

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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All efforts have been made to contact copyright holders of illustrations. Should any have unintentionally been overlooked, the necessary arrangements will be made at the first opportunity.

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