



"Melodrama" comes from the Greek word *melos*, meaning song and originally denoted a stage play accompanied by music. According to the early nineteenth-century use of the term, melodrama meant a romantic and sentimental play that contained songs and music deemed appropriate for enhancing the situations presented on stage. It is generally believed that the French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau first used the term *melodrame* in this sense. "Pygmalion," with libretto by Rousseau, was first performed in Lyon in 1770, and is considered the first melodrama in the West. From France, the term spread to other European cultures. In later times, music ceased to be an integral part of melodrama, and the term came to signify a form of drama characterized by sensationalism, emotional intensity, hyperbole, strong action, violence, rhetorical excesses, moral polarities, brutal villainy and its ultimate elimination, and the triumph of good. The words melodrama and melodramatic, which were originally applied to stage plays, later came to be used to describe and evaluate aspects of literature and film.

Until very recent times, the term melodrama was used pejoratively to typify inferior works of art that subscribed to an aesthetic of hyperbole, and which were given to sensationalism and the crude manipulation of the audiences' emotions (Brooks 1976). However, the past fifteen years or so has seen a distinct rehabilitation of the term within film studies with the reexamination of such issues as the nature of representation in cinema and the role of ideology and female subjectivity in films. Melodrama is now primarily employed not as a term of derogation or disparagement but as a neutral term that characterizes certain genres of film. Many contemporary film scholars and critics have begun to explore the nature, structure, and significance of melodramas and the complex ways in which they draw spectators into the orbit of narration. Melodrama has come to be recognized as containing subversive potential for exposing bourgeois ideology and an enabling vision to map the dialectic between ideology and desire.

The objective of this short essay is to call attention to this terminological and evaluative metamorphosis and to underscore the importance of melodrama in our appreciation of Asian cinema. In this regard I wish to focus on what I think are three important aspects related to film and melodrama. The first is that melodrama tends to give prominence to the experiences, emotions, and activities of women. Melodramas bring to the fore facets of women's experiences that are submerged in other genres and provide a forum for the expression of repressed feminine voices (Gledhill 1987). Melodramas may not have succeeded totally in breaking loose of the shackles of patriarchy, but they constitute an important moment in the development of the consciousness of women – hence the current interest in them by serious students of cinema.

Second, with the spread of postmodernist thinking, more and more film theorists and critics are abandoning the received categories of high art and low art, elitist aesthetics and popular entertainment, and are beginning to pay more attention to fundamental issues of representation, the role of ideology, and cultural construction. As a consequence, women's romances, crime thrillers, rock 'n' roll music, slasher films, comics, and television soap operas are receiving the kind of scrutiny that was once reserved for the canonized works of Eliot and Joyce and Kafka. Hence it is hardly surprising that melodramas, which form a vital segment of popular entertainment, should receive careful and sympathetic attention. A consequence has been the exposure of the complex and subtle working of ideology in melodramas and the cultural contradictions inherent in them. In works of art subscribing to a credo of realism, whether they be literature or film – and realism represents one stylistic antithesis of melodrama – the ubiquitous working of ideology is concealed and "naturalized." But melodramas, with their strong action, emotional intensities, and rhetorical excesses, assume an antirealistic orientation. The excesses and extremes in melodrama become signifiers of the alienation of their characters and useful openings through which we can discern the play of ideology.

Third, melodramas are important because of the ways they illuminate the deeper structures of diverse cultures. Thus far I have been discussing melodrama within the context of Western cultural discourse. But it is crucial to bear in mind that melodrama also constitutes an important area of creative expression in many Asian cultures. All cultural artifacts are products of specific histories and cultural formations, and melodramas exemplify in concrete ways the diverse casts of mind, shapes of emotion, vocabularies of expression, imaginative logics, and priorities of valuation of different cultures. Art in any society cannot be understood in aesthetic terms alone but needs to be related to other domains of social activity; concomitantly, melodramas

gain in depth and definition when examined in relation to the fabric of life and cultural contours of the society from which they emerge. By examining the processes of creation and modes of reception of film melodramas in different Asian countries, we can move closer to the cultural wellsprings of human creativity. Let us, for example, consider the notion of villainy, which is central to melodrama. The way this notion is conceptualized in Western melodramas is significantly different from the ways in which it is formulated in, say, the melodramas of Raj Kapoor (India) or Lino Brocka (Philippines). In most Asian societies melodrama has a distinguished history considerably different from its history in the West and is intimately linked to myth, ritual, religious practices, and ceremonies. In this regard, it is well to remember the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who observed that it is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of culture, is possible, and a theory of art is therefore simultaneously a theory of culture (Geertz 1983). The implications of this observation for the cross-cultural study of melodrama are profound and far-reaching.

