Although a great deal has been written in recent years about film melodrama, there has been little attempt to theorise it. To do this, it seems necessary to take into account the history of the melodramatic form, which evolved as a popular dramatic genre in the late eighteenth century and which then dominated nineteenth century theatre. Thomas Elsaesser’s seminal essay ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’ in Monogram 4 (an issue devoted to melodrama) sketches in the main lines of the complex set of determinants which contributed to the evolution of the form. Whilst I am much indebted to the article, particularly for its insights into the family/small-town melodrama, my concern here is with a wider notion of melodrama and is more generic-thematic: I shall take the ingredients (structures, characters, themes, motifs, etc) of traditional popular melodrama as a starting point from which to explore the melodramatic tradition in the American cinema.

The most useful short account of theatrical melodrama I have found is James Smith’s monograph ‘Melodrama’ (1973, No 28, in the Methuen Critical Idiom series; it contains a valuable bibliography). A more detailed account and a historical perspective is provided by Frank Rajli’s ‘The World of Melodrama’ (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), which traces the evolution of stage melodrama in France, England and the US. Such accounts of melodrama stress its vitality, richness, range and popularity. Even Allardyce Nicoll in ‘World Drama’ (Harap, 2nd edition, 1976), although writing within the Anglo-Saxon critical tradition of the inherent inferiority of melodrama, cannot but acknowledge its significance for more respectable drama: ‘it is not too much to say that the line of development towards Ibsen proceeds from the fount of melodrama’ (p 364). And, just as it now seems irresponsible to avoid serious consideration of such a vital form of popular culture on the grounds that ‘it isn’t art’, the common practice of film critics (see for example ‘Dossier on Melodrama’ Screen, Summer 1977) of ignoring the history of the form and simply concentrating on certain films of Ophuls, Sirk, Minnelli, Ray et al as melodramas seems too convenient a let-out. Melodrama is arguably the most important generic root of the American cinema. But until it has been located more theoretically as both a dramatic structure and a historical form, our grasp of its relevance will remain restricted and confused.

Tragedy and Melodrama

A theoretical approach to melodrama has been proposed by Robert Heilman in his books ‘Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience’ (University of Washington Press, 1968) and ‘The Iceman, The Arsonist and The Troubled Agent’ (Allen & Unwin, 1973). In her article on Sirk and melodrama in Movie 28, Laura Mulvey actually alludes to Heilman’s ideas. Whilst it becomes necessary, in the light of the evolution of the melodramatic form in the American cinema (Heilman restricts himself to the theatre), to refine Heilman’s model, it is a useful starting point. His model proposes that tragedy and melodrama be viewed as two alternative structures, determined by different kinds of ‘dividedness’ (dramatic conflict). In tragedy, man is divided, torn between conflicting values and desires. In Meredith’s words, ‘We are betrayed by what is false within’—tragedy has no need of villains; it is the forces within himself with which the hero must grapple. In melodrama, however, it is the world that is divided—between good and evil, weak and strong, oppressed and oppressors. The hero of melodrama is himself divided: unconflicted, ‘whole’, free from the tensions of choosing between conflicting loyalties, imperatives or desires. The forces with which such a hero must grapple are external: oppression, corruption, villainy in general, ‘natural’ disasters.

Elaborating on these basic alternatives, Heilman writes that in tragedy there is ‘freedom, choice, acceptance of guilt, tensions that pull men in opposite ways...’, whilst in melodrama ‘the inclusiveness of personality, a sense of the ambiguity and contradicorion in reality (of the good-and-evil in values and character): in sum, a fundamental complexity and a concern with the ordering of the self.’ Hubris and self-knowledge are subsequently added to these character-istics. But in the divided world of melodrama, there is a sense of innocence rather than guilt: ‘sometimes we need the innocence, weakness, inadequacy, deprivation, grievance; sometimes... by the spirit of blame and indignation, the finding of scapegoats and the punishing of the guilty: in sum, a concern with ordering the world.’ In ‘one of [these forms] we see evil as coexisting with good (Leur, Macbeth) and we contemplate it through the eyes of a doer with whom we are identified in the capacity for choice (of good or evil) and knowledge and self-judgment; in the other we see evil as independent, as out there, as a disaster (Richard III, Nazis, earthquakes, epidemics) that we contemplate from the vantage point of innocence, whether we simply suffer from it or actively contend against it. The latter is the realm which, because of its internal diversities, has not been known by an inclusive term (as it comprises aspects of both ‘tragedy’, ‘drama’, ‘serious play’, ‘problem play’, ‘propaganda play’, ‘naturalistic tragedy’ and... even of ‘romance’) but for which melodrama is the rational designation.’ (The Iceman, p 28)

