is set, the union between two men would already be problematic enough, while the considerable age difference further adds to this. Taking Sirk's film as the original, the situation thus shifts from a bias concerning age and class (Sirk), to age and race (Fassbinder), and ends with age and sexual orientation. Focusing on a homosexual couple, Ozon's film explicitly brings to the surface what was only implicitly alluded to in Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* and Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* through the two leading actors: Rock Hudson's homosexuality was an open secret in Hollywood and El Hedi ben Salem was Fassbinder's romantic partner at the time of filming. While Fassbinder's use of nude scenes already goes as far as to elevate the male body into the realm of »pure [visual] spectacle« (Neale 12), he does not transcend the limits of heteronormativity. It is only with Ozon's film that male homosexuality comes out of the closet and takes center stage. The category of race is also still obliquely present in Ozon's film, which makes the character of Franz legible as a person of color by choosing an actor with Algerian origin to embody him. On the one hand, this could be seen as a broadening of perspective towards a more intersectional approach to individual as well as structural discrimination.

On the other hand, it would be short-sighted to see only the films' younger characters as subjected to discrimination. In Sirk's film, Cary's gender and the restrictions of the 1950s hold her in much tighter bonds than the independent Ron; in *Angst essen Seele auf*, as a cleaner, Emmi suffers from class prejudice and feels unseen as an older woman. In both cases, the family is the place where these restrictions are articulated. It is significant that this institution has lost its impact in Ozon's film, although it does remain the framework of Anna's idea of a future for her and Franz. Even more so, Ozon's Leopold has interiorized the heteronormative rules to the point of having forced a former partner to undergo a sex change surgery (Ozon explains having borrowed this part from a text Fassbinder wrote for *In a Year of 13 Moons* [1978]; Levergois 122).

All three films are thus variations on the power relations among couples, be they hetero- or homosexual. Franz, who, in their first encounter, had confessed to a recurring erotic dream in which he was »like a woman, I probably was a woman in that dream,« has taken the feminine part in what seems like the reenactment of a typical 1950s heterosexual pair (Parent and Xanthos). And while Franz only dreams of being a woman (and acts like the parody of a 1950 housewife after a while: cooking, cleaning the house and getting dressed up for Leopold), Leopold's ex-partner Vera has already become a woman surgically. Through this, she embodies the radicalization of Franz's gender performance as a »housewife.«

However, instead of showing Leopold as self-hating and repressed, Ozon endows him with a »sexual mobility« that Andrew Asibong deems characteristic of the film-

maker (Asibong 64; Levergois 123). The film is a homage to Fassbinder and Sirk, as Ozon varies his predecessors' works, especially Fassbinder's, on various levels: from the 1970s interior of Leopold's apartment and the integration of a German Schlager song, to the signature 360-dolly of Fassbinder's favorite director of photography, Michael Ballhaus. At the same time, and not least through the grimly cheerful overacting of Bernard Giraudeau in the role of Leopold, it is also a pastiche of Fassbinder's and Sirk's films, highlighting and mocking their determination to maintain a serious and melodramatic tone throughout their films. As a meta-melodrama, Ozon's film renegotiates the stereotypes and conventions underlying the genre.

While in Sirk's film it is clear that Cary and Ron's marriage is prevented by the suffocating atmosphere society imposes on them, and that Cary suffers from it much more than Ron does, in Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf*, Emmi has already interiorized some of their environment's hostile behavior. She degrades Ali just as much as her colleagues: Instead of suffering with him, she ignores his pain, occasionally even adding to it. Ozon's Leopold is an authoritarian and dominant figure with sadistic inclinations. He does not need the support of the town's upper class society in the country club in *All that Heaven Allows*, nor that of Emmi's colleagues in Fassbinder's film, to make others suffer. He alone can provide the contempt necessary to manipulate and crush the other characters.

While it would be interesting to explore the light that this interpretation retrospectively sheds on *All that Heaven Allows*, and especially on the character of Cary, this exacerbation of a crucial aspect already latent in earlier melodramas is in Ozon's film, mostly, a function of its structure: Unlike its predecessors, and due to its origin as a dramatic text, the film is a chamber play. There are no friends or colleagues, there is no country club acting as a sounding board, amplifying the characters' fears of rejection. The moment Leopold's apartment door is closed behind Franz (and later the other protagonists), the trap snaps shut, and they are never to leave again, at least not physically. Franz's only self-determined act is his suicide, the only way to escape Leopold's grasp.

Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes reduces the melodrama to its essence, stripping it of all auxiliary characters. The extrapolation of social convention provided for in the films Ozon refers to, can now be done without, as—in a Foucauldian sense—the characters have incorporated the mechanisms of social control. Melodrama as Ozon shows it is a *huis clos*, an unescapable trap where the struggle for (social) control knows no winners and allows for no escape, except for the audience: The intersectional dilation as well as the exacerbation of the prototypical elements of the genre, allows us to see them for what they are.

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Erin Brockovich (2000)

Sarah Marak

dir. Steven Soderbergh; prod. Danny DeVito; screenplay Susannah Grant; photography Edward Lachman; music Thomas Newman. 35mm, color, 131 min. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.

With its David and Goliath story and rags-to-riches theme, *Erin Brockovich* has been described as an »American Fairytale« (Penning). Starring Julia Roberts as Erin Brockovich, the film was a major box office success for director Steven Soderbergh. The director also released his film *Traffic* in the same year and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for both films—ultimately winning the award for *Erin Brockovich*. Star actress Roberts won both an Oscar and Golden Globe for her performance as the hard-working legal assistant and single mother. The biopic is based on true events in the life of Erin Brockovich, who later became a real-world TV personality, author, and motivational speaker. The film relies on »victimhood's capacity to induce sympathy« (Loren and Metelmann 10), focusing on the protagonist's efforts to bring justice to the community of Hinkley, California, where Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), a large corporation, has knowingly poisoned the local water. Erin and her own former lawyer, Ed Masry (played by Albert Finney), take on the energy giant from their relatively minor office. In the end, they land an unlikely victory in court—with PG&E paying a record sum of \$333 million to the plaintiffs—which turns the once destitute Brockovich into a millionaire.

Early on, Erin is established as a melodramatic heroine *par excellence*: Broke and still jobless after a series of unsuccessful job interviews, we see her in a car accident and involved in the subsequent legal trial against the accident's perpetrator. The audience, unlike the jury, knows Erin is not at fault, as the film previously shows how the car hits Erin at an intersection. During the trial, however, the defense attorney insinuates that Erin—single mother of three children from two divorced husbands—provoked the accident due to the other driver's expensive car and his status as a doctor,



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

precisely because she wants monetary compensation. The jury denies her this compensation and, as Bingham writes, »Erin is at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder [...] victimized on all sides in the *female* biopic tradition« (337). These first scenes depict Erin as the morally righteous protagonist so characteristic for melodrama, despite her coarse manners and loose mouth—according to Bingham, characteristics usually found in the »male biopic tradition« (338)—which inspires »sympathetic allegiance toward the suffering protagonist« (Weik von Mossner 297).

Even though she is portrayed as a victim—and specifically one of the legal system—Erin is determined to not give up and will instead soon climb the social ladder through her hard-work, dedication, and personal sacrifice. Always wearing high heels, short skirts, and slinky tops, she demonstrates her tenaciousness for the first time when she basically forces Ed Masry, the lawyer who lost her accident case, to hire her as a paralegal, with no work experience or relevant education. When Erin discovers that PG&E pays for the doctor's appointments of people whose properties the company wants to buy, she decides to further investigate and soon uncovers that the water in the town of Hinkley has for years been contaminated with carcinogenic hexavalent chromium. Despite her ensuing work for those who seem even more disenfranchised than she is, Erin also develops self-esteem and earns the respect of others along the way. *Erin Brockovich* thus displays a narrative that is perfectly in line with what Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann have termed »the contemporary culture of victimhood,« that »has developed on the one hand in struggles against hegemonic power structures, and on the other as a form of social legitimation« (10).

The »villain« of the narrative, PG&E, is visually almost absent from the film. Yet, *Erin Brockovich* sketches the traditional Manichean conflict of the melodramatic tradition. With pollution and toxicity at the heart of the story and »the representative of big business« (Ingram 3) as its villain, Soderbergh's film can be categorized as an environmental melodrama with »the tendency [...] to construct environmental issues as individualized [...] simplif[y]ing the complex, often ambiguous allocation of blame and responsibility in such matters« (Ingram 2). The audience learns of the contamination in Hinkley through the testimonies of personal suffering related to Erin by the small desert town's inhabitants. The consequences of industrial pollution are thus shown in domestic spaces—backyards, living rooms, bedrooms. In a scene in which Erin insinuates to Donna Jensen (played by Marg Helgenberger), who has already developed several tumors, that her water might be contaminated, the film develops its affective force. Jensen's horror-stricken face as she realizes that her kids are playing in a pool possibly full of invisible toxicity in the backyard prompts »viewers [...] to feel strongly with and for a mother who tries to protect her children from harm« (Weik von Mossner 301). Later in the film, before it is revealed that Donna has developed yet another tumor, this time malignant, we see her husband, at night, standing in front of the PG&E plant, crying in despair. Emblematic for the unequal power structures in the seemingly hopeless fight against »big business,« he starts hurling rocks at the building.

With her open and cordial manner, and wearing her heart on her sleeve, Erin manages to connect to the inhabitants of Hinkley, who suffer from various cancers and other health issues likely caused by the chromium contamination. The people she visits—most importantly Donna Jensen and Annabelle Daniels (Kristina Malota), a young girl suffering from a brain tumor—trust Erin, the film suggests, precisely because she is *not* a lawyer. When asked if she was a lawyer herself, Erin replies: »Hell, no. I

hate lawyers. I just work for them.« While the people of Hinkley open their doors to Erin, they refuse to talk to Theresa Dallavalle (Veanne Cox), a female lawyer who is supposed to support Masry with the case. Dallavalle represents the exact opposite of Erin: She is a professional lawyer, dressed in formal attire, wears her hair neatly pinned up, and asks the inhabitants of Hinkley to spare her the »sentimental« details of their suffering. As Elaine Roth writes, »as part of her lack of femininity, Dallavalle [...] possesses none of the sentimental resources that aid Brockovich« (56). While Dallavalle holds the necessary legal education, Brockovich has her heart in the right place (»Herzens-Bildung« [Penning 224]). This contrast highlights the film's complex gender politics. While Erin is a working single mother, whose later budding relationship with biker George (Aaron Eckhardt) subverts traditional gender roles—he takes care of her children at home while she works long hours—other working women are depicted as heartless careerists, which weakens the film's progressive message. Within the film's gender logics, Brockovich, who often struggles to find a babysitter and sometimes takes her children with her to work, is allowed to sacrifice personal time with her children because she speaks up for the disenfranchised and suffering children of Hinkley—and it is specifically the story of young Annabelle that leads Erin's son to accept her long hours away. Bingham even suggests that the inhabitants of Hinkley, many of whom were employed and thus »provided for« by PG&E, are her metaphorical children: She thus »becomes the avenger of these ›children‹ who have been poisoned and deceived by their guardian« (346).

It is only through Erin's compassion and the plaintiffs' trust in her that the hundreds of signatures needed to bring the lawsuit forward are secured. In the end, her hard work and dedication are rewarded with a win in court and a record payment of \$333 million. Even her romantic relationship with George seems to be repaired when she takes him to Hinkley to show the reason for her frequent absence. They meet Donna Jensen—again, in a domestic setting, not in a court or an office but on her veranda—to deliver the good news. When informed that she will be awarded several million dollars in compensation, Donna begins to cry. Her tears, however, cannot be read simply as tears of joy. The conversation with Erin makes clear that they are rather tears of relief in the face of immense medical bills. *Erin Brockovich*, therefore, does not conform with formulaic endings of environmental melodrama, »when the hero resolves the narrative problem through decisive action [and it] may appear too pat and glib a response to environmental crises which, in the real world outside the cinema, do not have their loose ends neatly tied up« (Ingram 2). One aspect that is neatly resolved, however, is that of Erin's own story of upward mobility. Not only does she continue working for Masry. She is also awarded a \$2 million check.

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In the Mood for Love (花樣年華, *Fa yeung nin wa*, 2000)

Norbert M. Schmitz

dir. Wong Kar-wai; prod. Wong Kar-wai; screenplay Wong Kar-wai; photography Christopher Doyle, Mark Lee Ping Bin; music Michael Galasso, Shigeru Umebayashi. 35mm, color, 98 mins. Jet Tone Production, distrib. Paradis Films.

In the Mood for Love—the original Chinese title of which translates literally to »Flowery Years«—is at once a work of consummate, perfected aestheticism and an uncompromising melodrama. Despite an unreserved display of the most intense feelings, a suspicion of kitsch, which figures in every unbroken work of this genre, does not even begin to arise. The categorization of the film as melodrama is quickly realized: The story of love that does not become real, the focus on completely pure and unreserved feelings, the melting away in longing for connection to other lifeworlds, are all well-known ingredients of melodrama.

Much could be said about this complex masterpiece, this unconventional melodrama and unquestioned artifact of high art—but the main question of this article is what the film can tell us about the structure and function of melodrama as such. In the usual hierarchy of genres, melodrama sits toward the bottom, due in part to the fact that modern art, in the sense of critically reflexive aesthetics, fundamentally rejects the unbroken emotionality of classical Hollywood cinema, or melodrama in general. The question, therefore, is: What does such aesthetic sentimentality signify in so-called art cinema?

For stylistic reasons, the critically acclaimed *In the Mood for Love*, which won several awards (among them a César and European Film Prize), was primarily shot in Macao. The story is set in British Hong Kong in 1962, and stars Maggie Cheung as Su Li-zhen, the head secretary of a shipping company, and Tony Leung as print journalist Chow Mo-wan. When their two paths cross as tenants in the same apartment building, a friendship develops between them. The sense of abandonment Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan share in their daily lives, due to their spouses' regular absence—one on weeks-long business trips to Japan, the other a hotel receptionist working night shifts—is the



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

starting point for a bond that grows ever stronger (see Marschall 401-03). As the story unfolds, they find more parallels, such as their love of martial arts stories and their tendency for lonely dinners in a close-by soup kitchen. But what makes them grow even closer is the painful realization that their spouses have ventured on a love affair. Not wanting to be like them, Su Li-zhen and Chow Mo-wan end their own emotional, but still platonic, liaison. Convinced that she will never abandon her husband, Chow Mo-wan leaves for a work assignment in Singapore, and the question of whether she would consider accompanying him is audible only as an off-camera comment. Even though Su Li-zhen later secretly follows him to Singapore, she avoids meeting Chow Mo-wan, only leaving silent messages of love, like lipstick-stained cigarette butts, which reveal her presence in his apartment. As Susanne Marshall writes: »Calls not taken, silence at the other end of the line, and finally a silenced telephone narrate the slow loss of contact. In 1966, when both return to the place of their shared memories, they miss each other again and once and for all. The former landlady [played by Siu Ping Lam], whose vigilance previously stood in the way of their love's happiness, leaves Hong Kong in the face of the uncertain political situation and gives her apartment to Su Li-zhen, who moves in with her son who has been born in the meantime. Also Chow Mo-wan seeks out the old tenement but leaves when he learns that a woman with a child lives there now. The film ends at the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia, the largest sacred structure on earth and a ›museum of jealousy, passion, and love‹ (Wong Kar-wai). Here, Chow Mo-wan whispers his secret into a hollow in the stone, which he then seals. The love between him and Su Li-zhen remains forever preserved in a secret place« (401-03).

This story, which is melodramatic in the literal sense, is forced into a strict and artificial corset of form, marked by an almost claustrophobic permanence of glimpses through small rooms, narrow corridors, and steep staircases. The protagonists move naturally through the narrowest side streets in the quiet alcoves of a Chinese-European city of modern, international trade. The convoluted corridors and rooms hardly allow for a clear view, either. Only towards the end, when the actual plot is already concluded, and during the dreamlike journey to the temple of Angkor Wat, does this closed space open some. Throughout the film, the reality of the story rather resembles a rapturous memory. The strictness of the formal order, the focus on the glances of the male protagonist, and the fixation on the beauty of the female protagonist together become the vanishing point of a permanent desire, the elegiac mood of which almost renders an actual fulfillment seem redundant. The idiosyncratic lack of seriousness and the simultaneous heaviness of the role play with which the two envision the end of their relationship—the imagined end to the interplay of desiring and being desired—only highlights the loss of a stringent temporality, a loss that the psychologist Ludwig Binswanger once identified as the core of melancholy (Binswanger 23; Kirchmann). The almost cyclical repetition of tango and pop music render the past idiosyncratically present. The film takes place more in the temporal mode of the past—beyond an ordinary present, which has been characteristic of cinematography since its beginnings. In this respect, the film reminds us more of the temporality of the photograph, with its reference to the depicted as something lost in the past—an experience of time also reflected in the film through the almost excessive celebration of 1960s design and music. Even for Western viewers of this film, which is aimed at a global audience, this stylization contains the picturesque strangeness of a bygone era rather than the exoticism

of a foreign China. This is also evident in the nearly excessive presentation of Qipao dresses: not only because these fashionable 60s patterns characterized contemporaneous Western dresses, but also because the Qipao—with its tight and close-fitting cut—marks the European incursion into China's dress culture at the beginning of the 20th century. Or, even better: Because, as an external sign of reform and the individualism of modernity, it has become the costume and symbol of the emancipation of a new China, as the Sun Yat-sen suit has.

In this sense, art house cinema has long been global art cinema. Wong Kar-wai's references in the film are thus to European art cinema or the European novel—rather than to Chinese cinema or the literature of the Far East—which became part of Chinese modernity through the mediation of Chinese reformers and Westerners beginning in the second half of the 19th century. An original Chinese tradition is mentioned only in passing, in the enthusiasm that the main characters share for martial arts, a genre quite different from melodrama—in which action destroys a dwelling in deep feelings, and thus with it the essence of melodrama.

Usually, such exclusive focus on emotions, in works like Käutner's *Romance in a Minor Key* or Cameron's *Titanic*, is made more appealing to a broader audience through social drama or a morally charged plot. However, these feigned fractures allow viewers—and often also male viewers of this »women's genre«—to indulge without restraint in an otherwise tabooed »pornography of feeling,« where pornography refers to an unbroken, direct, and never critically questioned display of feeling. Wong Kar-wai's stylish choreography and Christopher Doyle and Mark Lee Ping Bin's perfect camerawork thus transform trashy sentimentalism into subtle emotion. On a meta-level, the film openly exhibits its aesthetic structure—especially through its numerous redundancies in content and form—that the structure of the work of art as the subject of the same becomes one with the hypostasis of the pure feeling of love. Melodrama as pure artistic form!

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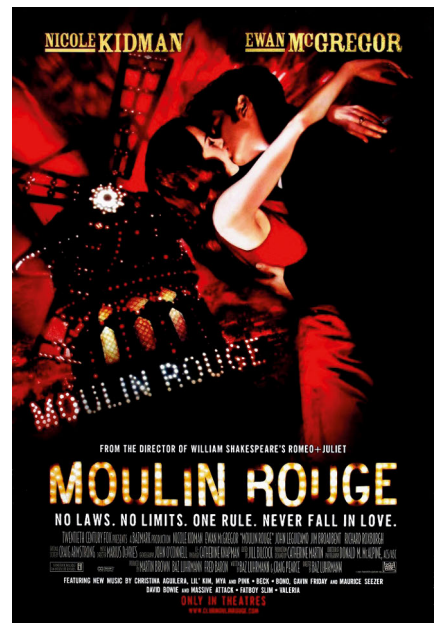
Moulin Rouge! (2001)

Nicole Wiedenmann

dir. Baz Luhrmann; prod. Martin Brown, Baz Luhrmann, Fred Baron; screenplay Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce; photography Donald M. McAlpine; music Craig Armstrong. 35 mm, color, 128 mins. Bazmark Productions, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox.

Moulin Rouge! is a U.S.-Australian musical film drama by Baz Luhrmann and the conclusion of his Red Curtain trilogy, which began with *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and continued with *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996) (Rosiny 174). According to Luhrmann, in each of these three films a different aspect of theatrical conventions is at the center of a synthesis of stage and screen: dance in *Strictly Ballroom*, Shakespeare's language in *Romeo+Juliet*, and, finally, music in *Moulin Rouge!*, in all its popular varieties from rock songs and musical themes to Offenbach's can-can (Coyle 13; Krenn 7-8). Another feature of the Red Curtain trilogy is the transfer of highly familiar narratives into different times and/or spaces. In *Moulin Rouge!*, Offenbach's operettas *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* are blended with topoi from Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias*, Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata* based on Dumas' novel, and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* and set against the backdrop of the 19th century Moulin Rouge (Coyle 13). These set pieces are then interspersed with music and dance interludes, with Luhrmann taking his cue from both the American revue film of Busby Berkley and Bollywood film, which he values as an opulent theatricalized cinema that is equal parts musical comedy and tragedy (Rosiny 174).

The setting of this spectacle is the legendary nightclub Moulin Rouge in 1899. The hitherto unsuccessful writer Christian (played by Ewan McGregor) comes to Paris to find his fortune as an author. He indeed succeeds in being commissioned to write a play for the Moulin Rouge, in which the beautiful courtesan Satine (Nicole Kidman) is to play the leading role. Satine is the star of the establishment and the men are at her feet—but she is suffering from an incurable case of tuberculosis. In order for the play



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to be put on stage, Satine is supposed to seduce the rich Duke (played by Richard Roxburgh) and win him over as a financial backer. Due to a misunderstanding, however, she initially mistakes Christian for the Duke and falls in love with him. Satine ultimately chooses true love over fame and a financially comfortable life—but then dies of her illness in Christian's arms.

Luhrmann follows a practice of postmodern eclecticism and of intertextual as well as intermedial referencing, both on the level of narrative and in their audio-visual presentation. This pastiche is not arbitrary, however, it reflexively pays homage to the principle of excess on the most diverse levels. Thus, the formula that Harold Zidler, the director of the Moulin Rouge (played by James »Jim« Broadbent), uses to mold the planned show also provides an apt description of Luhrmann's film itself: »The show will be a magnificent, opulent, tremendous, stupendous, gargantuan bedazzlement! A sensual ravishment. It will be spectacular, spectacular. No words in the vernacular can describe this great event, you'll be dumb with wonderment.« And the focus is not only on the constitutive sense of sight, but, as far as »a sensual ravishment« is concerned, all senses are to always be stimulated and overwhelmed. This form of melodrama has been referred to as *melodrama of excess*, in which shifts within relationships and feelings are accompanied by formal aesthetic exaggerations, such as opulent color dramaturgies, a dominant use of music, saturated pictorial spaces, rapid editing sequences, and sudden weather changes that mirror the moods of the characters (Brunner). This »hyperintensification of expression« (Brunner) comes close to kitsch but is again ironically undercut by Luhrmann. Accordingly, the protagonists in *Moulin Rouge!* sing in front of heart-shaped decorations and dance around a miniature Eiffel Tower under a moon reminiscent of Meliès, who joins in the lovers' song with the voice of Plácido Domingo. What is satirically revealed in Luhrmann's *melodrama of excess*, however, are the strategies of melodrama itself: a form of excessive melodrama already existed in the 19th century—thus the setting of the Moulin Rouge can be interpreted as a return to the cradle of carnivalesque melodrama. As Tom Gunning puts it: »Certainly, one of the main genres in the theater was melodrama. But, there's a 19th century form of melodrama, particularly in France, which is very filled with blood and thunder and sensations. It was very popular and, again, carnivalesque« (qtd. in Anderson). In addition, *Moulin Rouge!* also cites classics of U.S. melodrama: for example, in that Satine's face is staged with veils, as in Marlene Dietrich's films by Josef von Sternberg, or when a desperate Christian calls Satine's name in the rain, just as Marlon Brando called Stella's in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In addition, the conflicts of the characters and their states of mind are reflected, quite in the manner of a Douglas Sirk (Klinger), in the furnishings of the interiors, the respective blue or red coloring of the settings, the color of the clothing, and the spontaneous changes in weather.

While music in most melodramas is not equally important as plot and visual language (Brunner), it is central in *Moulin Rouge!*. Luhrmann takes seriously the audio-visuals (Chion) of melodrama, only to simultaneously break it ironically through exaggeration. Accordingly, medleys are repeatedly used in *Moulin Rouge!* to allow for as many quotes and collages as possible on the level of sound, too, yet at the same time revealing the textual monotony of well-known pop and rock songs on subjects of love and jealousy. Last but not least, songs are employed to comment on the dilemma of whether Satine should settle down to a luxurious life at the side of the rich Duke (e.g.

through Madonna's »Material Girl« and Marilyn Monroe's »Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend«) or follow her great love, the poor poet Christian.

The same old story of a man's love for a consumptive courtesan is also retold on a narrative level. Besides the already mentioned classics on the subject in novel and opera, the same story is negotiated in *Spectacular, Spectacular*, which Christian, Satine, and their troupe want to perform—this time between a poor lute player and a courtesan of an Indian sultan: The Lady of the Camellias meets Bollywood. However, as the Duke, the financier of the play, insists, the courtesan ought to die at the end of the play, following the laws of the genre. In the *Moulin Rouge*, the narcoleptic Argentine also tells the story of the tango in the form of a song about a sex worker in a Buenos Aires brothel and a man who falls for her. Thus, the narrative structure again and again operates according to the logic of *mise-en-abyme*, and in this respect confirms Linda Williams' observation that in melodrama there are »narratives that seem circular and repetitive« (3).

Furthermore, melodrama in general, and *Moulin Rouge!* in particular, aims at an explicit display of the body. In addition to the bodily ornaments of the revue (Kracauer), this »bodily excess« is here primarily attached to Satine, who embodies the classic role of the beautiful woman »with a deadly or debilitating disease« (Williams 4). According to Williams, melodrama is a spectacle of the body in which we see the character at the mercy of intense sensations and the body beside itself with pain and sadness (4). Accordingly, in *Moulin Rouge!*, the pain of the consumptive Satine is staged as a spectacle of the female body and female martyrdom. For Susan Sontag, tuberculosis is the misunderstood, mysterious disease of the 19th century that served as a positive metaphor, marking the sick person a venerable, exceptionally sensitive, and passionate character. The audience learns about Satine's tuberculosis very early in the film—and they know that she is going to die. Nevertheless, her body is permanently staged as an aesthetic spectacle—often with the help of close-ups and slow motion: Her noble and spiritualized pallor, the pale pink cheeks, the rattle and the feverish look during a seizure, and the fainting all construe a romanticizing semantics of a too-early, tragic, but passionate, passing. Already in the libretto of Puccini's opera, it is said: »The blood of youth was flowing warm and red through her veins and colored her cheeks softly pink upon the white of her transparent skin, a white that resembled that of camellia.« Satine's beautiful but ailing body becomes the permanent object of the audience's and the characters' gazes: For example, when the Duke's eyes (literally) light up at the sight of her. Furthermore, the visual code of the coughed-up blood on her pale face and spotless white handkerchief is repeated excessively, such as in the red and white color scheme of the costumes or in the red and white rose petals that fall to the ground and frame her in the moment of her death.

According to Rick Altman, it is redundancies and such »unmotivated events, [...] highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles« (345) like these that alert us to the existence of a deeper logic of the film and indicate that the excess is organized systematically (347). Thus, Luhrmann here adheres to the principle of cinematographic excess, following Kristin Thompson, in which the cinematic means become independent spectacles and their use is no longer motivated by the requirements of comprehension (55–56). Nevertheless, the cinematographic excess does serve a function: The film allows in cinematographic curiosity as such (while at the same time using it as a theme), and the opulence of the means transcends into a pure aestheticism of the melodramat-

ic. *Moulin Rouge!* is thus a meta-melodrama that at the same time positions itself as a global melodrama: Because the film tells »a story about a time, a story about a place, a story about the people, but above all things a story about love—a love that will live forever«—a story at home in Argentina, France, India, and the whole world, and is retold over and over again, because »the show must go on. . .«

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Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad (कभी खुशी कभी ग़म, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, 2001)

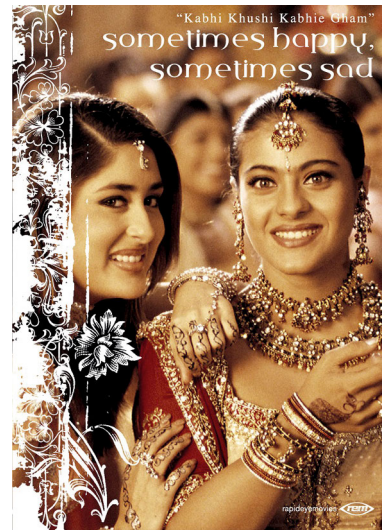
Mita Banerjee

dir. Karan Johar; prod. Yash Johar; screenplay Karan Johar, Sheena Parikh; photography Kiran Deohans; music Babloo Chakravarty. color, 211 mins. Dharma Productions, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox, Yash Raj Films.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham has all the ingredients of a Bollywood blockbuster. It stars Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, who have been termed Bollywood's »golden pair« for their iconic embodiment of star-crossed lovers. The film also features Amitabh Bachchan, who has been termed the »godfather« of Bollywood film. Directed by Karan Johar, one of the most renowned and commercially successful Bollywood directors, the film generated \$29 million in revenue.

When it emerged in the 1990s, Bollywood film was derided for its melodramatic form and overt sentimentalism. To Western audiences, in particular, it seemed to be the epitome of *kitsch*, not the least due to its elaborate song-and-dance sequences, reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood musicals. Based in Mumbai, Bollywood is generally equated with Indian popular cinema, in contrast to art film with avant-garde filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, the emblematic director of India's cinematic neorealism.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham has all the markers of melodrama, which are mapped onto an Indian cultural imaginary. From the very beginning, the film engages the topic of family lineage, kinship, and reproduction. Yash Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan), the owner of a global business empire, and his wife, Nandini (Jaya Bachchan), have been happily married for years. Theirs is a traditional Hindu marriage with the husband's patriarchal authority ruling supreme. The only thing that is missing for Yash's personal happiness is an heir for the family business. The failure of biological reproduction is not explicitly thematized by the film; it is hinted at only in a series of black-and-white family photographs in the introductory sequence. The filmic narrative opens with a scene of personal fulfillment: Yash comes home with a baby boy in his arms, whom he and Nandini adopt as their child.



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Their son, Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), grows up to follow in his father's footsteps: He is Western-educated, handsome, and completely devoted to his parents. He obeys his father's every wish and command. The reproduction of the familial status quo seems complete when Rahul is about to become engaged to the daughter of his father's business partner, a woman who is attractive, educated, and modern, and who seems to be Rahul's ideal match in social terms.

However, this line of the filmic narrative, which is defined by Hindu tradition, economic success, and absolute loyalty to the patriarch's wishes, is disrupted by a second narrative strand within the film. This second story line is incongruent with the first, in both content and style. The daughter of the family servant, Anjali (Kajol), is introduced as performing a breach of aesthetic style and moral tradition. Not only is she lower class, but she has grown up with her widowed father. To make matters worse, Anjali is a tomboy, unwilling to comply with traditional ideals of femininity. This defiance of etiquette is mirrored by the slapstick style that marks the sequences in which Anjali appears. A boyish character, who breaks whatever she touches and who constantly puts her foot in her mouth, she is all together unsuitable as a love interest for the family heir.

The pivot of the film emerges when both storylines meet. It is here that slapstick turns into melodrama. What results is an inner turmoil for Rahul, which is personal and socially disruptive. Unexpectedly both for himself and for others, Rahul falls in love with this tomboy, who he realizes is in fact a beautiful young woman. The melodramatic mode is particularly apt here. In Aristotelian tragedy, the hero's fate was seen as God-given and immutable. In melodrama, by contrast, individual fulfillment is possible, and there is at least the potential of a happy ending. Similarly, in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, inner conflict emerges as the gap between social expectations and individual fulfillment. In Hindu tradition, belonging to a particular caste is seen as ordained by fate; it cannot be changed. The film proceeds to challenge this dichotomy between fate and individual agency. Through the melodramatic mode, the film also engages the contrast between an arranged marriage and a love match.

For Rahul, this dilemma assumes both a biographical and a social dimension. A potential marriage to Anjali seems unthinkable because he would not only have to defy his father's wishes but would also have to rebel against the boundaries of caste. This inner conflict is exacerbated by his biography. As an adopted son, he has constantly tried to prove himself worthy of his father's love. In a dramatic plot twist, Anjali's father dies and leaves her orphaned. At this juncture, Rahul does what is ethically right but socially disruptive: He marries Anjali without his father's consent. In a scene ripe with melodrama, the young couple seeks the patriarch's blessing after the fact. They meet Yash and Nandini in their home at night, with a thunderstorm roaring in the background. The patriarch's verdict is both devastating and unsurprising: »Today,« he tells Rahul, »you have proven that you are not my son.«

In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, melodrama serves as a catalyst for action; climax and catastrophe are reached with the patriarch's verdict. However, it is tribute to the productiveness of the melodramatic mode that this outward climax gives rise to multiple internal conflicts. With Yash's verdict, the couple has been exiled. In the film, this is portrayed as the ultimate punishment within Hindu imagination. Rahul and Anjali have been forbidden from living with their family: the epitome of personal, social, and cultural stability. In the filmic narrative, this punishment is both personal and geographical. The couple has been banned not only from their family, but also from their country.

From now on, they will have to live in Britain. In this instance, the melodramatic mode can be seen as a form of postcolonial revenge. Traditionally, Bollywood film has often taken up concepts from Indian mythology. In its depiction of banishment, the film plays on the Hindu epic of the *Mahabharata*, in which the protagonist is banished to live in the jungle. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, however, the jungle turns out to be Great Britain, India's former colonizer.

It is during Rahul and Anjali's exile that the melodramatic mode unfolds its full potential. Significantly for the social dynamics that this genre can generate, the site of conflict has now changed. It is the patriarch, not his son, who is tormented by conflicting emotions. Moreover, his verdict and banishment of his son threaten to disrupt the stability of his marriage. Torn between her loyalty to her husband and her love for her son, Nandini starts questioning the soundness of her husband's judgment. At this juncture, the filmic mode highlights the forcefulness of social disruption as Nandini defies Yash for the first time in their marriage: »My mother told me that a husband was God. Today, you have proven that you are just a man.« Here, the film touches the core of Indian traditional values and points to Hindu religion as the basis of patriarchal order. In this understanding of marriage, the wife's duty to her husband is likened to religious devotion. It is her moral obligation to abide by her husband's wishes and to trust his judgment.

Through the motor of the melodramatic mode, the film weighs Hindu tradition against individual fulfillment and personal happiness. When relatives devise a plan for father and son to meet once more, the patriarch is at the height of his dilemma. His embodiment of the role of the Hindu patriarch clashes with his love for his adopted son. In a scene which is both melodramatic and shocking in its deliberate disruption of Hindu tradition, the patriarch proceeds to apologize to his son for his own error in judgment. In a gesture which for Indian audiences is disquieting in its symbolism, the father bends down to touch his son's feet, the utmost gesture of respect in Hindu religious tradition.

In Bollywood cinema, the melodramatic mode functions to navigate the tension between private and public spheres (Dudrah; Vasudevan). *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is emblematic of this tension. All characters are torn between social expectations and individual fulfillment. In the end, the resolution of personal conflict—the father's eventual acceptance of his son's inter-caste marriage—serves as an approval of social change. With the final approval of the patriarch, the film conveys to the nation that inter-caste marriage may indeed have come to be acceptable.

However, it is important to note that the film simultaneously disrupts and upholds the patriarchal order. It is to the patriarch, not to his wife, that Rahul looks for acceptance. Moreover, the film never mentions that Anjali, too, may struggle with an internal dilemma. As a filmic melodrama, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* focuses on the internal conflict of the middle class, not the lower castes. Anjali may have been a servant, but she has now been elevated to middle class status through her marriage to the family heir. In the filmic imaginary, the lower classes continue to be associated with slapstick, and neither poverty nor social immobility are dwelled upon. Social stability and cultural tradition may be challenged, but they are ultimately confirmed. In the same vein, the film is clearly rooted in heteronormative structures, with heterosexual marriage functioning as the ultimate resolution of all social conflict. In this sense, Bollywood may have come to accept inter-caste marriage, but same-sex relationships are still an »impossible de-

sire« (Gopinath). Finally, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, the tradition of India's religious majority. If the melodramatic mode serves to challenge some elements of this tradition, the tradition itself is ultimately upheld.

It is in another film where, almost a decade after the release of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, director Karan Johar would challenge this social status quo (Banerjee). In *My Name is Khan* (2010), Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol co-star once more, but this time, they defy cultural, religious, and social borders much more fundamentally: in a marriage between a Muslim man and a divorced Hindu woman, which also happens to be a union between a protagonist with autism and a woman who loves him against all odds.