Although we may use the term melodrama to characterize some types of Asian cinema, it is well to remind ourselves that none of the Asian languages has a synonym for this word. Such terms as we find in modern usage are recent coinages based on the English word. For example, in many of the South Asian languages terms such as *bhavathishaya natya* (drama with excessive emotion) and *adbhuta rasa pradhana sukhanta nataka* (dramas with happy endings in which the emotion of strangeness is uppermost), which are used to designate the term melodrama, are clearly of recent vintage. Classical India possessed a very rich dramatic literature, much of which could be categorized as melodrama. Some of the theoretical treatises composed on drama that were in India are among the finest in the world, but the concept of melodrama does not figure in them. Ancient scholars categorized drama into ten groups based on the structure of the drama, the nature of the protagonist, and the character of the aesthetic emotion generated. The idea of melodrama as we currently understand the term seems to cut across and pervade all ten types of drama.

Although there is no term for melodrama in the classical vocabularies, Asian scholars and critics of cinema are increasingly using this Western term to effect finer discriminations. As a consequence of the impact of the West, literature, drama, and cinema (which is directly an outgrowth of Western influence) have undergone profound transformations. Consequently, newer discriminations need to be made in relation to genre, experience, and sensibility, and the concept of melodrama is proving handy. As we seek to employ this term for con-

ceptual clarification, we need to constantly keep in mind that melodrama in Asia connotes different sets of associations from those obtaining in the West.

For example, the concept of suffering is pivotal to the discourse of film melodrama in Asian cultures. We need to bear in mind the fact that most Asian cultures valorize human suffering as a pervasive fact of life and that salvation is a liberatory experience emanating from the insights into the nature and ineluctability of human suffering. Hence the metaphysical understanding of suffering becomes the condition of possibility for participating in the meaning of life. Suffering and the ensuing pathos are commonly found in Western melodrama as well; however, their place in and significance to Asian film melodramas are considerably different (Dissanayake and Sahai 1991).

In Asian melodrama, as in Western melodrama, the family figures very prominently. However, there are significant differences regarding the presuppositions of family as they are thematized in Asian melodramas. In Western melodramas, by and large, it is the individual in the context of the family that is of interest to the filmmaker, whereas in Asian melodrama it is the family as a unit that generates the most interest. To phrase it differently, in Western melodramas it is the individual self in relation to family that is explored, whereas in Asian melodramas it is the familial self that is the focus of interest.

A study of melodrama in relation to Asian cinema enables us to understand better the dynamics of modernization taking place in Asia. It helps us to appreciate some vital dimensions of social modernization in terms of cultural differences. As a consequence, the dialectic between social existence and cultural production gains in depth and definition. For example, Paul Willemsen, in his insightful analysis in this volume of the popular Indian melodrama, *Andaz*, argues that the film presents the tensions and contradictions involved in the adoption of precapitalist social relations to a capitalist environment, while “forgetting” that the Indian bourgeoisie is itself a colonial legacy.

An examination of the ways that culturally determined icons and symbols, music and dance, organization of space and time, and so on figure in Asian melodrama serves to deepen our understanding of the interplay of social relations and cultural production in diverse societies and lifeworlds. Moreover, the mechanisms through which audiences construct subjectivities vis-à-vis melodramatic film summon up deep-seated cultural psychologies. Both in Western and Asian melodramas, questions of interpersonal relations, moral meanings, and the workings of good and evil are depicted in accordance with a poetics of hyperbole. However, the ways these are portrayed in the respective cinemas, the diverse ways they are framed and textually produced, illuminate underlying cultural differences. For example, as Peter Brooks

points out, the characters in melodrama generally assume essential psychic features of father, mother, and child (Brooks 1976). The way these characters are depicted in Indian melodramas has the distinct cultural imprint of Indian society and tradition.

Asian melodramas represent a confluence of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western sensibilities, voices of past and present. Cinema as an art form was introduced to Asia from the West but was very quickly indigenized (Dissanayake 1988). For example, Indian film melodramas deploy a creatively invigorating interplay among Western form, classical Indian theater, folk plays, and the more modern Parsi theater. To understand the cultural discourse surrounding Asian melodrama, one has to understand the significance of such sedimentations. The essays gathered in this volume further such a project. Films are cultural expressions in which the artistic, industrial, technological, economic, and political dimensions are inextricably linked. When analyzing films, whether they be comedies or melodramas or any other genre, historical context, political imagination, theoretical method, and textural analysis should come into a productive union, as the essays in this volume exemplify.