The advantages of Heilman’s model are i) its re-habilitation of the term melodrama: he insists that it refers to a structure, and has no qualitative overtones (neglect of structure obviously permitted the move to a greater complexity of character), ii) the insight it provides into the two forms, each relating to distinctive patterns of experience/ways of experiencing and hence, in the work, two types of structure, two ways of structuring ‘the world’, iii) the insight it provides into the works themselves. The forms, as Heilman characterises them, describe structuring patterns/tendencies with which melodrama deals that should be applied to a filmic work only if one of the forms can be shown to dominate. The forms ‘are often found in the same play; there is a sense in which they may compete for the play... But if we are to understand the generic mode that mainly organises a play—or even the doubleness or irresoluteness in a play’s interpretative angle of vision—then we need first to look at the pure forms of the elements’ (Iceman, p 29). At the same time, the model, whilst fitting the ‘standard’ tragedies and melodramas, in recasting plays such as ‘Richard III’ and ‘Romeo and Juliet’ as melodramas, enables one to make more sense of them dramatically than was possible with traditional, untheorised views of them as ‘tragedies’.

Accepting that the model requires some refinement (as Heilman admits), say, Hollywood melodramas, in which the characters are frequently ‘divided’, it nevertheless has a more problematic weakness. Its purging of such notions as ‘tragic’ and ‘tragedy’, as having some sort of primitive reaction to something deep is double-edged. One gains in terms of precision (whereas, traditionally, one man’s tragedy could be another man’s melodrama) but this could diminish our sense of what is ‘tragic’. The ‘tragic’ sense of a structure has—despite acute difficulties in being precise about it—an undeniable significance for drama, as writers from Aristotle onwards have acknowledged. But, for Heilman, the model necessarily mediates the structure of feeling. Whereas, according to the model, only characters with the ability to gain moral self-awareness can properly be described as tragic, we might feel as tragic the inability of a character to gain such self-awareness: for example, as Robin Wood has pointed out to me, Hammond in the final scene of Mandingo.

Whilst this potential split between ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic feeling’ raises problems too wide to be considered here, with melodramas there are fewer problems. Our sense of ‘the melodramatic’ derives primarily from the features of the eighteenth and nineteenth century plays commonly referred to as melodramas, and these readily fit Heilman’s model, as James Smith, who utilises Heilman’s concepts, demonstrates. Heilman himself, anxious neither to preserve the neutrality of the term melodrama, tends to disparage such works as ‘“popular melodrama”, which implies a stereotyped and subservant standard of a form capable of better things’ (The Iceman, p 23). But, within popular theatrical melodrama, there was a great range of quality, as Rahul shows.

And the cinema was fed by the whole of the nineteenth century theatrical and literary, including such respected literary works as the novels of Dickens, Hugo and Hawthorne. Investigation of the melodramatic tradition in the American cinema is not a job for the ‘appropriation of melodrama’ by early filmmakers. In discussing this, and the ways in which the tradition subsequently evolved, I shall keep to Heilman’s structural approach. Though Heilman’s model may not be immediately appropriate, such modifications as seem necessary to sustain its usefulness. I shall also introduce other models to supplement Heilman’s at points where they seem to contribute to a fuller understanding of the ways in which melodrama functions in the American cinema.

Melodrama and the Silent Cinema: D. W. Griffith

One can see this appropriation of melodrama especially in the works of Griffith: indeed, The Birth of a Nation (1921), Way Down East (1920) and Orphans of the Storm (1921) were adapted from theatrical melodramas, the last with ‘additional material’ from Dickens’s ‘A Tale of Two Cities’. But all Griffith’s films—like the vast majority of silent movies—display the typical features and forms of traditional melodramas, and less so of melodramas in the Heilman sense and others. Looking at Griffith’s movies thus enables us to characterise many of these features, although my use of his films in particular is as much a reflection of my familiarity with them as a wish to place them in privileged position.

1) Characters: the patient, suffering heroine; the upright, but often somewhat ineffectual hero; the unscrupulous, scheming villains, usually with sexual
forces which impel them, the choices which confront them. Otherwise they remain characters of melodrama, acting 'blindly', to a greater or lesser extent at the mercy of the ideological forces, even when the consequences are not as drastic as it is in *Dream Street*, but simply oblige the characters to behave in certain ways. This is not to claim that tragedy is 'ideology-free' (how could it be?) but rather that the self-awareness of the tragic character brings with it a greater freedom from the constraints of the ideology (e.g. the freedom of choice), even though the options themselves may be ideologically determined.