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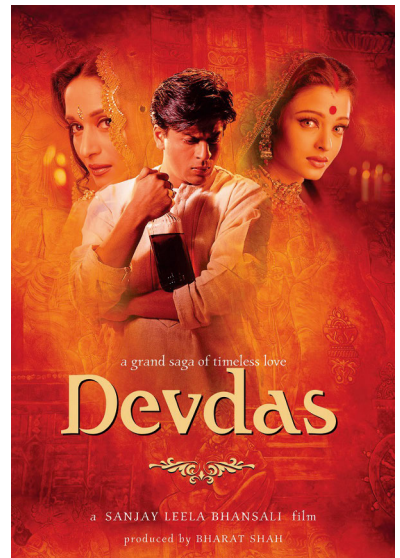
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Devdas (देवदास, 2002)

Vijay Mishra

dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali; prod. Bharat Shah; screenplay Prakash Kapadia, Sanjay Leela Bhansali; photography Binod Pradhan; music Ismail Darbar. 35mm, color, 184 mins. Mega Bollywood, distrib. Eros International and Focus International.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* is the third major Hindi remake of Pramathesh Chandra Barua's 1935 Bengali film version of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novel of the same name. Within a matter of months, Barua's *Devdas* was filmed in Hindi with the legendary singer-actor K. L. Saigal taking over Barua's own role as Devdas. While close replication of the novel has been rare, the novel's central theme—the Indian hero as the Werther figure, sentimental and always in a state of despondency and melancholia—has become the cornerstone of Indian films made in Hindi. However, the theme has required a structural correlative in the form of a local, nativist aesthetics of emotional response. Hindu culture already had a theory of reception that stretches back to the ancient Sanskrit manual of dramaturgy, Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra* (2nd century B.C.E). The manual prioritized the aesthetic response of pity, or *karuna*, as the most emotionally powerful and made it the dominant *rasa* of Indian reception theory. And it is here that, in the case of Indian cinema, the received English-colonial melodramatic mode enters the Indian aesthetic imaginary. Indeed, the success of Chattopadhyay's own novel was due to the way the writer had adapted the English and European melodrama of the »man of feeling,« so popular in colonial Bengal. The melodramatic mode, selectively invested with elements of Parsi theater and the folk dance tradition of Nautanki, within an Indian theory of artistic reception, became the dominant mode of narrative expression in Bollywood. In this mode, the man of feeling will not be able to translate love into action. Thus, in the Bhansali remake of the film, when Devdas' beloved Paro, in a red sari and black shawl, seeks him out in his own bedroom in the quiet of the night, he can only respond passively. His disconnected words alternate between what his parents would say and his own unease when faced with the strength



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of this forthright woman. But this is the melodramatic sublime, the Law of Reason for the moment in disarray, the specters of a castrating tyrannical father and the Oedipally inclined mother always lurking in the background. Failure to love does not lead to its transfer to another, nor to an alternative act as a compensation. Rather, it leads to an all-consuming death wish, as the hero is convinced that in this act of dissolution, of self-sacrifice, the world would itself come to an end. Devdas seeks out death, and after what can only be called a melancholic journey of life, finds it at the doorstep of Paro, the melodramatic hero fulfilling a promise made: »Before I die, I will see you.« But, of course, within the feudal laws of the regulative female body, she cannot step outside: The doors close and a final act of defiance and love is denied. This is the kind of mourning and self-denial that marks the Bollywood melodramatic film. Whereas elsewhere the form no longer excites, in Bollywood it thrives.

It is *Devdas*' preeminence as Indian cinema's definitive sentimental and melodramatic text that led Sanjay Leela Bhansali, some forty-seven years after the last version, to recreate *Devdas* as a pure »Bollywood« film. As argued by India's foremost film theorist, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, »Bollywood« is a post-celluloid form of Hindi/Bombay Cinema. It is a style, a simulacral digitally remastered cinema, that recreates the older filmic realism through »a reasonably specific narrative and mode of representation« and »a more diffuse cultural conglomeration« (Rajadhyaksha 23, 20). As a post-celluloid phenomenon, »Bollywood« may even be given a date (say, post-1990). Its productive expression, if not its genesis, may be traced back to Bhansali's film preceding *Devdas*—*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (*Straight from the Heart*, 1999). Here, digitally created *mise-en-scènes* celebrated a »Bollywood« that would also »speak« to its burgeoning spectatorship in the Indian diaspora in the West. In a radical shift from the received narrative, the establishing shots of Bhansali's film would show the return of Devdas not from Calcutta but from England, as a thoroughly colonial lawyer. Fidelity to the original in any recreation will now not be so much to historical truth or realist representation but rather to Indian cinema's own postmodern, simulacral modes of representation and with an eye toward consumption by the global diaspora. In this genre, matters must be spelled out. Feelings are no longer restricted to figurative language in dialogue and song—they must be demonstrated, too, through a visual syntax. Thus, whereas pre-Bollywood Hindi cinema had insinuated the central motif of impossible love through metaphor, Bhansali's Paro must hold on to an everlasting flame, the seafarer's lamp suffused with the magic of Aladdin. And this flame must die upon Devdas' death, in another instance of symbolic correlation. Visual splendor for Bhansali overtakes a poetics of suggestiveness—the heart of Indian aesthetics of response—as this splendor transforms the affective nature of aesthetic response into an invitation to voyeuristic specularity, and possibly identification.

On Paro's body, to adapt a line from Peter Brooks' theorizing of the melodramatic imagination, Devdas' »desire inscribed an impossible history« (xii). Devdas would never understand his role in creating a woman's hysterical body and would turn instead to a melancholic imagination—but not before he wounds her with her own necklace on her wedding day. For the Indian spectator, the symbolism is stark and its effect immediate. This act of phallic wounding symbolically transforms Paro into Devdas' bride, as he uses the blood on the wound to enact the Hindu marriage ritual by placing it in the parting of her hair. Such melodramatic excess, symbolically enacted, is common in Bhansali's treatment of the story. The enactment may be located in the

Bollywood film as a visual spectacle. Two dominant color palettes would be used to reinforce this: red and blue. The red palette would frame dramatic encounters principally between women—between two mothers (Paro's and Devdas', both framing Devdas in an Oedipal discourse of incestuous desire), and between two women in love with Devdas (Paro and Chandramukhi, both in a barely suppressed homoerotic desire)—but also between Devdas and Paro, when the latter brings a red jumper to him which she is knitting. The red would also capture—through the use of chandeliers, candles, and clay lamps—the world of the courtesan Chandramukhi, described as the city's »pre-eminent courtesan.« Elsewhere, the visual glamor of this palette would mark dance item numbers, a signature mode in all of Bhansali's melodramas, including his melodramatic epics, *Ram-Leela* (2013), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), and *Padmaavat* (2018).

The blue palette, with its soft focus on the bodies of lovers, often as intercut shots juxtaposing the splendor of the scenes in red palette—such as Paro's mother's Radha Krishna dance, where the crowd also swings in devotional harmony—drags the spectator into the world of illicit love, in which he, assuming spectatorial desire is male, slyly participates. What was suggestively present in the earlier versions of the Devdas tale—that Paro could not be the object of male desire and sexual gaze because her presence »desexualized« Devdas—is now offered, to borrow these affects from Laura Mulvey's work, both as a site of scopophilic eroticism (voyeurism) and as libidinous ego (narcissism). Colors would radiate in all directions—and the homage in Bhansali's *Devdas* is not to a theme that has held the narrative of Indian cinema together for almost a century, but to the hold that Bollywood, as visual splendor, now has on the spectator. This principle would resurface in Bhansali's finest film, *Saawariya* (*The Beloved*, 2007), based on Luchino Visconti's *Le Notti Bianche* (*White Nights*, 1957), itself sourced from a Dostoevsky short story.

Saawariya works as an aesthetic unity because of its homage to the Visconti intertext as art qua art. In Bhansali's *Devdas*, the ideological intrudes, reminding spectators of Bollywood's role as self-declared »national cinema.« But this is melodrama and the ideological is delivered in absolute terms without any self-critique: good versus evil, selfishness versus sacrifice, heroes versus villains (where villains are presented to be »hissed«). These are then dramatically shown through anecdotal incidents whose relationship to the central narrative is often incidental. Thus, the courtesan is brought close to the feudal wife as the provider of an essential item in a religious oblation. The courtesan is empowered as a woman in control of her destiny in a dramatic encounter with one of her erstwhile suitors. Paro herself is denied both love and motherhood by her husband because he cannot forget his former wife nor forgive Paro for her devotion to Devdas' memory. Paro's isolation is symptomatic of the plight of Indian women generally. Further, the abuse of alcohol—Devdas dies a maudlin drunkard—and the social consequences of a caste-ridden culture that would deny love together turn the excesses of Bollywood melodrama into a morality play. These characteristics are not new, but Bhansali's Bollywood must keep them dramatically alive, even when the text on which the film is based demands a different mode of artistic expression. That Bhansali triumphed and his *Devdas* entered contemporary Indian modernity, supplanting its earlier artistically more accomplished versions (it was chosen as India's entry as the Best Foreign Language Film for the 2003 Academy Awards), confirms Bollywood's role as the cultural dominant of India, through which both a pervasive art form (melodrama) and the (absolute) values of the nation are articulated.

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Destiny Has No Favorites (El destino no tiene favoritos, 2003)

O. Hugo Benavides

dir. Álvaro Velarde; prod. Alberto Cappa; screenplay Álvaro Velarde; photography Micaela Cahuaranga; music Irene Vivanco. 35mm, color, 90 mins. Álvaro Velarde Producciones, distrib. Wellspring Media.

The Peruvian film *El destino no tiene favoritos* is one of the earliest of its kind. It has left an indelible mark not only on Peruvian national cinema but also on Latin American melodramatic production as a whole. The film uses the genre's carnivalesque strategies to contest and critique the traditional conservative mores of the South American nation-state, and its tongue-in-cheek mode has the audience laugh at itself when the film's tenor and content would otherwise likely prompt a graver emotional response.

By the time that one of the maids, Oliva (played by Tatiana Astengo), authoritatively retorts to Ana (played by Monica Steuer), the prickly lady of the house, that »the problem with you, *señora*, is that you have confused marriage with love,« we are completely immersed in the film's seductive melodramatic *tour de force*.

The film presents a very straightforward plot. Ana, the lady and matron of the house, wakes up one morning to the unsettling news that a renowned Peruvian telenovela production, along with their famous actors, have taken over her large backyard. She does her best to protest such an unlikely turn of events, only further complicated by the transgression of class barriers in such a scenario. Her protest consists of thinly veiled complaints of how such lower class beings—i.e., *cholos*—can invade her palatial—i.e., *buena costumbre*—home in such unfathomable fashion.

However, both she and the audience are soon to find out that her husband, just before leaving on vacation, had rented out their home as a telenovela set. It is at this point that the melodramatic structure is put into place, with two immediately concurring implications that are primed to question both the matron's sanity and our social reality. Her home is turned into a commodified space open to consumption, literally to the highest bidder, no matter his or her social (and racial) background. Second, we are supposed to wonder whether the telenovela's melodramatic goings-on in the yard are so far removed from that which occurs *inside* the home—especially the exchanges between the lady of the house, the maids, and the other servants within the confines of the bedroom and kitchen.



At its core, *El destino no tiene favoritos* is a Latin American melodrama in which the boundaries between reality and farce are blurred. At first, and very slowly, we are introduced to contesting notions of what is »real,« or actually happening, in the narrative. However, by the end, these lines are completely blurred, and it is ultimately impossible to determine what is real and what is not. The film allows for a profound questioning of the most deeply held values of Latin America's traditionally conservative middle and upper classes. It disengages love from marriage and, further, interrogates the very nature of what happiness is or might be in quite existential fashion—not to forget the role that sexual pleasure might play in the equation of personal fulfillment and social obligations.

This is exactly what the film does best: pitting social mores against individual desires, allowing the audience to freely identify with one side or the other, with both or neither, until the encounters and exchanges no longer permit such conventional distinctions as clearly as before. The film also quite successfully allows the prohibitive and transgressive nature of desire to take center stage, quietly at first, until at its apex the characters' have seemingly exhausted their roles, and their social reach, consumed by the implications of their plausible authentic self.

The separation between melodramatic fiction and supposed reality is further collapsed when Ana is mistaken for a telenovela actress, something she protests at first but then wholeheartedly embraces. We are privy to her sensual and intimate pleasure as she switches from character to character: from the one she is playing in the telenovela to the one that she performs in her own life and home. Even more striking is that this pleasure is only increasingly fueled, and to some degree sexualized, by the crossing of a racial barrier in making her indigenous maids her confidantes. It is at this point that the melodramatic trap is set for its natural denouement. Little does Ana, nor the audience watching the film, know to what degree this melodramatic farce will call into question our own senses of reality and moral center, including our sense of self-fulfillment and happiness.

This complex reality (or fantasy) is ruptured (or reinserted) when one of her maids, Oliva, is not only hired to work as an actress on the set but even given one of the telenovela's leading roles. It is this moment of democratic equality—or, perhaps more of a Bakhtinian role reversal—that allows the maid to question her ex-employer's life-choices: »the problem with you, *señora* . . .« However, in this moment of intimacy several layers of reality are revealed—above all because Oliva is saying neither something new nor something that Ana does not already know.

The only shift in class and racial dynamics, if any, is the one afforded by the commodifying power of the telenovela set. Now the maid is superior in this game of capital and currency, and race is not only no longer an obstacle but is actually yet another asset to be commodified, open to the highest bidder, just as much as whiteness has been for centuries. It is in this role slippage that all other social mores and taxonomies—such as religion, gender, and sexuality, along with race and class—disintegrate. Because what also becomes visible is the incredible unhappiness of all those involved: the telenovela actors that continue to backstab and sleep with each other on and off set, or the cruel yet erotic relationship between the maids and Ana, neither one happy except in their expert destruction of each other. In this fashion, social categories that seemed stable before the telenovela production company's arrival are disturbed, ridiculed, and exposed as the façades that they are.

This is exactly what seems to be the main issue at hand: The telenovela production is itself a melodramatic recourse, like any other in their (and our) lives. Finally, as the telenovela company departs, they leave the house in shambles, nothing as it was in the beginning. However, by the end we are also privy to two meaningful insights. The first relates to the fact that one can seem to disregard the powerful message of the film, convincing oneself over time (as do the characters in the film) to see in the film a melodramatic release that has nothing to do with one's own life, merely providing an easy laugh.

The second assessment, on the other hand, is far from easy to accept. If taken seriously, the melodramatic farce we have just experienced is not distant from the melodramatic world of telenovelas that, as Latin Americans, we inhabit daily. In this manner, contained in the melodramatic messaging of telenovelas, we know that they are nothing to laugh about—or, worse, to scoff at (Martín-Barbero; Benavides). With this, *El destino no tiene favoritos* adds to our understanding that this is not at all about a telenovela production but about life and its contingencies, along with their almost infinite melodramatic, farcical dimensions in a postcolonial world.

What the final scene makes us privy to—as the maid leaves fulfilled in her newly acquired social role, and the matron is left bereft, hoping that her rich husband does not find out about her sexual infidelities and profound unhappiness—is that this melodramatic farce is what happens to postcolonial subjects, who are daily subjected to global capitalist realities. It is precisely these subjections that make us question the stability of the categories of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and religion that we desperately attempt to hold on to.

Ultimately, we are left with the profound reality that *destiny really has no favorites*. That nothing, no social category and no historical legacy, will protect us from life and its awe-full reality. And if there is one chance at happiness, it has to be taken at the fleeting moment when it is presented, rather than confusing money with superiority, race with civilization, and, above all, reality with stability—or, as the maid so prophetically states, »love with marriage.«

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Monsieur Ibrahim (Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran, 2003)

Karen A. Ritzenhoff

dir. François Dupeyron; prod. Lauren Pétin, Michèle Pétin; screenplay François Dupeyron; photography Rémy Chevrin. 35mm, color, 94 mins. ARP Sélection and France 3 Cinéma, distrib. ARP Sélection.

Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran is an adult fairytale, a paternal melodrama that melancholically depicts not only intergenerational alliances but also the transcendence of religious differences, and thus makes it a showcase for the illusion of global peace and understanding among migrant communities. One of the film's shortcomings is its reliance on a romanticized image of the exotic, »oriental,« fatherly male, represented by the iconic film star Omar Sharif as Monsieur Ibrahim in his final role. Another flaw in the charming plot is the idealized depiction of French sex workers as caring women who give more warmth to men than their absent mothers or potential partners could. One of the prostitutes, Fatou (played by Mata Gabin), is Black, which ostensibly makes her especially desirable for the young protagonist who wants to have his first sexual experience but cannot afford her services. The fact that Fatou is deemed most exotic clearly evokes a French colonial discourse of »Otherness« in visual culture, most prominently displayed, for instance, in the turn of the century photographs of Algerian women in *The Colonial Harem* (Sentilles; Alloula). Fatou is thus also a reminder of France's colonial past and the legacy of the »Grand Nation.« It is not only Monsieur Ibrahim who is the exotic Other but also some of the women in the »Rue Bleue« in Paris, where the story unfolds and which is constructed as a multicultural microcosm.

The plot is based on a novel by Belgian playwright Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt. Its melodramatic elements are interwoven with notions of transnational identity, religion, and diaspora. Schmitt's novel starts with the sentence, »When I was eleven years old, I broke my piggy bank and went to see the whores« (5). The attraction to paid sex workers is at



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the forefront of the movie adaptation as well. Prostitutes are depicted as belonging to an alternative form of kinship among marginalized groups in a bourgeois society. They are idealized as being understanding and compassionate with men, young and old—when properly paid. Moïse »Momo« Schmitt (played by Pierre Boulanger) is orphaned at a young age. His mother has supposedly died—however, she later returns but is rejected by Momo—and his biological father commits suicide after having suffered from depression.

Momo lives in a Parisian low income, predominantly Jewish neighborhood in the early 1960s, across the street from the oft-frequented grocery store run by the enigmatic Monsieur Ibrahim. The store-owner takes great pleasure in his shop in the »Rue Bleue«—it is an institution. Momo is drawn to him, despite being from a different cultural and religious background. Momo is Jewish, and Monsieur Ibrahim is Muslim. One fact that is seldomly addressed in the criticism of the film is that Ibrahim comes from Turkey, is part of a cultural minority there, and ultimately returns to a remote rural area of the country to die. Ibrahim is thus an outsider in his home country as well, not just in the Parisian neighborhood where he sought to live. He is Sufi, and one can also witness his affinity with the dervishes who perform their whirling dance as part of the Mevlevi Order. Monsieur Ibrahim takes Momo to his country of origin on his final journey back to Anatolia. Their mode of transportation is spectacular: a red sports car convertible that makes these unlikely travel companions look like movie stars in a road movie, or so they think. Despite the intimate undertones of the relationship between these two men, there is no sexual innuendo, but rather genuine mentorship that Ibrahim offers to his young friend. Ultimately, Ibrahim bequeaths the store to Momo, and Momo converts to his mentor's Muslim faith—not only by taking on the business and embracing admiration for the teachings of the Qur'an but also by assuming the role as the neighborhood »Arab.« The film deals with diasporic communities and the way subsequent generations reject or adopt father figures.

Momo experiences a lot of discord with his biological father, who appears to be a tormented, bibliophile intellectual. The son sells the weighty volumes of books to pay for sexual favors with the sex workers in the »Rue Bleue.« The idea that literary books as hardware pay for sex, a form of software, is just one of the film's story elements that is both entertaining and paradoxical. Momo also breaks his piggy bank to pay for the services of Sylvie (Anne Suarez), a white prostitute. In some ways, Momo becomes Monsieur Ibrahim. Their deep friendship is »built on« their attitudes toward women and prostitution. This could be interpreted as male social bonding via the exchange of women's bodies and experiences with these bodies in the flesh. The relationship between Momo and Monsieur Ibrahim is not sexual but relies on their »shared« sexual experiences with female sex workers. This affirms their maleness both subjectively and interpersonally. The aspect of the movie that turns it into a fairytale of friendship and tenacity is the idea that Jewish and Muslim cultures are so closely related that it is possible to effortlessly switch between them.

Monsieur Ibrahim revises what has been identified as one of the prevalent genres in melodrama: the maternal melodrama (Gledhill; Gledhill and Williams). While these films depict mothers and daughters—in difficult and at times murderous complicity, especially in film noir (e.g. *Mildred Pierce*, 1945)—*Monsieur Ibrahim's* melodramatic plot involves men. The power of patriarchy is challenged because Momo does not assume his father's legacy but conscientiously shifts his allegiance, stepping into Monsieur Ibrahim's footsteps. The way his mentor deals with women, especially stars and sex

workers, is visualized with a subplot that features Brigitte Bardot (Isabelle Adjani) upon her visit to the particular quartier in Paris during a film shoot. In *Monsieur Ibrahim*, she flirts with the store-owner during a break from filming in the »Rue Bleue.« He over-charges her for a bottle of water, which she playfully accepts. Ibrahim knows the value of services, especially when it comes to transactions between men and women. Momo also embraces the idea of commodity value when he pays for sex and assumes a controlling male role, mimicking »the Arab« and the cultural stereotypes that go along with this racist label, despite his young age.

One of the key themes in *Monsieur Ibrahim* is the notion that diasporic communities allow individuals to seek out their own family connections, creating what British film scholar Daniela Berghahn has described as »far-flung families in film.« Berghahn explains that Ibrahim is an elderly Turkish Muslim man (mistakenly nicknamed »the Arab« by his neighbors) who runs a grocery store in the Jewish quarter. The Jewish boy Moses from across the road is a regular customer (and shoplifter) there, and, after his father's suicide, Monsieur Ibrahim adopts him (77). The author labels the film adaptation as a road movie »about leaving the familiar behind and venturing forth into the unknown« (78). This metaphor of movement and shared experience is key to the understanding of the father-son relationship that develops between Ibrahim and Momo. It is also located at different cultural crossroads between Europe and the Middle East. Ibrahim takes the teenager onto a pilgrimage and a »home-coming« to a foreign, yet familiar, country. Berghahn concludes that »whereas many road movies convey their protagonists' marginality and ultimate unassimilability through an open-ended narrative structure—these outsiders just carry on driving« (80).

Like other diasporic films, François Dupeyron's *Monsieur Ibrahim* relies on strategies of representation connected to melodramatic story elements of isolation, loss, and identity crisis. Such films often display rites of passage from childhood to adulthood and the transformations that ensue: »the protagonists physically cross borders on their journeys to self-discovery as well as venturing beyond personal boundaries« (Ritzenhoff 204). They frequently depict families and destinies in flux, overshadowed by dark cultural tensions and conflicts. *Monsieur Ibrahim* plays with the notion of chosen cultural communities (see also Naficy 1999; Naficy 2001). The melodrama of diasporic films often shows that the tensions between homeland and chosen exile are based on memory—initially repressed, and then re-emerging in complicated cultural microcosms. While *Monsieur Ibrahim* ends with the death of »the Arab,« the melodramatic ending allows relief, as Momo is able to choose where he belongs, leaving his own traumatic past as a Jewish orphan behind.

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Osuofia in London, Part I (2003) and II (2004)

Uchenna Onuzulike

dir. Kingsley Ogoro; prod. Kingsley Ogoro, Kola Munis; screenplay Kola Munis, Emeka Obiakonwa, Kingsley Ogoro; photography John Ishemeke; music Kingsley Ogoro. color, 105 mins (Part 1), 72 mins (Part 2). Kingsley Ogoro Productions, distrib. Kingsley Ogoro Productions.



Osuofia in London is considered a comedy but features many melodramatic attributes as well. The film is a Nollywood classic—written, directed, and produced by Kingsley Ogoro, and casting Nollywood star Nkem Owoh as Osuofia—and is one of Nigeria's most popular film productions. The film is comprised of two parts: Part 1, *Osuofia in London*, was released in 2003, while Part 2, *Osuofia in London 2*, was released in 2004. The film's primary language is English, with some Igbo soundbites. The comedic and melodramatic story was filmed in Nigeria and Britain and is evocative of transnationality, seen, for instance, in its treatment of issues of gender, race, cultural practice, and emotion (Kilian; Krings and Okome; Onuzulike).

Nollywood (sub-)genres are continuously evolving but what remains consistent is an affinity toward explicit or implicit melodramatic themes and settings. Some of Nollywood's prominent genres and themes include: love and romance, comedy, drama, epic, the supernatural, action, and religion. Melodramatic plot lines, grounded in lived experience, are predominant in Nollywood films. Even though Nigeria has produced films in celluloid, it took the videocassette production of → *Living in Bondage* (1992), directed by Chris Obi Rapu (as Vic Mordi), to pave the way for the Nollywood film industry. When he directed the film, Rapu was working for the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). At that time, NTA workers were forbidden to engage in outside work—as a result, he was forced to use a pseudonym, Vic Mordi. The film production was a result of Igbo businessman Kenneth Nnebue's entrepreneurial mindset. Prior to 1992, the traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre of the 1980s, championed by directors such as Chief Hubert Ogunde, and his predecessors like Ola Balogun, had kept the Nigerian film industry alive.

Osuofia in London is about a village man, Osuofia, whose brother died in London. He receives the news that his only brother, Donatus, who was very rich, has passed, and that he has inherited his estate. Although Osuofia does not want anything to do

with his brother—as he never reached out to the family after travelling to London and did not even send a message when their father died—he changes his mind when he is informed that he is the benefactor of his brother's will. He then mourns Donatus' death and agrees to travel to London to inherit his estate. Upon his arrival in London, he experiences a »culture shock.«

The film opens with a melodramatic scene: Osuofia, a hunter, is aided by four of his five daughters, who are helping him to gain a clear view for shooting his prey, which will be used to prepare some soup. The scene is exaggerated, as his daughters use their heads and hands to support him while he clings to a palm tree with his legs aiming at the animal. When he eventually shoots at the animal, he misses. In the scene in which Osuofia first hears about his brother's death, he refuses to show emotion. But when he realizes that he is the benefactor of his will, he pretends to cry and asks his family to join him. When the family suddenly stops, he requests they cry harder, which they proceed to do. The scene's acting seems to be deliberately overstated, and they in fact appear to laugh while pretending to cry.

Another mockingly melodramatic scene is when Osuofia tries to capture pigeons in a London park. He runs after the pigeons countless times as passers-by watch with awe and laughter. The film shows multiple people, disturbed by his behavior, who try to call the police. Osuofia is arrested and still refuses to let the pigeon go. When the officers reach out to Osuofia's hand for the pigeon, Osuofia takes an oracle, or magic object, from his pocket, and then flashes it to one of the officers, who then becomes disoriented due to its magical power. The officer's reaction to these magical powers is clearly overstated. In fact, the entire scene is excessively overstaged, seen especially in the reactions of Osuofia and the police officers.

Similarly, during Donatus' fiancée Samantha's (played by Mara Derwent) stay in Nigeria, her attempt at poisoning Osuofia's food in order to obtain a signed bank check is depicted in dramatic excess. In this scene, Osuofia pretends that he is poisoned and passed out and is then rushed to the hospital. Upon the arrival of family members, including Samantha, to the hospital, Osuofia continues to pretend he is unconscious while tightly holding a signed check. The doctor's effort to open Osuofia's hand in order to obtain the check is to no avail. The doctor suggests that the only way to obtain the check from Osuofia's palm is to cut off his hand, to which Samantha agrees. In an attempt by the doctor to cut Osuofia's hand, he jumps up from an »unconscious« state and expresses his disappointment in both Samantha and the doctor. Samantha apologizes, and Osuofia forgives her and rewards her by declaring he will give her a portion of the money. He then throws a big farewell party for her return to England.

In sum, *Osuofia in London*, which is primarily considered a comedy, in fact demonstrates an abundance of melodramatic elements interspersed in its plot, just as most Nollywood films do. *Osuofia in London* uses melodramatic means, such as emotionally charged (over)acting, to evoke transnational emotions—as well as to challenge Eurocentrism, which the film also occasionally reproduces. The protagonist's exaggerated performance seeks to appeal to said transnational emotions, as he takes African culture to London while becoming acquainted with Western cultural habits and styles. Nigerians and other Africans in the diaspora relate to this film by remembering their lives both in the diaspora and in Africa. For example, the scenes set in Nigeria evoke traditional lifestyles, while Osuofia's scenes in London remind them about »culture shock« they may have experienced, especially upon entering Western countries. In

general, the film is interspersed with multiple transnational elements. The title, setting, characters, and plot are all distinctly evocative of transnationality, and elements of both African and Western music accompany the action of the film. The film's comic and melodramatic plot may have a long-lasting nostalgic effect on Africans in the diaspora. By now, *Osuofia in London* can surely be considered part of the canon of Nollywood, in the footsteps of such legendary films as *Living in Bondage*.

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Brokeback Mountain (2005)

Katharina Gerund

dir. Ang Lee; prod. Diana Ossana, James Schamus;
screenplay Larry McMurty, Diana Ossana;
photography Rodrigo Prieto; music Gustavo
Santaolalla. 35mm, color, 134 mins. River Road
Entertainment, distrib. Focus Features.

Based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Proulx's eponymous short story, which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, *Brokeback Mountain* not only became an instant commercial and critical success but was also immediately labelled »the gay cowboy movie« and thereby enmeshed in controversy (Cohan 233-34). It became a prime target for conservative critics and pundits, some of whom even outright refused to watch the film (Handley 18). *Brokeback Mountain* draws on two classical American film genres, the Western and the melodrama, which advance but also significantly contain its radical subject matter. For many observers, its release and crossover success constitute a breakthrough for the representation of queer characters in mainstream cinema (Osterweil 38). However, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences' decision to award the Oscar for Best Picture in 2006 to Paul Haggis' crime drama *Crash*, which interweaves several characters' lives and highlights racial and social tensions in L.A., instead of *Brokeback Mountain*, caused an outcry over Hollywood's perceived homophobia—and, in a 2015 revote among Academy members, Ang Lee's film came out on top (»Recount!«). From the initial hype to its ongoing critical (re)evaluation, *Brokeback Mountain* has clearly secured its place in film history.

Set mostly in the Western states of Wyoming and Texas, the film traces the relationship between Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) from the early 1960s into the 1980s. The two men meet on a job to herd sheep on Brokeback Mountain and develop an intimate relationship that, in the sociocultural climate of their time and place, can only exist temporarily and in isolation amidst a romanticized



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

landscape. *Brokeback Mountain* explicates the homosocial dimension usually contained in the dominant version of the Western myth. Lee utilizes the U.S. Western genre to contextualize his protagonists: »Setting a saga of same-sex love in the American wilderness both naturalizes and nationalizes it« (Kitses 25). Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto stages the pastoral idyll of *Brokeback* with expansive, lingering shots that emphasize the impressive landscape, wide skies, and open land of the American West. In the »civilized world« and within the literal and metaphorical constraints of their everyday lives, both protagonists (have to) deny parts of their desires and identities. Furthermore, they hide their deep emotional attachment to each other, for which they even lack a proper term. They use *queer* once »to possibly describe their bond [...] and they do so in order to disavow it« (Tinkcom 3). Jack is marked as the more transgressive character of the two by, for instance, his revealing last name (»Twist,« as in to contort or pervert), his black hat, and his range of mobility that extends to Texas and Mexico, while he also suggests early on that the two could ranch and live together. Ennis, however, who as a child had to see the lynched body of his presumably homosexual neighbor, does not give in to Jack's seemingly unrealistic visions of a shared future. Their initial romance only lasts until the end of the summer. They reunite years later to continue their love affair under the guise of occasional trips as »fishing buddies« to the Wyoming mountains.

Meanwhile, both characters create a life for themselves that conforms to the heteronormative standards of U.S. society: They marry, have children, and make ends meet. Throughout the film, they juggle these two worlds with mixed success leading up to the film's tragic ending. Ennis' wife, Alma (Michelle Williams), eventually finds out about their affair and leaves him; while Jack never fully settles into his middle class home and his role as father and husband in Texas. Time and again, he tries in vain to convince Ennis to fully commit to their relationship and to finally live together. Frustrated and rejected, Jack solicits a male sex worker in Mexico, and he eventually meets another man from Texas with whom he envisions a shared future. After his divorce, Ennis continues to care for his daughters, and he also has a short-lived relationship with another woman. He learns about his friend and lover's death when one day one of his postcards to Jack is returned with the stamp »deceased« on it. Jack's widow, Lureen (Anne Hathaway), tells him over the phone that her husband had an accident. Ennis, however, imagines Jack's death as a hate crime. By showing how Jack is beaten to death, the film visually connects his passing with his sexual transgression, while remaining opaque as to the actual circumstances of his death. At the Twist's home, Ennis finds a bloodstained shirt of his own under one of Jack's—a keepsake from their time on *Brokeback Mountain*, a reminder of the violent moments of their relationship, and a material testament to Jack's unbroken love for him. Jack's father makes dismissive comments about his son and firmly resists Ennis' plan to scatter Jack's ashes on *Brokeback Mountain* per his wishes. Yet, Jack's mother, in a gesture of belated blessing, not only lets him take the shirts from Jack's room but also encourages him to return. The film ends with Ennis living on his own in a trailer in a remote part of Wyoming. The two cowboy shirts and a postcard nostalgically commemorate their relationship and the fleeting moments of happiness in the wilderness. Ennis' final words, »Jack, I swear . . . «—captured in a close-up of his face with tears welling up in his eyes—attest once more to his inability to articulate his emotions. They can also be read as a promise for the future of queer love.

Though set in the mid-20th century, *Brokeback Mountain* relies on iconic Western tropes and settings, and it largely subscribes to »the Western's preoccupation with masculinity—and especially white, working-class, rural masculinity« (Tinkcom 102). Its protagonists, to some degree, resemble the cowboy type, i.e., the mythical male hero of Western films, in style, attitude, and demeanor. Yet, they are hired hands who have to do menial work in order to survive, they connect emotionally and act upon their mutual attraction, and they clearly lack the control, power, and freedom usually associated with this iconic American figure. Jack and Ennis also resemble the suffering heroines of classical melodrama as they are star-crossed lovers bound up in a doomed romance and caught within the social expectations of their environment. *Brokeback Mountain* revolves around the romantic love story between the two male protagonists, at the same time that it depicts them trying hard to perform as dedicated husbands and fathers. Especially Ennis' commitment to his daughters and his precarious economic situation come into conflict with their relationship and trips to the mountains. Jack and Ennis are shown as victims of a heteropatriarchal society that forces them to forsake their individual happiness in order to conform to the hegemonic masculinity of their time and place, and they are ultimately punished for their transgressions. »The awesome scale and reach of the mountain«—which represents the Western landscape of male action, signals some degree of freedom for the protagonists, and metonymically stands in for their relationship—ultimately becomes »reduced to a postcard« (Kitses 26). Whether shot »in dimly lighted washed-out grays and browns« to indicate an impoverished life and a lack of opportunity in the case of Ennis and Alma or cast in an aesthetic of »brightly lighted mid-twentieth century consumerism and comparative economic prosperity« in the case of Jack and Lureen (Tinkcom 74, 75), the domestic sphere and small-town family life are predominantly depicted as spaces of confinement for the main characters. Many critics have discussed *Brokeback Mountain's* queering of classical genres and have debated its seemingly »strange fusion between a Douglas Sirk melodrama and a John Ford Western« (Osterweil 38). This genre-mixing is reflected in the marketing of the film: While the tag line of the »gay cowboy movie« persisted, director Ang Lee frequently discouraged the categorization of his film as Western and rather emphasized its universal appeal as »a great American love story« (Needham 33). *Brokeback Mountain*, in fact, relies on both of these genres that are often seen as mutually exclusive: the masculine-coded classical Western with its emphasis on agency and action versus the feminine-coded melodrama with its emotional excess and its tendency to focus on passivity and powerlessness (Needham 79). The two genres interact in the film, as Jim Kitses explains, with »the melodrama contain[ing] the action, the heroes unable to achieve self-definition, to draw their weapons, to save the ranch, to bring civilization to America« and »the Western's conventions [...] constrain[ing] the melos, lowering the emotional and stylistic peaks, the extreme gestures, the ›music‹ of the melodrama« (27).

The aesthetic and narrative elements that *Brokeback Mountain* borrows from the Western and the melodrama also work together in shaping the film's politics. Its (Neo-) Western repertoire, on the one hand, serves as a framework to center the film's queer characters within the national mythology of the United States, and naturalizes their romance set in the pastoral idyll of the American West. On the other hand, the remoteness of its rural setting allows for individualizing the protagonists' struggle which detaches them from the social changes and activism of the Stonewall era and disrupts

the »metronormativity« (Jack Halberstam) that casts queerness/homosexuality as an urban phenomenon (Alley 6-7; Needham 44). The film's melodramatic features serve to affectively align viewers with the fate and suffering of the two heroes and invites audiences to feel with them. The melodramatic plot and aesthetics can be read as a strategy of containment that imagines queer love in a familiar register, and with an expectedly tragic ending. However, its emphasis on negative affect also supports a reading that highlights these feelings as »politically efficacious« and serves as a reminder that queer »modern subjectivity is constituted by a painful, closeted, homophobic past and that ›feeling bad‹ is an important affective dimension of queer subjectivity in the present« (Needham 93).

