

Melodrama

Prof.: Andrée Lafontaine

Film melodrama can be seen as an expressive mode, a genre and an ideological form. In this course, we will discuss melodrama as a culturally situated genre and expressive mode. Melodrama incorporates a variety of stylistics and aesthetic conventions and directors have exploited those for various effects. As it relies heavily on emotions, pathos and sensationalism, melodrama has been criticized as “low brow” and relegated to the “woman’s genre”. Recent theorists, however, point out melodrama’s intertwinement with discourse of gender, race, nationalism and modernity.

This course is subdivided into three modules, which correspond to three broad periods of American cinema history: early, classic and contemporary cinema. Each module tackles the main narrative tropes and formal elements of the melodramatic mode, namely: the sensational, repressed emotions, suffering and social criticism as they relate to typically feminine and masculine film genres and the national imaginary.

Classroom Environment

Questions or concerns relative to class material and classroom environment should be first discussed with the instructor, who will make every effort to address them. Some of the audiovisual material presented contains explicit nudity or depictions of sexual acts; there is material that deals with issues of violence, sexism, sexuality, and racial stereotypes. All material has been selected to engage with the course’s focus and should therefore be considered from an analytical rather than a moral perspective. It is your responsibility to see me if you require more specific forewarnings about the content of individual films or readings.

You may use your computer to take notes, but all computers must be turned off during screenings. All phones should be turned off in class.

Course Expectations:

1. **To attend class.** Written notification is expected if you cannot come to class due to illness or serious impediment. As the course depends on everyone’s contribution, students who miss more than two classes will be penalized (2% per missed class deducted from final grade unless medical document is provided). Everyone is expected to arrive on time: be discrete if you are late or leave early.
2. **To read the assigned materials.** The calendar gives you a week by week description of what will be discussed in class as well as required reading. You will want to consult the calendar a few days before each class. The

readings are not easy! You may need to go over them more than once in order to be fully prepared for class discussion. The readings will provide us with the common ground upon which we will base our conversations. Without that common ground, our conversations will lose some of their richness. **Readings must therefore be done before class.** Optional readings are sometimes suggested for those who wish to research a week's topics further.

3. **To be attentive and participate in class.** Participation does not simply mean speaking aloud in class, although that is essential. Students should participate by actively following the discussion, and by contributing to our quarter-long conversation through the insights they present in their papers and projects.
4. **To complete the required assignments in a timely fashion.** The assignments provide you with both informal and formal opportunities to articulate your responses to the issues we'll be discussing. You will get the most out of the course if you turn in your work on time.

Assignments and Evaluations

1. We will have periodical **writing exercises in class**, which are designed both to ensure that you are keeping up with the reading, and to stimulate class discussion. I will pose a question about the reading at the beginning of class, and ask you to write a paragraph or two in response.
2. You will write **three responses to films** screened in class. The first will be a film review, the second a formal analysis, and the last will be a critical analysis. Instructions for each will be provided in class.
3. With a partner, you will research and offer a **presentation** to introduce one of the films screened in class.
4. You will write one **final paper** (10-12 pages). This paper will incorporate your independent research on the course material, and will require you to use the research and documentation skills that you should have developed throughout the semester.

Writing Exercises: 15%

Film Responses: 30%

Oral Presentation: 10%

Final Paper: 35%

Attendance and Participation: 10%

General Guidelines for Written Assignments

Organization, grammar, spelling, syntax, formatting, punctuation, writing style and the use of illustrations will count towards your final grade. Computer difficulties will not be accepted as an excuse for a late submission; you may want to print your paper the night before to avoid last minute problems.

I recommend using a standard writing guide such as the *MLA Style Manual* and Timothy Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*.

All written assignments must be handed to the instructor in class on the day they are due. Electronic copies may be exceptionally accepted (preferably in a .pdf format). All assignments are to be written in Times New Roman, 12 pt, and double-spaced. Images are to be added at the end of the document and do not factor in the page count.