The character-types of melodrama derive from a complex of sources: historical, ideological, mythical, psychoanalytical. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton Paperback, 1971), Northrop Frye writes: 'The romantic does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylised figures which expand into psychological archetypes. It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine and villain respectively' (p. 304). One cannot simply reappraise this formula to melodrama—primarily because the latter operates more in Frye's low mimetic mode, with a hero with considerably reduced powers—but melodrama preserves a similar archetypal quality of character, into which the classical Oedipal family relationships have also been projected. And, given a certain puritan ideology, sexuality is necessarily displaced from the pure hero and heroine on to the villain and vamp (hence the form of Spike's conversion) and this, together with other ideologically-loaded projections of feared 'otherness' (racial, class, religious, etc) effectively creates these character-types. But this sexuality, along with other villainous attributes such as ruthlessness and deceitfulness, regularly endows these characters with powers greater than the all-too-good hero and heroine. It is a clear measure of the ideological bias in Griffith's characters that only when the hero is enacting some ideological project dear to the director's heart—as in *The Birth of a Nation* and *America*—do we find a 'strong' hero. Most Griffith heroes are no match for the older, more powerfully built villains. Thus, since most melodrama ends with the defeat of the villain and/or villainess, the ultimate suppression of these greater powers—there is an ideological contradiction at the heart of the structures. (The equivalent contradiction in *Dream Street* is that the hero is 'strong' because he was originally the villain!) Conversions of the villain (equivalent conversions of the vamp are almost unthinkable, unless linked to her death: ideologically speaking, she is simply too dangerous) in the form of defusing his sexual powers, but, as Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer write in their useful primer of Hollywood's archetypes, cycles and genres, 'The Movies' (Spring Books, 1971) it is 'much more satisfying to shoot [him].' In any event, these character-types of melodrama clearly act as prototypes for the more complex characters which evolved in the 1920s. Even the vamp, the most aberrant and caricatured of these character-types, converts readily into the (less 'exotic', more 'natural') femme fatale. This whole area of transformation of archetypes is interestingly discussed in Edgar Morin's 'The Stars' (translated by R. Howard, Grove Press, 1960).

2) Structures, themes, motifs. In 'Aspects of Melodrama' in *Monogram 4*, David Morse lists a number of characteristics of traditional melodrama, citing tendencies towards a) privileging the hero and heroine, b) strong audience identification, c) ranking characters in terms of good and evil rather than class, d) climaxes for their own sake, e) spectacle, dramatic action, suspense sequences, f) the unmotivated, unprepared, unexpected and immediate and g) wish-fulfilment, which evades rather than resolves dramatic conflicts. With reservations (class is more significant to melodrama than Morse suggests; wish-fulfilment I discuss later), I would broadly accept these, and would like here to follow up Morse's suggestion that 'much of what we value in the American cinema today stems from this melodrama tradition in general and from Griffith's specific translation of it into the film medium.' Morse himself speaks of 'the immediacy of the relationship which an audience establishes with a star,' of the American cinema's 'readiness to risk strong, sentimental, even embarrassing scenes, to resort to and go beyond cliché. The American cinema has been heavily self-censored... yet it has been strangely uninhibited. For in the cinema, love, hate, grief, joy, eroticism, violence cease to be concepts and verbal encounters and become realities which the spectator must confront and reckon with.'

Whilst fully concuring with this line of argument, I believe it is also possible to be more specific about the significance for Hollywood of the achievements of Griffith and other major directors of the early years, such as DeMille, Sjöström, Stroheim. In the 'unashamed melodramas' of these directors, one finds that the way in which the melodramatic structures, sequences and moments are translated into film invests them with an intensity and power which makes them paradigms for future film-makers. This is not to claim that later film-makers necessarily saw and copied the great moments of the pioneers, but rather that these direcdors had the potential of melodrama that, to achieve similar effects, other film-makers necessarily followed similar lines.

Consider, for example, the sequences of climax and suspense in Griffith's movies which are centred on threats to the heroine: both the famous last-minute rescues and those extraordinary scenes of hysteria in which women go berserk, faint dead away (in *The Blot*, *The Woman from Monte Carlo*, *Intolerance*) and then March trying to keep her baby in *Intolerance*, 1916, Lillian Gish in the closet in *Broken Blossoms*, the street/balcony meeting of the adopted sisters in *Orphans of the Storm*), lose their reason (Lillian Gish wandering on the battlefield in *Hearts of the World*, 1918) or even commit suicide (Marx Fleecing from the Negro Gus to jump to her death in *The Birth of a Nation*). Andrew Sarris has pointed out the 'The American Cinema' (Dutton, 1968) that the bird-in-a-cage telephone-booze image in *The Birds* (1963)