The essay by E. Ann Kaplan deals with questions of subjectivity and ideology and the relevance of theories of Western melodrama to modern Chinese cinema. In her chapter, Kaplan examines four Chinese films in relation to the problems posed by cross-cultural analysis. The challenge, as she sees it, is to undertake cross-cultural research in ways that avoid defamiliarizing the foreign text, appropriating it, subordinating it to the Western discourses, or domesticating it into dominant Western theoretical paradigms. Hence, this essay sets the stage for the ensuing chapters.

In the next essay, Ma Ning examines Chinese family melodrama of the early 1980s against the conceptual backdrop of symbolic representation and symbolic violence. In view of the fact that family holds such a position of centrality in Chinese society, it is not surprising that family melodrama is one of the most pervasive and powerful forms of symbolic expression in China. Ma Ning indicates how, given the vital interface between politics and aesthetics in socialist countries, the Chinese family melodrama, which constitutes a significant form of social representation, responded promptly to the vital changes in Communist Party policies. The essay goes on to point out how the films' adoption of traditionally Chinese modes of perception and a patriarchal logic that both informs and conditions the viewers' understanding of social realities prepare the viewer/subject for social change even as the asymmetrical power relations of domination and exploitation are perpetuated.

The essay by William Rothman deals with the Chinese film *The*

Goddess, made in the 1930s. The author makes a convincing case for the need to reexamine this outstanding film, which he claims is worthy of comparison with the greatest American, French, Soviet, German, or Japanese silent films. In comparing and contrasting *The Goddess* with American film melodramas as exemplified by *Blonde Venus*, the essay attempts to grasp what, if anything, is specifically "Chinese" about this film.

The next essay, by Yuejin Wang, one of the longest in the collection, deals with melodrama as historical understanding. The author is of the conviction that history and melodrama seek to create and recreate the other after its own image, to fashion the other into a simulacrum of itself. He explores this thesis by comparing Chinese and Western films in relation to Chinese history and to modern theories of art and culture.

In his essay, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto discusses melodrama, postmodernism, and Japanese cinema. Pointing out that a purely formal investigation of melodrama in the postwar Japanese cinema offers few useful insights, he advocates the necessity of examining melodrama against the background of social and political changes. Moreover, he asserts that, although the studies of Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s are important, they cannot be taken as a direct model for the analysis of the melodramatic form found in postwar Japanese cinema because of the clear divergences between the social and cultural matrixes that gave rise to them.

In the next essay, devoted to a discussion of Kon Ichikawa's film, *An Actor's Revenge*, Scott Nygren considers the film as the site of contestatory discourses of power and gender identification precipitated by a play of seemingly contradictory theatrical and cinematic styles. He argues that the film foregrounds melodrama as a style that uneasily pivots between traditional Kabuki theater and Western cinematic realism, and analyzes implications of this fact on gender relationships as portrayed in the film.

Catherine Russell's essay focuses on the melodramas of Ozu and Mizoguchi, arguing that Japanese ethnography has a particular ideological cast and that there is an identifiable melodramatic structure to the Japanese notion of national identity.

Maureen Turim, in "Psyches, ideologies and melodrama: The United States and Japan," compares the ways in which the Americans and Japanese have assimilated an originally European melodramatic tradition.

In the first of the book's two essays on Indian melodramas, Paul Willemen analyzes the film *Andaz*. Willemen's essay underlines the urgency of considering the different ways that what is designated as melodrama operates within Western and non-Western social forma-

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tions and historicities. In the second, Wimal Dissanayake discusses the concepts of evil and social order and how they constitute an evolving dialectic within three of the most popular films ever made in India.

The next essay in the volume, by Krishna Sen, addresses the politics of melodrama in Indonesian cinema. Like many of the chapters, Sen's calls attention to significant similarities and dissimilarities between Hollywood and Asian melodramas. She makes the point that in the 1970s there was a significant shift in Indonesian cinema away from a predominantly historical and nationalist textural structure and that this shift can partially be explained by the social and political transformations that took place during this period. She goes on to examine the concrete interplay between politics and film melodrama in Indonesia.

From Indonesia we move to the neighboring Philippines. In their chapter titled "Power, pleasure, and desire: The female body in Filipino melodrama," Teresita A. Herrera and Wimal Dissanayake demonstrate the close relation, in Filipino film melodramas, between the symbolic constitution of womanhood in the filmic enunciation and the films' discourse on the human body.