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Rang De Basanti (रंग दे बसंती, 2006)

Bhaskar Sarkar

dir. Rakeysh O. Mehra;
prod. Rakeysh O. Mehra,
Ronnie Screwvala; screenplay
Renzil D'Silva, Prasoon
Joshi, Rakeysh O. Mehra;
photography Binod Pradhan;
music A. R. Rahman.
35mm, color, 167 mins.
Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra
Productions, distrib. UTV
Motion Pictures.



Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* is one of a select number of critical and box office hits that have helped consolidate the transformation of Bombay cinema into the global cultural industry of Bollywood. Adopting the »ensemble buddy film« structure featured in contemporary megahits such as *Dil Chahta Hai* (2000), *3 Idiots* (2009), and *Kai Po Che!* (2013), RDB develops into a powerful political melodrama. What distinguishes RDB from most other youth-oriented ensemble narratives is its focus on patriotism, understood as love of and devotion to one's country, nation, or political community. Beginning with a rather naturalized sense of patriotism as an instinctual attribute tied to blood and soil, the film explores such blind commitment as the condition for the emergence of a populist, anti-corruption political agency. Mediality takes center stage in this affective exploration, with mass communication technology (radio and television) emerging as a crucial node of political mobilization. In the end, patriotism turns out to be a thoroughly mediated sentiment.

The story begins when Sue McKinley (played by Alice Patten), a young British filmmaker, arrives in Delhi to shoot a documentary about Indian freedom fighters of the 1920s: patriots such as Bhagat Singh and Chandrasekhar Azad, who gave their lives in fighting the British Raj. Sue's interest in this history stems from reading her grandfather's diaries. In spite of being a colonial administrator, James McKinley (Steven Mackintosh) was profoundly moved by the revolutionaries' courage in the face of death. Lacking institutional backing, Sue enlists the support of her friend Sonia (Soha Ali Khan). Soon, Sonia's circle of friends—Karan (Siddharth), Sukhi (Sharman Joshi), Aslam (Kunal Kapoor), and the irrepressible Daljeet aka DJ (Aamir Khan)—are all cast

as legendary martyrs in the film. At first, the happy-go-lucky college students find the characters' unguarded commitments to the country out of sync with their own experiences and values. But in the course of filming, the youthful slackers overcome their discomfort with the script and begin to discover their »inner patriots.«

This particular arc of self-realization emerges out of a South Asian conjuncture shaped by two contemporaneous, seemingly contradictory movements: globalization and the rise of fundamentalist religious nationalism. The launch of India's economic liberalization in 1991, followed by the state's formal recognition of the media industry in 1998, ushered in foreign capital and led to streamlining Indian cinema in accordance with global norms. *RDB*'s incorporation of a British perspective and the involvement of international personnel, including two high profile British executive producers, index some of the material-semiotic shifts in a creative industry looking for transnational collaborations and audiences. The film, which was India's submission for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2007 Oscars, is exemplary of Bollywood's concerted global gesture during this period. However, while globalization is widely thought to transcend the nation, the ensuing sociocultural transformations also elicited strong puritanical responses, often coalescing around a set of civilizational values based on *hindutva*, the concept of an essential »Hinduness.« In the film, Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni)—the idealistic Hindu nationalist RSS cadet, whose band of vigilantes aggressively censors fellow students for their deracinating and »western« attitudes and styles—is representative of this conservative tendency. The entanglements of these two trends, inducing mutual reconfigurations of the national and the global, drive many Bollywood films of the 1990s and 2000s.

Rang De Basanti negotiates such convulsions by returning us to the question of patriotism's relevance in the age of the transnational. The *mise-en-abyme* plot jumps between two temporalities: the sepia-toned footage shot by Sue, based on her grandfather's memoirs, and the present-day narrative in which the amateur student-actors, playing martyr figures in the film-within-the film, find their lives upended by »postmemories« (Hirsch) of selfless sacrifice from the struggle for national liberation. As the past seeps into the actors' present day lives, an uncanny coequality is forged between their nascent political consciousness and the martyrs' patriotic resolve. It is this affective synchronicity, orchestrated in terms of frequent intercuts and dissolves, that shapes a narrative of recursive coincidences. The dynamic is particularly apparent in the »male melodrama« subplot involving Aslam, a Muslim student, and the Hindu chauvinist Laxman, who play Ashfaqulla Khan (a Muslim Pathan) and Ramprasad Bismil (a Brahmin), respectively, in the nested historical narrative. While both students are from working class backgrounds, they overcome the communal rancor because of their shared appreciation of Khan and Bismil's devotion to the country. In the final sequence of *RDB*, Aslam and Laxman end up in a powerful tableau of joint sacrifice, echoing the martyrdom of the two historical characters whom they play, not to mention the iconography of 1950s patriotic Indian films preaching communal harmony (Sarkar).

In presenting the gradual kindling of an innate, if latent, patriotism in its youthful protagonists, *RDB* mobilizes a structuring trope of melodramatic narratives: delay or deferral, opening up the space for negotiation and transformation, and leading up to the eventual fulfillment of expectation. In spite of the initial apathy of the students, and their expressions of alienation and irreverence, audiences familiar with popular Hindi films expect them to step up, become socially engaged, and act on their new convictions.

Halfway through the film, the protagonists are already more contemplative and cognizant because of their immersion in the history of the freedom struggle—but they still need a catalytic event to launch them on a course of purposive action. This comes when Indian Air Force pilot Ajay Rathod (Madhavan), Sonia's fiancé, is killed in a flight accident. They receive the news from the television set at the tea stall, their favorite hangout, soon after they have seen stirring prints from Sue's film-in-progress. While their familiar lifeworld shatters, asynchronous moments get pulled into epiphanic coherence.

Even though there had been over a hundred accidents involving similar MiG-21 aircrafts, and in spite of reports that Ajay valiantly flew his malfunctioning vessel clear of a densely populated city, the minister of defense publicly blames the deceased pilot for rash flying. Here, the narrative takes a topical turn, reviving memories of multiple graft controversies—most notably the late 1980s Bofors arms deal scandal involving the highest levels of government. When the police brutally attack a peaceful candle-light vigil at Delhi's India Gate, Ajay's grieving mother is seriously injured and put into a coma. Already a war widow, Mrs. Rathod (Waheeda Rehman) has now lost her son to state corruption. When she asks for redress, her life is imperiled. Played by an iconic star of 1960s Bombay cinema, Mrs. Rathod here invokes Mother India, a potent nationalist archetype consolidated across the 20th century by a range of cultural productions. Within the diegetic world of *Rang De Basanti*, this attack on civil society—as well as the iconicity of a Mother India figure fighting for her life—revives memories of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, in which British soldiers killed over 380 peaceful protestors and injured 1,200. For Aslam, DJ, Karan, Laxman, Sonia, and Suki, having just acted in Sue's film as freedom fighters who gave their lives to fight against colonial violence, the assault of the contemporary Indian state on its own citizens seems no less atrocious. Once again, the nation—Mother India—is under attack: this time by the corrupt, power-mongering members of its own ruling bloc. Inspired by their aliases, the friends decide to take action against the repressive state on behalf of the wronged national community.

The politicization of the friends' group and their subsequent actions take distinctly mediatic forms. The *mis-en-abyme* narrative is producer-director Mehra's stratagem to revivify seemingly archaic sentiments associated with patriotism, which today's youth cannot relate to, by framing them in the context of postcolonial malfeasance (Mehra). DJ and his friends shoot down Minister of Defense Shastri, echoing the scene in the film-within-the-film that depicts Bhagat Singh and his compatriots' assassination of a British officer known for his draconian actions against Indian nationalists. Interestingly, Sue McKinley, who catalyzes the rekindling of patriotic fervor, now takes a back seat in the narrative. This is not so much about a gendered positionality against violence—after all, it is Sonia who unequivocally pronounces the minister's death sentence—as it is a matter of showcasing the emergence of local grassroots political agency. Sue's reduction to a lovelorn heroine (her worries are focalized onto DJ, her romantic interest) may also have to do with the narrative's shift away from the values and institutions of civil society. In societies of the global South (understood as an irregular, historically constituted geography of dispossession), especially in the face of flagrant state violence, »civil society« may seem more like a mechanism of containment than a conduit to social justice. However, when the state confers the nation's highest civilian award on the dead minister, eulogizing him as a martyr who gave his life to fight terrorism, the protagonists realize the need to take charge of the emerging media nar-

rative about the MiG-21 incident. With this objective in mind, they take over the Delhi station of the state-run All India Radio (AIR). The political efficacies of civil society's institutions are constantly negotiated: for instance, in the ambivalent on-air exchanges between Karan and the listeners who call in.

The modern political subject is an idealization. How the pre-political »people« gets transformed into the right-bearing citizen-subject remains a mystery. In explaining this black box of political emergence, humanities scholars have focused on the sentimental education of subjects within national life. Lauren Berlant, for instance, speaks of the *national symbolic*, a space where public artefacts and narratives render abstract political values, rights, and institutions emotionally legible to the common masses. One might say that *RDB* engages in the reorientation of the Indian national symbolic for the transnational contemporary moment. If the shared iconicity of a wounded Mother India prompts patriotic intervention in defense of a nation under duress, that intercession extends to patricide—figuratively, against the state, with the defense minister standing in as the locus of betrayal and abuse, and literally against Karan's business tycoon father, for his role in the fraudulent arms deals. Karan's extreme action is divulged on air, in response to a caller's question, right before he and DJ are gunned down by state forces. As if on cue with this supreme sacrifice, Mrs. Rathod awakes from her coma and tears trickle down her cheeks. This narrative denouement invests *RDB* with elements of a family melodrama with no possible happy resolution. But the irresolvable contradiction presents the possibility of a wider mass mobilization. The film concludes with proliferating images of television screens, showing young people from diverse backgrounds across India participating in spirited discussion of the nation's current malaise and its potential futures.

Whether this media-technological invocation of an animated public sphere can translate into concrete engagement, and what forms such patriotic conscription could take, remain open questions. Experiences of right-wing vigilantism in India cast sinister light on the film's populist gestures, even as signs of student mobilization for social justice provide reasons for optimism. *Rang De Basanti* indeed returned patriotism to popular discourse, conjoining anti-colonial struggles with postcolonial political challenges. It also made certain affective-expressive practices, such as candlelight marches, a regular aspect of urban political life in India (Dilip). Writing a decade before the film's release, Arjun Appadurai suggested that certain U.S. pop-cultural modalities were being appropriated in »piecemeal, pragmatic, haphazard, flexible, and opportunistic ways« across the globe to launch »struggles for self-determination.« As part of this tendency, transnational forms of patriotism were being forged by »link[ing] human rights, consumer style, antistatism, and media glitz« (174). *Rang De Basanti* has put a Bollywood twist in this production of »woke« youth cultures, articulating Bombay idioms with global trends to fashion a potent political address.

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The Yacoubian Building (عمارة يعقوبيان , 'Imārat Ya'qūbiān, 2006)

Thomas Demmelhuber

dir. Marwan Hamed; prod. Imad Adeeb; screenplay Wahid Hamed; photography Sameh Selim; music Khaled Hammad. 35 mm, color, 1.85:1 anamorphic, 172 mins. Good News, distrib. Good News 4 films.

The Yacoubian Building is based on the eponymous novel by Egyptian writer, dentist, and political activist Alaa Al Aswany, who played a critical role as an intellectual during the Arab uprisings in 2011. His bestselling novel was published in 2002 at the time of a closed political order and a highly regulated society under the autocratic regime of



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President Hosni Mubarak. This led some observers to speculate that the novel (and four years later the film) must have accidentally passed Mubarak's rigid government censors. Others hinted at changes in the Egyptian regime with emerging business elites in the media and entertainment sector becoming more influential in the 2000s and thus creating new spaces for contentious politics that allowed for some limited criticism of the regime. The novel had a tremendous impact on an already thriving period in Egyptian poetry and fiction of the 2000s. Meanwhile, there is a broad consensus that both the novel and the film offered a boost or even inspiration for the political uprisings in 2011, which used the unifying slogan »The people want the fall of the regime« and culminated in the breakdown of the Mubarak regime. The initial public debate after the film's release in 2006 was substantial: More than one hundred parliamentarians criticized the film, saying it was »spreading obscenity and debauchery, which is totally against Egyptian moral values« (»Egyptian MPs«). Nonetheless, *The Yacoubian Building* broke box office records in Egyptian cinemas right from the start after its premier at the 56th Berlin International Film Festival.

The film—with the cast featuring some of the most prominent Egyptian actors (e.g. Adel Emam and Yousra)—depicts and deconstructs modern Egyptian society since the revolution of the »Free Officers« in 1952 and the founding of the republic soon after.

The film is set in downtown Cairo (Wust al-Balad) in the early 1990s. An apartment building near Talaat Harb Square serves as a microcosm of contemporary Egypt and is the place in which most of the film's characters either live or work. This splendid house that has lost much of its former glory is placed at the center of a sentimental discourse and its nostalgic praise for Egypt's history in the early 20th century. It depicts the brightness of colonial architecture and the allegedly beautiful era of the Pashas that was eventually brought to an abrupt end by the free officers' revolution in 1952. The apartment block »Yacoubian Building« functions as a fine-grained mirror of Egyptian society with all its different strata, (in-)formal modes of interaction (such as patronage or clientelism), and religious stereotypes (e.g. *vis-à-vis* the Coptic minority). Although the sub-plots hardly correlate, they all revolve around a shared reference point as they deal with the shameless exploitation of power and examine corruption, torture, and sexual abuse as well as other issues, such as homosexuality, that are usually taboos in cultural productions of a patriarchal and hierarchical society.

It is intriguing that the melodramatic attribution is a central feature in international reviews of the film, e.g. that it is »overlong and schematic; episodic and melodramatic« (Stehlik). The film is indeed rich in (unfulfilled) romance and longing, stereotypical characters, and emotional suffering. The story of the young doorman's son Taha el Shazli (Mohamed Emam) is a case in point: He was not admitted to the police academy due to his social background, radicalized himself by joining Islamist extremists, and turned out to be a terrorist in order to retaliate his own hardship of torture in police custody. The film also includes numerous melodramatic scenes with the singer Christine (Yousra) as confidant and former love of Zaki Pasha el Dessouki (the main character representing the old cosmopolitan elite, played by Adel Emam), performing songs like Édith Piaf's »La Vie en Rose« on the piano, reminiscent of the allegedly *Belle Époque* of Egyptian-European entanglements.

Yet can this exaggerated depiction of societal characters, interactions, and schemes successfully appeal to the emotions of the audience? It probably depends on which audience (for example Arabic or non-Arabic) and sub-plot one refers to. Kate Daniels argues that the film with its stance on romance, emotional hardship, and stock characters »appears to have been made, at least aesthetically, with Western audiences firmly in mind« (109). Maria Golia is also rather critical in her review stressing that a melodrama »subtracts gravity from its subjects and individuality from its characters for the sake of contrast, and to place the viewer at a comfortable and entertaining distance.« It is precisely this comfortable distance that does not exist in *The Yacoubian Building* for an Egyptian audience. Despite the fictional plot playing in a historical setting of the early 1990s, the film presents the profile of a political and social reality in a surveillance state that remains highly relevant to and valid for Egyptian viewers. It shows the extreme and uncompromising dichotomies and cleavages of a society that accepts the exploitation of the poor and the stifling of a shrinking middle class by the rapidly increasing business elites alongside a traditionally privileged class. Apart from that, autocratic regimes do not only define limited spaces of political debate. They also try to set the »rules of the game« in all spheres of society, thus affecting the whole setup of social relationships. At this point, melodramatic devices can be an intended and effective artistic tool to bypass or undermine political censorship and reservations based on religious norms and values as the novel (2002) and later the film (2006) show impressively. Yet, there are also limits for writers and artists who cross these implicit

limits of political and social critique. In the aftermath of the political upheavals since 2011 and the restoration of autocratic rule, Alaa Al Aswany left Egypt in 2019 and has been in exile abroad ever since.

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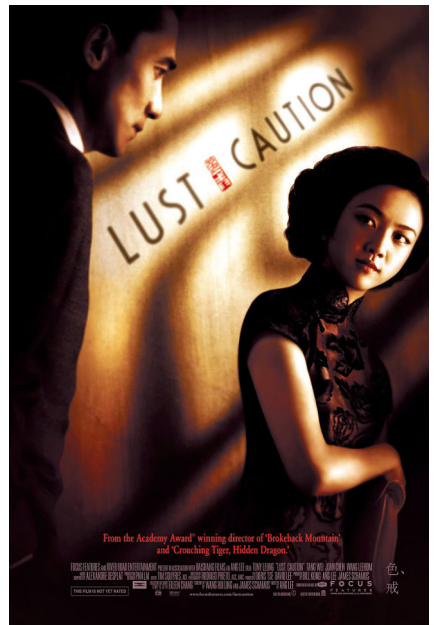
Lust, Caution (色, 戒, Sè, Jiè, 2007)

Ioana Uricaru

dir. Ang Lee; prod. Ang Lee, William Kong, David Lee, Doris Tse; screenplay James Schamus, Hui-Ling Wan; photography Rodrigo Prieto; music Alexandre Desplat. 35mm, color, 157 mins. Haishang Films, distrib. Focus Features.

Lust, Caution captured international attention for various reasons: It won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, it received an NC-17 rating in the United States for its explicit sex scenes, and its female star, Tang Wei, was ostracized and black-listed in China because of her participation in said sex scenes. Based on a novella by Eileen Chiang—which, in turn, was inspired by the life of Chinese spy Zheng Pinru—the film's plot is set in the late 1930s and early 40s during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The protagonist, Wong Chia Chi (played by Tang Wei), a young, innocent student at Hong Kong's Lignan University, becomes part of a drama group that becomes a gateway to the student patriotic movement, determined to resist Japanese occupation. Their leader, Kuang Yu Min (played by Leehom Wang), recruits Wong Chia Chi, as both an actress and a resistance fighter. She develops from a shy, unassuming girl, into an irresistible »seductress,« whose mission is to trap Mr. Yee (played by Tony Chiu-Wai Leung), an important official of the collaborationist puppet government, and to lure him into an assassination plot. Wong Chia Chi executes her mission impeccably, managing to find the vulnerable spot of the sadistic, impenetrable Yee through their intense erotic experiences. At the very last moment, however, she decides to warn Yee of his immediate danger, and he then saves himself while sending Wong Chia Chi and all her comrades to execution.

The emotional intensity of this doomed love story, the visual richness of a lavish period reconstruction, the vast contribution of score and source music (including a song performance by Wong Chia Chi that makes her hardened male listener break down and cry), and the overwhelming range of emotions of the film's female protagonist,



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some expressed through sexual acts, all seem to classify *Lust, Caution* as a melodrama in the generally accepted use of the term. More recently, however, Linda Williams has proposed a different take on the conceptualization of the genre. She defines melodrama as a genre expressing an a priori acceptance of the (moral) dichotomy of good and bad. In melodrama, according to Williams, the genre conventions are not shaped by the imperative of an overt, sometimes overwhelming, display of exaggerated sentiment, convoluted conflicts, extreme character traits, and the whole battery of emotion-inducing techniques—what is commonly known as melodramatic excess. This excess is nothing but a means to an end: a proven, effective methodology for involving an audience in the story of good versus evil, which fight and attempt to vanquish each other. The protagonists fight the antagonists, as well as a host of other obstacles (from societal forces to historical circumstances to personal or family prejudice to bad luck), while attempting to help the good side win. The conventions of the genre are tools employed to generate the audience's empathy to fight for a good cause, in the most effective way possible, which often means in a visceral way.

The foundational myth of melodrama could be defined, therefore, as the belief in the existence of a good that is opposed to evil, complemented by the protagonist's ability to choose this good and act in its support. From this perspective, Ang Lee's film presents a daring take on the genre. While the protagonist's struggle fits the melodramatic conventions as understood by Williams, Wong Chia Chi's final decision reiterates an even deeper, fundamental element of melodrama: the paramount importance of personal choice and ineffable subjective experience. She joins the righteous struggle against occupation, and gives it her all, but, as the story develops, we become less certain of the distinction between »good« and »bad.« Mr. Yee, established as the villain of the story—who betrays his people, collaborates with the enemy, and tortures prisoners with his own hands—seems to be the only man in her life who does not use, lie to, or abandon her. Her father left to remarry and moved overseas with no concern for his daughter's safety; Kuang Yu Min, who recruited Wong Cha Chi, never musters the courage to express his feelings for her; the revolutionary commanders treat her like a tool to achieve political goals. The emotionally stunted, morally deficient Yee is the only one who apparently cares for Wong Cha Chi, even if in a simplistic way—tending to her needs and desires, from sexual hunger to longings for exquisite jewelry. Tony Chiu-Wai Leung's extraordinary performance creates a Yee that is deeply convincing, both as a monster and a lost soul, and when Wong Cha Chi saves his life at the cost of destroying everybody else, including herself, we understand why. He allowed himself to become truly vulnerable to her, and she is so moved, so touched, so aware of the precious unlikeliness of this vulnerability, she must reward it by protecting him. At first glance, it might look like the woman becomes guilty herself of betrayal and murder for the sake of a diamond ring and a man's attention. However, the central point of the story and film, the way it is constructed and the way it unfolds, the overall use of the melodramatic toolkit, is a wager made with the audience. Ang Lee's goal is to present a bold twist on genre conventions, counteracting the good/evil structure as theorized by Williams with the idea that »good« and »evil« are categories that individuals could, in circumstances of heightened emotions and intense human connection, re-create according to their deepest instincts. This Taiwanese melodrama can therefore be most closely related, thematically, to Pedro Almodóvar's stories of *amour fou* (in, e.g. *Mataador*,

Law of Desire, and *Talk to Her*), where morality is transcended through a mad act of absolute love, sealed by sacrifice.

Betrayed by those who were supposed to love her, and used by those who claim higher ideals, Wong Chia Chi chooses to save the one man who has recognized her as an authentic human being, even as she tried to fool him, and to sacrifice herself for him. Hers is a powerful decision with catastrophic consequences, and, while Yee is not redeemed (still sending Wong Chia Chi and her comrades to death), what the protagonist accomplishes is a validation of *her* feelings, *her* agency, *her* power—and ultimately the meaning of *her* existence. Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* is not only a story about the struggle between good and evil but about passion redefining right and wrong.

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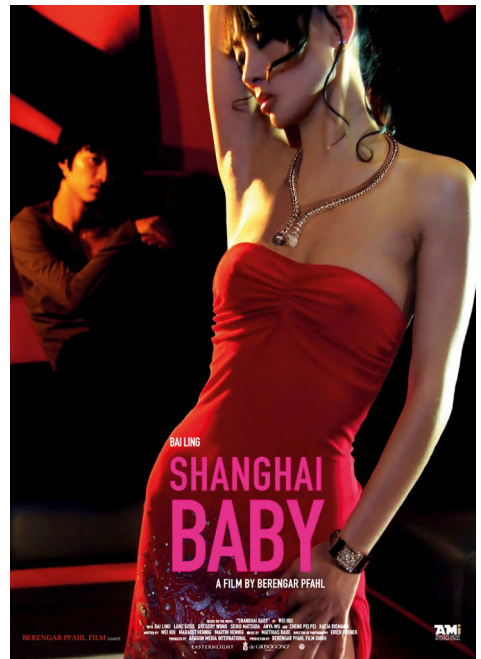
Shanghai Baby (2007)

Sandra Folie

dir. Berengar Pfahl; prod. Pino Curcio; screenplay Wei Hui Zhou, Martin Henning, Margaret Henning; photography Stephanie Cornfield; music Matthias Raue. 35 mm, color, 120 mins. Aragon Media International, Berengar Pfahl Film, distrib. Delta Pictures.

Shanghai Baby is based on the 1999 novel by Wei Hui, who, like other Chinese women writers of the post-1970s generation, was labeled a *meinü zuojia* («beautiful woman writer»). This label has also been translated internationally as »chick-lit«—an Anglo-American subgenre of romance that combines conventional genre tropes with more emancipated heroines. Its cinematic renditions are typically called chick-flicks. These »commercial films that appeal to a female audience« (Ferriss and Young 2) span several genres from romantic comedy to melodrama. While the highly successful chick-lit formula of young metropolitan women—white, heterosexual, and affluent—looking for Mr. Right and a fulfilling career has spread globally, the *meinü zuojia* and their fictional heroines were perceived as too sexually assertive in China. Wei Hui's novel was banned (even burned) for both its »pornographic« content and its »decadent« Western-ness (Chen 56).

The film rights for the controversial international bestseller were acquired by Berengar Pfahl Film, a German independent production company. According to Wei Hui, they won out against international studios because they were »the one firm that already had a footing in China [...] and thus an expertise that other competitors did not have« (*shanghai-baby.com*). Moreover, their entrepreneurial philosophy of focusing more on »a plausible, compelling emotional universe« rather than on »high-speed action plots« fits the genre of the novel (*shanghai-baby.com*). The film adaptation can be classified as a contemporary woman's film, or chick-flick, and thus aligns nicely with



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Berengar Pfahl's numerous productions focused on women's search for identity and self-determination (e.g. *Britta*, 1977; *Neues von Britta*, 1985; *Brücke am Schwarzen Fluss*, 1987; *Tanja*, 1997-2000).

The title *Shanghai Baby* refers to the main character, Ni Ke (played by Bai Ling), who is also called Coco, after Coco Chanel. She finds herself in a love triangle with the impotent artist Tian Tian (Gregory Wong) and the hypermasculine English-German businessman Mark (Luke Goss) while writing her first novel and searching for her own identity. This search can be understood using Raymond Williams' concept of »structure of feeling,« since Coco's individual feelings also embody and make tangible the interplay of social and political forces in 1990s Shanghai—both persistent structures of the past (colonialism, communism) and resistant emerging formations (capitalism, feminism). The juxtaposition of these structures is visible in the film poster, showing Coco posing erotically on the rooftop of the Peace Hotel on the Bund: a symbol of old, cosmopolitan Shanghai. Behind her shines a symbol of a new and global Shanghai: the Oriental Pearl TV Tower in Pudong. Coco's necklace mirrors the two »pearls« of the phallic tower, thus creating an image of castration. She literally wears »the balls« of Pudong's capitalist phallus like a trophy around her neck. This image exhibits the very mixture of femininity and feminism that led Chinese critics to label the *meinü zuojia* as dangerous to prevailing cultural norms. Post-Cultural Revolutionary China may envision its ideal female citizens as moderately feminine (as opposed to the androgynous »iron girls« of the past), but certainly not in a sexually assertive, nor even feminist, manner.

While Wei Hui emphasized that her novel *Shanghai Baby* has no political intention (*cinema.de*), the film gives a different impression—by, for instance, casting Bai Ling, who was banned from working in China for ten years after starring in the critical-of-China American thriller *Red Corner* (1997). However, on the narrative level, *Shanghai Baby's* political subtext becomes clear when in the opening sequence Coco names → *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) as her favorite film. Philip Kaufman's adaptation of Milan Kundera's novel explores the social atmosphere before and after the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia through the emotional and moral registers of a romantic relationship. For the female lead, Tereza, who describes herself as »weak« (like her country), »life is very heavy«—while it seems to be »so light« for her insensitive and promiscuous husband, Tomas. Similarly, *Shanghai Baby* portrays the »culture clash« and gender roles in modern Post-Mao China by personalizing the social context and by contrasting national and gender stereotypes. By explicitly affirming the statement in Kundera's novel that »making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two almost opposite passions,« Coco identifies herself with Tomas' (unbearably) »light« philosophy of life, which she applies to her men: Mark (»the foreign lover«) and Tian Tian (»the local sleeper«).

Shanghai Baby therefore does not simply adopt Western melodramatic tropes and clichéd characters but plays with them. »Feminine« qualities such as virtue and passive suffering are acknowledged—not, however, in the figure of the nonconformist heroine but in that of the male protagonist, Tian Tian, whom Coco describes as »soft, delicate, almost poetic.« The impotent artist loves Coco selflessly and embodies a kind of higher ground of morality. There is a powerful gender and racial component to this characterization. While Coco is portrayed as a strong-willed and free-spirited woman, Tian Tian, while admirably virtuous, is heavily feminized and confined to intro-

spective and self-destructive forms of action (e.g. creating art for art's sake, getting drunk or high on heroin) and thus affirms Western stereotypes about Asian masculinity. Meanwhile, his competitor, the successful international businessman Mark, is portrayed as hypermasculine and thoroughly active (an omnipotent lover, caring father, and captain of the football team), if shallow and hypocritical. Torn between the two men and »the familiar libidinal dynamics between China and the West« (Lu 171), several scenes show Coco's suffering. During an erotic striptease on the rooftop of the Peace Hotel, she threatens her impotent boyfriend with suicide unless he sleeps with her. A quickie with Mark, pushing the boundaries of sexual consent, in the restroom of a discotheque leaves her feeling »cheaper than a prostitute«; she bursts into wild and uncontrolled screaming after realizing that Mark will never leave his wife for her; and she collapses upon finding that Tian Tian used heroin right after he had been released from rehab. The film's melodramatic »mode of excess« reaches its climax when Coco wakes up one morning, seemingly happy and in love, only to find herself lying next to the corpse of her boyfriend who has died of an overdose.

This scene marks the clearest shift in the film's »dialectic of pathos and action,« which Williams describes as »a give and take of ›too late‹ and ›in the nick of time‹« (69). While Coco's tears can be attributed to a kind of »false consciousness, released [...] when it is already too late,« they do at least acknowledge that »something important has been lost« (70). In the end, Coco's suffering is also the source of her future empowerment. Her tears give her the strength to rewrite the initial ending of her novel. In the second and final ending, she travels to Berlin, not to resume her toxic relationship with Mark but to end it once and for all. »I'm not a cold-blooded woman, but I didn't go mad,« Coco says to justify herself. This ending represents personal liberation and a commitment to Shanghai—not, however, to either the melancholic »feminine« city of Tian Tian or Mark's »masculinist« capitalist showpiece but instead to a cosmopolitan space that flexibly combines and interchanges »the female« and »the male,« »the old« and »the new,« »the East« and »the West.« In the last shot, which serves as a kind of epilogue, we see Coco riding her bicycle through the Shanghai night and learn that she has not yet found a publisher for her novel but is reading from her manuscript at universities. While male students ask her if she—like the protagonist of her own novel—would strip in real life, she discusses with their female colleagues the question of »Who are we, or rather who am I?« Coco and her female audience thus represent an emerging »structure of feeling,« namely an individualist brand of feminism that is less concerned with »the nationalist burden to cure or build a national spirit« or with »the glorious restoration of male sexuality« than with searching »for the purposes of their own lives« (Zhu 158). Although the »we« that Coco explores through her semi-autobiographical writing is situated in »a specific Chinese history of sexual repression, a neutering of women during the Cultural Revolution, and the overwhelming desires to experiment with ›modern‹ lifestyles and excessive consumption in the postsocialist environment« (Schaffer and Song 84), the sentimental politics of the film are directed at everyone. »Basically, we can all find ourselves in her,« as Bai Ling asserted in an interview at the premiere at the 60th Cannes Film Festival in 2007. The film, she says, is »cross-cultural, East and West. It's not about culture anymore, it's not about female or male anymore, it's about the universe, a story about love, about the mystery of life, about emotions, about the meaning of life.«

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Sleepwalking Land (*Terra Sonâmbula*, 2007)

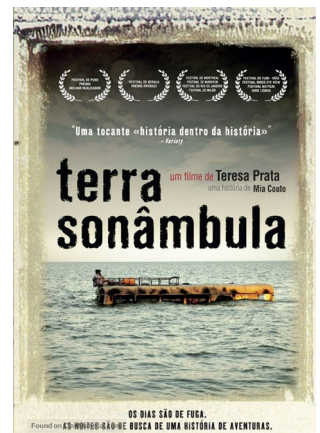
Peter J. Maurits

dir. Teresa Prata; prod. António da Cunha Telles, Pandora da Cunha Telles; screenplay Teresa Prata; photography Dominique Gentil; music Alex Goretzki. 35mm, color, 97 mins. Filmes de Fundo, ICAM, distrib. Marfilmes.

»I am not your uncle.« This phrase, repeatedly uttered by one of the protagonists of Teresa Prata's 2007 *Terra Sonâmbula*, encapsulates the film's dominant melodramatic strategy. Here, this strategy is proposed as the sub-category of »solicitous melodrama«—solicitous signifying anxious, full of care or concern—and is suggested to have emerged, on the one hand, from the idiosyncratic conditions that have shaped Mozambican cinema, and, on the other hand, from the sentimental modes that have circulated in and through Mozambican cultural »ecology« (to use Beecroft's term).

Mozambican cinema is a comparatively new phenomenon. A long history of imperial occupations impeded the formation of a national consciousness and thus of national artistic production. Due to the technological requirements, cinematic production started particularly late. When cinema arrived in Mozambique in the 1890s, it was exclusively accessible to the Portuguese colonizer. In the 1960s, both the colonial state and advertising agencies began to see film as an effective means of propaganda, and thus built cinemas throughout the country and democratized access thereof. By the end of the 1960s, even a Mozambican-run cinematic laboratory was built (Piçarra, Power). Nevertheless, at independence »in 1975 Mozambique had neither film-makers nor production facilities« (Diawara 94). Post-independence, the single political party, Frelimo, successfully encouraged cinematic production, but the fifteen-year long and devastatingly brutal civil war (1977-92) that followed was »near fatal to the survival of cinema« (Arenas 103).

While attempts to rebuild the film industry were moderately successful during the 2000s, cinematic production was affected both short- and long-term. The lack of the means of production led to international collaborations (e.g. with Robert van Lierop and Jean-Luc Godard); to the need for foreign capital (e.g. from Portugal, Brazil, and the U.S.); and to a supranational area of circulation, which is nevertheless limited in scope as most Mozambican films are low budget and non-commercial, and therefore



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non-competitive (Arenas 10). Despite this internationalism, nationalism—translated formally as *Moçambicanidade* («Mozambicanness»)—remains the horizon of national artistic production, and, due to the relative lack of cinematic tradition, film often draws on literary work. The first Mozambican feature film, *The Time of the Leopard* (1985), is a collaboration of Yugoslav director and prog rock legend Zdravko Velimirović and Mozambican author Luís Patraquim. *Terra Sonâmbula*, in turn, is an adaptation of Mia Couto's novel by the same name. The film, directed by the Portuguese Mozambican Teresa Prata, features an amateur Mozambican and Angolan cast and European funding and production with a budget of half a million euros. It was screened widely at international film festivals, while having negligible results at the box-office.

Nationalism and internationalism also shape *Terra's* melodrama. The film is set during the civil war and has two storylines. In the first, Farida (played by Ilda Gonzalez) waits on a ship for Kindzu (played by Hélio Fumo), who is looking for Farida's son. However, marauders, who ambushed a bus and are slaughtering its passengers, also murder Kindzu. In the second storyline, Muidinga (a boy, played by Nick Lauro Teresa) and Tuahir (an old man, played by Aldino Jasse) flee from the violence, find the corpse-filled and burned bus, which they make their home. Muidinga finds Kindzu's diary and comes to believe he is Farida's son—the boy Kindzu is looking for. Eventually, he himself creates, invents, or dreams a river that possibly brings him to her.

The plot is dotted with *Moçambicanidade*. Renamo, Frelimo's main opposition in the war, frequently used bus attacks to terrorize society into paralysis, and the bus attack subsequently became a trope in Mozambican cultural production. Further, after the 1986 publication of Couto's *Voices Made Night*, the form that Prata calls *supra-realism*—present here in the form of creating a river—became central to Mozambican artistic production. Licínio Azevedo even argues that those who, for instance, disbelieve the »reality« that crocodile attacks are human-planned, or that »sorcerers ride hippos at night in the middle of the river,« cannot understand Mozambican cinema (topography) (38). Finally, *Terra's* melodrama takes shape relative to the Mozambican sentimental mode of *narrações de sofrimento* («narratives of suffering»; henceforth »NdS«) in two ways.