Stills: D. W. Griffis’s *Dream Street*—Spike (Ralph Graves) and Gipsy Fair (Carol Dempster).
duplicates the way in which Griffith shows Lillian Gish in the closet. But a more instructive example is provided by the way in which the ending of *Cathy Come Home* (1966, UK) reprises Mae Marsh's helpless fight to keep her baby. Now, any scene in which an innocent young mother is forcibly deprived of her child(ren) is bound to be upsetting for an audience, and so the similarity would seem to be of limited interest. But there is a deeper, ideological structure which Griffith here, and Sjöström and Frances Marion in their equivalent scene in *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), clearly grasped, however intuitively. *Intolerance* and *Cathy Come Home* are both melodramas of protest (see later) and so it's important that the child(ren) are legitimate, that the husband is likewise a victim of the hostile society and that the child(ren) are actually removed from the mother's care. However, in the scene in *The Scarlet Letter* and its echo in *Johnny Belinda* (1948), where the attempts to remove the child are unsuccessful, a significantly different set of factors are brought into play. In these films, the child is illegitimate and the father is unknown to the society—but not, of course, to the mother—and he himself takes an active part (anti- and pro-replacement respectively) in the scene. And so we are not just concerned here with an indictment of an unjust, intolerant society, which the film of *The Scarlet Letter* views far more scathingly than Hawthorne's novel, but also with a (more challenging) view of male cowardice and duplicity, in which the woman vigorously triumphs.

An obvious inheritor of the Griffith tradition is John Ford, whose westerns and family/community films are steeped in melodrama. Yet Ford critics have scarcely recognised this. McBride and Wilmington in *'John Ford'* (Secker & Warburg, 1974) can, for example, write a long sympathetic article on *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953) and yet virtually ignore the central (melodramatic) plot of the return home of a 'fallen woman' seeking her lost daughter, and the latter's place in the 'classic' hero- heroine-villain configuration in the film. Andrew Sarris in *'The John Ford Movie Mystery'* (Secker & Warburg, 1976) actually has an aversion to the 'excesses' of melodrama—see his review of *Pilgrimage* (1933)—which perhaps accounts for his dismissing *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) on the grounds that it 'never recovers from Claudette Colbert's whining performance at the outset of her ordeal in the wilderness,' since this 'whining' (which is, rather, an expression of genuine fear and distress) follows on from a hysterical outburst of a frenzy and intensity no less extraordinary than those in Griffith. But, unless one comes to terms with what caused the outburst and its fearful aftermath, one is refusing to acknowledge a major factor in Ford's work. It is the result of the heroine's first encounter with an (in fact friendly) Indian, and its quality of sheer hysterical panic is the exact equivalent of Mae Marsh's when propitiously by Gus in *Birth of a Nation*, who, again pace Sarris, this time in an essay in *Focus on 'The Birth of a Nation'* (ed. Frank Silva, Prentice Hall, 1971), doesn't just want to talk, but says he wants to get married! Although Ford's Indian is 'friendly' (i.e. Christianised), the hysteria of his heroine is not presented as a comment on her but as an expression of the very real fears of women in the wilderness, no less so than the equivalent racial fear in Griffith's movie. *Drums along the Mohawk*, like Griffith's *America*, is a film about the War of Independence. Accordingly it is not surprising that its climactic sequence (the attack on the fort) is an almost exact repeat of the climax of *America*. And, in the ideological forces which are called into play in these climaxes (American against English/Tory; Christian against heathen; civilisation against savagery; white against Indian), the significance of the presence of the Indians—who, rather than the Tories, represent the real threat—cannot be overestimated. Just before the hero arrives with troops to the rescue, the Indians are seen 'manhandling' hysterical white women. Although Ford's racial attitudes are certainly far more ambivalent overall than Griffith's, such links emphasise how deep-rooted certain racialist assumptions are.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of the persistence of melodrama in Ford's films is to be found in the links between *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* (1956). One would expect films with a quest structure to have aspects in common, along the lines of the mythical structures analysed by Joseph Campbell in *'The Hero with a Thousand Faces'* (Abacus, 1975). But the links are more complex and detailed than this, to the extent that Ford's film actually seems to have been based structurally on Griffith's, with the climactic scene in which the adopted sisters meet, only to be torn apart again, being recreated in *Marty* and *Debbie* 's meeting in the desert. Yet it seems unlikely that Ford and Frank Nugent (the significant changes from Alan LeMay's novel all being the film of *The Searchers* closer to *Orphans of the Storm*) have performed such an

Still: D. W. Griffith's America—the Indians break into the fort.
operation, consciously at least. Accordingly, it would seem to be a task for a theory of melodrama to help elucidate such connections.