Your final paper should be written in an essay form, and should be 10-12 pages (approximately 2500 to 3000 words, excluding title page, bibliography, endnotes and illustrations). You must briefly explain the concepts you are using (with proper referencing) and demonstrate how they apply (or not) to the film. Your term paper will be evaluated according to the grid provided below.

A good strategy would be to select your film early on and work on your paper throughout the semester, as we discuss the various texts. This will allow you to view your chosen film several times during the course of the semester and work on the final paper while your ideas are still fresh.

Late submissions will be penalized (2% per day, including week end days).

Plagiarism:

The most common offense under the Academic Code of Conduct is plagiarism which the Code defines as “**the presentation of the work of another person as one’s own or without proper acknowledgement**”. This could be material copied word for word from books, journals, internet sites, professor’s course notes, etc. It could be material that is paraphrased but closely resembles the original source. It could be the work of a fellow student, for example, an answer on a quiz, data for a lab report, a paper or assignment completed by another student. It might be a paper purchased through one of the many available sources. Plagiarism does not refer to words alone — it can also refer to copying images, graphs, tables, and ideas. Finally, if you translate the work of another person and do not cite the source, this is also plagiarism. You cannot submit the same paper for more than one course. If you are not sure how to quote or reference some material, I will be more than happy to help.

MARKING GRID

Your grade is necessarily a composite assessment of a number of factors. Each can be conceived of as a general range of performance.

Topic not understood	0		15	Topic well-understood
Does not answer the question(s)	0		5	Clearly answers the question(s)
Does not satisfy the parameters of the assignment	0		5	Satisfies all parameters of the assignment
Does not define/understand key terms and concepts	0		15	Defines/understands key terms and concepts
Does not use relevant sources efficiently	0		10	Uses relevant sources efficiently
No critical understanding of the literature	0		20	Solid critical understanding of the literature
Points are unclear and inconsistent	0		5	Points are clear and consistent
Unfounded assertions and description	0		5	Uses evidence-based reasons and argument(s)
Essay is rambling and without structure	0		5	Essay is logically structured and consistent
Numerous grammatical and/or spelling errors*	0		5	Few or no grammatical and/or spelling errors
Poorly implemented/ inconsistent writing style	0		5	Consistent and well-implemented writing style
Unacceptable referencing	0		5	Acceptable referencing
Final Grade (before late penalty if applicable)				/100

* I do take into account students whose native language is not English. It is your responsibility to let me know if that is the case.

CALENDAR

WEEK 1 Introduction

- 📖 Langford, Barry. Chapter 2 “Before Genre: Melodrama”. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. 29-53.
- 🎞️ *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), 100 min.

Optional:

- 🎞️ *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955).

MODULE 1 Early American Cinema

WEEK 2

The Silent Era: Sensational Serials and Oedipal Dramas

- 📖 Brooks, Peter. Preface and Chapter 1 “The Melodramatic Imagination”. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995. Vii-23.
- 📖 Singer, Ben. Chapter 8 “Power and Peril in the Serial Queen Melodrama”. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. 221-262.
- 🎞️ *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), clip.
- 🎞️ *The Hazards of Helen* (1915), clip.
- 🎞️ *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), 90 min.

Optional:

- 📖 Lesage, Julia. “Artful Racism, Artful Rape: Griffith’s Broken Blossoms”. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 1987. 235-54.
- 📖 Andrew, Dudley. “Broken Blossoms: The Art and the Eros of a Perverse Text”. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6.1 (1981): 81-90.
- 📖 Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. “The Blossom and the Bole: Narrative and Visual Spectacle in Early Film Melodrama”. *Cinema Journal* 33.3 (Spring 1994): 3-15.
- 🎞️ *Way Down East* (D.W. Griffith, 1920).

WEEK 3

Swashbucklers and Heartthrobs

- 📖 Singer, Ben. “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism”. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz. Berkeley: U of California P., 1995. 72-99.
- 🎞️ *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921), 80 min.