Luís Bernardo Honwana coined the term NdS in reference to Mozambican works thematizing African peasant life during »the colonial aggression« (2). Over time, NdS have adopted plots about the relentless violence of raw human suffering as their main narrative mechanism and have become a dominant sentimental narrative mode in literature. For example, in Aleluia's 1987 *Mbelele*, a taxi driver refuses the protagonist and his sick, infant child a ride to the hospital because they are poor and black, and the baby dies in front of the clinic. In Magaia's 1989 *Double Massacre*, bandits force a character to butcher a family member, and threaten to murder his family if he does not comply. In Mendes' 1965 *Portagem*, protagonist Xilim finds a source of subsistence after a novel-long job search, allowing him and his wife Luísa to live, albeit in poverty. Their competitor then lowers his prices, puts Xilim out of business, and rapes the nine-month pregnant Luísa. Xilim intervenes, but he leaves Luísa, who gives birth alone. Three days later, unable to walk and thus eat, Luísa's resources run out, and the baby dies in her arms.

Terra, the novel, subtly departs from NdS. It ends with Farida, waiting futilely for the murdered Kindzu, drenching herself in gasoline and setting herself ablaze. But it does not narrate suffering as explicitly as in the examples above. The adaptation more clearly (and intentionally, Vieira 2013) shifts from NdS towards a melodramatic plot.

It ends with a medium close-up of Kindzu dying, seeing but never reaching Farida's possible son, and realizing that his mission has failed. Yet Farida lives, and the river scene (re)unites her family (it may be a dream, and Muidinga may not be Farida's son).

The solicitous melodrama operates alongside and in friction with the melodramatic plot. Tuahir advocates throughout the story that »it is better to forget« everything. In lieu of forgetting, anxious and full of concern for Muidinga's wellbeing, he argues against feeling at all, because feeling, in the midst of ongoing brutality, leads to more suffering. Family relations are particularly off-limits. When Muidinga slumbers in the evening, Tuahir reproaches: »There you go again, thinking about your parents. Listen, your parents don't want to know if you're alive. [...] In war time, children are a burden.« Whenever Muidinga calls Tuahir »uncle,« he responds with familial denialism: »I am not your uncle.«

The melodramatic character of Tuahir's wholesale rejection of feelings intensifies, particularly relative to the novel, through the amateur overacting: making the rejection appear exaggerated and insincere. This is foregrounded more by the film's minimal(ist) settings and images, which put the performance center stage, as well as by the warm-color texture of *Terra's* celluloid format. Yet exaggeration and insincerity are functional and result from the dual impossibility of having/not having social and familial relations. Tuahir clarifies how he saved Muidinga from being buried alive, grew attached (»all you did was vomit, but then you learned how to laugh«), and gave Muidinga the name of his lost son. Insincerity thus characterizes Tuahir's dilemma. »I am not your uncle« anxiously rejects familial relations out of concern, and (but also because) it signals »I am not your uncle—I am your father.« »Father«—or, translated more accurately, »elder«—is also Tuahir's social function, which paradoxically forces him to insist that Muidinga rejects feelings and family relations to protect him from (further) suffering. Of course, attachment is reciprocal, and at the end of the narrative, when Tuahir dies in Muidinga's arms, the latter is devastated.

If feelings are fundamentally social, as affect studies scholars like Sianne Ngai have invariably demonstrated, the narrative mode of the »solicitous melodrama« emerges precisely from the breakdown of the social. In the Mozambican case, this is a retrospective narrative mode, and it is questionable if a Mozambican director would indeed have combined it with a melodramatic plot. Even at the time of *Terra's* release, Tuahir's preferred strategy still echoed through the country's artistic production: »It is better to forget.«

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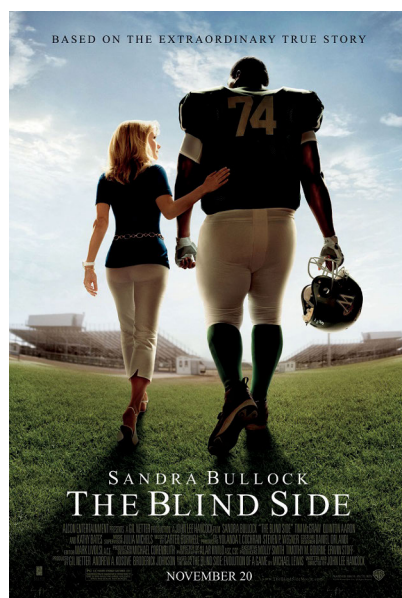
The Blind Side (2009)

Birgit Hebel-Bauridl

dir. John Lee Hancock; prod. Andrew A. Kosove, Broderick Johnson, Gil Netter; screenplay John Lee Hancock; photography Alar Kivilo; music Carter Burwell. 35mm, color, 129 mins. Alcon Entertainment, distrib. Warner Bros.

The Blind Side is a film adaptation of Michael Lewis' 2006 book *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, in part a biography of NFL star Michael Oher. A sports drama, social problem film, and melodrama, it became a major success and was nominated for Best Picture, grossing more than \$309 million. The film resonates with a repertoire of ideologies prominent throughout American cultural history: heroism, exceptionalism, rugged individualism, and upward mobility. It evokes multiple trajectories of American cultural expression, including didactic life narratives like those of Benjamin Franklin and Barack Obama; 19th century women's sentimental fiction and social critique, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; or mid-20th century social problem films, such as → *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). The most pertinent criticism aimed at *The Blind Side* is its catering to White sensibilities—that is, White discomfort when confronted with White privilege and systemic racism (see DiAngelo). The film resounds with problematic dimensions—overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical portrayal of Black communities and identity, White saviorism, and trivialized discussion of racism—manifest in a range of contemporary popular productions, notably *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), → *Invictus* (2009), *The Help* (2011), *Twelve Years A Slave* (2013), and *Green Book* (2018) (Pimentel and Santillanes; Burris). *The Blind Side* thereby constitutes a »post-9/11 Hollywood race drama« (Burris), exploiting claims of authenticity and superficially presenting anti-racist viewpoints, while in fact rather reaffirming racial divides and ignoring institutional responsibilities.

Set in Memphis, Tennessee, *The Blind Side* portrays the story of Michael Oher (played by Quinton Aaron), a Black teenage boy who is accepted into the all-White Wingate Christian School because of his promising athletic skills and the teachers' paternalistic



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

benevolence. The wealthy Tuohy family then offers him educational guidance and a new home in an affluent suburban neighborhood. They supposedly rescue him from Hurt Village, a stereotypical Black »ghetto.« In the end, Michael graduates from high school, and, after being heavily recruited, he accepts a football scholarship at Ole Miss, the alma mater of his adoptive parents and center of their sports enthusiasm. A sequence of images of the »real« Tuohy family and Michael Oher concludes the film.

This claim to presenting a »true story« disguises the market-oriented formatting and almost uncanny absorption of Oher's »real« life into a White-savior narrative (see Ash). In his book, *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to the Blind Side, and Beyond* (2012), as well as in public statements, Oher has challenged the film's depiction of his younger self as lacking intellectual abilities and football skills. The movie also significantly digresses from Oher's life by establishing the Tuohy family as his sole supporters (Pimentel and Santillanes).

Such alterations produce an unambiguous attribution of melodramatic roles. The White heroine, Leigh Anne Tuohy, saves the Black boy, Michael. The White-savior theme (see Ash; DiAngelo 89–98) is exacerbated, on the one hand, by the capacity of Sandra Bullock (who won an Academy Award and Golden Globe for her performance) to draw public attention as the star cast as Leigh Anne, and, on the other hand, by additional White saviors like the teachers and football coach at Wingate. Creating a feel-good opportunity for identification with the positively presented White characters, the movie renders any confrontation with white privilege dismissible. As »nice« religious, patriotic, Southern Republicans—in the year of President Obama's first inauguration—the Tuohy family, *pars pro toto*, suggests that White America is constituted by »good people« to be acquitted on all accounts.

In the film, Michael is fashioned as a naïve *tabula rasa* to be shaped by Whites, thus justifying notions of White superiority and supremacy. Reflecting anti-Black stereotypes of the animalistic brute, the film constructs Michael as unintelligent but excelling at »protective instinct,« which enables him to safeguard others' (read: Whites') blind side (DiAngelo 96–98). White characters like Leigh Anne, schoolteachers, and his adoptive little brother S. J. (played by Jae Head) run both his intellectual and football lives, all while Michael remains silent. The visually grotesque apposition of the tiny S. J. and the gentle giant »Big Mike«—their friendship may remind viewers of Huck Finn and Jim—provides comic relief to the serious bipolarity within the film's simplistic dichotomies. Yet the humor comes at the Black character's expense and solidifies the racial divide—given that the »grotesque« in American literature is defined as the juxtaposition of *incongruous* parts. Michael's construction resembles the clichéd roles of Uncle Tom, the »black saint« (Anthony Appiah), and, to some extent, the »magical negro« (Glenn and Cunningham; see Hughey on »cinesthetic racism« and »magical negro« films). Michael is reduced to a catalyst for Leigh Anne's personal development from distrusting him to defending him against the racism of her White elite friends.

In essence, *The Blind Side* is a film about Leigh Anne, the plot-driving melodramatic heroine. Her voiceover frames the story, and the camera frequently traces her (and other White people's) views of Michael (see Pimentel and Santillanes' concept of »the white cinematic lens«). While Michael now has his first-ever bed, he has neither a past nor a voice. He is constructed as assimilated into the White family and its internal hierarchy and is supposedly thankful for Leigh Anne's leadership and care. Adoptive father Sean Tuohy (played by Tim McGraw) suggests that Michael wants to and can

forget his traumatic past. The audience learns hardly anything about Michael that is temporally or spatially situated outside his new life with the Tuohy family (see Burris). Instead of advocating for shared humanity by portraying complex Black characters, *The Blind Side* implies that Black identities are only acceptable for White saviors (and audiences) when they are flawless and malleable.

Within the film's array of »good« vs. »evil« binaries, Michael is the solitary—and hence exceptional—»good« Black character. Black people in Hurt Village are characterized as criminal, poor, sexually transgressive drug dealers, and, in the logics of »colorblind« racism (see Bonilla-Silva), as themselves responsible for their situations. The Black social worker and lawyer also lack any positive traits (see DiAngelo 96-98). Despite a brief sentimental moment of connection between Michael's mother Denise (played by Adriane Lenox) and Leigh Anne, the character constellation positions the two women as opposites: Leigh Anne ostensibly succeeds in caring for Michael, who eventually addresses her as mother. Denise remains the poor drug addict who can hardly identify her children's fathers, thereby reasserting stereotypes of dysfunctional Black motherhood. Pulling the core drawstrings of sentimentality, the movie presents Michael as the quasi-orphan (his father is dead) in need of Leigh Anne's motherly affection. *The Blind Side* perpetuates prototypical values of American melodrama like family and social harmony, as illustrated by the Thanksgiving scene, a core cultural performance of (White) American history and identity. Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943), an iconic painting in American culture inspired by Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address, appears as a coffee table book and is reenacted in the Thanksgiving dinner scene, in which Leigh Anne takes on the role of *pater/mater familias*. United, the family holds hands—including Michael.

The Blind Side employs major assets of melodrama such as sentimentality, a definite dichotomy of »good« and »bad,« a strong sense of victims and saviors, an appropriation of collective ideologies, and the evocation and steering of the audience's sympathy. Not unlike the tradition of American 19th century women's popular fiction or slave narratives, the film attempts to utilize these structures of feeling to initiate reform yet avoids disturbing the audiences it wishes to teach. However, it is precisely this rigorous adherence to melodramatic conventions that causes the cementation of racial divides. At the Thanksgiving table, Michael's Blackness remains a signifier of difference. The spatial and social boundary between the Black »ghetto« and the Tuohy's White suburban neighborhood remains intact. The film's stable contrast between »good« and »bad« neighborhoods (DiAngelo) attributes Michael's problems to the Black community. Sustaining notions of individualism, *The Blind Side's* strict distinction between »good (White) people« and »bad (White) people« (DiAngelo) explains racism as the sum of singular acts, for example by a redneck at a football game or Leigh Anne's suburban friends, and defines social justice as created by individual White acts of charity. Similarly, Leigh Anne's role as an empowered woman is an individual privilege based on class and wealth within a reproductive, heteronormative context. *The Blind Side's* melodramatic focus on collective American narratives of individualism, compassion, and charity (see Burris) and its clinging to bipolar and flat character construction hinders it from, for example, portraying the Tuohy family as benevolent people who nevertheless benefit from White privilege. American melodrama prototypically advocates reform from within and avoids radical systemic disruption. Following this convention, *The Blind Side* remains informed by colorblind racism and a disregard of systemic ra-

cism. Echoing the American jeremiad, it laments the situation but promises a solution from *within* unchallenged, inherited structures—a supposition the film yet again affirms with its happy ending.

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Invictus (2009)

Sarah Marak

dir. Clint Eastwood; prod. Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Lori McCreary, Mace Neufeld; screenplay Anthony Peckham; photography Tom Stern; music Kyle Eastwood, Michael Stevens. 35mm, color, 134 mins. Liberty Pictures, distrib. Warner Bros.

Set in South Africa, *Invictus* is one of the few movies directed by the »quintessentially American« actor-director Clint Eastwood not primarily concerned with the United States (Gentry qtd. in Sterritt, 7). Focusing on racial reconciliation in the post-Apartheid era, *Invictus* is an unusual mixture of biopic and sports melodrama, mythologizing the role of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in building the new »Rainbow Nation.« With Nelson Mandela, the first black South African to be elected president, as the main protagonist (played by Morgan Freeman), *Invictus* exhibits »the central fixation of the biopic on ›Great Men‹ doing ›Great Things‹« (Cartmell and Polasek 2). However, with its 2009 release and with racial reconciliation and forgiveness as the film's main themes, critics have argued that Eastwood's movie is not so much about South Africa as it is about the United States (Roy 111). Barack Obama had been elected as the first African American President just the year before, prompting fantasies of a post-racial U.S. and questions about »who makes up the ›we‹ of the nation« that have been negotiated in American melodrama time and again (Poole and Saal 11). As Sohinee Roy writes, Obama era films thus often »gravitated toward racial reconciliation because reconciliation fits the optimistic white narrative of a nation that has repaid its historical debts with the election of its first African American President« (112). Based on the book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation* by journalist John Carlin, *Invictus* »stitches together elements of documentary realism, melodrama, and sentimentality to heighten its appeal for a global audience with only a limited knowledge of South African politics and popular culture« (Fu and Murray 25). Despite criticism, the



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

film gained two Academy Award nominations (for Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon) and critical acclaim in the U.S., along with positive reviews in South Africa.

The film's opening shots show two sports fields divided by a road. On one field, a group of kids practice rugby on lush green turf, enclosed by an impressive iron picket fence, led by a coach. On the other side of the road, another group of kids chases a soccer ball on a dusty field surrounded by chain-link fence. When a motorcade passes through on the dividing road, the soccer kids run to the fence and start chanting, while on the other field the coach tells his rugby team to »remember this day«—February 11, 1990. »It is that terrorist Mandela. They let him out [...]. This is the day our country went to the dogs.« In these opening shots, the conflict is quickly established: Racial tension and hostility abound, and the nation's division is also prominently reflected in its sports culture. Rugby, being the favorite sport of the white Afrikaaner minority, is played by white kids only; soccer, favored by black South Africans, is played by a group of black kids, excited to see Mandela released from prison after twenty-seven years. With this dichotomy established from the start, despite being a biopic on a world-famous politician, *Invictus* abstains from showing in more detail the political and social problems of post-Apartheid South Africa and instead focuses on depicting the unifying power of sports in a divided nation.

Fast forward to 1994: South Africa is to host the Rugby World Cup the following year, which the newly elected President Nelson Mandela sees as a political opportunity to unite the nation's people behind a shared cause: the national rugby team. Despite a general disinterest in—if not outright disdain for—the Springboks among his black staffers, Mandela continuously campaigns for every South African to support the team. He even prevents the disbandment of the Springboks, who are viewed as a remnant of the former Apartheid regime and a symbol of Afrikaaner nationalism by many of his fellow black South Africans. Mandela's vision is to unite the nation behind the Springboks as a sign for forgiveness and a step towards reconciliation, and he seeks to realize it with the help of the world championship. While the viewers accompany Mandela as he gets used to the duties of the presidential office and tries to integrate his black and white bodyguards, the Springboks suffer a humiliating defeat and are ridiculed on national sports television. Clearly, they are the underdog in the upcoming World Cup—just as Mandela is in the eyes of many on the political stage. On several occasions, Mandela meets team captain François Pienaar (played by Matt Damon) and the team. As goes the message of *Invictus*, he inspires them to, in the end and against all odds, win the World Cup—and inspires South Africans to embrace the notion of the »Rainbow Nation.«

Despite the centrality of music for melodrama, the first half of *Invictus* makes use of it only sparingly, yet to great effect. After the opening scenes, music is conspicuously absent as long as racial boundaries remain strictly drawn. When President Mandela is picked up by a unit of bodyguards, consisting of a black and white agent, the score sets in for the first time, accompanying a dialogue that establishes a central motif of *Invictus*: Mandela's white bodyguard, unaware of the president's own family situation, happily answers a question about the well-being of his family, and asks Mandela the same question in return. Irritated only for a brief moment, and with background music for the first time, the president replies: »I have a very large family. Forty-two million.« The South African nation, thus, is his metaphorical family, and it is also within familial structures that *Invictus* depicts the process of racial reconciliation. The film thus ne-

gotiates post-Apartheid South Africa's racial divisions not on a structural and political level but rather in classic melodramatic fashion on an intimate familial level (Elsaesser 72). Racism is not depicted as structurally entrenched here, but as a personal issue of prejudice that can be overcome by empathy and a shared enthusiasm for sports. The plot of *Invictus* thus unfolds in two interconnected »domestic« spheres—the national is always also mirrored in the domestic. When he is not shown playing rugby, Pienaar, the captain of the Springboks team which has only one black player, is shown in his parents' home discussing political developments and the upcoming Rugby World Cup, and often watching Mandela on the news. The family's black maid, Eunice (played by Sibongile Nojila), is always present, yet stays in the background, seemingly unfazed by Pienaar's father's racist statements and open disdain for the president. When Pienaar, who functions as a »mediating white presence« (Roy 126), gets a call from the president's office—an invitation to have tea with Mandela—only Eunice smilingly asks him to relay her concerns to the president.

Pienaar, at first somewhat skeptical about the president's hopes for a Springbok title, is inspired by Mandela's moral integrity and tries to incorporate some of his ideas into the team's routine: for example, by singing »Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika« instead of the previous national anthem. Before the final match against New Zealand's All Blacks, Pienaar takes the team and their families on a visit to Robben Island, where Mandela was incarcerated for most of his prison sentence. In a highly emotional scene, he locks himself into Mandela's tiny former cell, measuring it with his arms, and envisions Mandela reciting »Invictus«—a poem by British poet William Ernest Henley that the president gave to Pienaar during one of his visits. With the final lines of the poem spoken by Morgan Freeman (»I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul«), Pienaar seems to envision Mandela staring up at him from the prison's stone pit below, and dramatic music underlines the completion of the Springbok captain's racial education.

Over the course of the tournament, previously skeptical characters successively fall for the fascination of rugby, among them Mandela's political advisor, Brenda (played by Adjoa Andoh), as well as his black bodyguards, who are even taught the basics of the game by their white colleagues. Before the final game, Pienaar returns to his family's home to drop off tickets—one for his wife, two for his parents, and, to the surprise of his father, a fourth ticket for Eunice, thus symbolically turning her into a member of the family. On game day, we see Mandela's bodyguards united in their duty to protect the president, the Pienaar family in the stands accompanied by Eunice, Mandela's estranged family listening to the match on the radio, and people in townships watching in bars. Mandela, seated next to the president of New Zealand, is wearing a green-and-gold Pienaar jersey, as well as a cap given to him by the team. The match is shown in meticulous detail: Action-packed scenes alternate with slow-motion shots, interspersed by scenes from outside of the stadium and the stands. In several intercut scenes, *Invictus* shows people, black and white, overcome by emotion and celebrating South Africa's historical win together: the reluctant but happy bodyguards, Pienaar's family with his mother and Eunice hugging each other in joy, and people in the stands singing and waving the new flag. The development from disdain and rejection to forgiveness and reconciliation is reflected once more in a series of scenes featuring a young black boy lingering next to a police car, wanting to join two white officers listening to the match on the radio. At first, they chase him away. But as the events in the stadium become more and more suspenseful and emotional, they let him come

closer—until at one point he sits on the hood of the car, drinking a can of Coca-Cola. With victory now secured, in an emotional eruption one of the officers lifts the black boy up in the air with a police cap on his head, which, analogous to Mandela's cap, symbolizes shared victory, forgiveness, and a united nation. Reconciliation—if but for a brief moment—is achieved by this one »magical event« (Roy 117). *Invictus*, thus, not only »construct[s] a [...] mythical past suited for the present« (Fu and Murray 25) in a South African context but can also be read as a projection of U.S. American post-racial fantasies.

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The Secret in Their Eyes (*El secreto de sus ojos*, 2009)

Sophie Dufays

dir. Juan José Campanella; prod. Mariela Besuievsky, Juan José Campanella; screenplay Juan José Campanella, Eduardo Sacheri; photography Félix Monti; music Federico Jusid, Emilio Kauderer. 35mm, colors, 127 mins. Haddock Films, Tornason Films, 100 Bares, distrib. Distribution Company.

»A guy can change anything. His face, his home, his family, his girlfriend, his religion, his God. But there's one thing he can't change. He can't change his passion ...«
(Pablo Sandoval to Benjamín Espósito)

El secreto de sus ojos is a film about passions. More specifically, it delves into two passions that are both at the core of melodrama and appear closely, yet ambivalently, linked: inter-class love and social justice. With its consequent generic blending of thriller and romance, Campanella's film has successfully captivated audiences and critics alike. It has received more than forty awards across the world, including two Goyas in Spain and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It was the second Argentine film to win this prestigious prize, twenty-four years after → *The Official Story*. The extent of the film's impacts on the Argentinian public sphere is comparable, as both have triggered intense debates about memory, national identity, and social justice. Like Puenzo's melodrama, *El secreto de sus ojos* returns to the collective trauma of the last Argentine military dictatorship (1976-83), or, more precisely, to the earlier years (1974-76) in which the Triple A (the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) was experimenting with the repressive terrorist methods later implemented by the military. This violent past is revisited from the memory of the film's protagonist: Benjamín Espósito (played by emblematic Argentine star Ricardo Darín), a retired judiciary employee who, at the end of the 1990s, tries to write a novel about his own trauma. But unlike *The Official Story*, which unlocks historical secrets through a female perspective, and against the melodramatic canon, here the characters who discover judicial and emotional truths are men. Therefore, *El secreto de sus ojos* can be conceived as a »male melodrama« (Rocha), which is structured



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around »fallen men« who are dominated by their passions, are led to bypass a balanced definition of justice, and eschew an ethical commitment within the public sphere.

This excess of a sense of social justice is highly melodramatic, and simultaneously derives from a deviation from traditional melodramatic conventions. Thus, the film adheres to the melodramatic *mode of excess*, rather than to the rules of the genre. To understand this subtle play with melodrama, we need to look at how the film constantly interweaves its two plot lines: the search for justice and the love story. This interweaving is introduced from the very beginning. The first two sequences evoking Espósito's separation from his superior and secret love interest, Irene (played by Soledad Villamil)—in a melodramatically coded train departure—and the violent rape and murder of Liliana Colotto, respectively, are indeed interdependent. Both of them are displayed as memory flashes that the protagonist tries to put on paper in the diegetic present of the film, set in 1999. These initial flashbacks refer to two experiences that are equally traumatic for him, and which will later be reintegrated into a more structured plot. When re-watching them, we understand that in the first sequence, Espósito, looking from inside the train at Irene running after him, was realizing *too late* that his love for her was reciprocal and that his decision to leave Buenos Aires without her condemned both of them to live »an empty life,« »a life full of nothing,« just like the one left to widower Ricardo Morales (played by Pablo Rago) after his wife's murder. The audience is also led to understand that the horrific vision of Colotto's bloody corpse in the second sequence crystallizes a state of shock and moral outrage that stirs Espósito's deep desire for justice. He felt this desire just shortly after having met Irene Menéndez-Hastings, a rich woman engaged to be married, when she started working in the judiciary system as his new supervisor.

Until the very last sequences, both the »Morales case« and the love story are left unresolved: The murderer, Isidoro Gómez (played by Javier Godino), arrested by Espósito and his colleague Pablo Sandoval (played by Guillermo Francella), had been released from prison and hired as a hit man—and Espósito is still unable to express his love for Irene. The final sequences display the extent to which these narrative lines are intrinsically linked, as the love affair between the protagonists can only culminate after the search for justice—and, with it, traumatic memory of 1970s Argentine violence—has been resolved. The prolonged and hopeful realization of the melodramatic »foundational romance« (Sommer) indeed happens after the »sensation scene,« in which Espósito and with him the audience discover the secret jail where Morales had for decades locked up the murderer, taking the law into his own hands. Following Linda Williams, the melodramatic confrontation typically reaches its climax in such a »sensation scene« where »the unspeakable truth« is revealed through a paroxysm of pathos and/or spectacular action, in both cases »bypassing language altogether« (52). The sequence in which Espósito witnesses Morales' peculiar appropriation of justice could be interpreted along these lines, as the pathos-laden revelation leaves the former speechless. But if the sensation scene is supposed to make the viewers and diegetic characters recognize the moral virtue of the victim (Morales), here the uncovered »truth« of the case is a morally questionable one, and Espósito's silence conveys a tacit agreement, or even complicity, with Morales' vigilantism. The attitude of the ex-judiciary employee and his consequent action—going to court to express his love to Irene, instead of making public the secret truth of the Morales case—alludes to a collective failure of justice and to the corrosion of the legal system in the post-dictatorship era (Rocha 13).

This ambivalent ending is especially striking regarding the film's relationship with melodrama. Some commentators have argued that *El secreto de sus ojos* »deploys the melodramatic mode masterfully, demobilizing audiences by redirecting our investment away from collective, politicized demands for accountability,« and is, consequently, »ideally functional for neoliberal democracy and the global marketplace« (Tandeciarz 68). But such a reading supposes a reductive understanding of melodrama's operations and multiple levels of signification.

In its activation of the melodramatic mode, the film is indeed much more complex. *El secreto de sus ojos*' romantic resolution »masks the disturbing message that in a society in which justice for decades has been linked to political power, the legal system is no longer effective nor reliable to act fairly« (Rocha 13). From this perspective, the sensation scene, far beyond its apparent revelation of a secret truth, destabilizes all certainties about the past and questions the very existence of justice. This operation of destabilization is grounded on two narrative and visual strategies throughout the film. The first consists in the use and reversal of certain conventions of the melodramatic genre regarding the narrative structure and the characters' roles. The second lies in the implementation of modes of visual excess and the investment in forms of symbolic value particular to the melodramatic mode, which mobilize the spectators' memories and collective imaginations of history (of 1970s Argentina).

First, the seeking of justice as enacted by the »good« characters appears, from the beginning, to be impure—that is, contaminated by personal feelings. This impurity recalls Brooks' analysis that, in melodrama, »morality is ultimately in the nature of affect, and strong emotion is in the realm of morality: for good and evil are moral feelings« (54). In its intertwining of justice and love, Campanella's movie blurs the borders between the traditional roles of melodrama. If the roles of the traitor, the champion of justice, the victim and the fool (as defined in Martín-Barbero) are clearly distributed at the beginning, all of them progressively become interchangeable, up until their final inversion: In the sensation scene, Gómez is transformed into a victim and Morales into a monstrous executioner. Before this culminating moment, Espósito moves from his role of champion of justice, and alternately mirrors both Morales—as a frustrated lover and the victim of an »empty life«—and Gómez. In the photos of Irene's engagement, he looks at her just as Gómez was observing his future victim, with the same *secret* passion *in his eyes*. The fool himself, Sandoval, becomes a victim when he is killed in place of Espósito.

Secondly, the melodramatic truth does not have to be found in the causal order of the signifiers but rather in the construction and dissemination of significant figures and images as well as in the *mise-en-scène*, the semantic value of which is open to diverse metaphorical interpretation (Dufays and Piedras). Some images of the traumatic events reconstructed in Espósito's novel symbolically allude to a visual collective memory of the Argentine military dictatorship. Liliana Colotto's naked and tortured body, Sandoval's murder in Espósito's house, Espósito's internal exile to Jujuy, Gómez and Morales behind the jail bars, the secret prison itself, all offer images that exceed the plot and its morally unsatisfying resolutions. This excess accounts for the perturbed processes of Espósito's memory but also for a narration that pretends to organize and resignify images loaded with collective trauma.

The final scene of interclass reconciliation between the lovers and the door that is literally closed on them is typical for the intrinsic contradictions of melodrama. Despite the obvious allegorical value of the foundational romance and its setting in an

office at the courthouse, this happy ending gives us the appearance of a retreat to the private sphere that comes to compensate for the film's disruption of the idea of justice. The discomfort generated by *El secreto de sus ojos* is based on the construction of a plot that seems to offer closure but that is exceeded by the symbolic and emotional density of its own images and *mise-en-scène*.

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Jaffa (כלת הים, Kalat Hayam, 2009)

Yael Munk

dir. Keren Yedaya; prod. Emmanuel Agneray, Jérôme Bleitrach, Benny Drechsel, Marek Rozenbaum, Karsten Stöter; screenplay Illa Ben Porat, Keren Yedaya; photography Pierre Aim. 35mm, color, 106 mins. Bizibi, Transfax Film Productions, Rohfilm, distrib. Rézo Films.

One of the narrative configurations of Israeli cinema's impossible love affairs between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs is melodrama with all its complexity (Loshitzky). The genre of melodrama, once underestimated as appealing only to housewives, is today considered a way to enable renewed symbolic discourse around complex political issues. One such issue in Israeli cinema is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his seminal article »Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,« Thomas Elsaesser contends that the family melodrama was the preferred site of petit bourgeois conflict, and that »the persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms« (72). In other words: while melodrama seems to deal only with personal issues, it in fact reflects and works through social—and, I would add, political—crises. In this sense, Keren Yedaya's second feature film, *Jaffa*—the Hebrew title meaning »The Bride of the Sea,« referring to the Arabic name for the city of Jaffa—perfectly illustrates the symbolic role of melodrama.

After the enormous success of her debut film, *Or, My Treasure* (2004), the filmmaker returned to her two favorite Israeli actresses, Ronit Elkabetz and Dana Ivgy, but this time with a melodramatic narrative set in the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The city of Jaffa, which after Israel's independence in 1948 was supposed to become a symbol for the coexistence of Jews and Arabs but failed to do so.



Just like the city of Jaffa, which has since been torn between two conflictual and contradictory identities, the film *Jaffa* takes place in an unspecified present and reveals an almost textbook family melodrama, giving special importance, for instance, to home decoration over the intellectual content, and emphasizing characters' emotional and psychological predicaments (Elsaesser 76). The narrative opens in a realistic scene in a garage owned by a Jewish Israeli man who runs a small family business, where his son works as a mechanic and his daughter as the secretary. He also employs a Palestinian father and his son. At first sight, it seems that things run smoothly and in accord with traditional gender roles: Men are busy with mechanical tasks, and the only female employee performs administrative work. Under this peaceful surface, however, high tensions seem to accompany every move. Behind this fragile coexistence, displaying a seemingly normalized relationship between Jews and Arabs in a »mixed town« where Israelis and Palestinians live side by side (Rabinowitz and Monterescu), a romantic drama takes place. A forbidden love grows between Mali, the owner's Jewish daughter (played by Dana Ivgy), and the Palestinian mechanic Tawfik (played by Mahmud Shalaby). They successfully kept their love affair secret for a long time, hoping that their relationship would one day be tolerated. However, the animosity between Jews and Arabs has not abated but in fact seems to have worsened. Mali's brother, Meir, who represents the younger Israeli generation, behaves violently and discriminately toward Arabs in general, and toward Tawfik in particular. This holds detrimental implications for his sister's love affair.

Like their son, Mali's parents are unaware of the drama in which their daughter lives in their very own family business. As typical middle class Jewish residents of Jaffa, they demonstrate a kind of entitlement toward Arab citizens, and especially the mechanics. While the father's relationship with his two Arab mechanics reveals his professional esteem for and dependence on their loyalty, his wife manifests enormous racist contempt toward them. The vast difference between the father's and mother's mentalities seems to shape their son's views, which are expressed not only in small provocations in the garage but also in racist remarks at the family's dinner table.

The tension at the dinner table is duplicated in the garage, where the father works with his two children. What could have been a recipe for a happy family instead turns catastrophic when the brother learns about his sister's love affair. Meanwhile, Mali discovers that she is pregnant and decides to fly to Cyprus with Tawfik and marry him there, because in Israel such a union is forbidden: not only by her family, but also by Israeli law, according to which civil marriage does not exist. Mali buys a wedding dress and Tawfik buys a ring and the flight tickets. Mali hides their travel bags under Meir's bed in the garage. The day before their planned departure, Meir repeats his provocations against Tawfik, insulting his father, and a physical quarrel erupts between the two, at the end of which Meir is fatally wounded. He is taken to a hospital but later succumbs to his injuries. Tawfik is accused of murder and sent to prison. Needless to say, Mali's family is devastated, and Mali realizes that her wedding plans will not materialize. The family decides to leave Jaffa in an act that can be interpreted as the end of a dream of coexistence. Mali's pregnancy becomes more and more visible, until she must confess it to her parents. The moment they learn of the father's identity they decide to move to another town, where they attempt to force an abortion on their daughter, who refuses. After a violent confrontation Mali leaves home and goes to her aunt's house in Jaffa, where she gives birth to her daughter. The family reunites around the newborn

baby and succeeds to create a seemingly normal life. As time goes by, Mali learns that Tawfik has been released from prison, and she begins planning how to meet with him. However, it is in vain that she walks the streets looking for Tawfik. The film concludes with a sequence in which Mali sits by the seashore with her daughter playing next to her. She looks at the sea meditatively. At that moment, Tawfik appears and looks at the little girl, as if recognizing his own daughter. He thoughtfully raises his head, only to see his beloved sitting on a rock. He again looks at the child, and in this exchange of gazes the narrative builds hope that the Jewish-Palestinian family will (re)unite. The film ends with the view of the waves of Jaffa, an iconic image of the unpredictability of life in this tormented city.

The film's title reveals the filmmaker's intention. The tormented bride of the sea is indeed Mali, but also, and mostly, the mixed town of Jaffa, where for generations Palestinian citizens lived until Jewish Israelis entered, first after the 1948 war for independence and then, a few years later, following the processes of gentrification. These historical details invite an allegorical reading of the setting. The city has been conquered and passed from one conqueror to the other: from the Turkish authorities to the British to the Israelis. But behind these exchanges, there was a people who lived quietly through war and peace, attempting to make a living throughout changing circumstances. These people suffered from discrimination and violence, and, just like Tawfik, they hardly dared to respond to violence with violence—but when they did so it led to terror. At first sight, it seems that Yedaya's film does not stake a position from either side of the conflict, as it focuses on Mali's impossible love story. But the choices of its protagonists and their insistence on their right to love against all prejudices, and, above all, the sea landscape so typical to Jaffa, all work to remind the viewer that this story is about more than just two people's love. It represents, rather, the impossible loving relationship between people and their land, which lies at the foundation of all national discourse. These protagonist lovers accordingly turn into symbolic actors in a decidedly political world.

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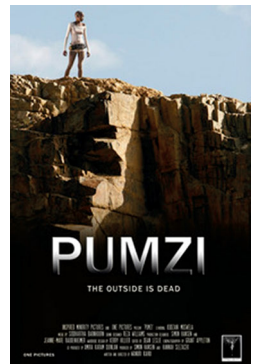
Pumzi (2009)

Maira Marquis

dir. Wanuri Kahiu; prod. Simon Hansen, Hannah Slezacek; screenplay Wanuri Kahiu; photography Grant Appleton; music Siddhartha Barnhoorn. digital, color, 21 mins. Goethe Institut and Focus Features, distrib. Inspired Minority Pictures.

Pumzi is an Afrofuturist melodrama in which a young woman breaks from a technologically rich African state existing in the ecologically destroyed aftermath of World War III, the »Water War,« in order to reestablish a traditional ecological culture. *Pumzi* traffics in conventional melodramatic depictions of a repressive state that masquerades as benevolent. The escape of the protagonist, Asha (played by Kudzani Moswela) from this regime is achieved only through self-sacrifice. Aesthetically, the film is innovative through its depiction of Gĩkũyu epistemology as the solution to both environmental and social ills. Through its affectively charged return to the traditional reverence for Mũgumo trees, it makes an emotive appeal for ecological social change through the revival of tradition, even as it conforms to Western melodramatic conventions that promise freedom for the virtuous (Anker).