The fear of rape, or of the forcible separation from a loved one—clearly what is being expressed in the examples of 'female hysteria' are certain very basic fears. This immediately suggests that a psychoanalytical model may help in the analysis of such moments. It is notable that, in melodrama, rape is a greater fear than death, as the expression 'a fate worse than death' implies. And so it is not surprising that certain threats of death are 'reified' expressing the threat of rape. This is quite explicit in _Broken Blossoms_. After Burrows has smashed through the closet door with his axe (clear psychoanalytical imagery for rape), his beating to death of Lucy is filmed by Griffith as if it were a rape. Likewise, behind dozens of film murders of women during the Production Code years, one can discern the (necessarily suppressed) threat of rape as the underlying source of terror. The psychoanalytical significance of such fears has proved a contentious issue for feminists; see Juliet Mitchell's 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism' (_Penguin_, 1975). But the _prevalence_ of the fears is not in doubt, being clinically well attested.

Whilst the threats to the heroines are almost invariably elaborated into suspense sequences (as in the last minute rescues), the misfortunes that befall the heroes are often very sudden and shocking. Again, examples in Griffith's films have served as cinematic paradigms. In the Modern Story of _Intolerance_, the hero is falsely accused of murder—a standard melodramatic device. But the way in which this is sprung upon him is a marvellous example of dramatic construction and timing. The hero is (unsuccessfully) fighting the villain; suddenly the latter is shot and the gun thrown into the room. Disbelievingly, the hero picks up the gun (his own) and is thus caught in a three-fold evidential trap: with a motive, holding the murder weapon and standing over the body. Subsequent uses of the device are equally dramatic: an enraged Lory (Charles Laughton), determined to 'settle with' Lambert (George Sanders), bursting into the latter's office and virtually tripping over the body as the Nazis storm in behind him (_This Land is Mine_, 1943); Michael (Orson Welles) walking into the arms of the police bearing both gun and a signed confession as Grisby's (Glenn Anders') body is solemnly wheeled out (_The Lady from Shanghai_, 1946); Thorndyke plucking the knife out of Townsend's back in sheer incredulity as everyone gapes at him in _North by Northwest_ (1959). Each of these moments produces a complete dramatic switch: suddenly the hero has only two options—arrest for murder or flight. This underlines the strategic weakness of the device when used at the end of _Frenzy_ (1972). In terms of ingredients, the usage is inspired: having been framed by Rusk for the neck-tie murders, Blaney breaks out of jail to seek revenge and, arriving at Rusk's, proceeds to batter the figure in the bed, only to discover that it is the body of Rusk's latest victim—enter Inspector Oxford. But the moment is reduced to pure _frenzy_ as, seconds later, Rusk returns to be incriminated.

Other moments in Griffith's films which anticipate the highlights of future movies may be cited: friends/relatives, fighting on opposite sides, suddenly coming face to face on a battlefield (_Birth of a Nation_ repeated in _Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse_ (1921) and _Shenandoah_ (1965)—even the delirious 'meeting' of the hero and heroine on a battlefield in _Hearts of the World_ is echoed in an extraordinary sequence in _The Snows of Kilimanjaro_ (1952); tensions between the hero and the heroine's father exploding into violence which kills (_Broken Blossoms_ or _Mam'zelle Blanche jacquot_ the father repeated in _Home from the Hill_ (1960), _El Cid_ (1961) and _Missouri Breaks_ (1976). In seeking to explain the impact of all such moments relating to the hero, a psychoanalytical model is here particularly suggestive. In a psychoanalytical analysis of _North by Northwest_, Raymond Bellour (_Communications_ 23, summarised by Kari Hanet in _Edinburgh '76 Magazine_) argues that the film has an Oedipal narrative, with Townsend as a father-figure whom the hero apparently kills. Whilst not wishing to comment on the overall argument, I would like to focus on the hero feeling accused of the murder of Townsend. At first it looks suspect that Townsend can be seen as a father-figure; however, if we look at the other examples, it is striking that—with the exception of _Frenzy_—the dead characters are either a bad (sexually aggressive) father-figure (_Intolerance_) or sexual rivals in a narrative with fairly clear Oedipal overtones (_This Land is Mine_, _The Lady from Shanghai_), with the twist in the Welles that it is a death that enables the father-figure to exact a punitive revenge on the hero for his Oedipal transgression. So it would seem that part of the power of the syndrome does lie in buried Oedipal fears: of parricide or punishment. To demonstrate this convincingly would, of course, require detailed analysis, but it is notable that overtones of parricide are conspicuously less buried in the final examples above, complicated further, in these instances, by the at least implicitly incestuous father/daughter feelings.