The next essay is on Australian melodrama. Culturally speaking, Australia is not an Asian country. However, no doubt spurred by the influx of Asian immigrants, Australian culture has made strenuous efforts to identify with Asia. In "The register of nightmare: Melodrama as it disappears in Australian film," Susan Dermody introduces us to the complex world of Australian melodrama. Admitting to the ambivalence initially experienced by so many film scholars who seek to examine melodrama, the author finds herself lamenting that, although there are melodramatic aspects to almost all current Australian films and television programs, full-fledged melodramas are comparatively rare in Australian culture.

Concluding the volume is an "Overview" by William Rothman, which attempts to put Western film study's recent embrace of Asian cinema – as witnessed by the present collection of essays – into historical perspective, and provocatively addresses the question of whether, in embracing Asian cinema the way it has done, the field has adequately acknowledged specifically Asian ways of thinking.

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CHAPTER II
**Melodrama / subjectivity /
 ideology: Western
 melodrama theories and
 their relevance to recent
 Chinese cinema**
E. Ann Kaplan

As I have argued elsewhere (Kaplan 1989), cross-cultural analysis is difficult: It is fraught with danger. We are either forced to read works produced by the Other through the constraints of our own frameworks/theories/ideologies; or to adopt what we believe to be the position of the Other – to submerge our position in that of the imagined Other. Yet, cross-cultural work appears increasingly essential in an era when secure national identities are being eroded in the wake of multiple immigrations and other boundary confusions. The challenge is to undertake cross-cultural research in ways that avoid defamiliarizing the alien text, appropriating or “managing” it, with the result of making it subordinate to the imaginary Western “master” discourses; or, worse still, “domesticating” it into dominant Western critical paradigms (see Zhang n.d.). Arguably, since all texts conceal their multiple and shifting meanings, it is conceivable that cross-cultural work (from many directions, incidentally: North American–Chinese interchange represents only two of the desirable exchanges) might uncover strands of a text’s multiple meanings different from those found by critics in the originating culture.

I hope to contribute to theories of cross-cultural analysis through the limited project of seeing how far certain European and North American theories of melodrama may illuminate select Chinese films of the 1980s. I cannot pretend to a knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and history it would take years to gain: The aim is to get close to some alien texts rather than leaving them “over there” by seeing what understandings can emerge from entering such texts via theories developed for reading films in my own culture. The hoped-for end is mutually beneficial intercultural exchange, if anything like that is possible given the obvious differential between China and America as world powers.

Texts from a culture other than the critic’s may be approached using one of two main kinds of discourse, that is, aesthetic and political. The aesthetic discourse may take two forms, either humanist/individu-

alist or focused on genre. The political discourse may take many forms, including economic, ideological, and institutional concerns. The danger of the first approach, used alone, is eliding the specificity of cultural differences under a universalizing, humanist discourse which then masks oppressive, intercultural relations (e.g., colonialism, hierarchical power relations based on class, sex, and race). The danger of the second approach is eliding the specificity of the level of representation, subjectivity, the cultural imaginary.

In order to avoid the dangers inherent in either approach used alone, I here attempt to combine an aesthetic *genre* approach, focusing on how *subjectivity* is represented (but avoiding humanist/individualist traps), with attention to political/economic/ideological discourses, which focus on why certain representations emerge at a specific time, on whose possible interests specific images serve, on the institutional constraints on image production.

I have chosen melodrama as the most suitable genre for illuminating select Chinese films of the 1980s, for bringing them "close." This genre's theoretical parameters, as these have been worked out in European/North American¹ literary and film research, seem to best suit the sphere in representation occupied by the Chinese films I discuss. This sphere may loosely be called that of the "domestic," entailing the level of love/sex, marriage/motherhood, jealousy, loss, murder or other violence; infidelity, preoedipal/oedipal relations. Other qualities have to do with (a) exaggeration/excess; (b) allegorical or stereotypical good versus evil forces; (c) the individual shown as at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control – that seem to waft the figure in directions he or she did not produce. Significantly, dramas (or other forms with such features) are to be found in early modes in many nations, including China: Often, these modes (like the Chinese opera) involve the use of standardized makeup, which literalizes what became less obvious in much Western melodrama – namely, precisely melodrama's interest in fixed types representing generalized emotions and situations. They also literalize (through circus, folk, and song elements) the retention of the popular, again hidden in late Western melodrama.

The two melodrama discourses can be distinguished. The first aesthetic melodrama discourse is mainly interested in the cultural repression of unconscious desire (sexual, oedipal), whereas the second political one concerns repressed social prohibitions to do with, in particular, class and race. Both theories rely on a notion of melodrama fulfilling a function of expressing what cannot be said; or, in Gledhill's (1987, 38) words, acknowledging "demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse." But theories differ in whether they are concerned with repression within the human individual (implying a humanist perspective), or within the "self" now