The film opens in a Sahara-like desert. Tubular white structures appear, which viewers are informed constitute the East African Maitu state: a society that has survived the Water War. Within this structure is the Virtual Natural History Museum, which catalogs flora and fauna that have gone extinct, including a jar that holds a dried seed pod with a label that identifies this as Maitu (»mother«) seed, which comes from *maa* (»truth«) and *itu* (»our«) in Kikuyu (in English, also spelled »Gĩkũyu«). Another exhibit features a newspaper clipping that details greenhouse gas and climate change, titled »There Goes the Last Tree.« This is positioned below the petrified roots of the final tree. These exhibits introduce the major theme of the short film: the environmental collapse that precipitated the Water War. Water and trees—specifically the Mũgumo tree, which is a maternal figure, a giver and restorer of life, in Gĩkũyu epistemology—play a central role in the decolonial narrative the film embraces (Karangi 127). The main character, Asha, whose name means hope, desire, or life, is a curator at the museum. We first see Asha as she appears in her own dream, standing in the vast desert when a majestic tree suddenly appears, leafy and green. She reaches out to touch it and her face alights with joy. This dream is abruptly interrupted by a computer voice, reciting



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AFROBUBBLEGUM

»Dream detected. Take your dream suppressants.« Asha wakes with a start and reaches for a bottle of pills with the directions »Take 1 tablet immediately after an attack« printed on the side.

Asha is a dutiful member of this dystopian society, which is hierarchical and oppressive even as it inverts the gender and racial order of colonially inherited monoculture. Women are in charge, and the lighter complexioned characters are in more menial positions (bathroom attendant, security guard). The Maitu state is also supremely ecological, from recycling water to carbon neutrality. However, water usage is monitored with military enforcement, and urine and sweat are recycled for drinking water. None of the characters in the film speak. Instead, they communicate through computers, because speaking would release water vapor through breath and necessitate more water consumption. In *Pumzi*, which means »breath« in Swahili, people are literally silenced in order to achieve ecological sustainability. As Shirin Assa notes, although Maitu claims traditional lineage through its moniker, this society instrumentalizes its people. The regimentation of daily life, the hierarchy among people, and the restriction of peoples' movement is explained as a concern for their safety and seemingly has achieved the liberal goals of female and Black empowerment and ecological sustainability. And yet, its portrayal constitutes a critique of the colonially inherited global monoculture's technofix environmentalism and establishes the need for broad social change to achieve both human freedom and ecological sustainability.

After the initial dream, Asha receives a mysterious soil sample at her desk, which she is told to report to security. She disobeys and finds out that the test results indicate abnormally high water content and no radioactivity—two markers of a healthy ecosystem. These qualities also mark the soil as part of a Mūgumo grove, since »Mūgumo has an enormous capacity to conserve the soil moisture and [...] fertility« (Karangi 118). She places some soil in her hand, lowers her face to her palm, and inhales deeply. Her head then falls to the desk, as if fainting. Similarly, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's canonical short story »Mugumo« (1975) depicts the tree as having this soporific quality: The main character falls into sleep repeatedly under the influence of the tree, having dreams that blend with reality and reveal deeper truths. In her dream, Asha plunges into a pool of clear water, clothed in a traditionally patterned, flowing dress—quite a contrast from her real-life neutral colored, futuristic unitard—which billows around her under the water. In this darkly lit water, we see what appear to be tree roots. Mūgumo grows by water, and this therefore further marks the tree from her dreams as a Mūgumo.

Asha wakes with a start and raises her head from the desk. She turns and sees one of her specimens: the »mother seed« from the beginning of the film. This marks the point when Asha begins pursuing the decolonial ecology that her dreams encourage, by evoking the Mūgumo tree that is foundational in the identity of the Gīkūyū (Karangi). Gīkūyū culture traces its nine different matrilineal lines to a single female ancestor: the mother seed (Mūkūyū). The central role of the Mūgumo is ecological as the tree provides habitat and food for a greater variety of species than any other tree in Africa (Deeble and Stone). It is due to its role in ecological well-being that the Mūgumo is so central in Gīkūyū culture, as in the transferring of government from one generation to the next in the *ituika* ceremony (Karangi 119). The film draws a contrast between the oppressive environmentalism of the state that appropriates the Mūgumo and the traditional culture that instead reveres it and argues that the future needs to break from colonial inheritances to achieve a non-oppressive environmentalism.

Asha tries to leave Maitu to plant the seed, which has begun to sprout, but her request is denied. Her subsequent punishment marks her as unwarrantedly persecuted, raising her virtue for affective appeal. Asha's integrity is further enforced when she escapes and smuggles the plant out into the desert, searching for the coordinates from the soil sample. Asha walks through the desert alone. Her lips appear cracked, and just before she runs out of water, she waters the seed. She becomes disoriented from dehydration and drops her compass. Wandering through the desert, Asha sees the tree from her dream, vibrant and green. However, when she arrives, this mirage fades and the tree is revealed as a dead and wind battered trunk with no sign of life. Surrounding it are similarly dead trunks, most of which appear to have been cut. This image evokes a dispute occurring in contemporary Kenya, between people who want to maintain traditional culture and those who want »progress« through a neocolonial policy that sanctions the cutting of Mūgumo trees. *Pumzi* aligns with the traditional Gikūyū reverence for these trees and alludes to the ecosystem's collapse due to the colonially inherited desanctification of the trees. Asha digs a hole in the sand in what was once a Mūgumo grove and plants the sprout, watering it with the last of her remaining water from her canteen. She then wipes the sweat from her body and wrings it out and onto the seed. Pulling her shawl over her head, she lies down, shading the sprout from the direct sun. The camera pans up, and from above Asha cradles the sprouted plant. As the camera pans out, a tree's crown blooms and covers Asha. As the camera continues to zoom out, this lone tree becomes an ever-fainter dot in the midst of a vast desert. As the title of the film, *Pumzi*, appears at the end of the film, the view expands to include high mountains, on the other side of which appears a vibrant green forest with low hanging clouds as the sound of thunder cracking breaks through high-pitched singing.

This ambiguous ending invites several possible interpretations. If Asha's sacrifice creates this forest, and if the distance between her tree and the forest is a temporal, not a spatial one, then Asha's act is in keeping with tradition and against the repressive Maitu state. This asserts that traditional Gikūyū culture is morally right in opposition to a culture inherited through colonialism—even as the Maitu state enacts ecological, feminist, and pro-Black policies. Asha's sacrifice is a gesture of reciprocity, which is an epistemological claim found throughout ecologically minded societies worldwide. Juxtaposing the militarized, dystopian, and colonially inherited techno-ecology of the Maitu state with this kind of reciprocity creates two possible environmental futures: highly repressive and environmentally scarce, or free and ecologically abundant. Asha plants the mother seed of traditional culture: a tree, whose shade she will never partake of, but which will create a better future for others.

Another possible interpretation is that the distance between Asha's tree and the forest is spatial. In this reading, the ecological scarcity of the Maitu community is fabricated but presented as a fact of nature. The construction of artificial scarcity is designed to maintain rigid social hierarchies and benefit some—although the beneficiaries are never represented in the film. The intentional obfuscation of natural abundance is accomplished through media representations, as the newspaper articles and Virtual Natural History Museum exhibits show. If this is the reality, Asha's sacrifice is unnecessary. The Earth is already abundant—some are just hoarding all its resources. While it would have been impossible for Asha to know that the lush forest lies just on the other side of the mountains, she perceives ecological ruination as total. This interpretation undermines the sacrifice of her life as necessary for the revival of non-human life.

In either interpretation, *Pumzi* leverages the classic melodramatic sacrifice of the virtuous against the oppressor, for ecological purposes. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, melodramas enjoy high popularity at times of »intense social and ideological crisis« (70) in part because of their moral goals. Environmental collapse is an existential crisis. The Maitu state's environmentalism is not a solution that most viewers, even of the most ecologically inclined, would embrace. *Pumzi* advocates for the healing of environments and colonially inherited social ills through a decolonial turn to traditional culture by depicting Asha as a parallel to the Mũgumo: a foundational maternal figure that ushers in reciprocity and ecological abundance, in contrast to the cruel motherhood that the colonially inherited Maitu state enacts.

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Anchor Baby (2010)

Claudia Hoffmann

dir. Lonzo Nzekwe; prod. Lonzo Nzekwe, Jeremy Hood; screenplay Lonzo Nzekwe; photography Ricardo Diaz; music Sean Baillie. Red One Camera, color, 95 mins. Alpha Galore Films, distrib. Urban Home Entertainment.

The massive success of Nigeria's popular film industry, Nollywood, has been widely documented over the past few decades. As the world's most successful grassroots film industry, Nollywood has not only taken the country but also the continent and the African diaspora by storm and has joined Hollywood and Bollywood as one of the world's three largest film industries. Nollywood's success is generally attributed to its localized and relatable stories and distinctive style, characterized by »rough-and-ready production practices, stylistic mélanges, humdrum soundtracks, stilted dialogue [...] and proclivity for melodrama« (Akudinobi 133). However, the excessive drama and amateur rapid-fire production of the early films has led way to »New Nollywood«—films for which »the standard is spectacular and the production process is more or less formal« (Uwah 65). Many of these New Nollywood-style films are produced by expatriate filmmakers but continue to tell stories that are relevant for Nigerian audiences and feature a style that, while more restrained, remains unapologetically and recognizably Nollywood. Regardless of when and where Nollywood films are produced, however, melodrama »is a major component of Nollywood films and has been its primary aesthetic and narrative focus since the industry's beginnings« (Arthur 5).

The dramatic emotionality that plays out in soap-opera style through big gestures, facial expressions, and dramatic dialogue and underscores narratives that are often about moral failures and their punishments, make up Nollywood's most recognizable features: »Extremes of fortune, emotion, and moral character are classic melodramatic elements« (Haynes 2000, 22). In *Anchor Baby*, a story about an undocumented Nigerian couple by Canadian-based Nigerian producer and director Lonzo Nzekwe, this typical emotionality maps out contemporary immigration concerns: the pressures of living without documents, the lack of funds for lawyers, the constant threat of Immigration and Customs Control (ICE), the vulnerability to exploitation.

Like many Nollywood films made abroad, *Anchor Baby* is more subdued in style than is typical for domestic Nollywood films (see Haynes 2013), but it nonetheless re-



tains the genre's proven signature elements. Here, Nollywood's typical melodramatic appeal lies in the heavy reliance on dialogue to move the story forward, the central themes of morality and betrayal, and the punishment for not adhering to Nigerian societal expectations: »[Her] zeal for America results in Joyce's punishment because she refuses to return to her African home nation where she is obligated to take care of her husband and household« (Arthur 20).

Joyce Unanga (played by Omoni Oboli) and her husband Paul (Sam Sarpong) live undocumented in Chicago and are expecting their first child when Paul is arrested and deported to Nigeria. He urges Joyce to stay behind in the U.S. until the baby is born as an American citizen. Left to her own devices and with very little money, Joyce accepts the help of Susan (Terri Oliver) and her husband Tim (Colin Paradine), who offer to take her in until she can return to Nigeria with her baby. In order to secure prenatal care for Joyce, the women acquire fraudulent health cards under Susan's name. When Joyce gives birth, she does so under the identity of Susan Backley, thereby assigning her baby Susan's last name. When she realizes that she will not be able to leave the country with a baby she cannot prove to be her own, she and Susan decide that Joyce will turn herself in to immigration to be put on a plane to Nigeria while Susan and the baby board the same plane as regular passengers. Only after she is detained by immigration officials and Susan disappears with her baby does Joyce realize that, all along, she was the victim of an elaborate scam for Susan to steal her baby. The film ends with Joyce's deportation back to Nigeria without her son.

Joyce's betrayal by her close friend is a common trope for both domestic and diasporic Nollywood films: »Betrayal of or by intimates is the most prevalent of all Nollywood themes« (Haynes 2013, 89). The excessive nature of Susan's elaborate betrayal is also quite typical. *Anchor Baby* relies »heavily on melodrama's signifying practices, even if put to work on foreign soil« (Ryan 68). The film is not interested in a »realistic« portrayal of immigration challenges. Rather, *Anchor Baby* emphasizes emotions. At the end, the film lingers on Joyce's suffering as she walks through the airport, flanked by two immigration officers. Her anguish, grief, and guilt are emphasized through close-ups of her face. Her slow, defeated walk through the gate door to the plane that is to take her back to Nigeria, without her baby, evokes feelings of sympathy for her utter desolation and hopelessness. The people around her barely acknowledge her debilitating sadness. These final scenes mirror what Jonathan Haynes calls the »alienation/hardship sequence« that so often occurs in Nollywood diaspora films. »The protagonists trudge disconsolately, carrying their shoulder bags, through the streets of the foreign city« (2013, 82). *Anchor Baby's* hardship sequence brings home the moral of the story: »*Anchor Baby* alerts viewers about what life in America can become for those who abandon their cultural morality« (Arthur 20).

However, while Joyce's sad story leaves some room for sympathy, another portrayal of moral transgression in *Anchor Baby* is less sympathetic to the perpetrator. In true Nollywood tradition, the film features a loosely connected, parallel storyline about the ICE agent, Mark Castello (played by Michael Scratch), who apprehends Joyce's husband, Paul, at the beginning of the film. Towards the end, Castello once again leads an effort to fulfill deportation orders. This time, he and his team enter the home of an undocumented Mexican couple. In the ensuing gunfire exchange between the agents and the couple's teenage son, both Castello and the boy die. The morality tale is particularly overt here: The Mexican father was also the man who earlier provided Joyce with the

fake health card. Not only is the man punished for his crimes, but his son becomes the innocent victim, while he has to live with the knowledge that his material greed killed his child—thus emphasizing that the violation of social norms is harmful not only to the perpetrator but to society as a whole. In this way, *Anchor Baby* continues the Hollywood tradition of presenting a »tale of greed and moral transgression« (Okome 179).

Rather than being concerned with the justice or injustice of the American immigration system, the film acts as a cautionary tale about the temptations of abandoning cultural values and community in search of greener pastures. However, while *Anchor Baby* ruthlessly punishes the sidestepping of social expectations, the film nonetheless allows us to feel sympathy for Joyce as a mother whose primary concern is her baby's future.

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Even the Rain (*También la lluvia*, 2010)

Teresa Hiergeist

dir. Icíar Bollaín; prod. Juan Gordon; screenplay Paul Laverty; photography Alex Catalán; music Alberto Iglesias. 35mm, color, 104 mins. Morena Films, distrib. Vitagraph films.

The Spanish, Mexican, and French coproduction, *También la lluvia* re-stages the first contact between the indigenous people of South America and the Spanish, whose imperialist and violent character has been at the root of innumerable conflicts throughout history. A European film crew travels to Bolivia to shoot a film about the early stages of Spanish colonialization, focusing on the monk Bartolomé de las Casas, his resistance against the conquistadors, and his supposed commitment to a humane treatment of the native population. The idealistic intention of the fictional director Sebastian (played by Gael García Bernal) is to present a genuine version of the »discovery« of America by providing room for both the perspective of the Spaniards and that of the oppressed population. However, this commemorative and historiographical project, ambitious and naïve at the same time, is disrupted by concurrent violent protests against the privatization of groundwater, in which several of the actors are involved. While the filming proceeds, the water supply of Cochabamba is sold to a multinational company. The primary local character, Daniel (Juan Carlos Aduviri), who is hired to portray a tribal leader in the movie, turns into a leading figure in the mobilization against this neocolonial scheme, which is shown to curtail basic human rights and to especially affect the poor. Sebastian and film producer Costa (Luis Tosar) are forced to suspend their pretentious project, to face the social realities of contemporary Bolivia, and to take sides in the escalating conflict.

También la lluvia is characterized by a *mise-en-scène* and montage that repeatedly draw parallels between the historical and the contemporary situation. The similarity of scenes such as the famous exchange of gold for glass beads during the *conquista* as well as the film crew's enthusiastic conversation about the indigenous actors' low



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wages allowing for cheap production costs, is easy to detect (Verlaguet 244). Equally obvious is the fact that Europeans are shown as masters on both the intra- and the extradiegetic level of the film, while indigenous people are limited to their »traditional« roles as colonial subjects. The director and producer, who are just as little interested in the indigenous people's rights as the colonists, pressure them not to participate in the »water wars« before the film is finished. These analogies underline the continuity of the colonial hermeneutics that establish binary and hierarchical oppositions between Spaniards and indigenous people (Amago 159). The proximity of the corresponding scenes in the movie, the recurring objects on both narrative levels, and the parallel montages all further accentuate this connection between past and present. Viewers are confronted with ongoing European hegemony and Eurocentrism that is evinced in the connection between colonial history and the contemporary filmmakers' struggle to finish their film at all costs. Imperialism is not at all confined to history, but in fact still structures everyday life in the postcolonial world.

However, the ignorance and indifference of the film team serve a further purpose: namely, to generate a melodramatic effect. The emotionalized breakdown of their insincere attitudes and their final redemption is primed by the film's melodramatic structure: It arises from the fact that the film crew members condemn the imperialism of the colonists and consider themselves enlightened, emancipated, and morally superior, while they constantly affront, disrespect, and discourage indigenous people without realizing it. This exposed hypocrisy may prompt spectators to recognize the moral wrongness of these actions (Elsaesser 12). Producer Costa's personal conversion is particularly striking. Initially, he embodies the ignorant, narcissistic capitalist welcoming Bolivia's minimal pay and the indigenous peoples' precarious situation, which permits him to play out his power position (Barrenetxea Marañón 457). However, moved by the fate of a little indigenous girl injured during the violent street protests against law enforcement, he realizes his moral duty not to flee from the erupting violence like the other crew members but to take responsibility in order to rescue the innocent child. This transformation is combined with a typically melodramatic insight (Fix 83): Both Spaniards and indigenous people of Latin America share the same needs and should therefore be in solidarity with each other, a conclusion symbolized by the vial of water given to Costa at the time of his departure, which, in its striking simplicity underlined by melancholic violin music (Schäfer et al. 12), is meant to move not only him, but also the film's audience, to tears.

The intercultural contacts and conflicts in the age of globalization do not only challenge the hegemony of Western societies but also their cinemas. Every feature film is forced to position itself with regard to issues of representation and their political implications. In the case of *También la lluvia*, the outcome is rather ambivalent. On the one hand, the film raises awareness for the ongoing victimization of indigenous people in Latin America, calling for a transcultural meta-perspective (Luna 191) and drawing attention to the continuity of structural exploitation since the early modern era. Here, the melodramatic effect holds a central role, as it models Costa's awakening from his Eurocentric, capitalist indifference to emotion, compassion, and humanity—and, at the same time, appeals to the spectator to follow his example. On the other hand, this ostensibly tolerant representation entails a racist subtext, which is inextricably linked to the requirements of the melodramatic mode: by showing Costa's empathy as a key to intercultural understanding and as a universal human capacity that transcends cul-

ture, the film stumbles into two pitfalls. First, »listening to your heart« is presented as a solution to all conflicts, which simplifies the dynamics of interracial contacts and negotiates them on an individual rather than a structural level. It implies a promise that a new beginning between Spaniards and indigenous people is possible. This fantasy of a tabula rasa may prevent any awareness of the complexities of postcolonial entanglements and can be interpreted as a call for denying past injustices. Secondly, this empathy, which for the sake of melodramatic dramaturgy is shown as an anthropological constant, turns out to be a European construct. While *También la lluvia* at least implicitly draws attention to the fact that the humanism of the intradiegetically portrayed Bartolomé de las Casas is based on a European tradition of thought (Santaolalla 213), it does not reflect on Carlos' emotion, which, just as any possible sentimental reaction of its audience, is based on Western Christian socialization. Hence the film determinedly excludes indigenous traditions and perpetuates a colonial hermeneutics of Othering; it contributes to the invisibility of »the new world« in favor of »the old.« To avoid this, *También la lluvia* would have had to forgo the intensity of its melodramatic effect. Between respectful representation and popular success, it has chosen sides.

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Melancholia (2011)

Marius Henderson

dir. Lars von Trier; prod. Meta Louise Foldager, Louise Vesth; screenplay Lars von Trier; photography Manuel Alberto Claro; sound design Kristian Eidnes Andersen. 35mm, color, 135 mins. Zentropa Entertainments et al., distrib. Nordisk Film.

Key aspects of melodramatic convention have prominently inflected many of Lars von Trier's films, including the centrality of moral conflicts and the extensive (perhaps exploitative) depiction of the sacrificial suffering of »virtuous« female protagonists. The melodramatic mode is often employed in his films in conjunction with other aesthetic styles and modes, with, for example, the Dogme 95-style realism in *Breaking the Waves* (1996), the musical form in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), or elements of Brechtian epic theater in *Dogville* (2003). Similarly, von Trier's *Melancholia* has been classified as a film in which »domestic melodrama meets metaphysical disaster movie« (Sinnerbrink 117) that scurries »from intimate melodrama to cosmological drama and back again« (Shaviro 7).

The film begins with an eight-minute sequence of sixteen disjunctive shots, mostly filmed in slow motion and appearing like painterly images or tableaux vivants. The opening sequence is largely proleptic, and it contains at times rather surreal images of the protagonists in states of depressed melancholia as well as fearful terror, interspersed with depictions of a collision between planet Earth and the title-giving rogue planet, Melancholia, which will lead to the destruction of all life on Earth. This sequence is musically accompanied by the prelude to Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* and contains further visual references, both explicit and implicit, to canonized artifacts of European art. The film then centers on the last moments in the life of its protagonists, the sisters Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg). Claire and her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland), host a wedding party for Justine and her groom, Michael (Alexander Skarsgård), at their lavish estate and castle, which marks



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them and their guests as members of an affluent, predominantly white European and North American upper class. However, the wedding celebration does not go as planned, due to Justine's severe depression, which results in anhedonia, her obstruction of the planned wedding protocol, and the eruption of old family conflicts. Meanwhile, planet *Melancholia* approaches Earth. Whereas Claire reacts to the approach of *Melancholia* with increasing panic, Justine seems to look upon the impending apocalypse with calm, and even identifies with the intruding planet.

The haptic visual texture of the film can be pictured as an embodiment of depression and its paradoxical commingling of (inner) turmoil, frenzy, and stillness. Justine and her identification with *Melancholia* congeal into an aestheticized metaphorical correlate of a major depression, or of depression as a political-ontological position of, in Dominic Fox's terms, »militant dysphoria« or »politicized unpleasure« (5; Shaviro 20). It might therefore be unsurprising that several critics and viewers with experience of severe depressive episodes have stressed the aptness of the film's rendition of depression (Kaufman; Shaviro). This applies not only to its content and Dunst's performance as Justine, for which she received the Cannes Best Actress Award, but also to the film's form. The opening sequence, with its disjunctive, slow motion tableaux, captures a leaden weightiness, sometimes verging on catalepsy; whereas the hectic handheld camera, used throughout the rest of the film, amounts to a dynamic, spatialization of scurrying distress. Both (e)motional states are symptomatic of depression, and the film renders them in a way that »depathologizes depression« (Shaviro 20). Moreover, the handheld camera, which cannot be associated with the perspective of a specific entity or a particular diegetic function, seems to elude conscious and rational protocols, and thus sensorially incarnates the experience of uncontrollable volatility so typical of depression, in a non-judgmental way (Shaviro 15-17). In addition, as Steven Shaviro explicates, Justine's depression »needs no external motivation or justification. It is just what it is: an unconditioned and nonreflexive state of pure feeling« (19). This emanation of Justine's depression as »pure feeling« is not only indicative of a kind of melodramatic »depressive realism« (Berlant 80; Lukes 196-97), but can also be interpreted in more explicitly political terms as a reaction to what Mark Fisher has termed »capitalist realism«—that is, the hegemonic belief that there is ostensibly no alternative to capitalism and that, therefore, referencing a phrase of Jameson's, »it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism« (Jameson 76; see also Fisher 2).

In *Melancholia*, Justine's depression, which accompanies the literal end of the (terrestrial) world, leads her to an outright rejection of capitalist realism, which pervades her life and becomes particularly pertinent during her wedding party. She works for an advertising agency and her boss is also her groom's »best man,« who promotes her to the position of »art director« during the wedding party and primes a young employee to follow her during the party so as to squeeze out a tagline for their latest ad campaign. This shows how, under the conditions of capitalist realism, even a supposedly »intimate« and »personal« event, such as a wedding, is pervaded by the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism's call for endless productivity and value creation. However, due to her depressive state, Justine thwarts the expectations by resigning from her job, thus refusing the imperative toward ceaseless productivity and the compulsion to be happy (Ahmed) found in the heteropatriarchal logic engrained in capitalist realism (Cvetkovich 166-69). Justine declines to have sex with her groom on their wedding

night, and instead sexually »consumes« the young employee of her former boss, albeit without providing the much longed for tagline.

This interspersing of the personal and the political is typical for melodrama. Yet, in *Melancholia*, the personal is not only political but decidedly political-economic. And, in a further step, the personal-political conflicts and scenarios of crisis, which suffuse the film, branch out and reach a cosmological dimension. Clearly, the overarching scenario of crisis in the film is neither Justine's depression nor the conflicts with her family and employer: but the impending collision of Earth with Melancholia.

A major function of melodrama has always been to mitigate crisis, and especially crises caused by moralistically charged antagonisms between positionalities construed as either »virtuous« or »evil.« In *Melancholia*, however, the most threatening antagonistic force—that is, the titular planet—exceeds the all-too-human categories of morality, as Melancholia, this great inorganic mass, destroys the Earth not out of evil intention but without any intention at all, due to purely contingent physical circumstances. The sheer indifference and affectlessness of Melancholia contests and ultimately upends the paradigms of traditional melodrama, which remain attached to human categories of morality and affectability. By letting Melancholia act as a hidden, nonhuman protagonist, the film grants space to a perspective that has been called for by proponents of speculative realism and similar critical theoretical approaches (Daniel; Peterson)—that is, the perspective of a nonhuman »world-without-us« (Thacker 8-9), of indifferent, inorganic materiality, in addition to its engagement with depressive realism and capitalist realism.

All the while, *Melancholia's* treatment of these different forms of realism is mediated by the melodramatic mode, through conflictual familial constellations and affectively laden crises. Contrary to melodramatic convention, however, there is no cathartic conflict resolution. *Melancholia's* persistent dwelling in irresolution and »suspended animation« (Fox 4) is condensed in the ways music is used in the film, which is, ironically, a typical melodramatic asset. The only piece of nondiegetic music in the film is Wagner's prelude to the opera *Tristan and Isolde*, which not only accompanies the opening sequence but is also routinely heard throughout the film. It contains the famous and likewise enigmatic »Tristan chord,« which supposedly builds up tension and longing, yet finds no release in a resolving cadence. The repetitive appearance of this operatic prelude and its Tristan chord upholds said suspended animation in *Melancholia*. Neither the reference to Wagner nor the many other intertextual references to canonized works of so-called European »high culture«—such as paintings by Bruegel, Bosch, Caravaggio, and Millais—can provide redemptive solace. Neither can this task be fulfilled by cinema, self-reflexively invoked in the »magic cave,« a brittle tent-like structure under which Justine, Claire, and Claire's son, Leo, sit and wait at the very end of the film, holding hands, until they and all life on Earth are eradicated by the collision with Melancholia. After the screen turns black, and after a brief moment of silence, the credits begin to roll and Wagner's music again begins to play, seemingly extending the unresolved tension and suspended animation even into post-apocalyptic time and space.

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Laurence Anyways (2012)

Marius Henderson and Nele Sawallisch

dir. Xavier Dolan; prod. Xavier Dolan, Gus Van Sant; screenplay Xavier Dolan; photography Yves Bélanger; music Noia. 35mm, color, 168 mins. Lyla Films, MK2, distrib. Alliance VivaFilm.

There seems to be at least one obvious connection between Xavier Dolan and the protagonist of his third feature film, Laurence Alia (played by Melvil Poupaud): Both struggle with and defy the power of the gaze and the expectations of others, while both also attempt to navigate the crafting of their public persona and unabashedly follow their passions—»anyways.« Dolan, as a prominent figure and noted contemporary filmmaker, has drawn both awe and skepticism in the »love-hate relationship« (qtd. in Massimi 31) with his home of Québec, with critics at home and abroad, and with domestic and international press. Following the surprise breakthrough with his first film, *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), incredulity at his young age first dominated the discussion of his work, but this has since given way to increasing critical »respect« (Knegt) and scholarly attention which have turned to focus on his signature style in filmmaking. Indeed, the »Dolandrama« (Pidduck 52) has cemented his standing as a »popular auteur« (Rees-Roberts 209) amongst a new generation of filmmakers.

Laurence Anyways is representative of the particular melodramatic »Dolanian sensibility« (Lafontaine 4) that underlies his films. The plot reconstructs a decade in the life of Laurence, following her coming out as transgender in 1989 and the consequences that her transition has for her own life, her lover Fred (played by Suzanne Clément), her family, and her environment. With this setup, the film incorporates several of Dolan's »narrative obsessions« (Knegt 31), most importantly the depiction of (intimate) relationships between mothers and children, as between Laurence and Julienne (played by Nathalie Baye); relationships between lovers, as between Laurence and Fred; and the experience of tragic or unrequited love, again as between Laurence and Fred. In general, however, the film is not so much plot-driven—it does not present a straight, linear, chronological, or »chrononormative« (Freeman 3) narrative—but rather contains achronologi-



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cal breaks, flashbacks, and flashforwards as well as sequences in slow motion. Many scenes also draw significantly on aesthetics of music videos and are therefore reminiscent of distinct atmospherically connected tracks on an audio-visual album or could also be conceived as affectively saturated tableaux (vivants) on a cinematic mood board (bearing in mind the director's work in costume design and music videos) rather than simply as diegetic stations on a plotline. *Laurence* thus exemplifies Dolan's holistic, sensual approach to his craft by highlighting the »affective impact« (Rees-Roberts 217) of music and visual aesthetics, both of which are central to his storytelling.

This has sometimes been called »expressive maximalism« (Marshall 101), bordering on »camp hyperbole« (Rees-Roberts 212), but these narrative and stylistic elements are vital to understanding *Laurence* within the context of melodrama. Here Melodrama is not necessarily understood as a distinct genre but rather as a mode or »expressive code« (Pidduck 53) that is employed in *Laurence* as well as queerly transformed and undermined. In this code, musical and visual aesthetics (lighting, costumes) are used diegetically (Kotte 326-28) to reflect, for instance, characters' emotional development, states, and relationships—a strategy which, in turn, may affect the audience who becomes emotionally invested in the story.

A few key examples illustrate how *Laurence Anyways'* »emotional charge« (Lafontaine) and overall relation to the melodramatic mode—ranging from affirmation to subversion—play out. *Laurence* resonates with the historical and etymological meaning of melodrama (music + drama) as music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, is used as a means of affective intensification in relation to specific events and the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, in a scene in which Fred is confronted by Laurence and admits to an affair, a butterfly is seen flying out of Laurence's mouth. All the while, a Beethoven symphony plays in the background, mirroring Laurence's emotional turmoil as she ends up soaking wet at her parents' house. The encounter climaxes in a moment of connection and solidarity between Laurence and her mother, Julienne, who destroys the father's TV and shares a smile with her daughter.

The prominent, well-orchestrated use of music is also indicative of a queer politics of melodrama in *Laurence*. This becomes apparent in the prominent inclusion of non-diegetic tracks that were released only after the time covered by the film's narrative (1989-99), such as Moderat's throbbing and synth-heavy electro track »A New Error« (2009), and Fever Ray's likewise pulsing, loop-driven »If I Had a Heart« (2009). These tracks instantiate additional temporal layers, anticipating a queer futurity with glimpses of a shifted horizon of the possible (Muñoz 1), from within the confines of (chrono)normativity. Nonetheless, these tracks allude to the past as well due to their 1980s-style synths. Fever Ray's »If I Had a Heart,« as a song by an artist deeply embedded in queer subcultural contexts, is the track that sets in at the end of the very first scene of the film, in which viewers hear a conversation between Laurence and an interviewer while the screen remains black apart from the appearance of a few opening credits and the film's title. The inclusion of the track enhances the aural undermining of »straight time« (Muñoz 25) and »straight voicedness/sound« due to the track's utilization of pitch-shifting effects, which render the vocals—as well as the previously heard voices of the actors, who were audible but invisible—difficult to classify and fluidly ambiguous in terms of gender.

Traditionally, a key function of melodrama has been to provide a »coping mechanism« in light of personal-political scenarios of crisis, such as crises of identity or sov-

ereignty (Anker 28-30, 225-26; Zarzosa 237-42). *Laurence Anyways* divests from (hetero-) normative melodramatic fantasies of identitarian »truth,« cohesion, and reconstituted sovereignty. This divestment is epitomized in a scene in which Laurence relates her transition to Fred for the first time. Contrary to melodramatic convention, and thus to being set in a contained domestic space and being staged as an intimate act of »confession,« Laurence elliptically hints at her transitional gender identification to Fred in a semi-public, mobile, and likewise transitory space—that is, in a car—while in a car wash. The loads of splashing water that surround Laurence and Fred literally turn this into a space of fluidity. In general, figurations of water, as a liquid element constantly in flux, permeate the entire film (Armbrecht 38). The tropological importance of water's fluid ontological status for the film is already inherent in the film's title and the protagonist's name. Not only is »Laurence« a gender-fluid name in French but is also an allusion to the St. Lawrence River (*Kaniatarowanenneh/Le fleuve Saint-Laurent*) which flows through Québec, where the film is primarily set (Armbrecht 38-39).

Laurence also assumes a different relation to the notion of excess, which has been called a defining characteristic of melodrama by canonized theorists of melodrama, such as Peter Brooks (viii–ix). The film fosters a re-thinking of the assumptive logic of classical melodrama. Excessive display of affect does not lead to a re-enforcement of a binary moral economy or to the showcasing of virtuous suffering. Whereas the film includes incidents of transphobic and anti-queer violence and discrimination, from which Laurence suffers, these incidents are not depicted in a spectacularizing manner. The attention and affective charge are not so much centered on Laurence's suffering as they are on the transgenerational, queer relational networks that Laurence forms with others in response to violence and discrimination.

Rather, in *Laurence*, affective intensities travel between bodies and their surroundings, soften hardened binary oppositions, and generate »soft subversions« (Guattari 306) of normative configurations of embodiment. Therefore, Dolan's take on melodrama in *Laurence* strongly resonates with Jonathan Goldberg's non-identitarian, queer theoretical conceptualization of melodrama: »The aim of melodrama is not to find the possible in the impossible situation, but to surpass the possible, to realize what the possible deems impossible« (160–61). Moreover, Goldberg claims that queer melodrama emerges »when identity withdraws from being identified as such, and the reality of an unthought (im/possible) relationality can take place« (162). And this is also the skewed melodramatic path that *Laurence Anyways* follows, as the film is concerned with neither its characters' ostensible innermost being nor its protagonist's formation of a fixed, post-transitional identity. Instead, it focuses on what mantles and enables the characters' performative, embodied, relational, and affectively intensified becoming—that is, fashion, interior design, music (diegetic and non-diegetic), and (bodies of) water. Laurence's process of transition is neither depicted in a voyeuristic way nor as a teleological progression. The achronological structure of the film underlines this.

Hence, Laurence's transition seems relatable to Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of »trans*« as a term that »holds open the meaning of the term »trans« and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming« (3), and in which »the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity« (4). In queerly melodramatic ways, *Laurence Anyways* presents a multiplicity of fluid (path) ways that forms of embodied life may take: *any – ways*.

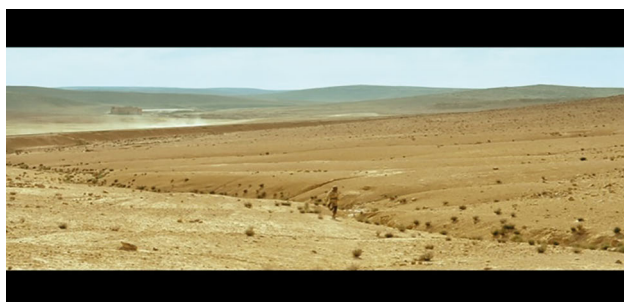
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The Cut (2014)

Claudia Breger

dir. Fatih Akin; prod. Fatih Akin, Kari Baumgartner, Reinhard Brundig; screenplay Fatih Akin, Mardik Martin; photography Rainer Klausmann; music Alexander Hacke. 35mm, color, 138 mins. Bombero International et al., distrib. Pandora Film Verleih.



Fatih Akin's 2014 drama on the Armenian genocide and its aftermath, *The Cut*, received mixed reviews as an (in some critics' eyes) unfortunate turn to genre on the part of the award-winning contemporary Turkish German arthouse director. Citing the director's avowed reference to classical Hollywood forms and intertexts, they characterized *The Cut*, for example, as »a narrative of almost archaic simplicity« (Kothenschulte) and »big, ambitious« but »a little simplistic emotionally« (Bradshaw). However, the film is anything but simple (Breger). In addition to Hollywood forms of both family and spectacular melodrama (via traditions of Western and historical epos), *The Cut* draws on the aesthetics of European, including Turkish, independent art cinema. At the intersection of these diverging intertextual vectors, we can situate *The Cut* as a transnational adaptation of the melodramatic mode for a specific artistic-political project: Akin's creative search for a cinematic language to mourn the Armenian genocide.