Dramatic re-encounters are a favourite motif in melodrama; not just the reconnaissances discussed in Rahill (long-lost relatives/lovers finally being identified to one another) but equally the sudden, unexpected meeting of two people for whom the re-encounter is highly traumatic, such as the villain and someone he 'deeply wronged'. (Both represent melodramatic forms of Aristotle's discovery scenes.) A marvellous example occurs in _David Copperfield_ (1934), when Ham, swimming out to get a line to a wrecked ship, clammers aboard to come face to face...
with Steerforth, the man who ‘ran off with’ and then abandoned Emily, Ham’s sweetheart. In the renaissance, we see the operation of (usually) uncomplicated wish-fulfilment, but here there are brought into play a more complex set of impulses whose efficacy depends, I suggest, on the extent to which the re-encounter dramatises ‘the return of the repressed’. The David Copperfield example is powerful, not just because of the way it is handled, but also because it presents both men with a form of ‘the return of the repressed’, the confrontation arising structurally out of the recent trauma of Emily’s death. The first group of battlefield encounters has a similar structural-dramatic complexity. In particular, in the two Civil War examples, the characters experience not just the shock of seeing that an enemy is in fact a friend (underlining the ‘tragedy’ of civil war), but something more. In Shenandoah it is the fact that the encounter of the youngest son is with a young Negro friend from the family farm—in context, a racial return of the repressed, despite the film’s attempt to keep the family ‘innocent’ by insisting on its non-slave-owning ideology. In The Birth of a Nation, it is a shared death which Griffith handles erotically, suggesting a gay return of the repressed, the implications of the extensive earlier horseplay between the two friends surfacing at the moment of death.

The battlefield ‘reunion’ of hero and heroine in Hearts of the World is even more remarkable. Retrospectively, the sequence actually reads ‘like’ a dream: the heroine magically finds her sweetheart (wish-fulfilment) but believes him to be dead (her worst fears) and afterwards only partly remembers what happened. And the fact that she lies with him all night, her wedding dress wrapped around her—it was to have been their wedding night—adds a quite Bunuelian dimension. The reunion in The Snakes of Kilkisangaro is virtually ‘presented as’ wish-fulfilment: an injured Cynthia (Ava Gardner) prays for Harry (Gregory Peck) to find her; he does. And, in their subsequent separation, when Harry is shot in the leg by his own officer for attempting to go with her, we see an extraordinary expression of the military (the law) as a ‘castrating’ power.

The psychoanalytical model is here employed as a means of making sense of the effectiveness of certain melodramatic structures and motifs, on the assumption that much of their inherent power lies in the way they dramatise, however unconsciously, key psychoanalytical processes, such as the Oedipus complex or


‘the return of the repressed’. (See, for instance, Robin Wood’s ‘The Return of the Repressed’ in Film Comment July/August 1978, which argues that this process underpins and structures the whole of the horror genre. For a detailed application of this concept to a film, see my article on Black Narcissus in Framework 9.) The battlefield reunions are special examples, in which the ‘emotional logic’ of the films’ narratives can be likened to that of a dream, with the battlefield as the terrain of the unconscious. But the general rationale for the use of the psychoanalytical model is that melodrama can be aligned, not just with dreams (the simplest expression of which is in the oft-noted wish-fulfilment aspect of the form), but also, as a popular cultural form, with myths and folk-tales which have been fruitfully investigated along such lines. Moreover, melodrama has always worked to elicit an intense emotional response, along the lines specified by David Morse, which ‘opens a way’ for psychoanalysis.

3) Settings. Theatrical melodrama covered an enormous range of historical, geographical and cultural settings. But certain settings were evidently more dramatic than others. Stroheim’s films illustrate one general principle: that there is more dramatic potential in upper-class settings (opulence leading to intrigue, decadence and vice) and lower-class ones (poverty leading to suffering, crime and violence) than those of the middle classes, which rose to an equivalent prominence later, in the family/small-town melodramas. Griffith’s films, in some cases demonstrate the same principle (Broken Blossoms, Dream Street, Orphans), but tend rather to follow the spectacular tradition of melodrama: the narratives are set against a background of momentous historical events, massive conflicts and upheavals which are spectacularly recreated—the American Civil War (The Birth of a Nation), the Fall of Babylon and the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of the Huguenots (Intolerance), the First World War (Hearts of the World), the French Revolution (Orphans of the Storm), the War of Independence (America). But, whilst the opportunities for spectacle are fully exploited by Griffith, the crucial function of these background settings, as in all good melodrama, is to provide a succession of events which threaten, disrupt or violate the way of life, security or happiness of the central characters. And at the heart of the central characters we find ‘the family’: a network of family relationships whose ties dominate the character interaction. The family was, of course, an important ingredient of traditional melodrama, but Griffith reinforced its centrality. Thus The Birth of a Nation tells its story of the Civil War almost exclusively through the war’s impact on two families, one from the North, the other the South. But, of course, this very emphasis on the family introduces fundamental psychoanalytical and ideological tensions into the narrative which in turn provide much of the dramatic interest of this area of melodrama.

