

Melodrama as a genre



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In his essay 'Melodrama and Tears', Steve Neale proposes the melodrama as a genre emerged to occupy the space between tragedy and comedy. Neale quotes Denis Diderot and identifies melodrama as a primarily 'touching' art form, which has the ability to move audiences and induce physical reactions like crying. Neale discusses Diderot's quote 'the pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears' as an important part of the melodramatic mode. Neale continues to illustrate in his essay how the tricks used in showing point of view and timing perform an essential role in achieving maximum pathos in melodrama.

Neale argues that the melodramas rely on the discrepancies between the knowledge that the spectator has and knowledge that the character has, to achieve maximum dramatic potential. This is also a way for the spectators to be more involved with the story, as they are now in a position of power. They hold the code that could possibly unlock the mystery and cause events to happen. The spectator's awareness of this power and the resulting helplessness they feel with their actual inability to influence the events unfolding on screen is what drives the pathos.

A fairly neutral scene in *Awaara*(1951), of the Judge meeting a stranger at a birthday party is heightened by our knowledge that the characters share a father-son bond, unknown to either of them. Neale also points out the optical point of view method of using eye line match to establish character's emotions. *The Best Years of Our Lives*(1946), uses this to let the audience know that Fred and Peggy still have feelings for each other. As Homer and Wilma stand at the altar and get married, we see Fred and Peggy gazing at each other and hearing the words of commitment spoken by the priest.

They maintain their gaze without breaking, till they finally embrace and profess their love to each other. Linda Williams' also acknowledges the feeling of helplessness, by giving us an example of her seven year old son's reluctance to watch melodrama. Williams' articulates her son's disgust at the 'unseemly emotions that remind him a little too acutely of his own powerlessness as a child'. The term 'unseemly emotions' is the code for what Williams calls the 'excesses' of cinema. She compares melodrama to pornography and horror cinema; by stating that here naked emotions replace the naked bodies and extreme violence in the other genres.

She defines melodrama as encompassing a range of films 'marked by "lapses" in realism, by "excesses" of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions and narrative that seem circular and repetitive'. Both Williams and Neale define the unrealistic nature of the narrative as a fundamental element of melodrama. Neale points out that melodramatic narration relies heavily on events not being defined through a realist standpoint, but more dependent on chance encounters and coincidences. The generic verisimilitude of melodrama tends to be marked by the extent to which the succession and course of events is unmotivated (or undermotivated) from a realist point of view. "He calls this 'an excess of effect over cause', arguing that this phenomenon assigns power to the theory of an external force governing the story. As the all-knowing spectator, some of this power flows to us too, causing our illusion of being able to affect the situation. This makes the lack of our ability to influence the story even more poignant, resulting in our feeling of vulnerability.

According to Williams, it is the audience's involvement with the physical display of emotion on the screen that causes the pathos. Williams argues that the female spectacle of the body is offered as a sensational sight in different genres. The horror genre uses terror, pornography uses orgasm, and melodrama uses crying to portray an excess of emotion. She theorizes that our tendency to imitate the emotion on screen lends the element of pathos to melodrama. The act of a body, not in control, convulsing with tears lends itself to heightened identification by the audience.

Both Neale and Williams demonstrate the concept of timing as an effective method to control pathos in melodrama. Neale attributes timing and articulation of point of view to contribute equally to the effect of poignancy and pathos. Neale presents Moretti's thesis that the concluding act in the cinema is always too late to affect the protagonist. An example for this point maybe a story where the object of affection might only verbally reciprocate the feeling after the character is dead; while we, as the audience know it beforehand.

Moretti also presents the theory that our tears are a result of the reality that our fantasy has been fulfilled and now will not continue. Neale counters this argument by suggesting that delayed timing is equally poignant in some cases. The pathos arises from the fact that we are dependent on the time of the narration and its narrative, rather than just the fact that it is always 'too late'. Here, Williams is almost identical in her theory and uses the phrase 'too late' to define the temporality of fantasy.

Williams also speaks about Moretti's theory and argues that the once the pursuit is over, there is a sense of melancholic loss that the audience

experiences. She evokes the Freudian concept of 'original fantasy' to define what the character's are in pursuit of. The enigma frequently occurred during melodrama is "'solved" by the fantasy of family romance, or return to origins'. Although Williams and Neale take different approaches to defining the melodramatic sensibility, they both do find a common ground in what forms pathos on the screen.

There are finer points to be examined in both the essays but a general view points to the spectator's feeling of helplessness and the crucial element of timing as being very important contributions to the dramatic element of melodrama.

Neale, Steve. "Melodrama and Tears." *Screen* 27 (November-December 1986): 6-22. Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly*, Published by University of California Press 44. 4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.