Optional:

- 📖 Hansen, Miriam. Section III “The Return of Babylon: Rudolph Valentino and Female Spectatorship (1921-1926)”. *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. 245-294.

WEEK 4

Maternal Melodrama I & Emotions

- 📖 Elsaesser, Thomas, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama”. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*.

Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992. 68-92.

- 🎞️ *Sarah and Son* (Dorothy Arzner, 1930), 86 min. **Film Review due next week.**

Optional:

- 📖 Baron, Cynthia. "‘Tales of Sound and Fury’ Reconsidered: Melodrama as a System of Punctuation". *Spectator* 13.2 (1992): 45-59.
- 🎞️ *East Lynne* (Frank Lloyd, 1931).

WEEK 5 Film Review of *Sarah and Son* due today

Imagining the Nation I

- 📖 Williams, Linda. Preface, Introduction and Chapter 1 "The American Melodramatic Mode". *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002. Xiii – 44.
- 🎞️ *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920), 79 min.

Optional:

- 📖 Green, Ronald. Chapter 1 "Micheaux v. Griffith". *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.

MODULE 2 Classical Hollywood

WEEK 6

Imagining the Nation II

Because of its length, it will not be possible to watch Gone With the Wind during class time. I strongly recommend that you watch the film on your own before class. We will try to organize a group screening.

- 📖 Williams, Linda. Chapter 5 "Rewriting the Plantation Legend: Scarlett ‘Totes a Weary Load’". *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002. 197-219.
- 🎞️ Recommended: *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), 238 min.

Optional:

- 📖 deWaard, Andrew. "The Geography of Melodrama, the Melodrama of Geography: The ‘Hood Film’'s Spatial Pathos". *Cinephile* 4. <http://cinephile.ca/archives/volume-4-post-genre/the-geography-of-melodrama-the-melodrama-of-geography-the-hood-films-spatial-pathos/>

WEEK 7

Maternal Melodrama II

- 📖 Doane, Mary Anne. "The Woman's Film: Possession and Address". *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 1987. 293-98.
- 📖 Doane, Mary Ann. "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal," *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit:

Wayne State UP, 1992. 283-306

- 🎞️ *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), 111 min.

Optional:

- 📖 Neale, Steve. Chapter 5 "Melodrama and the Women's Film". *Genre and Hollywood*, New York: Routledge, 2000. 168-193.
- 📖 Kaplan, E. Ann. "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*". *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 126-136.
- 📖 Williams, Linda. "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama". *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 2-27.
- 🎞️ *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937).

WEEK 8

Postwar Angst

- 📖 Rodowick, David N. "Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s". *Home is where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: BFI, 1987. 268-280.
- 🎞️ *The Cobweb* (Vincente Minnelli, 1955), 124 min. **Formal Analysis due next week.**

Optional:

- 📖 Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. "Minnelli and Melodrama". *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992. 268-274.
- 📖 Haralovich, Mary Beth. "*All That Heaven Allows*: Color, Narrative Space and Melodrama". *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*. Ed. Peter Lehman. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990. 57-72.
- 🎞️ *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956).

WEEK 9

Formal Analysis of *The Cobweb* due today

Japan — Mizoguchi

- 📖 Russell, Catherine. "Insides and Outsides: Cross-Cultural Criticism and Japanese Film Melodrama". *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*. Ed. Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 143-154.
- 🎞️ *Street of Shame* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1956), 87 min.

MODULE 3 Melodrama in the 1970s and Beyond

WEEK 10

Germany — Fassbinder

- 📖 Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revised," In *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory* Ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 42-88.
- 📖 Paul Thomas, "Fassbinder: The Poetry of the Inarticulate," *Film Quarterly*, 30. 2 (Winter, 1976-1977): 2-17.
- 🎞️ *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (Reiner Werner Fassbinder, 1974), 94 min.

Critical Analysis due next week.

Optional:

- 📖 McCormick, Ruth, "Fassbinder's: Reality: An Imitation of Life". *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992. 578-585.