American film melodrama also took over the basic pastoral polarity between city and country: the former a place of violence and corruption, the latter of the Arcadian ‘good life’. It is a village community which is the chosen ideological material to represent the sufferings of a people at war in Hearts of the World, fusing the close small-scale community (families and friends) with the appropriate pastoral
images. (In the equivalent world of Drums along the Mohawk—frontier American—images of sheep are inserted into the narrative at appropriate moments purely to create a pastoral atmosphere, being otherwise disconnected from the diegetic world.) If a Griffith heroine goes to the city, she suffers some terrible villainy: seduction through a false wedding (Way Down East, abduction, bondage, imprisonment, etc. Orphans of the Storm). In other films, the city can of course be equally dangerous for a 'country boy': Sunrise (1927), Halley's (1929). As regards class, Griffith's films are archetypally bourgeois: the upper-class worlds (Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm) and the lower-class worlds (Broken Blossoms and again Orphans of the Storm) afford little but exploitation and misery for the suffering central characters who, when 'rewarded' with a happy end, tend to be placed firmly in an idealised middle-class, preferably upper-middle-class, setting (Way Down East, Dream Street, Orphans of the Storm). The villains likewise almost invariably come from the non-bourgeois classes, or, of course, are characterised racially. But silent film melodrama wasn't exclusively a 'bourgeois' form any more than theatrical melodrama had been, despite Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's assertions (Screen, Summer 1977). Melodrama should be seen rather as a structure, which can be applied to proletarian, bourgeois or upper-class dramas, each with their different settings, characters and ideological emphasis. In nineteenth century popular melodrama, as Frank Rahill shows, there was an honourable tradition of proletarian heroes, who may similarly be found in the silent cinema, e.g. in the films of Walsh, Vidor and Dwan.

4) Tone. Rahill stresses the moral preaching in melodrama as popularised by Pirexcourt: 'Preaching is scattered thick in the plays; and, as in drams, maxims occur on virtually every page' (p 64). I argue below that this 'preaching' tradition was incorporated in quite complex ways into later film melodrama, but Griffith's films seemingly continue the tradition quite openly—with their 'moral' inter-titles and quaintly instructive opening legends. Like their stage predecessors, the films seem designed to edify and instruct. However, it should be emphasised that the naivety of the inter-titles is frequently contradicted by the complexities of the visuals, which accordingly set up a resistance against such simplifying. Rahill also attempts a definition of melodrama (quoted in full in Smith) which concludes: 'It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished.' This is perhaps the conventional view of melodrama, but it doesn't really do justice to the complexities of tone in the works themselves. The peculiar fusion, in different combinations and/or rapid succession, of sentimentality, wistfulness, comedy, moral earnestness, pathos, passion, triumph, despair, high drama and sheer corn (a by no means comprehensive list) makes the tone of melodrama unusually difficult to 'catch' and respond to: indeed the high brow reaction (intellectual 'sophistication' tyrannising emotional response) commonly rejects these different textures to treat it all basically as comedy. But Rahill's description is also deficient in another respect, as he himself later acknowledges. Most melodramas may be optimistic, but melodramas can be highly pessimistic, with unhappy or even bitter endings, as in Broken Blossoms.

Triumph, Defeat, Protest

In this respect, James Smith, still working within Heilman's model of melodrama, has proposed some useful categories. He distinguishes between three groups: melodramas of triumph, defeat and protest. Melodramas of triumph end happily, 'with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished', e.g. Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm. But melodramas may end in defeat: usually with the death of the hero and/or heroine, e.g. also The Scarlet Letter (a film which actually follows through the 'logic' of the villain's superior strength). Smith characterises as melodramas of protest those which set out to attack established ideology, to expose injustice, to champion reform or even to incite revolution—the tradition, indeed, of protest theatre. This category merits further discussion, since it survives, its structures virtually unchanged, to the present day.