As recent scholarship has emphasized, melodrama deploys »the power and value of feeling« (sensation, pathos etc.) to facilitate »empathy as a [...] site of social cohesion« (Gledhill and Williams 1; Gledhill xv). Rather than by way of »abstract morality,« melodrama develops its meanings via »felt affect, the visceral language of embodiment, gesture« (Gledhill xv, xxii). In creating »pathos« for its protagonists overcome by more powerful forces, melodramatic representation issues a call for »justice« in relation to their suffering (Williams 42, 48). In this spirit, Akin embraced melodrama's high-affect aesthetics specifically with the goal of a counter-hegemonic intervention into the contemporary Turkish public sphere, where the Armenian genocide has remained unacknowledged by the government and more or less taboo (see Akin). His primary aim, the director states, was »that Turkish viewers watching the film can identify fully with the main character« (Akin qtd. in Kürten and Glasenapp). With its clear-cut embrace of the

victim's perspective, *The Cut* aims to facilitate a public process of unqualified mourning for and with a political »Other.«

With its audience address thus explicitly designed as polar, *The Cut* nonetheless complicates the prototypical economy ascribed to melodrama both aesthetically and ideologically. »[M]oral polarities of good and evil« (Anker 2) are attenuated through the character of a Turkish soldier who becomes the Armenian protagonist's (short-term) flight companion after saving his life (although not his throat and voice) in the genocide. The overall film also emphasizes the institutional dimensions of genocide more than individually developed perpetrator figures. Furthermore, there is a sequence set at the end of the war, in which the protagonist, Nazaret Manoogian (Tahar Rahim), is invited to join an angry group of Armenians throwing stones at Turkish soldiers and refugees in the street. With his hand already raised to throw, Nazaret interrupts his gesture after he sees a child get hit in the face. Rather than validating the »bloodlust« aroused by a despicable »villain« (Singer 40), Akin's adaptation of the melodramatic mode thus displaces the villain target with a reminder of precarious humanity across groups.

More interesting than these diegetic elements, however, is the film's cinematography. Creatively adapting the widescreen (CinemaScope) technology associated with 1950s Hollywood cinema, *The Cut* counterintuitively develops affective intensity through an aesthetics of extreme spatial distance. On a first level, this aesthetics of distance operates as an ethical safeguard insofar as it develops what we might call an anti-sensational variation on the »sensational melodrama [...] of spectacular diegetic realism« (Singer 53). Designed to respect the »dignity« of the victims, in particular in the depiction of violence (Akin), this aesthetics of spatial distance also qualifies the director's goal of facilitating identification (or empathy as feeling *with*) by discouraging facile audience claims that we could ever fully understand a historical experience unimaginable to most of us.

But there is yet more to this aesthetics of distance. In line with dominant early Hollywood use of CinemaScope's technology, the first part of the film deploys its potential for »ensemble staging« (Bordwell 294) in showing collective imprisonment and labor. After the execution sequence that severs the (wounded but surviving) protagonist from his collective, however, spatial distance is not attenuated towards more classical individual engagement. During Nazaret's lonely travel through various desert and desert-like landscapes that dominates the second half of the film, the audience sees him, again and again, as a minuscule figure in bare surroundings. This dramatizing of the individual's separation from his—and in fact any—community performed by the (material and metaphorical) cut of genocide is in tension with prototypical melodramatic alignments of the individual with the collective. Akin's cinematography also performs a thoroughly de-heroicizing intervention into the ideologies of spectacular melodrama (in dialogue with Williams, Anker). Radically exposed to an overwhelming, hostile environment, Nazaret is both *deserted* and, in the film's visual assemblages of human and desert, *desertified*. Inviting an intense affective response that exceeds immediate character relation, *The Cut's* spectacular vistas align us less with Nazaret's perspective than they challenge us to endure a co-experience of radical isolation in the projected immensity of the desert.

On the plot level, Nazaret's ongoing wanderings throughout the second half of the film serve the goal of reuniting him with his two daughters who emigrated to the U.S. via Cuba. In intertwining the affective economies of the spectacular melodrama with that of the family melodrama, *The Cut* personalizes its drama, albeit not to the degree

of privatizing the underlying social conflict (in dialogue with Williams). Rather, the haunting cinematography combined with plot reminders of Nazaret's loss of religious or cultural identification and capacity for broader solidarity encourages us to read his relentless familial quest as indicative of the radical reduction of collective belonging effected by genocide. Finally, the film does not melodramatically resolve this radical loss of collective orientation on the level of the family: Even the protagonist's eventual reunion with his surviving daughter does not significantly change the film's iconography of desertion. In the very last shot, the camera slowly pans sideways to trace Nazaret and his remaining daughter walking out into the bare steppe, further and further away from us, to become a minuscule double figure before the credits start rolling. This visual permanence of isolation counteracts any temptation of reading *The Cut's* epic quest in terms of an ideology of the family. Rather than indexing the director's resignation *vis-à-vis* the neoliberal revival of these ideologies in the film's 21st century moment, *The Cut's* spectacular family melodrama forcefully urges its audiences to make room for the process of mourning genocidal violence.

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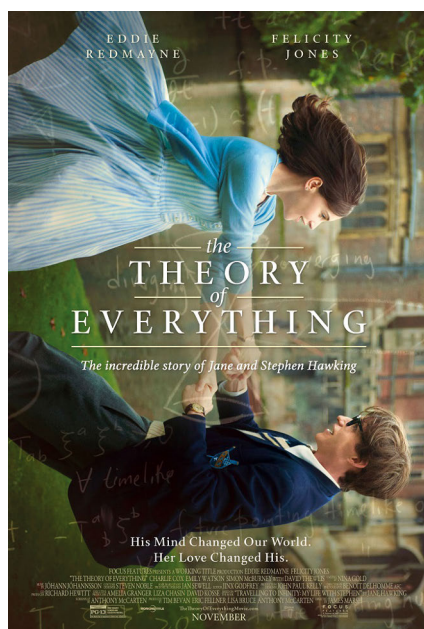
The Theory of Everything (2014)

David Eisler

dir. James Marsh; prod. Tim Bevan, Lisa Bruce, Eric Fellner, Anthony McCarten; screenplay Anthony McCarten; photography Benoît Delhomme; music Jóhann Jóhannsson. digital, color, 123 mins. Working Title Films, distrib. Focus Features and Universal Pictures.

The Theory of Everything presents a partial biography of Stephen Hawking (played by Eddie Redmayne), the world's most famous physicist since Albert Einstein. The film fits within the broader trend of biopics depicting great figures in science and mathematics, including *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) about John Nash, *The Imitation Game* (2014) about Alan Turing, and *Radioactive* (2019) about Marie Curie. Based on the 2007 memoir *Traveling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen*, written by Hawking's first wife, Jane Wilde (played by Felicity Jones), *The Theory of Everything* begins with the story of their romantic relationship amidst Hawking's diagnosis, at the age of twenty-one, with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a motor neuron disease that gradually left him paralyzed. The film's central conflict takes place within the context of their marriage, with pressure mounting on Jane as Stephen's illness progressively limits his physical capabilities while, at the same time, the demands of their family grow. The couple have three children, leaving Jane with the responsibility to care for them as well as her husband, who, despite being wheelchair-bound and eventually voiceless, continues to revolutionize theoretical physics with his research and insights.

The film's melodramatic tendencies, from emotional music cues and contrasting mood lighting to set-piece staging and dialogue, enhance the themes of »miracle« and »tragedy« that so frequently characterize biopics of scientists in which scientific discovery comes with a flash of insight and, ultimately, the individual's triumph over adversity (Elena). Hawking's diagnosis is presented first and foremost as an obstacle to his professional ambition: »I have two years to live,« Hawking says in response to Jane's



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early offer of romance, rebuffing her with »I need to work.« Under the time pressure of his imminent mortality, Hawking's goal is to finish his PhD thesis and make a lasting contribution to science, even as Jane declares her love for him, saying »I want us to be together for as long as we've got, and if that's not very long well then that's just how it is.« That he would live another fifty years was something neither of them foresaw.

The film is less interested in Hawking's contributions to science, though, than in depicting the domestic toll extracted from his marriage and family that created the space for him to think about physics despite his condition. As one critic wrote, »Director James Marsh and screenwriter Anthony McCarten are content to make a melodrama« (Morris). When the film engages with Hawking's work at all, it does so in conversation with religion—a tension that exists between Stephen's atheism and Jane's faith from their very first conversation. Within the film's first five minutes, the two make eyes at each other during a 1960s student party at Cambridge University before engaging in a bit of melodramatic dialogue embedded in casual flirtation. Stephen tells Jane that he studies cosmology, which he describes as »a kind of religion for intelligent thinkers.« They laugh awkwardly as Jane reveals her own religious affiliation before asking him, »What do cosmologists worship then?«

The conflation of the rigorous practices of a scientific field with »worship« implicitly reduces science to the realm of faith and belief, a thread that runs throughout the film. If Hawking's reputation as a scientist were not already so cemented, one could be forgiven for viewing this film as a mere meditation on science, faith, and overcoming personal obstacles, rather than a biopic of a theoretical physicist whose breakthroughs earned him international recognition and accolades, culminating in a mathematical equation chiseled onto his gravestone at Westminster Abbey, only a few steps from Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin.

Films about well-known figures, whether historical or contemporary, tend to rely on melodramatic aesthetics to explore the lesser-known aspects of the individual's private and family life, though the tension between the biographical details as depicted in the films and the filmmakers' desires to enhance the sentimentality through melodramatic emplotment and dialogue is a frequent concern (Brown and Vidal). Audience expectations typically preclude a straightforward retelling of a public figure's professional exploits, instead preferring untold tales of household dynamics, family drama, and personal turmoil. Such themes have their roots in Thomas Schatz's identification of the »family melodrama« as a distinct subgenre of Hollywood cinema that dates to the earliest era of silent films but matured in the 1950s (Schatz 148–67; Mercer and Shingler 9–12). Since 2000, nearly half of the awards for Best Actor and Best Actress were given for biopic films, including Redmayne's 2015 win for his uncanny portrayal of Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*, putting him in the company with the likes of Philip Seymour Hoffman as Truman Capote in *Capote* (2005), Rami Malek as Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), and Renée Zellweger as Judy Garland in *Judy* (2019).

Redmayne's portrayal of Hawking's physical deterioration sets the stage for the family drama that follows. The couple's courtship takes place against the backdrop of Hawking's race to complete his thesis before his disease overtakes him. Scenes of Hawking struggling against his shaky hands while scrawling equations on a blackboard are interspersed with the young couple on a walk, with Stephen excitedly explaining his theory of the origins of the universe. Their wedding and early family life are shown through a montage shot in the style of a handheld home video, a cinematic technique

that enhances the scene's domestic atmosphere and announces a tonal shift—Stephen's diagnosis was not as terminal as the doctors had believed—and, within a few frames, their family has grown with the addition of a new baby.

The domestic space of home and family serves as the foundation for everything else in the Hawkings' lives, and many of the film's most important moments occur during dinner table conversations and backyard social gatherings. Any sentimentality associated with a honeymoon phase is short-lived, though, as even celebratory moments are undercut by Stephen's physical struggles and Jane's gradual transition from spouse to caregiver. A family dinner to toast Stephen's successful PhD defense turns into a scene where he can hardly feed himself, slinking away from the table but too weak to even crawl up the stairs. His speech becomes more labored, bordering on unintelligible without Jane as an interpreter. Even the moment of Stephen's greatest scientific insight—that black holes radiate heat and thus »are not in fact black at all,« as he explains to an assembly of colleagues during a lecture in the following scene—occurs when he gets stuck trying to put on a wool sweater, staring at the fireplace through gaps in the fabric while Jane runs upstairs to check on their crying baby.

The Hawkings' relationship simultaneously upsets and reaffirms traditional notions of a heterosexual nuclear family, creating a source of social commentary on family values as well as on gender roles and norms that follows a well-trodden path of family melodramas with reflections on class, gender, and social structures within the context of a family unit (Schatz 152-54). Jane, an intellectual in her own right, takes up the expected role of housewife and caregiver at the expense of her own studies (later completing a doctorate in medieval Spanish poetry). Overwhelmed with household responsibilities, Jane is urged by her own mother and Stephen's family to get someone to help. The introduction of Jonathan, the conductor of a local church choir, both complicates and alleviates the relationship dynamic between Jane and Stephen. A widower with no children who battles his own loneliness, Jonathan sees a purpose for himself as a potential solution to the Hawkings' need for assistance despite lacking the financial means to acquire a professional nurse. A second cinematographic interlude in the home video style, recalling Stephen and Jane's wedding, shows Jonathan as an intimate member of the family, playing with the children, caring for Stephen, and sharing quiet moments with Jane. That Jonathan and Jane have feelings for each other is immediately obvious, as is their reluctance to acknowledge them with words. This leads to a confrontation with Stephen's family who, having already been characterized as highly educated with an air of aristocratic conservatism about them, are uncomfortable with the Hawkings' arrangement. After another home movie sequence following the birth of the Hawkings' third child—this time set to more somber music and with palpable tension on Jane's face—Stephen's father voices his concern about the family's lack of a »proper live-in nurse,« gesturing to Jonathan's somewhat awkward presence at the gathering, while Stephen's mother outright questions Jane whether Jonathan is the child's father.

The climax of the film's love story occurs in a heart-wrenching moment for the Hawkings in which they both realize, with only a few words, that their marriage is over. The melodramatic affect and sentimentality hinges on their dialogue and references to earlier moments in the film, providing a bookend to their relationship. The first moment brings back the connection between Stephen's science and Jane's religion. As Jane reads the concluding pages of Stephen's manuscript for *A Brief History of Time*, she

comes to the final sentences and is pleasantly surprised at Stephen's assertion that learning about our origins and purpose in the universe »would be the ultimate triumph of human reason, for then we would know the mind of God.« When, moments later, Stephen informs Jane that he has been invited to America to accept another award and that Elaine—the nurse they eventually hired to take over for Jonathan—will accompany him, there is an instant wisp of recognition that something fundamental has changed. (The film only implies a relationship between Stephen and Elaine, though in reality they married and later divorced amidst allegations of physical and emotional abuse). »How many years?« Stephen asks, communicating with the aid of his now-famous computerized voice. »They said two,« Jane responds. »We've had so many.« Not only do these simple lines acknowledge Stephen's resilience and triumph over what was believed to be an early death sentence, they also underscore how Jane's experience has been equally grueling.

By the end of the film, the publication of *A Brief History of Time* has turned Hawking into an international celebrity, and he is even offered knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II. He invites Jane and his children to accompany him, and for one last time the film focuses on the family melodrama as the story's narrative centerpiece. Aided again by callbacks—Jane tells Stephen »Your glasses are always dirty,« and cleans them, just as she did when they first met—the film's poignant final sequence turns Stephen's early thought experiment about reversing the flow of time to the beginning of the universe, into an emotional visual metaphor, rewinding through scenes that highlight important points of their lives and relationship and ending with the moment they first saw each other at a party in 1962. The film leaves the viewer with a sense of closure that, while tidier than Hawking's actual biography, packs an emotional density that rivals a collapsing star.

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Eye in the Sky (2015)

Karen A. Ritzenhoff

dir. Gavin Hood; prod. Ged Doherty, Colin Firth, Genevieve Hofmeyr, David Lancaster; screenplay Guy Hibbert; photography Haris Zambarloukos. 35mm, color, 102 mins. Raindog Films et al., distrib. Entertainment One.

Eye in the Sky is a British-Canadian co-production and war film about international terrorism, released in 2015, whose title refers to drone warfare and surveillance from



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

above. The «eye in the sky» is a metaphor for drones that can produce images of moving war zones from their vantage point that are being transmitted into war rooms and different military control centers across the world (Kaplan; Parks; Parks and Kaplan). The film stars Helen Mirren as Katherine Powell, an iron-willed British Colonel, and Alan Rickman as Lieutenant General Frank Benson. Both have to maneuver and negotiate their military strategies to execute a controversial kill mission in East Africa while being based in the United Kingdom and conferring with elusive U.S. American diplomats and military officials. Powell is guiding a drone mission to eradicate a group of hunted and wanted terrorists of the al-Shabaab group, who plan a suicide bomb attack in a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. This scenario is loosely based on an actual terrorist attack that took place in Kenya. The precision drone, launched from a great distance by two pilots in a trailer in the Nebraska desert, will land in the middle of a suburban settlement that also houses civilians, among them Alia (played by Aisha Takow), an eight-year-old girl. At the core of the film's narrative is an ethical conflict: Are children justifiable as collateral damage if it is in the larger interest to fight international terrorism? The melodramatic elements revolve around Alia, whose presence frames the entire movie in the first and last scenes. She is the main point of identification for the audience because she is placed outside the military chain of events while being directly affected by its doings. Her parents eventually survive; they are seen at the end of the movie—mourning the loss of their child. The sentimental ending of the movie blames modern warfare for the

decisions also depend on mass media and those in charge are aware of potentially negative news coverage. One of the other women involved is a British diplomat, a Lieutenant (played by Kate Liquorish) who argues that killing an innocent child as well as a UK citizen, even if she is involved in a terrorist plot, would provide bad press. She suggests that having African terrorists killing people in a remote shopping mall in Kenya might be causing less of a media stir. Her cynical view of the situation is contrasted with the calculating strategies of the military personnel in charge.

In *Eye in the Sky* only body parts remain after the drone has hit the house with great precision. The victims of the attack can be identified by their earlobes that are decoded in a high-tech lab in Hawaii. Among the assassinated terrorists is the British female national, Susan Danford (played by Lex King), who had been on Powell's most wanted list for several years. She had converted to Islam and is seen wearing a niqab in the movie. While the drone transmits the footage from inside the terrorist's house, her face can be detected and positively identified. The film does not provide any visual doubt that the terrorists were planning a bombing. There is little ambiguity. This is made even more obvious when the drone fly detects a second room and provides close-ups of the suicide bomb vest and a camera with tripod where the suicide recording was supposed to be taped. This war is fought with hugely different techniques on both sides. While the terrorists are unaware that soldiers across the globe follow their movements, they still seem to be unstoppable with conventional means of intervention. This is why the drone needs to be launched under British control from American territory. The film insinuates that there is a strong military alliance between the United Kingdom and the USA; no other western nation is seemingly involved in the negotiations. The high level of intelligence and technology in the mission is contrasted with the clumsy and neglectful responses by politicians such as the U.S. secretary of state and even the American president. They always seem distracted for mundane reasons and detached from the gravity of the situation. However, the rationale of fighting global terrorism ultimately convinces everyone involved that the drone strikes are unavoidable: The global melodrama of fighting terrorism replaces the maternal melodrama of saving the child. Furthermore, it is framed as a military necessity.

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Masaan (मसान, 2015)

Meheli Sen

dir. Neeraj Ghaywan; prod. Vikas Bahl; screenplay Varun Grover; photography Avinash Arun Dhaware; music Indian Ocean, Bruno Coulais. digital, color, 109 mins. Drishyam Films et al., distrib. Pathé.

Masaan is one of the most compelling films to have emerged from Bollywood, a testament to the industry's recent investment in the verisimilitude of the portrayal of Indian lifeworlds. However, *Masaan* also remains something of an exception: as an Indo-French coproduction that debuted at the Cannes Film Festival to thunderous acclaim from the international media, a reception rarely bestowed upon more mainstream Hindi-language films. The film features no stars and includes only three songs, all of which are atypically non-diegetic. Contemporary scholars of film melodrama, among them Christine Gledhill, have stressed that realist and melodramatic modes need not be hermetically sealed off from one another. Indeed, in many instances, realist and melodramatic tendencies can be adjacent or even overlay each other. *Masaan*, I suggest, remains an example of how realist texts can deploy the melodramatic mode to maximize cinema's expressive possibilities.

Set in present-day Varanasi—one of India's most ancient cities, and one of its holiest for practicing Hindus—*Masaan* narrates two ill-fated love stories which briefly intersect. Devi (played by Richa Chaddha) bears the consequences of a police raid when she secretly meets her boyfriend, Piyush (played by Saurabh Chaudhary), in a hotel for sex. Deepak (Vicky Kaushal) inappropriately falls in love with upper caste Shaalu (Shweta Tripathi), only to lose her to a tragic road accident. The film chronicles their struggles to overcome these adverse circumstances. It also tells the story of a city caught in a time warp. Varanasi is both ancient and modern: static in its timelessness and seething with 21st century energies all at once (Gangopadhyay). The film has been rightfully lauded for its deft presentation of the city, particularly of the ghats, where devout Hindus cremate their dead to ensure the salvation of the departed soul. While



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the plot focuses on Devi and Deepak's struggles against entrenched vectors of social discrimination—especially those of caste and gender—the film is equally rich with philosophical themes.

In *Masaan*, the social is vividly textured. Devi and her father, Vidyadhar (Sudhir Mishra), must pay the price, both socially and financially, for her single indiscreet encounter with Piyush. Inspector Mishra (Bhagwan Tiwari) could easily blackmail them for enormous sums of money as women must follow the rules of chastity before marriage, even as the city and the country are in rapid transformation. The threat of public humiliation is so overwhelming that Piyush kills himself, while Devi must soldier on, chafing against Varanasi's »small-town« conservatism. Similarly, Deepak easily falls in love with Shaalu, but a socially sanctioned relationship between them remains impossible: She hails from an upper caste, comfortably middle class Hindu family, whereas Deepak's family is of the Dom ethnic group (»untouchables«) and cremates corpses for a living. When not in school or with friends, Deepak is always in the crematorium, covered in dirt and soot from the endlessly burning pyres.

The entanglements of these lives and the spaces they inhabit provide verisimilitude in *Masaan*—they are easily recognizable as authentic and believable. However, it is the melodramatic involvement of the social with the emotional—what scholar Deidre Pribram evocatively calls »socioemotional«—that makes the film especially moving to audiences of all backgrounds, both domestic and international.

In a remarkable departure from typical performative modes, both Devi and Deepak remain muted in speech and gesture in the film's early segments. In fact, following the incident of police brutality and Piyush's suicide, Devi seems inscrutable, with defiance structuring her erect posture and refusal of shame (Ghosh 334). Not even the inspector's insulting gaze nor her father's rebukes can elicit anything beyond monosyllabic responses or frosty silence. Deepak is painfully awkward, almost tremulous, in his tentative courting of Shaalu. Unsure and acutely aware of his lower-caste identity, Deepak can only record Shaalu's words interspersed with Bollywood songs as a token of his love for her. Unlike the confident and articulate Shaalu, who quotes love poetry at will, the language of romance is inaccessible to Deepak. Fittingly, it is a song sequence—»Tu Kisi Rail Si« (»You pass like a train/I shudder like a bridge«)—at the festival grounds that communicates Deepak's efflorescent emotions to the audience. Music and *mise-en-scène* do the work of emotional expression in this key moment in *Masaan*.

While *Masaan* is supremely restrained in the first half, often relying on silence or music to communicate the affective states of its protagonists, emotional outbursts increasingly punctuate its »muteness« in later portions. Attentive to pacing, *Masaan* cautiously and gradually builds up to these melodramatic revelations and coincidences. Midway into the film, Devi's simmering resentment against Vidyadhar explodes into a torrent of angry words, as we learn that she holds him responsible for her mother's untimely death. Both father and daughter therefore remain enmeshed in a circuit of old and new guilt.

However, the most shocking moment of revelation involves Deepak's discovery of Shaalu's corpse at the crematorium. Like him, we had no knowledge of the accident that has killed her, and, like him, we are stunned by this catastrophic discovery. This is a moment of intense pathos and identification. A dreadful interregnum follows, as all emotional expression is blocked and Deepak stumbles around to find a pathway to grief.

As someone who deals with the materiality of death in the most quotidian ways, cremating Shaalu devastates him. Deepak's grief, when it comes, crashes over him—and us—like a tidal wave, against a serenely illuminated Ganges. He breaks down in tears while drinking with his friends, screaming into an unyielding void. A little later, Deepak absently tosses Shaalu's ring into the river, only to plunge into the water to frantically hunt for it. As Deepak thrashes about in the indifferent river, the song »Mann Kasturi Re« (»The heart is a musk deer/Such is the order of the world«) anchors this sequence of melodramatic affect, as the lyrics foreground the film's larger metaphysics about the impermanence of life and the futility of attachment. Deepak finally collapses on the riverbank, and as dawn breaks over the holy city, he at last finds a modicum of tranquility.

Devi, likewise, must find a way to work through guilt in her mourning of Piyush, an emotional minefield she avoids for much of the film. In the penultimate sequence, when she finally approaches Piyush's father perhaps to offer condolences or apologies for her part in the tragedy, *Masaan* reverts to its minimalism: The camera remains discreetly stationed outside the family home, while we hear the old man's anguished sobbing.

Although human subjects oscillate between restraint and sudden outbursts—even Vidyadhar breaks down in tears when Devi announces she is leaving home—objects come to be voluble in *Masaan*. The film presents the city of Varanasi as a transactional domain, where economies of desire are tethered to the economy-as-such. Weighty vectors of death and salvation are subject to market imperatives, but romantic love appears to liberate commodities, at least temporarily, from predictable conduits of exchange and circulation. The gift from Piyush to Devi remains unopened, numinous in its mystery. As a token of their doomed relationship, it is fitting that she consigns it to the holy Ganges at the film's end. Shaalu's ring functions as a reverse MacGuffin: mentioned in passing to him, it enables Deepak to recognize Shaalu's corpse when he spots it. Thereafter, it condenses his grief and loss until he flings it into the water. In a superbly melodramatic turn, it is this ring that finally frees Devi and Vidyadhar from blackmail—and that braids the two narrative strands together at last.

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The Salesman (فروشنده, *Forushandeh*, 2016)

Pedram Partovi

dir. Asghar Farhadi; prod. Asghar Farhadi, Alexandre Mallet-Guy, Olivier Père; screenplay Asghar Farhadi; photography Hossein Jafarian; music Sattar Oraki. 35mm, color, 125 mins. ARTE, Farhadi Film Production et al., distrib. Memento Films, Filmiran.

Iranian filmmakers have long engaged with melodramatic modes. However, melodrama's historical imprint on Iranian cinema was, until recently, one that most foreign viewers were unaware of and that many Iranian critics and scholars had ignored or derided. The writer-director Asghar Farhadi's critical and commercial success across the globe over the past decade has forced a scholarly reckoning with an Iranian strain of melodrama, one that can be traced back to the domestic industry's beginnings (Dardar). Although Western reviewers have highlighted Farhadi's links to Euro-American theatrical and cinematic traditions (Bradshaw 2012), Iranian fans may appreciate his narrative and stylistic choices for their creative debt to homegrown melodramas. His 2016 Persian-language feature, *Forushandeh*, which was briefly the all-time domestic box office hit and won Farhadi a second Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film—perhaps best reveals Farhadi's unique and complex entanglements with melodrama that have made him at once an international *auteur* and a local crowd pleaser.

Before Farhadi, cineastes both in Iran and abroad privileged the mainly post-revolutionary, neorealist »New Iranian Cinema« (Tapper) in their definitions of »national cinema. However, commentators now seeking to explain Farhadi's oeuvre increasingly recognize the neorealist wave as both aesthetically and politically important but as a minor part of Iran's historical output, which had been dominated by different melodramatic genres before and after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Hassannia). The commercial film industry that emerged after World War II, and which collapsed in the late 1970s, came to specialize in what I have called »contemporary social melodrama« (Partovi 4). Such features depicting family and class conflict in a society undergoing massive change immediately raised the hackles of critics who claimed that they



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were nothing more than third-rate copies of other, especially Hollywood, productions, and appealing only to the most culturally ›backward‹ audiences. From the early 1950s, newspaper and magazine reviews referred to the industry's products collectively by the moniker *filmfārsī*, or ›Persian film,‹ to ironically highlight their ›foreignness‹ by drawing attention to their one seeming concession to the home culture: the use of Persian dialogue. Yet, press dismissals did not necessarily keep more ›discerning‹ or upwardly mobile audiences from attending *filmfārsī* screenings, even if only as a ›guilty pleasure.‹ In fact, pre-1979 melodramas and their stars have continued to resonate with Iranians today via home video, satellite television broadcasts, and a flurry of newer productions paying homage to ›classic‹ titles and narrative themes.

Despite the intellectual elites' critique of *filmfārsī* as escapist and reactionary, its lasting significance can be attributed to its overarching concern with ›modern‹ realities, which, according to Miriam Hansen, has characterized the film-attending masses' experience of (Hollywood inspired) melodrama in the non-Western world. Specifically, pre-revolutionary melodramas dealt with the moral and material consequences of ›modernization,‹ a process promoting in much of the ›Third World‹ the universalizing Western social ideal of the rational and acquisitive individual who is engaged in a companionate marriage, one that would serve as the foundation for the nuclear family. While the protagonists who butted up against this ›individualist‹ model of society invariably hailed from the under- or uneducated urban working class, thus supporting claims about *filmfārsī*'s ›unsophisticated‹ viewers of similar backgrounds, it was middle class characters (and filmgoers) who most acutely felt the threats to ›traditional‹ social structures identified in these films. In fact, the rise of a modern educated middle class in Iran during the 20th century has seemingly coincided with the democratization of formerly aristocratic conceptions of controlled (female) sexuality (‘*ezzat*’) and family honor (*namus*). *Filmfārsī* titles often endorsed ›traditionalist‹ bourgeois interests, alongside the more ›desirable‹ aspects of the Shah-era modernist project, by depicting the protagonist's willingness to sacrifice himself or his personal happiness to protect ›honorable‹ women and the ›inviolable‹ bonds of family and friends from morally dissolute and superficially Westernized middle class antagonists.

Interestingly, Western critics have praised Farhadi's catalog for its focus on ›the everyday moral and relational problems of the urban middle-class family‹ (Rugo 15). Eschewing what Nicholas Barber has called the ›medieval‹ subject matter of previous Iranian film exports, Farhadi's familiar ›modern‹ characters and situations have instead invited favorable comparisons to the best traditions of European and American melodrama (Rugo 3). Emad (played by Shahab Hosseini) and Rana (played by Taraneh Alidoosti), the young bohemian Tehrani couple featured in *Forushandeh*, epitomize the filmmaker's ability to create characters that especially Western audiences may claim as kindred spirits, rather than exotic ›others.‹ The opening scenes seem to place special emphasis on their non-conformity with the ›anti-Western‹ Islamic Republic's social and moral order. The *mise-en-scène* immediately paints them as hip, cosmopolitan types, at home in any ›modern‹ city. Emad, in his day job teaching high school literature, also exhibits his free-spirited (even politically dangerous) bent by bringing in banned books and films for his young students to study. In the evenings, he and Rana pad their ›counter-cultural‹ credentials by performing onstage, shown in the film as playing Willy and Linda Loman in a Persian-language production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller's exploration in the play of below-the-surface domestic

tensions comes to mirror the couple's own off-stage dramas, whose raw emotions predictably leach into their on-stage performances (Wiegand). Initially, however, viewers only see Emad and Rana's modern bourgeois exterior. Rana's close relationships with male troupe members may lead viewers to assume her liberation from ›antiquated‹ notions of female chastity, while Emad's own non-patriarchal views are seemingly on display in his lack of concern about these friendships. Farhadi calls further attention to their 21st century companionate relationship by focusing almost exclusively on them, with the presence of other family members conspicuously absent. However, just as quickly, the film upends this image of progress towards the ›individualist‹ social model when Rana becomes the victim of a brutal assault, which in turn reveals Emad's darker side.

Late one night, Rana mistakenly buzzes open the apartment building to her attacker, assuming he is Emad returning from the theater. The next time Emad sees his wife, it is in the hospital where she is receiving treatment after neighbors had found her bloodied and unconscious on the shower floor. What exactly happened that night remains a mystery, but Rana's traumatized silence and the speculations of friends and neighbors fuel Emad's rage and set him on a single-minded pursuit of the man whom he believes to have violated his *namus*. The film's climax presents an unhinged Emad detaining his wife's attacker, a pathetic old street peddler very much an Iranian equivalent to the figure of Willy Loman. The salesman admits that he had mistakenly entered their apartment expecting to find the former tenant, a prostitute who received her clients there, and the still-unknown events that followed were the result of blind panic. Emad nevertheless seeks to exact revenge by revealing the salesman's infidelities to his family. When Emad rejects Rana's pleas to release her attacker, she walks out in disgust. Shortly thereafter, the salesman suffers what appears to be a heart attack, with viewers left to wonder if he survives. The final scene depicts the couple, silent and emotionless, preparing once more to take the stage.

Western press reviews prominently noted Farhadi's flair for taut psychological drama, again claiming links to Euro-American ›masters‹ of that genre (Hornaday), but also puzzled over the narrative focus on Emad's ›irrational shame at what the neighbours will say‹ (Bradshaw 2017) rather than on his wife's reaction to the attack. According to Peter Bradshaw, the protagonist's actions reflect the narrative theme of ›middle-class hypocrisy in Iranian life‹ so characteristic of Farhadi's work, with Emad's ›enlightened‹ mask slipping away to instead reveal an aggressive and irrational masculinity. His ›morally conceited view of himself‹ is ultimately punished, with Rana's rejection of Emad validating such critical interpretations of the film. However, if Farhadi's work also engages, even critically, with an indigenous tradition of popular melodrama (Dadar 224), then Iranian audiences familiar with its narrative tropes—specifically the genre's preoccupation with modernization's moral pitfalls—may well expect Emad's central role in the drama, or may even interpret his actions as righteous precisely because of his acute awareness of their potential negative consequences. Farhadi's spin on *filmfārsī* would appear to be the de-mystification and de-allegorization of its social and moral dilemmas by doing away with the outward conflict between the self-abnegating lumpen hero and the self-absorbed Westernized villain, instead fusing these two aspects in one character, Emad. As a ›survival‹ of earlier melodramatic motifs, Emad's ›dual‹ role also puts a different spin on Bradshaw's claim that Farhadi is shining light on bourgeois hypocrisy, since it presupposes a necessary concordance between outward

appearances and inner convictions. Bradshaw explains away Emad's moral inconsistencies by viewing his actions for family honor to be rooted in irrational impulses, thus allowing for the individualist values that he and Rana supposedly represent to go largely unquestioned. However, from a middle class Iranian viewpoint, the appurtenances of modern life, cosmopolitan cultural interests, and even violations of societal norms or political taboos under ›close-minded‹ clerical rule, may not by themselves be signs of a character's full embrace of hegemonic Western modes of thought and behavior. Yet, neither are they signs of a wholesale rejection of ›traditionalism.‹ Iranian fans of melodrama then and now would likely make different moral judgments about Emad's actions than would Western critics—emphasizing instead his conscious and situational deployment of ›global‹ Western values and locally hegemonic traditionalist ones, rather than his faithlessness to either. In fact, the character's ability to navigate between these different value systems may itself be a sign of his ›worldliness‹ and class bona fides for many Iranian filmgoers.

Farhadi may well be channeling Western melodramatic traditions in his work, but he is also interrogating issues—especially ›the transition to modernity‹ (Rugo 9)—that have long characterized Iranian melodrama. His ability to operate between and above these related, yet different, genre conventions in a double-voiced melodramatic discourse of his own seemingly explains his rare popularity with both international and domestic audiences.

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Jackie (2016)

Stefanie Schäfer

dir. Pablo Larraín; prod. Darren Aronofsky, Juan de Dios Larraín, Mickey Liddell, Scott Franklin, Ari Handel; screenplay Noah Oppenheim; photography Stéphane Fontaine; music Mica Levi. 35mm, color, 96 mins. Fox Searchlight Pictures, distrib. Fox Searchlight Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox.

Pablo Larraín's *Jackie* is a historical biopic about first lady Jacqueline Kennedy. It covers the time after her husband's 1963 assassination and the making of the Kennedy myth as an embodiment of national mourning. *Jackie* represents Larraín's turn to U.S. national iconography and its global media impact in an oeuvre in which he has previously interrogated Chilean life, politics, and trauma, and more generally themes of motherhood, family, and celebrity, most recently in a biopic about Lady Di, *Spencer* (2021). Like Larraín's other films, *Jackie* problematizes the audience's investment in the central characters' feelings and gender role stereotypes (Wells). This is achieved with Stéphane Fontaine's cinematography of extreme closeups, which creates a proximity between viewer and protagonist on the big screen, reminiscent of the media scrutiny Jacqueline Kennedy was subjected to, the mystery surrounding the Kennedy assassination, and her transition from glamorous first lady to publicly grieving widow. In *Jackie* we see the protagonist looking back in a post-assassination interview through flashbacks to the Kennedy White House, the Dallas assassination, and the arduously orchestrated JFK state funeral. From Jackie's moments of trauma and excessive feeling to a final nostalgic ballroom reverie, the storyline portrays her struggle to create the Kennedy myth as montage. Hence, the film's narrative structure and aesthetics entangle three different constructions of »Jackie«: the public first lady persona, the politically active wife, and the legacy-building widow.