WEEK 11 **Critical Analysis of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* due today**

"All Male": Victims, Suffering, and the Body

- 📖 Gallagher, Mark. "I Married Rambo': Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film". *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*. Ed. Chris Sharrett. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999. 199-225.
- 📖 Fradley, Martin. "Maximus Melodramaticus: Masculinity, Masochism and White Male Paranoia in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema". *Action and Adventure Cinema*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2004. 235-251.
- 🎬 *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976), 119 min.

Optional:

- 📖 Willis, Sharon. "Mutilated Masculinities and their Prostheses: Die Hards and Lethal Weapons". *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 27-59.
- 📖 Cook. Pam. "Masculinity in Crisis? Raging Bull". *Screen* 23.3-4 (1982): 39-46.

WEEK 12 **Term Paper Due Today**

Queer(ing) Melodrama

- 📖 Needham, Gary. "A Pathetic State of Affairs: *Brokeback Mountain* and Melodrama". *Brokeback Mountain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010. 79-94.
- 📖 Pidduck, Julianne. "The Times of *The Hours*: Queer Melodrama and the Dilemma of Marriage". *Camera Obscura* 28 (1.82) (2013): 37-67.
- 🎬 *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), 134 min.

Optional:

- 🎬 *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002)
- 🎬 *Mommy* (Xavier Dolan, 2014)

WEEK 13

Post-modernity—Homages and Remakes

- 📖 Joyrich, Lynn. "Written on the Screen: Mediation and Immersion in *Far From Heaven*," *Camera Obscura* 19(3 57) (2004): 187-219.
- 📖 Willis, Sharon. "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk". *Camera Obscura* 18.3 (2003): 131-175.
- 🎬 *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002), 107 min.

Additional Resources:

- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New York : Columbia UP, 1985.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Cawelti, John. "The Evolution of Social Melodrama". *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991. 33-49.
- Cook, Pam. "Melodramas and Women's Film". *Gainsborough Melodrama*. Ed. Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy. London: BFI, 1983. 14-28.
- Creed, Barbara. "The Position of Women in Hollywood Melodramas". *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 4 (1978): 27-31.
- Cunningham, Stuart. "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama". *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6.4 (1981): 347-364.
- Fletcher, J. "Melodrama: An Introduction". *Screen* 29.3 (1988): 2-12.
- Gillman, Susan. *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult, 1877-1915*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Gledhill, Christine. *Home is where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: BFI, 1987.
- Klinger, Barbara. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- Koszarski, Richard. *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Leider, Emily W. *Dark lover: the Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2004.
- Mercer, John and Martin Shingler. *Melodrama*. London: Wallflower, 2004.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama". *Visual and Other Pleasures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Melodrama In and Out of the Home". *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*. Ed. Colin MacCabe. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
- Neale, Steve. "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press." *Velvet Light Trap* 32 (1993): 66-89.
- Nemesvari, Richard. *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Shattuc, Jane. "Having a Good Cry Over *The Color Purple*: The Problem of Affect and Imperialism in Feminist Theory". *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*. Ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill. London: BFI, 1994.
- Singer, Ben. "Female Power in the Serial Queen Melodrama". *Camera Obscura* 22 (1990): 90-129.
- Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001.
- Thompson, Alan R. "Melodrama and Tragedy". *PMLA* 43 (1928): 810-835.
- Thompson, Kristin. "The Concept of Cinematic Excess". *Film Theory and*

- Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Willemsen, Paul. "Notes on the Sirkian System". *Screen* 12.2 (1971): 63-67.
- Whitney, Allison. "Race, Class, and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama: The Case of *Stella Dallas*". *Journal of Film and Video* 59.1 (2007): 3-18.
- Wood, Robin. "The Homosexual Subtext: *Raging Bull*". *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 15/16 (1983): 57-66.
- Zarzosa, Agustin. "Melodrama and the Modes of the World". *Discourse* 32.2 (Spring 2010): 236-255.
- Zarzosa, Agustin. *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013.

