



The Lure of an Ever-Elusive Global Melodrama

Michael Stewart, ed. *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 246 pages.

Book review by Meredith Slifkin

In recent years, melodrama has experienced a surge in critical attention, a second act to follow the Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill-led march to reclaim, reinvigorate, and redefine a mode that had been marginalized by a high-versus-low cultural hegemony in film studies academia. An interest in the way that melodrama shapes narratives not just of gender and genre but also of nation and history has contributed to the current impetus to investigate global and transnational connections. This is where *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television*, edited by Michael Stewart, aims to situate itself: among the growing list of scholars attempting to expand the narrow geographic and historical parameters of melodrama put forth by scholars such as Peter Brooks (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 1976) and Thomas Elsaesser (“Tales of Sound and Fury” 1972).

The collection of essays was published in 2014, emerging from a symposium at Queen Mary University in Edinburgh in 2010. The films and television series examined are therefore mostly of the millennial era, throwing into question the eponymous contemporaneity of the book. This lack of timeliness, combined with a noteworthy absence of examples from Latin America and a misplaced section on gender and sexuality, leave the reader to question whether this collection can successfully fulfill its ambitious goals. The collection might not be the comprehensive answer to the question of how melodrama functions in a global media culture, but it does provide insightful readings of its chosen topics. Despite some limitations, the collection as a whole successfully conveys an urgency in its methodology: an imperative to explore the complexities at work in the melodramatic mode across boundaries of geography, media, genre, and time.

The collection is divided into two parts, on television and film respectively. Stewart explains this division was made for reasons of convenience rather than design, yet the distinction necessarily brings up questions of how melodrama functions as a mode across different media. Indeed, medium specificity plays a significant role in the first section of television essays, which focuses mainly on the importance of seriality to melodramatic methods of narration and affective manipulation. Of particular interest is Douglas McNaughton's chapter, "Nature, Culture, Space: The Melodramatic Topographies of *Lark Rise to Candleford*," wherein the author argues that melodrama functions to revise history by privileging the subjectivity and experience of women during the transitional period of modernity. The specific context of the British television industry and the aesthetics of BBC literary adaptations discussed in McNaughton's chapter contrast interestingly with Shoma Munshi's essay, "'We Are Like That Only': Prime Time Family Melodramas on Indian Television." Both highlight the ways in which melodrama is used to signify notions of national identity, respectively denoting "Britishness" or "Indianness" as it is propagated by these two massive television markets. The increasing relevance of melodrama's ability to connect with popular and public cultures through television is evident in this section, and Munshi's essay especially highlights the urgency of understanding the Indian family melodrama within the changing cultural structures of the new millennium.

Less topical, perhaps, is the following section on gender and sexuality in American television. Though filled with insightful readings of *The Sopranos* finale from Martin Zeller-Jacques ("Don't Stop Believing: Textual Excesses and Discourses of Satisfaction in the Finale of *The Sopranos*"), and the melodramatic concept of excess in *Nip/Tuck* from Alexia Smit ("On the 'Scalpel's Edge': Gory Excess, Melodrama, and Irony in *Nip/Tuck*"), the themes overall seem out of place for a collection that otherwise makes strides towards understanding melodrama in a post-colonial context. The essays in this collection generally cohere around the possibility of theorizing melodrama as a mode that exists across borders and mediums, yet this section explores only American television without any explanation for the delineation. The topics seem more arbitrary

than in other sections of the book where issues of gender and nation are more closely entwined.

The second part of the collection moves to film, with a section on memory, cultural trauma, and destiny in contemporary film melodramas, a fitting topic for the current cycle of melodramas that explore memory and evocations of the past (most notably, Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* (2002), as well as the spate of nostalgia-centric films that followed in their wake). The most theoretically complex essay of the collection can be found in this section: Kenneth Chan's "Melodrama as History and Nostalgia: Reading Hong Kong director Yonfan's *Prince of Tears*." Chan treats the film as a tool for understanding current Chinese political anxieties through the lens of the political history of Taiwan portrayed in the film. Melodrama, he argues, through its unique manipulation of nostalgia and desire, functions as a conduit for expressing the collective cultural trauma of the era of the White Terror (the 38-year period of martial law in Taiwan that lasted from 1949-1987). In her chapter, "Vienna to Beijing: Xu Jinglei's *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (China, 2004) and the Symbolic Simulation of Europe, Sarah Artt picks up on many of the same themes as Chan, as she explores the primacy that melodrama is once again taking in contemporary Chinese cinema when it comes to expressing the experience of Chinese cultural life. Her essay furthermore forges interesting transnational connections by addressing the transplantation of the story from Vienna to Peking. Both Max Ophuls' 1948 film and Xu Jinglei's are based on the 1922 novel by Stefan Zweig, which takes place in turn-of-the-century Vienna. Artt explores the translation of this story to 1940s Beijing (then Peking), where the novel's themes of women's suffering and the melodramatic manipulation of time are repurposed in a new socio-cultural context.

The final section of the book addresses a prevailing issue in melodrama studies: the question of the melodrama-realism divide. The two were, for a long time, seen as diametrically opposed. Melodrama has long been associated with exaggeration, excess, and expressivity at levels both visual and thematic, reliant upon a Brooksian notion of moral legibility that enforces binaried codes of good and evil. However, the line between

melodrama and the messier world of realism appears increasingly blurred in these essays, as many scholars of melodrama would argue it should be. Stewart's own chapter, "Anticipating Home: *The Edge of Heaven* as Melodrama," explores the renewal and reapplication of melodramatic tropes in spaces that otherwise break confining notions of home and nationhood in the Turkish film. Taraneh Dadar explores similar issues in contemporary neo-realist Iranian cinema in "Framing a Hybrid Tradition: Realism and Melodrama in *About Elly*," wherein he argues that the Manichean moral universe of Peter Brooks is complicated by the film's style of "excessive reality."

Taken as a whole, Stewart's collection succeeds in its main goal: to understand the relationship between melodrama and history more fully than existing canonical work on melodrama. The assembled essays take full advantage of the distinct cultural moment that is post-millennium cinema, and examine the ways in which melodrama functions politically and aesthetically in different forms across different film cultures (though, as previously noted, there is a problematic gap when it comes to Latin American cinema). By dividing the sections into television and film the collection unintentionally creates a divide not just in medium specificity, but also between popular culture and art cinema. This latter divide needed to be addressed, but overall the collected chapters provide thought-provoking analyses of the complexities and prevailing relevance of the melodramatic mode in contemporary cinema.

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