Jackie reiterates the historical events of 1963, when Jacqueline Kennedy launched the »American Camelot« myth in a *Life* interview, published on December 6, 1963, (White), where she linked her late husband's favorite Broadway musical, *Camelot*, to



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his boyish penchant for heroism. Here Kennedy asserted her role as admiring wife and caring mother when she described her husband's heroic fantasy through the chorus line: »Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot« (White). Kennedy thus latched onto the musical's staging of postwar U.S. imperialist fantasies (Finke and Shichtman) and the melodramatic love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Launcelot (suggested in *Jackie* through Jackie's proximity with Bobby Kennedy). The Camelot myth offered a fantastic escape from the era's political struggles around civil rights, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, and ushered in the era of the »Imperial Presidency« (Konstantinou 158). It cast the Kennedys as legendary, Arthurian royal couple in a Broadway-style origin narrative tethered to transatlantic kinship and Anglo-Saxon whiteness, complete with cheerful musical tunes and sentimental tensions.

Larraín's direction and Noah Oppenheim's screenplay assert the first lady's »underestimated power« (Dunak 305) and present Jackie as white sentimental heroine struggling to shape her husband's legacy while acting as focal point of national mourning. The interplay of Jackie's different personas is also emphasized in the film's *mise-en-scène* and soundscape. The interview situation, lit in cold natural light, contrasts with the stark colors of JFK's blood and brain tissue on Jackie's dress and face, the black-and-white restaging of original documentary footage, and the dazzling glow of her best White House memories. The score combines extradiegetic fragmented strings resounding in Jackie's mind with the full-blown title song of *Camelot*. It forms the soundtrack to her final night in the White House, when she drinks and plays dress-up, and moves through the bedrooms and down to the Oval Office, where she even climbs into the President's desk chair.

Through its playacting of the melodramatic mode, *Jackie* meditates on the relationship between politics and the arts. Kennedy coyly dodged this question in the 1961 CBS documentary *A Visit to the White House* (»that's so complicated«), but her husband was actively invested in charisma and »rule-by-celebrity« (Konstantinou 166). Larraín's biopic stages the everlasting search for the »real« Jackie amidst a palimpsest of celebrity images, replacing the meaning-making of historiography with emotionality as an »alternative language« (Pribram 237) wielded by Jackie the mythmaker herself. The cinematography's key motif, the extreme closeup, reappears in variations: when we see Jackie looking at herself in the mirror—watching herself as mannequin, her face layered with reflections of mourners through a limousine window—or when she seeks recognition in conversation with a priest. *Jackie* thus blurs the boundaries between media images, individual memories, and historiographies. In the finale, the inquiring public (symbolized by the journalist), the first lady widow, and the deceased President, all fuse in one ecstatic moment of public feeling: »Jack/ie« will dance on forever in the nation's memory of a Camelot past that never was.

Jackie shows U.S. politics as a melodramatic spectacle, directed by and starring Jacqueline Kennedy herself, to generate a maximum of media coverage. She uses the White House as stage and archive for the national drama of the short-lived Kennedy Presidency. In the CBS documentary, she emphasizes her role as homemaker-turned-curator in a historical building. For the JFK funeral, she researches the precedent of Abraham Lincoln's state funeral, decides to include an anachronistic, empty-saddle war horse, and orchestrates her family's exit from the White House through the front door. It is also Jackie who selects the Kennedy burial plot in Arlington National Cemetery,

thus creating a Kennedy monument among the nation's war heroes. The protagonist's behind-the-scenes memory work is complemented by her public first lady persona: In her televised appearances, she enacts the soft-spoken care work and affective labors expected from a first lady. Her performance creates the gendered and racialized »dignity discourse« as part of the controlling image of white womanhood that build the first lady »cult« (Eaton 2018, 2020; Handau and Simien).

With its blended media and short scenes of emotional excess, *Jackie* interrogates Jackie Kennedy's first lady afterlives. Released at the end of the Obama presidency, the film also pinpoints queries about the Obama years as a postracial »New Camelot,« spearheaded by Caroline Kennedy's 2008 endorsement of Obama as a »President like my father« (Kennedy). Michelle Obama's trailblazing first ladyship inspired comparisons with Kennedy (Schäfer), and the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act in the Obama White House built 1960s nostalgia at a time of racist police brutality and the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Jackie* thus looks back at the making of Kennedy's first lady persona while also imagining the future of U.S. democratic cultures. By employing the melodramatic modalities of the big screen, Larraín's biopic negotiates the affective economies of celebrity politics and the political benefits of a global cinema of melodrama.

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The Nest of the Turtledove (Гніздо горлиці, Hnizdo horlytsi, 2016)

Roman Dubasevych

dir. Taras Tkachenko; prod. Volodymyr Filippov; screenplay Taras Tkachenko; photography Oleksandr Zemlianyi; music Stefano Lentini. digital, color, 111 mins. Insight Media Producing Center.

The Nest of the Turtledove is an adaption of a novel by author Vasyl Mel'nyk, whose original screenplay version of the story received the prestigious Korotysia slova Award. In addition to Italian co-funding, the film was sponsored by the Ukrainian State Film Agency—created, it should be noted, under the rule of authoritarian president Viktor Yanukovich—and received several national and international awards, including the Golden Duke for Best Ukrainian Feature Film at the Odessa International Film Festival in 2016 (Nanchino). The start of *The Nest's* production coincided with the outbreak of the Euromaidan protests and the war in Donbas—events that considerably delayed the film's release, but which make it an even more important

document of its time. Director Taras Tkachenko viewed the «documentary» quality of his film as an expression of *Kulturkampf* for an ambitious Ukrainian cinema pitted against Russian mass production, thereby echoing the growing military confrontation.

There are a number of reasons to categorize Tkachenko's film as a landmark in the development of contemporary Ukrainian cinema. Being about a migrant Ukrainian woman working as a housekeeper in Italy and desperately trying to keep her family together, the work makes for a remarkable melodrama. First, thematically: the film's focus on migration touches upon an issue that, although an everyday experience of many Ukrainians after the fall of the Iron Curtain, has been rarely addressed in national, even post-Soviet, cinema. Second, its depiction of the challenges and pains of leaving family and home not only lent a voice to the millions who left Ukraine «in search of a better life» since 1991—but the film's female protagonist, Daryna (played by Rymma Ziubina), specifically embodies the crucial dynamic of gender in migration, al-



Courtesy of InsightMedia

ready epitomized in the literature under the snappy name »skype mama« (Brunner et al.). In addition to problems of migrant motherhood, the film furthermore negotiates the issue of abortion and deals with a perceived crisis of hegemonic masculinity that has been exacerbated by Ukraine's difficult post-Soviet transformation. Finally, the cinematic toolbox the film employs to highlight its melodramatic core and its central conflicts also deserves attention. Contradictions emerge from the tension between the heroine's drive for emancipation from the social, moral, and cultural pressures at home and abroad, on the one hand, and her paradoxical reinscription into the patriarchal symbolic order, which she had struggled to escape, on the other hand. Despite the film's unequivocal categorization as melodrama, its generic structure is far from homogeneous—its transnational narrative is mirrored in a hybrid cinematic form, combining elements of Soviet social melodrama, especially the »village film« (*derevenskoe kino*), the arthouse film exploring marginalized social issues, and even of documentary film. Several scenes, such as those showing Easter church services in Ukraine and Italy, were shot with real villagers and migrants—with one, the heroine's house, even providing the film's eponymous location.

The Nest tells the story of Daryna, a Ukrainian woman from a Carpathian village in the historical region of Bukovyna, who, as many Ukrainians do, heads to the West to support her family. Thanks to her immigrant network, notably her shrewd neighbor Halyna (played by Nataliia Vas'ko), she finds a job as *badante*, a caretaker and housekeeper, in the home of the divorced Genovese lawyer Alessandro (Mauro Cipriani) and his mother, Vittoria (Lina Bernardi). Nevertheless, the heroine's arrival in the West is marred by a cold and unwelcoming reception. Alessandro's mother rejects the newcomer, making Daryna's arduous job emotional torture. For instance, at the beginning of their relationship Vittoria begrudges Daryna for calling her family in Ukraine, suspects her of stealing jewelry, and generally dehumanizes her. Meanwhile, Alessandro develops a passion for Daryna, whom he, unlike his autocratic and ill-tempered *mamma*, treats fairly from the very beginning, introducing her step by step into his bourgeois Italian home.

The images of the refined and rich (but distant and cool-colored Italy) alternate with episodes from Daryna's humble Ukrainian home. On the one hand, the viewer immediately feels the abyss between the living standards of both countries. Yet the inconveniences of the rural life in a bitterly poor mountain village are—somewhat stereotypically—compensated by the warmheartedness of its dwellers. The rural community still functions as a big family, indicating Daryna's first »nest.« Consequently, the protagonist's self-sacrifice abroad is primarily motivated by her will to support her student daughter and her husband, Dmytro (played by Vitalii Linets'kyi), both representing Daryna's immediate home—her second, but most important, »nest.« In this respect, the film's ornithological title goes beyond mere tribute to Ukrainian folklore and popular culture, with their traditional metaphorization of women and mothers as *horlytsia* (»turtledove«) destined »to build a nest.« The money Daryna earns abroad is not only spent on food but is invested into a new country house that will be rented to tourists and thus create an economic basis for her loved ones. Daryna's husband, though jobless and often drunk, does his best, too, to realize this goal.

Hence, the humble but humane microcosm of the post-Soviet Ukrainian village and the isolated private household of Daryna's Italian employer represent the central melodramatic extremes that tear apart the film's protagonist. To complicate the situa-

tion, the relationship between Alessandro and Daryna becomes an intimate one. After two years in Italy, Daryna is not only more fluent in the language of her hosts and assimilating to their habits, but she is also pregnant from Alessandro—a narrative twist that contributes considerably to the melodramatic pathos of the film. Daryna's best intentions to better the economic situation of her family result in a double life and an unwanted pregnancy, threatening her family life's very existence. To solve this intractable melodramatic dilemma, she decides to return home and abort the baby—one of the film's many moments of verisimilitude that point to migrants' dependence on deficient domestic health care.

At this point, the film's narrative doubles in a characteristic way. Having arrived home for the abortion, Daryna finds her daughter, Myroslava (played by Oleksandra Syzonenko), in similar turmoil. She is also pregnant and the child's father, the decadent young son of her university rector, refuses to support her, underlining the moral corruption of an increasingly unjust Ukrainian society.

Yet the boy's influential father's offer to pay for an abortion provokes a contrarian reaction in both women. Supported by her mother, Myroslava decides to keep the baby, a step that motivates Daryna to keep hers, as well. Both mother and daughter return to their home village. After tense discussion, a distrustful and humiliated Dmytro finally accepts the male offspring and reconciles with his wife. The social and moral equilibrium is also restored for Myroslava. Although she loses her child after a troublesome encounter with her reckless lover, she finds a humble and acquiescent husband in her neighbor Mykhas. Both families, united by place and the fates of their migrant mothers, become kin through the wedding of their children. The traditional Hutsul ceremony seems to provide important harmonizing relief from the considerable moral tensions arising from the extramarital relations of absent women, which also stand for new cultural experiences, gained away from the village by Daryna, Halyna, and Myroslava. Through the traditional rituals and songs, both female heroines again become authentic *berehynias* (Ukrainian sacral term for the female head of the family and »preservers of the hearth«). However, this bucolic scene of reconciliation does not last long. Missing Daryna and ready to take responsibility as father of the child, Alessandro insistently calls on his Ukrainian lover and threatens to disturb this new Carpathian idyll.

Alessandro's reappearance in the final scene betrays not only the return of a repressed desire for a caring and cultivated »European« man on the part of Daryna. His reemergence furthermore exposes the painful contradictions and transcultural continuities in the ideological structure of the film. It suggests that Daryna's struggle for self-determination culminates in her return to her home village. Her repatriation is critical because it means a reintegration into the patriarchal order, where Daryna pretends to find her place and peace. However, the ironic twist of such a denouement also hides the fact that as an ideal Ukrainian mother—caring, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—Daryna is now forced to perform the same duties as in Italy, yet under much less rewarding circumstances.

This tension also marks the interplay of the film's visual, musical, narrative, and ideological regimes. Its images are slow and poetic, allowing time and space for sympathizing with the protagonist and her inner turmoil. Above all, director Tkachenko brings to the fore places and objects that are avoided and stigmatized as *chormukha* (from the Russian *cherknukha*, or »doom-mongering«) in mainstream post-Soviet cin-

ema. The mundane details of the migrant experience: the destitute infrastructure of Ukrainian mountain villages, a battered enamel mug hanging on the pipe of a mountain spring, the iconic beat-up taxi busses connecting villages and cities, Sunday church services in Ukraine and Italy.

Unique settings are beautifully complemented by Stefano Lentini's music, which guides us through Daryna's inner life. In melodramatic terms, the heroine's inner conflict is primarily rendered through the constant juxtaposition of the two worlds of Ukraine and Italy. This binary effect is further intensified by the extensive use of analepses and prolepses, reflecting Daryna's emotional disarray. Apart from the nuanced portrayal of its main character, the film clearly shows that family dramas in Ukraine and Italy are surprisingly similar, despite unequal living standards and cultural differences. The melodramatic »excess of emotion« is further secured by a peculiar technique—the Italian episodes are not subtitled, but in Italian. Surprisingly, such bilingualism does not impede the general understanding of the film. It almost forces, with great intensity, the viewer to carefully listen and re-experience Daryna's being lost in translation. Even as Daryna acquires a fair command of the language and changes her clothes »to become an Italian woman,« as one of her fellow villagers ambiguously remarks, inside she remains firmly tied up within the boundaries of her native culture with its traditional, patriarchal order: a stunning continuity connecting *The Nest* to another migration masterpiece, Petr Todorovskii's melodrama *Intergirl* (*Interdevochka*, 1989). Despite the differences in time, political and economic systems, and cultural borders, the two films nonetheless share a striking tendency to bring their women back home, to their families and local husbands. Moreover, both films issue serious moral warnings against any kind of emancipatory adventures, at home or abroad—in contradiction to a poetic and sympathetic portrayal of their female protagonists' genuine drive for liberation.

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Cold War (*Zimna wojna*, 2018)

Mirja Lecke

dir. Paweł Pawlikowski; screenplay Paweł Pawlikowski, Janusz Głowacki; photography Łukasz Żal; music Marcin Masecki. 35mm, black/white, 89 mins. Opus Film et al., distrib. Kino Świat.

Zimna wojna tells the tragic love story of two Polish musicians between the early postwar years and the 1960s. It is a music film and a melodrama that shows the inseparable entanglement of individual feelings with a politicized public sphere marked by the establishment of state socialism. In the arts, the tightening grip of ideology is shown to bring about the trivialization of musical expression as well as the blatant moral corruption of the cultural elites. *Zimna wojna* thus presents a post-communist analysis of the characteristics of the era's sentimentality (Howard 76). While the plot follows an established narrative about East Central European society's deception and disenchantment with socialism, *Zimna wojna* is innovative in casting the love story between the East and the West, transgressing the Iron Curtain. The film questions the idea that Europe was divided fatally, yet safely, into separate worlds and that stories ended for those who crossed that border.

The lovers, Zula (played by Joanna Kulig) and Wiktor (played by Tomasz Kot), are an uneven couple. He is older than her, an established pianist, composer, and conductor with a bourgeois background, a natural-born fellow traveler, who pursues his professional ambitions in the wake of the Communist party's rule. He is involved in a campaign to build up a socialist folk music culture as it is promoted by the state and which would be presented by the choir and dance ensemble called Mazurek. Wiktor, the party commissioner Kaczmarek (played by Borys Szyc), and other experts for music and dance travel provincial Poland and record peasants' songs, most of them in unsophisticated tunes, some with »exotic« glottal sounds but, importantly, all about



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

either love and marriage or drinking, occasionally religion. This is not the folk music needed for hard-working communists who have overthrown their lords and exploiters and that is capable of emotionally uniting the nation. The female protagonist Zula enters the stage in a casting at the former noble estate that the Mazurek organizers use for accommodation, auditions, and dancing exercise. Zula erotically appeals to Wiktor and when asked to sing for him, she provocatively performs a cheerful popular Soviet love song from a war comedy: Russian popular culture instead of Polish folklore. Zula's ambition is to make a living and have fun, but she also has the air of a *femme fatale*. Previously, she had attacked her abusive father with a knife, which introduces her impulsive nature early in the film. Wiktor and Zula fall in love, but soon party schemes interfere: Zula reports to the secret police about Wiktor. As the grip of Stalinism grows firmer, Mazurek turns away from popular arrangements of authentic folk music to openly political texts and praise of Stalin, »the father of the peoples.« Wiktor plans to flee to West Berlin during a guest performance at the 1952 socialist youth convention. Zula has doubts, she fears to lose her status and income in the West. Having waited in vain for Zula at the check point, Wiktor leaves on his own.

The next scene is set in Paris, where Wiktor plays in a jazz club and socializes with existentialist avant-garde circles. Zula and Wiktor see each other again during Mazurek's international tours in France and Yugoslavia; both have new partners but are unhappy. They realize that theirs is the love of their lives. In 1957, Zula suddenly shows up in Paris. After a happy reunion, they start working as musicians again. Zula sings jazz and chansons, first in Polish then in French. But in the elitist milieu of Paris their relationship suffers again, this time from the Parisian vanity fair. Zula now finds Wiktor unmanly and inhibited. To promote their success, she sleeps with a Parisian music producer. Frustrated and disillusioned, she, ultimately, flees back to Poland. Wiktor, although stateless and considered a traitor by the Polish state, follows her and ends up in a penal camp with a 15-year sentence for illegal border crossing. Zula employs her sex appeal once more for their reunion: She marries the opportunistic cynic Kaczmarek, now Mazurek's head, and has a son with him. When Wiktor is finally released from prison, Zula has become an alcoholic and is desperate in her unhappy marriage. The couple escapes to the province where their love began. They commit suicide.

The dynamic and fragmentary picture is shot in black and white with sharp contrasts. It plays with the film styles of socialist realism and the *nouvelle vague* as well as with post-Stalinist documentary cinema that all flourished in Communist Poland. The traditional melodramatic love triangle is transformed into a constellation of the couple and two obstacles, embodied by two male figures. Each of them symbolizes a morally illegitimate authority, one in the West, one in the East: the market and the Communist party. The emotional encounter between Zula and Wiktor is impressively conveyed with musical means. As a leitmotif the folk song »Two little hearts, four eyes« recurs, a song about a girl whose mother forbade her to love a young man but she »grabbed him by the neck« and now is doomed. The mother's interference with her daughter's erotic life symbolizes illegitimate intrusion into the protagonists' personal life. Importantly, they cannot break free even in the West. The song is first presented by a little girl, later sung in two voices, consecutively turned into a choir arrangement for Mazurek. In the crucial scenes set in Paris, however, it is sung by Zula in Polish and French, causing a fight between the lovers over authentic musical expression and adequate translation. Can folk songs be adapted into popular mass culture without distortions? And what is

more, do individualist jazz music and the French language at all allow for the expression of »Polish« unconditional romantic love? Zula's answer seems to be »no.« After her return to Poland, she is forced to give up the illusion of personal fulfilment through music altogether, touring with trite mambo songs through tourist resorts. Wiktor's ability for musical expression is also doomed, he has lost a finger while in prison.

Pawlikowski, son of Polish émigrés, who is no less a British than a Polish director (White 44), drew on his family history when writing the script. *Zimna wojna* is a significant contribution to the historical reevaluation of Europe's division, a piece of geopolitical analysis (White 48) that uses melodrama's transcultural potential to forge an affective community across Europe. To Western viewers, Poland is presented as a poor but aesthetically very appealing country. Polish spectators may appreciate the film's claim to a firm place in European high culture. For debates over the responsibility for oppression under Communism, however, the film is a provocation, not unlike its Oscar-winning predecessor *Ida* (2013) that dealt with Poland's troubled Jewish history. In *Zimna wojna*, too, guilt permeates society: Wiktor, Zula, Kaczmarek, no one is without fault, not even the woes of Stalinism can be blamed on the Soviet Union exclusively. It is, however, also worthwhile to acknowledge the numerous ways in which the film establishes a connection to traditional patterns of Polish cultural self-perception: There is a fatalistic belief in the power and endurance of heterosexual romantic love, in which the female part is strong, active, and uncompromising, even though she bears the harsher consequences and sacrifices. Christian faith is another case in point. Zula and Wiktor perform a wedding in a church ruin, Bach music playing from the off. Paradoxically, the last scenes show the couple in a situation they could have easily achieved from the outset, had they only refrained from their mundane ambitions—Pawlikowski's plea for a modest life in the homeland.

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Rafiki (2018)

Claudia Böhme

dir. Wanuri Kahiu; prod. Steven Markovitz; screenplay Wanuri Kahiu, Jenna Bass; photography Christopher Wessels; music Frederic Salles. DCP, color, 83 mins. Big World Cinema, distrib. Edition Salzgeber et al.

The Kenyan film *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu is a postmodern melodrama about two young women in love. »Rafiki« means friend in Swahili, and homosexual lovers cover their love with this neutral term. With its narrative about two young women finishing high school, *Rafiki* is a coming-of-age drama as well as part of an international feminist and queer cinema (Kinofenster.de; Ojiambo). As Lyn Johnstone argues, *Rafiki* can be interpreted as part of a queer worldmaking that offers Kenyan LGBTIQ+ the affirmation that a world does exist beyond the hegemonic heteronormative status quo. Queer sexualities are forbidden by law in Kenya and LGBTIQ+ activists have fought in vain to change this (Ncube 61). The film was banned for »legitimiz[ing] homosexuality against the dominant values, cultures and beliefs of the people of Kenya« (Cooper). But according to the decision of the Kenyan Film Classification Board (KFBC), the reason was not the visualisation of same-sex intimacy but rather the end of the film, as it was »too hopeful« for queer people in Kenya (Cooper). Kahiu sued the government and won, and when the ban was lifted for one week to allow for a consideration at the Oscars, *Rafiki* enjoyed a major run in Kenyan cinemas, was screened at several international queer film festivals, and was nominated in Cannes for the Queer Palm category (MacArthur; Ncube). Moreover, as a popular social text, viewers vividly discussed the film on social media, a space where alternative standpoints can be articulated and same-sex relations discussed (Ncube).

Rafiki is an exceptional film both for its story and production design. It is a lesbian love story located in Nairobi and expresses the love and the struggles the two women go through as well as the harsh violence they endure in their neighborhood. Remarkable is *Rafiki*'s stunning visual narrative with its play of colors and costumes. The film's visual style supports the film's topic. As Kahiu states, while creating the common world of Kena (played by Samantha Mugatsia) and Ziki (played by Sheila Munyiva), Kahiu and her co-producers were thinking about artists like the South African photo artist and LGBTIQ+ activist Zanele Muholi, the African American visual artist Mickalene Thomas,



Courtesy of Big World Cinema / Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH

and the Nairobi based Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu (in *Rafiki* Presseheft). The production designer of *Rafiki* is Arya Laloo, who has used these references in the creation of what Kahiü calls an »excessive hybrid aesthetic,« combining different patterns and structures from traditional Kenyan and African cloth and mass fabrications, furniture from different epochs and styles, as well as the application of »daring« shining and diverse color palettes (in *Rafiki* Presseheft).

Wanuri Kahiü is one of the young female Kenyan writers and filmmakers who has become internationally known as part of a new Kenyan cinema (Dovey; Okioma and Mugubi; Steedman). She was born in Nairobi in 1980, studied management in London, and took film courses in Los Angeles, where she also took part in the production of *The Italian Job* (2003). She came back to Kenya to make films with an Afrofuturistic perspective (*Rafiki* Presseheft). Her other films are *From A Whisper* (2008), *For Our Land* (2009), → *Pumzi* (2009), and *The Thing about Jellyfish* (2021) (Diang'a; »Regisseur/in Wanuri Kahiü«; Rico; Giruzzi). Kahiü is co-founder of the media network AfroBubbleGum, which produces African art with aesthetics that are fun, fierce, and frivolous, opposing the image of Africa as a poor, war- and HIV/Aids-beaten continent (*Rafiki* Presseheft; Kahiü; Kinofenster.de). *Rafiki* displays this aesthetic especially at the beginning of the film which stands in sharp contrast to the dramatic and violent scenes of the melodrama, marked by the lovers' struggle with themselves and their outside world. The film was foreign-funded and has a clear gender-based moral message, which is typical of so-called donor films in the region.

Rafiki is based on the short story »Jambula Tree« by the Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko about the two adolescent girls Anyango and Sangu who fall in love. The piece is written in the form of a letter by Sango to Anyango, not knowing whether it reaches the lover. When their relationship is discovered, Anyango is sent to a boarding school abroad and Sangu becomes a nurse and lives alone. An old Jambula tree with purple fruits, which are unreachable as well as color the girls' tongues and the ground all purple, is a metaphor for their love (Arac de Nyeko; Barlet; Moshenberg). As Kahiü states, as she has never seen Africans in a romantic relationship or even kissing until she reached her late teens, she was so inspired by the short story that she had to bring the two women to life with her film (in *Rafiki* Presseheft).

Like in a music video, the camera follows Kena on her skateboard through the scenery of the Nairobi neighborhood Slopes to the sound of the rhythmic song »Suzi Noma« by Muthoni Drummer Queen. She picks up her close friend Blacksta (played by Neville Misati), a stylish young man always on his motorbike, followed by the jealous eyes of Nduta (played by Nice Githinji). Kena is presented as a cool type of girl, who rides a skateboard, plays football, and hangs out with her male friends at a small kiosk and café, the realm of Mama Atim (played by Muthoni Gathecha), the evil gossiper. The topic of homosexuality is hinted at for the first time when a young queer man passes through the scene.

The genre of ethnic and post-election violence in Kenya is referenced in the side story as Kena is Kikuyu and Zena is Luo and both are daughters of rivalling politicians. Kena's father (played by John Mwaura) is a politician who works in a small kiosk, asking for the votes of his neighbors. He has left Kena's mother for a younger woman who is expecting his baby. Ziki's father (played by Dennis Musyoka) is the wealthier rival politician. When Kena spots Ziki for the first time, dancing with her two girlfriends, she freezes. Her appearance has something of an Afrofuturistic queen or goddess or

a free rebel girl. The two girls have their first date at the café and later go on a rooftop where they can talk about their future. Kena wants to become a nurse while Ziki wants to travel and see the world and not be doing »Kenyan stuff,« leading a domestic life with housework and childcare. The two women make a pact while crossing their fingers that they will never be like any of them down there; instead, after some thoughts, they want to be »something real.«

When they play football together, it starts to rain heavily, and the two women take shelter in an old white VW minibus as a safe space. Purple bougainvillea flowers cover the bus, which fuse with Ziki's pink lipstick. Purple is also the color of love in *Jambula Tree* (Arac de Nyeko 18). Although Kena flees this first sexual encounter, the two women from now on spend their leisure time together. They do a tour with an artfully decorated Tuk Tuk, ride in a rollercoaster, ride a pedalo, hold hands, and lean on each other to the sound of Mumbi Kasumba's romantic song »Ignited.«

The first violent attack comes from Ziki's girlfriend pushing and cursing Kena, culminating in a fight between the two women. Afterwards, Kena confesses her love while Ziki is kissing her wounded lip. When her mother threatens to call Kena's mother, the two girls flee to their retreat and dream of their future together. Mama Atim and Nduta destroy their intimate togetherness and call a violent mob of young men who drag and beat the two women. At the police station, the two officers only mock Kena and Ziki and laugh at them while the girls wait for their parents to collect them. In what follows, Kena has to undergo an exorcism under the homophobic priest in their church and Ziki's parents are determined to send her to London. When Kena goes to visit Ziki for a last time, she sends her away but is crying bitterly afterwards in her mother's arms. In the next scene, apparently years later, we see Kena working as a doctor trainee in a hospital. Mama Atim is one of the patients but rejects being touched by her while telling her that Ziki has come back. Kena goes to her locker, where she keeps a postcard with Ziki's »I miss you« from London. She goes home, walks to the hill, looks around, and suddenly Ziki's soft voice calls her name, Kena smiles happily and relieved. It is Ziki's hand with her neon fingernails touching Kena's shoulder. The film ends and leaves it to the audience to imagine the future of the two lovers.

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Elevator Baby (2019)

Adedayo Abah

dir. Akhigbe Ilozobhie [Akay Mason]; prod. Niyi Akinmolayan; screenplay Akhigbe Ilozobhie; music Gray Jones Ossai. digital, color, 83 mins. Anthill Studios, distrib. Film One, Netflix.



Elevator Baby is a Nollywood drama that addresses postcolonial and postmodern anxieties in

Nigerian society. The movie is Akay Mason's debut as director, while Akinmolayan is a veteran producer in Nollywood. *Elevator Baby* is a sentimental story of forgiveness. The Nollywood industry is a response to the inadequacies of postcolonial modernity in Africa and specifically in Nigeria. Using innovative production techniques and non-government financing, the industry has grown to become a major player in the entertainment industry throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and in various African diaspora groups across Europe and the United States. The industry started with amateur moviemakers using cheap video cameras to shoot stories recorded on VHS for consumers to watch on VCRs in their homes. The stories resonated with many audiences, and Africans saw their fears, anxieties, hopes, and disillusionment reflected in the homemade films they were watching. Now in its middle age, Nollywood has evolved both in production value and with respect to the modes of consumption.

In her analysis of Nollywood's transition from VHS to DVD, and now to streaming on Netflix, Starr Rhett Rocque states: »What stands out most are the over-the-top storylines [...] melodramatic acting, and the seemingly never-ending supply of ridiculous yet still imaginative material [...]. Netflix has been steadily building a collection of Nollywood movies for the past few years, but in 2018 it began making originals. As a result, more people are discovering the entertaining world of Nigerian cinema.« *Elevator Baby* is not an original Netflix movie but was already showing in Nigerian theaters before it was acquired by Netflix in summer 2020. While telling a simple story of the life-changing encounter between a »spoiled brat« and an underprivileged woman caught up in extraordinary circumstances, the storyline also foregrounds several broken systems in contemporary Nigerian cities. The flamboyantly affluent lifestyle of the rich is vividly contrasted with the abject poverty of the poor, generously peppered

with the infrastructural anemia with which all citizens contend, regardless of their social class. The film thematizes private pain, shame, guilt, and redemption, while at the same time addressing societal ills, such as youth unemployment and urban traffic jams that put all citizens' lives at risk.

Celluloid-based filmmaking in Africa evolved from oral storytelling—and, in the case of Nigeria, from the Yoruba masque theater, which utilized chants, the dance drama, and other verbal and non-verbal performances by masked entities to take audiences through myriad emotional states (Adedeji 261-62). While the melodramatic form may have travelled to Nigeria through colonialism, it received a warm reception in Nigeria because it coincided with the existing traditional forms of storytelling, non-expressive ritual, festival, and theater. Yoruba masque theater, for instance, evolved with the technology of cinema, though it later collapsed and was creatively replaced by Nollywood.

In *Elevator Baby*, one of the protagonists, Dare (played by Timini Egbuson), is an affluent young man living in a posh but sterile house that less than one percent of Nigerians could afford. He lives with his widowed mother and her boyfriend, a gynecologist, against whom he holds deep resentment. The family is obviously one of the few who have found financial success in a postmodern society where most others struggle financially. The excesses of his class are illustrated by his huge house and Dare's ostentatious lifestyle funded by his mother. His bill from one night of clubbing is 200,000 Nigerian naira (roughly US\$ 500), an amount that would constitute half a year's salary for most people his age. After several warnings, Dare's mother cuts him off financially, and Dare decides to look for employment with his honors degree in engineering. He quickly realizes that the job market is in fact tough for everyone, even when you graduate with high honors, unless you have connections. His mother's connections would have helped, but he is determined to not ask for help in his quest for independence. On one of his job-search trips to a corporation building, he encounters Abigail (played by Toyin Abraham). Abigail is a maid to one of the women working in the corporate building. She is in the building to unburden her heart to her boss and to reveal that the late-term pregnancy she is carrying belongs to her boss' husband, who wishes for a male child. The husband had promptly abandoned the maid once a sonogram scan revealed the gender of the unborn baby to be female.

The elevator becomes the explosive stage where Dare, bloated with guilt, anger, and frustration, collides with Abigail, wracked with guilt and the burden of carrying an unwanted baby. The second meeting of the two characters in the elevator on the same day becomes fateful. There is a power outage (a common occurrence in Nigeria) and the backup power generators in the building fail to work due to lack of maintenance. Abigail goes into labor, and it is up to Dare to help her deliver the baby. All sentimental emotions—from fear to anger, pain, frustration, and agitation—are employed in this second elevator encounter. Abigail grunts, yells, and rolls in pain as she pleads for help. She makes all kinds of deals with God as she painfully contemplates dying in an elevator during childbirth. It is also in the elevator that Dare confronts his own inadequacies as a spoiled, unemployed youth living off his mother, an insight that also comes with guilt about his father's death.

The elevator, in a melodramatic fashion, shines light on a country where the most talented youths are jobless, and men sexually exploit women for their own gain. It is a society where the streets and roads are so congested that you cannot get to a hospital in an emergency. All of these issues become conflated in the elevator. The elevator is

itself an artifact and symbol of modernism: tinged with nostalgia for its physical ability to quickly get you to the top and save time in negotiating the high-rise buildings of modernity. In this movie, however, the elevator is a trap that might be inescapable, because it offers a solution to a problem created by postcolonial modernity itself, and that alienates you from all that is moral. This trap also compels you to confront your fears, accept your shortcomings and flaws, and accept responsibility for allowing yourself to be lured in. The pitfalls of modernity need to be maintained by other infrastructures, whose costs might be unaffordable.

Guided by instructions from a phone call from his mother's gynecologist boyfriend, Dare delivers the baby safely before they are freed from the elevator. Under the unbearable stress of being stuck in an elevator and going into labor, Abigail confesses her transgressions to her boss, who is at the door of the elevator with the others, trying to pry it open. The film acknowledges the growing role of cell phones in the documentation and verification of events in today's Nigeria. Dare is asked, for example, to send video evidence before his friend believes him that he is stuck in an elevator with a woman in labor and needs help. The video goes viral on Twitter and Instagram, elevating Dare's status from spoiled brat to hero. The virality of the video and Abigail's confession also shame Abigail for having had an affair with her boss' husband. In addition to pain, fear, and guilt, shame is another strong emotion explored in the film.

Sarah Olivier states that »melodrama is a spectacular form that uses iconic images to move audiences to feel powerful emotions and to assign moral legibility to societal problems« (ii). *Elevator Baby* explores this in its sentimentality and range of emotions, generated in several scenes: Abigail rolling around in pain on the elevator floor, the congested roads that prevented the ambulance from getting to her, and Dare, covered in sweat as he tries to help while dealing with his own feelings of guilt and remorse. Another scene, in which the helpless spectators are standing at the edge of the elevator shining their cell phone lights, creates a melodramatic fusion of fear, tension, expectation, and compassion also in the audience of the film.

Speaking about sentimental fiction, Jane Tompkins holds that these works are »agents of cultural formation [...] bearers of a set of national, social, [and] economic [...] interests« with »designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way« (xi–xii). The use of melodrama as a powerful mode for telling this story is not surprising, given that Nigerian cinematic sense developed from a traditional performative culture that is didactic in nature and emotional as it moves listeners through stages of virtues and villainy.

Mark Mullen reminds us of the »ease« by which melodrama crosses national borders (44). While it would be easy to conclude that Nigeria, as a former British colony, imbibes the melodramatic form of storytelling through colonialism, it could be argued that the traditional performative oral traditions, such as Yoruba Egungun festivals and masque theaters, included masking, drumming, and other non-verbal elements as well as verbal elements—thus connoting the essence of the melodramatic forms as described by Peter Brooks, when he says that »mélo-drame, literally meaning a play with music, originated on the Parisian stage during the French Revolution [...]. Music was used to underscore meaning and intensify emotional responses« (xiii–xvii). Drewal, for example, writes that »the content of Egungun masked performance is highly dependent on the repertoire of myths and performative segments the performer is able to conjure up through gesture, song, dance, and speech in the improvisational moment of performance« (102).

Given the above facts, a conclusion could be reached that while the melodramatic form may have followed colonialism to Nigeria, the precolonial traditional performative art forms, such as the masque theater and Egungun performances, already had demonstrated melodramatic tendencies. Therefore, in its use of melodramatic forms, Nollywood—the contemporary platform for film and storytelling in Nigeria—can be seen as a return to the traditional performative arts as well as a borrowing from European melodrama brought by colonialism.

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The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão (*A vida invisível*, 2019)

Oliver Fahle

dir. Karim Aïnouz; prod. Rodrigo Teixeira, Michael Weber, Viola Fügen; screenplay Murilo Hauser, Inés Bortagaray, Karim Aïnouz; photography Hélène Louvart; music Benedikt Schiefer. DCP, color, 139 mins. Canal Brasil, RT Features et al., distrib. Vitrine Films, The Match Factory.

The opening images of *A vida invisível* are sensual: moss on rocks, a water spring clearing a path in the ground, precipitation in a rainforest of great greenery. The subsequent shots show the sea and two young women, gazing yearningly over the infinite water. We are in Rio de Janeiro in 1950, where the tropical green of the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest) merges with the rocky seaside. In the next shot, two sisters, Guida (played by Júlia Stockler) and Eurídice (played by Carol Duarte), are on their way home through the forest, where they encounter small apes and tropical wilderness as they reflect on their inner restlessness. The camera catches a glimpse of the mighty Corcovado Mountain, with the statue of Christ erected on its summit. This statue manifests both the Catholic and patriarchal basis of Brazilian society, and is also an expression of transcendence and awakening. Suddenly the camera zooms close to the face of Eurídice, who follows Guida and looks for her sister. Reminiscent of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurídice, the danger of losing contact with the beloved is evoked. In an inner monologue anticipating the future, Eurídice speaks to her sister, asserting that she had let her go away only because Guida wanted her to. Rather than letting her go, however, Eurídice should have locked her in a room and swallowed the key. While she is uttering these words, the camera reveals the sky over Corcovado, draped in clouds. It changes color and a deep red fills the screen.

The narrative of the film—based on Martha Batalha's less melodramatic 2016 novel, *A vida invisível de Eurídice Gusmão*—centers on the separation of these closely connected



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

sisters. Guida, the older and more adventurous one, falls in love with Yorgos (played by Nikolas Antunes), a young Greek man, and impulsively follows him to Greece without saying goodbye to her family. Eurídice, a passionate piano player, is shocked. Some months later she marries Antenor (played by Grégorio Duvivier), who is a decent husband but who struggles to understand Eurídice's devotion to music. While Eurídice rehearses for the Vienna Conservatory, where she intends to study, Guida returns from Greece, pregnant and separated from her unfaithful lover. Unable to accept the disgrace, her father, Manuel (played by António Fonseca), kicks her out of their home. The parents lie to Guida, pretending that Eurídice is in Vienna, though in fact she lives close by in Rio. Guida finds a job and comes to accept the baby whom she initially rejected. She writes letter after letter to Eurídice, hoping her mother will forward them to her sister in Vienna. In turn, Eurídice hires a private detective to trace down Guida. Yet, all her efforts are in vain. In one scene, the sisters come into close proximity in a restaurant, but miss each other—a famous »if only« scene, characteristic of classical melodrama (Neale 165). The sisters remain separated for the rest of their lives. Although Eurídice finds out her parents lied to her, she mistakenly assumes that her sister is dead. Sixty years later: Eurídice, now an old lady (played by the famous Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro), discovers the letters from Guida, which her now-deceased husband Antenor had kept from her. Searching for her sister, she finds only Guida's grandchild (played by Júlia Stockler, who also plays young Guida). The film ends as it began: Eurídice speaks with her sister in an inner monologue confessing that she has never loved a person as deeply as her.

The tropical green is one component of the vibrant coloring in *A vida invisível*. Colors form part of the »mode of excess« (Brooks 1976) of melodrama and have stood for reflexive use since the films of Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Color often reflects an exaggerated expression of non-realized emotions of the protagonists. Thus, melodramatic *mise-en-scène* alludes not only to the inner life of the protagonists but also to the non-expressible, the power of affect (Deleuze 143). Affect detaches from the protagonists, filling the whole screen and creating another realm of virtual and de-subjectified power. Director Ainoz juxtaposes the expressive work of color with moments of silence and voicelessness. When Guida goes dancing with Yorgos, for example, red color filters the visual space of the dance room. The couple stop dancing and merely look at each other without a word. Through such nearly motionless shots, which reinforce the intensity of liveliness, a sense grows for Guida's spontaneous and fateful decision to leave everything behind. This kind of intensity, which disregards chronological order and expresses affect, is part of an aesthetic approach that transcends classical melodrama.

Thomas Elsaesser emphasizes the importance of sound and music in classical melodrama: »Sound, whether musical or verbal, acts first of all to give the illusion of depth of the moving picture and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the *mise-en-scène*« (76). Even when music plays an essential role in Ainoz's film, silence remains crucial as well. In another scene, Antenor and Eurídice are shown arguing in expectation of their first baby. Eurídice is unhappy with the pregnancy and is deeply preoccupied with her sister's lost trace. Antenor, tired of Eurídice's mental absence in the midst of their own family dilemma, shouts at her that »Guida is dead.« Eurídice reacts with a furious, almost ferocious, look, shown in a close-up that captures her face

from the side rather than the front. The look detaches itself from the situation. The enraged, even distorted, face is an »affect-image« (Deleuze 123) that no longer marks a person or object, but rather stands for a specific cinematic quality.

Throughout the film, it seems that deep reds represent the color of passion, whereas blue is the color of patriarchy. The latter is the dominant color in the couple's living room, for instance, where even the curtains are blue. They symbolize the threshold to the outside world, dominated by traditional rules of male authority. The famous mirror and window motifs, characteristic of classical melodrama (Weber 103), are also included in the film through Eurídice's colorful visions of the outside world. The most ambiguous colors are yellow and green. When Antenor wants to paint the room of the unborn and, in his opinion male, baby, Eurídice makes the proposal to paint it yellow. Yellow and green are the colors of Guida's house, itself (a microcosm of) a matriarchal universe. Green and yellow are also predominant in the Atlantic Forest, in the meeting between Guida and Yorgos and in the imaginary encounters between Eurídice and Guida when Eurídice auditions at the conservatory in Rio de Janeiro. The deeper and saturated orange, a mixture of yellow and red, alludes to a world of dreams and imagination. However, these imaginations are not just fantasies of a lost world. On the contrary, they become tangible and alive through the separation of Eurídice and Guida. The imagined bond between them corresponds with a more materialist expression, because it refers to the *mise-en-scène* of the body and forges a genuine female gaze. A striking paradox of *A vida invisível* is the prominence of women in contrast to the relative absence of men. Patriarchy is powerful, but the *mise-en-scène*, following the two sisters' paths, is centered on the women. We learn much about their lives, their hopes and passions, their suffering and pain, their resistance and the imaginary (inter)connections between them, even when they lack physical contact. One of the prevailing male characters is their father, Manuel, whom the sisters call only »the Portuguese« in recognition of his belonging to Brazil's colonial past, a world long gone. Still, the father is responsible for their lifelong separation. When he finally confesses his lies to Eurídice, she strikes him. As he offers no resistance, he becomes increasingly weak. Antenor, Eurídice's husband, is the most present male figure. He dreams of a heteronormative bourgeois family with a housewife and children, and he cannot understand Eurídice's desire to become a professional piano player. According to the norms of patriarchal society, the passions of women should remain concealed unless they cater to the desires of men. Yet the film actualizes the contrary. It not only envisions the powerful inner life of women (and cinema), but it stresses the meaning of their bodies as individual and social actors.

Classical melodrama draws attention to the inner life of the protagonists, and, according to Linda Williams, as body genre it provokes corporal reactions of the spectator. Yet the melodrama rarely exposes the body in such visual and sensual ways like it does in *A vida invisível*. The unintended pregnancies of Guida and Eurídice are the most obvious signs of the conflict that marks their lives. Guida loses her home, Eurídice her career. While there are few scenes in which the sisters are close together, these moments are all the more intimate. For instance, there is the moment when Guida describes the intimacy between her and Yorgos, as she recounts how he performed cunnilingus on her and how she touched his penis. This storytelling of a lustful encounter serves as a contrast to the beginning of Eurídice's wedding. She is in the bathroom, sitting on a toilet, contemplating with a relative the married life that awaits her. Although sex

scenes with Antenor involve some desire, they cannot measure up to Eurídice's passion for the piano. In the scene in which she gets pregnant, for instance, Antenor persuades her to have sex. In the background of the shot, we see them sleeping with each other on the sofa, half hidden by the piano. Since she did not fully consent to the sexual act, the scene is clouded with the sexual violence often condoned in marriage.

The birth of Guida's son is depicted as a stressful experience for her. Guida wants to ignore it and goes straight to a bar where a man kissing her notices milk on her breast. She must acknowledge that motherhood interferes with her desire to have sex. Both women eventually acquiesce to their situations, but there is no reconciliation between femininity and motherhood, only fragile agreements and a tenuous »truce.« There remains conflict between, on the one hand, women's autonomy and sexual desire, and, on the other hand, social norms of how women, and especially mothers, ought to behave. This conflict continues into our own contemporary society as shown in the political developments in 2020s Brazil with President Jair Bolsonaro, who has publicly voiced a misogynist attitude. Moreover, it demonstrates that melodrama in *A vida invisível* relates not only to heterosexual love, but that the genre can today be concerned, too, with diversity. In this case, sisterly love outdoes all other forms—in particular, the unfulfilled love between man and woman. Eurídice burns her piano when she is told her sister is dead. Her passion for music is inexorably linked to her sister. A universal issue of the film, therefore, is that love is all about where and whom you love, and that this can be far removed from heteronormative binaries.

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Joker (2019)

Carolín Lano

dir. Todd Phillips; prod. Todd Phillips, Bradley Cooper, Emma Tillinger Koskoff; screenplay Todd Phillips, Scott Silver; photography Lawrence Sher; music Hildur Guðnadóttir. 35mm, color, 117 mins. Warner Bros., distrib. Warner Bros.

»I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize, it's a fucking comedy.« As Arthur Fleck (played by Joaquin Phoenix) speaks these words, his transformation into the supervillain Joker has already begun. Writer-director Todd Phillips takes viewers on a dark journey into a previously unknown past of the comic book character in this unusual origin story. Set in 1981, it follows Arthur Fleck, a low-rent clown, eager to bring laughter to others while dreaming of a big career as a stand-up comedian. Throughout the film, Arthur drifts in a state of mental illness and becomes increasingly delinquent. His performances provoke a violent uprising against the decadent elite of Gotham City. The film opens with Arthur, made up as a clown, sitting in front of a mirror and forcing the corners of his mouth up into a painful grin until the tears flow silently with the paint. With this exposition, the basic motif of the film is already introduced: Although Arthur makes every effort to uphold the professed values of society, he is constantly punished for his good nature and humiliated with brutal violence. His mother, who gave him the nickname »Happy,« taught him to smile regardless of his feelings. Arthur seems to have internalized this so much that he bursts into hysterical laughter even in the most inappropriate moments. Only later do viewers learn that Arthur is repressing childhood trauma that surpasses all visible cruelty in the film. At the climax of the action, Arthur proudly repeats his artificial grin, this time by drawing it on his lips in blood. Thus, he does not settle into the role of the innocent victim, as melodrama usually prescribes.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

At the same time, one of the origins of the Joker character itself lies in melodrama. Before the supervillain Joker entered the comic book world in 1940, coinciding with the birth of the DC superhero Batman, his creators drew inspiration from the film *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). Based on a novel by Victor Hugo, it tells the story of a man (mimed by Conrad Veidt) who was disfigured as a child. To take revenge on his father, both corners of his mouth were cut into a grin that never disappeared. However, Arthur's gesture with which he first violently, and then finally triumphantly, brings a grin to his face recalls another iconic moment in the history of melodrama. It is the agonizingly forced smile that Lillian Gish, in the role of the daughter in D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), forms with her fingers to appease her brutally irascible father. Significantly, this gesture was instantly adapted by actor and comedian Buster Keaton, as it ideally suited his stoic facial expression as a clown.

Joker, however, not only contains allusions to well-known movie melodramas but also crosses several lines of the genre tradition. The label »weepee« or »women's film,« which was common from 1930 onwards, was accompanied by a devaluation of the genre as a low form of cultural expression associated with women writers, stars, and audiences. With his emphatically androgynous acting style, Joaquin Phoenix is reminiscent of the heroines of melodrama. Arthur sacrificially cares for his decrepit mother, while passively enduring all injustices. The traces of abuse are clearly visible on his body, as his gaunt figure is a physical expression of his psychological condition. In the film we also encounter a deep moral polarization as part of the melodramatic formula of social conflicts played out in the family. Penny and Arthur Fleck are the epitome of the powerless poor who turn to the rich with hope but without success. Time and again, Penny's letters to her former employer, Thomas Wayne, go unanswered. When Arthur finally learns that he may be the illegitimate son of Thomas Wayne (and thus related to his later antagonist Batman), the class conflict leads to open confrontation. In this version—the film confronts us with different possible alternatives to the family history—Penny Fleck embodies the maid who is discreetly chased away, due to an »inappropriate« relationship, familiar from so many melodramas. In another melodramatic twist, however, we learn that Penny was apparently lying about her illicit relationship with her employer, only to again be left in doubt about it shortly before the end of the film (much is unreliably narrated in the manner of a mind game film, which makes Arthur's delusions appear as reality). It is part of the cruelty of the film that it is later revealed that Arthur only dreams himself into a better world and fantasizes a love affair with the neighbor, while the disproportionately violent reaction of the presumed wealthy father Thomas Wayne when Arthur confronts him is brutally real. Significantly, the movie theater shows the Chaplin classic → *Modern Times* (1936)—but Arthur does not transform into the harmless Tramp, even though he initially resembles him in his ridiculous get-up as a ticket-taker. Instead, he becomes a revenge clown, fighting from the underclass against the new feudal class of modern capitalism.

In his seminal study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks introduced the notion of melodrama as a mode of excess. According to him, the task of the melodrama in the 19th century novel was to make »the world morally legible« (42). At the turn of the 20th century, however, when melodrama conquered the big screen, another line of tradition emerged, more associated with the *Grand Guignol* in France: a theater of horror and spectacle, a Punch and Judy show for adults that refuses to make moral sense (Gunning). In early sensational film, the melodramatic mode of excess is inseparably

connected to an excitement of »thrills for thrill's sake« (Singer 148). We also encounter this line of tradition unmistakably in *Joker*. The victim triumphs in the end: not by restoring the moral order, but in an orgy of violence.

As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has pointed out in another example, the melodramatic mode of excess bears striking similarities to conversion hysteria as described by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, in this form of hysteria, repressed ideas are converted into physical symptoms or somatic reactions. In the melodrama, however, »a conversion can take place into the body of the text« (Nowell-Smith 73-74). In *Joker*, hysteria is not only present in Joaquin Phoenix's performance but also in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*. The »signs of melodrama« (Gledhill) can be read in the actor's body, as well as in the décor and in certain objects (Elsaesser 61-62). For example, after the confrontation with Wayne, Arthur locks himself in a refrigerator, which symbolizes his emotional world. Moreover, the dirty colors and gloomy lighting of the slum dwellings express an oppressive mood, as do the reminiscences of the shadow plays of film noir and a cleverly used Vertigo effect. Finally, the steep staircase, which Arthur has to climb again and again in resignation and fatigue over the course of the film, is also emblematic. It represents Arthur's desire for advancement through recognition as a stand-up comedian in bourgeois society. After this utopian hope is finally dashed, the staircase then leads, in a paradoxical reversal, to the ascent of the character Joker, who dances down the stairs in elation.

The excess culminates at the end in a hysterical outburst. The hero is finally recognized by the community and rescued from the crashed police vehicle in a kind of symbolic rebirth. In a depraved world determined by the cruel forces of the ruling class, morality becomes recognizable as an instrument of oppression and consequently can no longer triumph in the end.

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Hamilton (2020)

Elisabeth Anker

dir. Thomas Kail; prod., screenplay, music Lin-Manuel Miranda; photography Declan Quinn. digital, color, 160 mins. Walt Disney Pictures et al., distrib. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, Disney+.

Hamilton is a Hollywood film that was released straight to streaming in July 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic. The release alone was a moment of celebration for millions of Americans who had been isolated for months under quarantine. *Hamilton's* story of a scrappy nation fighting unjust colonial power and emerging as a new country resonated with those who were stuck at home, sick, grieving the loss of loved ones, and generally feeling powerless as they were confined inside for months on end. The release of *Hamilton* on the eve of Independence Day, directly into homes across the country, promised a light at the end of the tunnel and became a national event.

Hamilton is the filmed version of one of the most popular and award-winning Broadway musicals in history, which tells the story of the American national founding by focusing on the rise and fall of Alexander Hamilton. The movie films the staged show by stitching together three live performances. It thus combines the emotional closeness of the movies with the electric energy of live performance, showcasing dynamic staging for revolutionary wartime and heated political battles alongside close-ups of actors that would otherwise be inaccessible to a theater audience. A roving camera adds to the movement of busy action scenes, while overclose shots of sweat, spit, and tears give audience members a connection to the characters that enhances the affective power of the Broadway show.

At one level, *Hamilton* offers the felt pleasures of the familiar national melodrama of the American Revolution, in which virtuous Americans, unjustly victimized by the British, eventually overwhelm the villainous forces of evil through their own courage, pluck, and wit to found a new nation (McConachie; Grimsted). In addition, *Hamilton* continues the tradition of »founding melodrama« by erasing from its story the indigenous dispossession that drove revolutionary power, while downplaying the enormous



role of enslavement in powering the nation's financial capacity to revolt. Yet, on another level, *Hamilton* offers a different founding melodrama by fronting its idiosyncratic version of Alexander Hamilton, a figure usually positioned either in the background of the drama or as a vaguely nefarious banker juxtaposed to Thomas Jefferson, the yeoman farmer. Americans have been captivated by a founding father fetish for the last few decades. As their own democratic self-image has lost critical force, many have turned to heroic stories of past greatness to ground their national identity (Schocket; Sehat; Anker 2014). While *Hamilton* certainly operates within this fetish, its reworking of the founder theme both breaks new ground for envisioning democracy and helps to contextualize the film's galvanizing force.

Hamilton's melodrama recasts who and what an American revolutionary can be. Alexander Hamilton was a penniless immigrant from the Caribbean—»a bastard, immigrant, son of a whore,« as the cast sings in the first act. Centering Hamilton's story thus creolizes the nation's founding from the start, rooting it in a hybrid and ever-shifting identity derived from multiple peoples and traditions throughout Atlantic regions. The character of Hamilton is played by the show's writer and director, Lin-Manuel Miranda, himself a Latinx son of immigrants from Puerto Rico. Indeed, all of the founding fathers and Americans are portrayed solely by people of color. Only King George and a handful of British loyalists are white. In this sense, *Hamilton* is less history retold through the eyes of an unsung hero than it is a future fabulation that reimagines what America could look like once it not only grapples with but celebrates its creolized, multi-racial, multi-ethnic origins. *Hamilton* asks its audience to invest in a national vision where people of color are both central to the American story and equal participants in shaping the nation.

Hamilton's emotive appeal also comes in its *melos*, its use of hip-hop as an original African American music vernacular, bringing the Broadway musical genre into a more capacious present. The show untangles and elaborates sophisticated political arguments in the cadence of hip-hop, debating the role of state power, the struggles of federalism, and drawbacks of limited government with the often brash and irreverent braggadocio of the hip-hop form (Rose). In its music, as well as its casting and storyline, *Hamilton* offers a vision of politics that is not contained within the imaginary of colonial architecture and hallowed gestures of white aristocracy. It expands who gets to tell the story of America—and in what cadence. In this sense, the lines Hamilton wrote for Washington, which they here sing together, anticipating »the sweet enjoyment of partaking in the midst of my fellow-citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government,« are *Hamilton's* own vision of democratic pleasures to come, not those already achieved in the miasma of a mythic past.

Thus, in contrast to the familiar founding melodrama, *Hamilton* offers a new version of black and brown revolution for racial equality where the forces of white supremacy, equated with colonialism here in the figure of King George, become the villainous foe of popular sovereignty. This is why it is important for the show that Thomas Jefferson, rather than the expected moral hero of most American founding stories, is instead pusillanimous, flighty, and less committed to the fight than the others. This portrayal highlights rather than elides Jefferson's own contradictions as a supposed proponent of freedom who enslaved hundreds of people, as someone who fathered children with an enslaved woman and enslaved his children, all while writing the Declaration of Independence. Many criticized the show for its historical inaccuracies, but the film is not

so much a historical reenactment as much as a contemporary reimagining of American national identity and political ideals.

Released not only during a pandemic but at the start of the largest protest movements in American history against endemic racism, *Hamilton* became the soundtrack for those working to change ongoing racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. At the time of its film release, many in the United States were in an uproar over the continued police killings of unarmed black men, and the protests organized by the slogan and politics of Black Lives Matter became the most multiracial and multi-coalitional political protests in American history (Chua; Anker 2022). *Hamilton* connected with this moment, as it offered a lyrical, aesthetic, and emotionally resonant story of immigrants and people of color revolting against injustice and reimagining a better world with all of the authority that Americans grant to their traditional founding heroes. The film's famous line »Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now!« petitions its audience to think of *their own* difficult moment as a lucky one, as they have the potential to change the dire circumstances in which they find themselves. Perhaps the best way to view the film, then, is as a work of imaginative and affective political theory rather than a revisionist history: one in which multiracial democracy is a lived possibility, where agonistic debate is played out to the bold rhymes of hip-hop, where the country is not run by vituperative, xenophobic, and racist leaders but by people who aim for freedom and equality even within their own ambivalences and complexities. It's this message that ultimately lets *Hamilton* bring its audience to tears.

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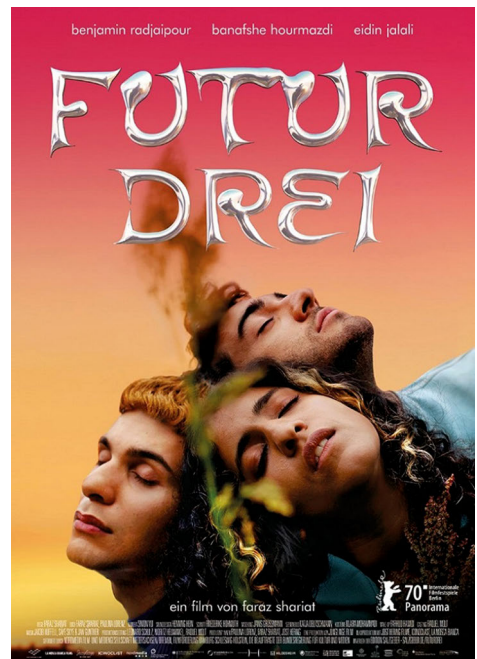
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No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI (2020)

Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner, Aidan Riebensahm, and Arpana Aischa Berndt
(for Jünglinge collective)

dir. Faraz Shariat; prod. Paulina Lorenz, Faraz Shariat; screenplay Faraz Shariat, Paulina Lorenz; photography Simon Vu; music Jakob Hüffell, SÄYE SKYE. DCP, color, 92 mins. Jünglinge Film et al., distrib. Edition Salzgeber.

No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI is a German production by a grassroots young queer BIPoC film collective (Jünglinge) and the first feature film of Jünglinge and director Faraz Shariat. The collective is involved in a range of other productions, such as the latest season of the online youth series *DRUCK* (2021), which centers on queer Black and East Asian femme experience. The interaction and community-building (i.e. the communal) aspect of this work is integral to all of its projects, including the feature film *No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI*, which focuses on experiences of the Iranian diaspora in Germany. Community and communal practice are associated with a shared history of experiencing Otherness, that is a shared range of feelings and emotions when interacting with the dominant society, which can be summarized under the umbrella of »non-belonging.« »Non-belonging« in German-speaking societies can be associated with modes of behavior that are deemed too emotional, too (melo-)dramatic (a »cultural difference,« see Shoorman), and art produced by actors that are viewed as Others, as individuals who employ modes of behavior that do not belong, is not considered part of what is canonically viewed as art. To put it more clearly, there is no space for hybrid identities in German art practice. Therefore, the only way of carving out spaces is to uncover the labels assigned to the margins and to use them to one's advantage from a marginalized perspective. The film *No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI*, released in the year of one of the largest right-wing terrorist attacks in post-World War II Germany, employs a melodramatic mode of storytelling to this effect.



Courtesy of Edition Salzgeber

No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI is in part based on events that Shariat himself experienced growing up as a queer Person of Color in provincial German suburbia, attempting to shed light on non-normative identity formation processes outside of urban landscapes. The film has been lauded in the press as »an immigrant love song set to a gay nightclub dance-pop beat with a defiant chorus of ›We are the future‹« (Kiang). Indeed, an aesthetic based on music videos is part of its trademark. By the collective's own admission, the film is not interested in telling a straightforward narrative but rather aims at subjectifying its protagonists to the greatest possible degree, to perhaps show them as »willful subjects« (Ahmed) in a world aimed at silencing them. To this end, amplifying the characters' intentions and their emotions is a central theme of the film, thus allowing for a viewing experience that is affective and itself part of the community building process outlined above. There is a certain naïveté in this approach but also more than a modicum of hopefulness. As Kiang puts it, »[a]s ridiculous as it is for three twenty-nothings to believe they can somehow remake the world in their own hopeful image, it is also perhaps the best shot we've got.«

The film tells the story of the young queer second-generation Iranian-German Parvis (played by Benjamin Radjaipour) who, after having been caught shoplifting, is sentenced to communal service at the local refugee center. There, he encounters the siblings Amon (played by Eidin Jalali) and Banafshe (played by Banafshe Hourmazdi), whom he quickly befriends. Amon and Parvis begin a relationship without much of the gravitas usually associated with narratives centering on queer relationships between Middle Eastern men and with only little outside interference and resistance from Amon's friends at the refugee center. Towards the end of the movie, Banafshe is informed that she has not been granted asylum and therefore must return to Iran. The trio flees from the refugee center but in the end, Banafshe leaves Amon behind and returns to Iran on her own. While the film's narrative follows a simple structure, it is full of montages and cinematographic embellishments that emphasize the characters' inner worlds, albeit in a metaphoric way that aims to become part of a larger (meta-) discourse. These montages and music video-esque aesthetic choices that veer away from a hard, gritty reality and have magical under- and overtones (and metaphors, as in the theme of the Japanese magical girl anime *Sailor Moon*, which is recontextualized here as part of a post-migrant childhood and serves as Parvis' catalyst for exploring his femininity) can be viewed as sentimental, since they shift reality into fantastical settings of 90s nostalgia from a post-migrant point of view, drawing on children's cartoons and anime, images of food, soft, dream-like colors, and the grainy images of home videos. This cinematographic aesthetic practice is highly melodramatic in nature and perhaps best encapsulated in the montage of possibilities towards the end of the movie (filmed with a method that turns the images into a fragmented kaleidoscope), which shows the characters how they are and how they could have been. The film's melodramatic mode is furthermore engrained in every aspect: in its English title (*No Hard Feelings*), in its use of color, in its dialogue. Melodramatic practice is viewed as an asset, as a mode of generating empathy with its characters, and a way of creating visibility and subject positions for these characters. When Amon looks at Parvis and whispers »I see you,« this is a comment directed at audience members who themselves may not be part of mainstream society, who may themselves be othered and feel unseen—it is an invitation to become visible through the act of seeing. Nonetheless, the film displays an acute awareness that the majority of the prospective audience is not

part of this minority. Therefore, it is interspersed with scenes that provide additional exposition directed at mainstream society, for example, when Parvis talks with his sister about what it was like growing up as a second-generation migrant, or when Banafshe explains that the refugee experience is not part of the diaspora experience. In a long montage towards the end of the movie, *No Hard Feelings/FUTUR DREI* becomes self-conscious and self-reflexive, knows it is being watched, knows that the majority of its audience is looking in from the outside, and that this practice itself is a form of Othering. It reacts by letting its actors and extras stare directly into the camera, as a challenge directed at the audience: They see you.

As a further act of self-awareness and a self-critical approach, Jünglinge offers up a catalogue carrying the title of this transcendental line (Molt and Berndt), to revise some of the images being called the »future of German cinema« (Kay). The collected texts offer thoughts and perspectives dealing with the ambivalence of visibility (Schaffer) and highlighting the limitations of the film's story. For example, female and femme perspectives, Blackness and refugee issues are addressed only superficially, thereby unwittingly turning these marginalized positions within the BIPOC community into objects. Radically subjectifying as many marginalized positions as possible in German cinematographic landscapes in the future is one of the collective's most important goals.

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Contributors

Adedayo Abah is Professor of Journalism and Mass Communications at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, USA.

Elisabeth Anker is Associate Professor of American Studies and Political Science at George Washington University, USA, and Director of the Film Studies Program.

Jana Aresin is a Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Mita Banerjee is Chair of American Studies at Johannes-Gutenberg-University in Mainz, Germany.

Werner C. Barg is Professor of Film, Media and Communication Studies at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany.

Louis Bayman is a Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Southampton, UK.

Maria Belodubrovskaya is Associate Professor at the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, USA.

O. Hugo Benavides is Professor of Anthropology and the Director of the Global Studies Consortium at Fordham University in New York City, USA.

Arpana Aischa Berndt is a Berlin-based Screenwriter and Script Consultant.

Claudia Böhme is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Social Anthropology at the University of Trier, Germany.

Claudia Breger is the Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, USA.

Elisabeth Bronfen is Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University, USA.

Matthew Bush is Associate Professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, USA.

Lucia Cardone is Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sassari, Italy.

Robert Dassanowksy is Distinguished Professor of Film and Languages & Cultures at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, USA.

Thomas Demmelhuber is Chair of Middle East Politics and Society at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Simon Dickel is Professor of Gender and Diversity Studies at Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany.

Stefanie Diekmann is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Hildesheim, Germany.

Amanda Doxtater is Assistant Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, USA.

Roman Dubasevych is Junior Professor of Ukrainian Cultural Studies at the University of Greifswald, Germany.

Sophie Dufays is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Hispanic Literatures and Cultures at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

David Eisler is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany.

Lorenz Engell is Professor and Director of Media Philosophy at Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany.

Karin Esders is a Senior Lecturer of Cultural History and American Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany.

Oliver Fahle is Professor of Film Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany.

Sandra Folie is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna, Austria.

Axelle Germanaz is a Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Katharina Gerund is a Senior Lecturer of American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Simoné Goldschmidt-Lechner is a Writer, Translator, and Researcher based in Hamburg.

Tom Gunning is Professor Emeritus of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, USA.

Birgit Hebel-Bauridl is Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Regensburg, Germany.

Markus Heide is Associate Professor of American Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Hildesheim, Germany.

Marius Henderson is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Teresa Hiergeist is Professor of French and Spanish Literature and Culture at the University of Vienna, Austria.

Claudia Hoffmann is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Clarkson University in New York, USA.

Michael Höckelmann is Chair of Chinese Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Jan-Niklas Jäger is a Freelance Cultural Journalist and Translator, based in Nürnberg, Germany.

Alessandro Jedlowski is a Media Anthropologist and the Coordinator of the »Chaire Diasporas Africaines« of the Bordeaux Institute of Political Sciences (Sciences Po Bordeaux), France.

Jünglinge is a film collective of mid-twenties raised in the hybrid cultures of post-migrant Germany and founded by Faraz Shariat, Paulina Lorenz, and Raquel Kishori Dukpa.

Kay Kirchmann is Chair of Media Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Alexander Knoth is an Editor, Film Critic, and Blogger. He has been writing about Asian cinema both academically and journalistically as an editor for »Asian Movie Pulse.com« and on his blog »Japancuts.de.«

Christian Krug is a Senior Lecturer of English Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Rui Kunze is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Chinese Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Carolyn Lano is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Theater and Media Studies and Personal Assistant of the President of Nürnberg Technical University, Germany.

Mirja Lecke is Chair of Slavic Literature and Culture at the University of Regensburg, Germany.

Pei-yin Lin is Associate Professor at the School of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong.

Alexandra Ludewig is Professor of German and European Studies and Head of the School of the Humanities at the University of Western Australia, Australia.

Ana M. López is Department Chair, Professor of Communication and Director of the Cuban and Caribbean Studies Institute at Tulane University, USA.

Sarah Marak is a Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Carla Marcantonio is Associate Professor and Chair of Film, Television, and Media Studies at Loyola Marymount University, USA.

Moira Marquis is Assistant Professor of English at Claflin University, USA.

Peter J. Maurits is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Comparative Literary Studies and American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Annika McPherson is Professor of New English Literatures and Cultural Studies at Augsburg University, Germany.

Vijay Mishra is Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Murdoch University, Australia.

Thomas Morsch is Professor of Film Studies at the Free University Berlin, Germany.

Florian Mundhenke is Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

Yael Munk is Senior Lecturer in Film and Cultural Studies as well as Gender Studies at the Open University of Israel.

Lars Nowak is Professor of Media Studies at Hunan Normal University in Changsha, China.

Uchenna Onuzulike is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communications at Bowie State University, USA.

Pedram Partovi is Associate Professor of History at American University, Washington DC, USA.

Heike Paul is Chair of American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Laura Podalsky is Professor of Latin American Studies at Ohio State University, USA.

Thomas Preston is a Doctoral Researcher in German Studies at Columbia University, USA.

Aidan Riebensahm is a Moonshine Academic with a background in Cultural Studies and Theater, a Moderator and a Hopeful Utopian Witch.

Karen A. Ritzenhoff is Professor in the Department of Communication at Central Connecticut State University, USA. She is also affiliated as co-Chair with the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program as well as Cinema Studies.

Ivo Ritzer is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Bayreuth, Germany.

Cornelia Ruhe is Chair of Romance Literature and Media Studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany.

Bhaskar Sarkar is Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.

Nele Sawallisch is Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Trier, Germany.

Stefanie Schäfer is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in American Studies and a Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Vienna, Austria.

Norbert M. Schmitz is Professor of Aesthetics and Media Studies at the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel, Germany.

Sophie Johanna Schweiger is Visiting Assistant Professor at Colgate University, USA.

Meheli Sen is Associate Professor of South Asian and Global Film Studies at Rutgers University, USA.

Rama Srinivasan is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Anthropology and a Marie Curie Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

Katharina Sykora is Professor Emerita of Art History at Braunschweig University of Art, Germany.

Chiara Tognolotti is Adjunct Professor of History of Cinema at the University of Florence and Professor of History of Italian Cinema at the Sarah Lawrence College Italian Study Abroad Program.

Ioana Uricaru is Associate Professor of Film and Media Culture at Middlebury College, USA.

Nathaniel Weisberg is an MA Student in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Nicole Wiedenmann is a Senior Lecturer of Media Studies at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

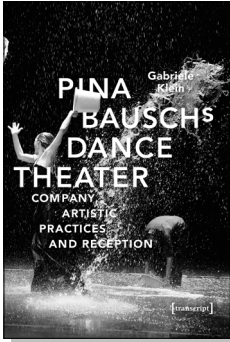
Thomas Wortmann is Chair of Modern German Studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany.

Shuangting Xiong is a Doctoral Researcher in East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Oregon, USA.

Sigal Yona is a Doctoral Researcher in Communication Sciences and a Member of the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies at Ghent University, Belgium.

Oleksandr Zaborko is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Slavic Studies at the University of Regensburg, Germany.

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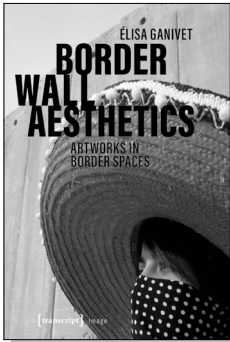
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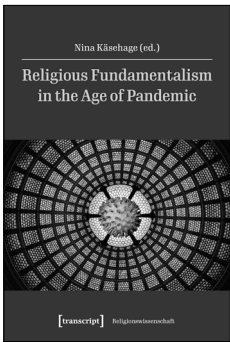
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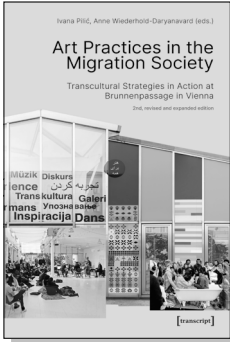
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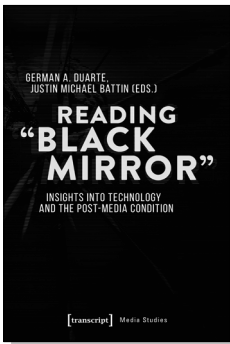
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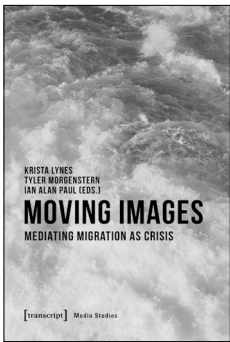
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