Of Griffith's films, Intolerance is of course the famous melodrama of protest, with its four parallel stories each designed to protest at 'man's inhumanity to man'. But it is The Birth of a Nation (particularly the second part) which is more instructive in this respect, and has had such an emotional effect on audiences throughout the film's history. In the second part, Griffith expresses his outrage at what he feels were the injustices of the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. The details of this, and the furore the film has caused, primarily as a result of its racism, are well documented (see Focus on "The Birth of a Nation"). Less investigated are the mechanisms whereby Griffith structures his 'protest'. In particular, he utilises one of the key melodramatic devices of melodramas of protest: the death of an innocent (here the 'little sister' played by Mae Marsh) which serves as a focus, a pretext, even a symbol (here she is explicitly a symbol of the Confederacy) to rouse 'the people' (here the Klub Klux Klam) to action.

The significance of this device may be gauged from its lineage. It is crucial to Battleship Potemkin (1925, USSR), Mrs Miniver (1942), This Land Is Mine, Roma Città Aperta (1945, Italy), Z (1968, France) and Blood of the Condor (1969, Bolivia)—all, whatever else may be said about them, melodramas of protest on the Smith/Heilman model. In these films, as in
The Birth of a Nation, the world depicted is completely polarised, and our sympathies are enlisted unequivocally with a group of people—defined by race, nationality, class or political creed—who are 'innocents', victims of persecution, exploitation or oppression. The oppressors/exploiters are usually heavily caricatured, like the German aviator in Mrs Miniver, the Nazis in Roma Città Aperta, the Americans in Blood of the Condor. Like all melodramas of protest, these films are in effect propaganda. They all use the death of the 'innocent', or, indeed, innocents (in Battle of the Sexes, both Vakulinchuk's daughter and the Odessa steps massacre are focal points) as an emotional device, to rouse not just the people in the film, but those in the audience as well.

Smith asserts that the melodrama of protest must end in triumph or defeat. In fact, none of the above sound films ends in either, but rather in affirming the determination to fight on. (Except, perhaps, Roma Città Aperta who, in common with the other World War II movies, has an uncharacteristically downbeat ending, although earlier in it, Pina's death is explicitly linked, via a dissolve, to a partisan uprising.) And so, to fuel this affirmation, the deaths tend to occur at the end: Mrs Miniver, This Land is Mine, Blood of the Condor. Even Preminger, a director noted for his 'ambiguity and objectivity' has used the device in its conventional form at the end of Exodus (1960), where it includes, for instance, virtually all the key elements of the final church scene of Mrs Miniver, and in a more complicated sense at the end of Hurry Sundown (1966). And, even though these two films do not show such a clear-cut, rhetorical view of the world as the others I have cited, in an important sense they, too, are melodramas of protest.

Perspective on the power and durability of the form may be gained from looking at two impressive recent examples, both TV series: Days of Hope (1975, UK) and Roots (1977). Roots, clearly, is a classic melodrama of protest: the twentieth century's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (according to Rahill 'the world's most successful melodrama'), with the necessary radical shift in the characterisation of the Negroes, and also, of course, a long-delayed 'answer' to Birth of a Nation. It employs, no less shamelessly than other melodramas of protest, exactly the same sort of emotional devices to put over its message; it relies crucially on 'the family' as its primary source of identification/continuity from episode to episode. When screened in the US in January 1977, it was a phenomenal success. Days of Hope is a marvellous example of the 'anglicisation' of the form. The structures are still essentially all there—even the focus on the family—but everything is muted. In the first episode of Roots, Kunta Kinte, captured by slave-traders, threshes around in chains in violent protest, but in the first episode of Days of Hope, Philip, a conscientious objector conscripted into the army, stoically endures the repeated punishments and humiliations. Unexpectedly, not one of the protagonists of Days of Hope dies. And, even though the series did not appear to catch the popular imagination to the extent of Roots, its unusual impact was nevertheless strongly felt at the time. In particular, there was agitation in right-wing circles at its showing, which led, as Colin McArthur observes in his BFI Monograph 'Television and History' (1976), to a special edition of Tonight which 'debated' the series' 'merits'. As with Roots, it seems probable that one can largely relate such an impact to the inherent emotional power which the form, when effectively articulated, carries. That the form has been especially well grasped by Loach and Garnett may be deduced from the observation that all their combined projects—Cathy Come Home, Kes (1969), Family Life (1971), Days of Hope—are melodramas of protest: crudely, against 'authority'. And all end in defeat. Roots, of course, ends in triumph.

Within the framework of Smith's categories, one may critically examine the notion that melodrama offers audiences wish-fulfilment: for example, Michael Booth's observation in 'English Melodrama' (Herbert Jenkins, 1965) that melodrama creates a dream world, inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfilment and satisfaction found only in dreams.
highly suggestive. Second, it only requires a shift in
degree to see the patients in the ward as like children
in a kindergarten, disrupted and exhilarated by one
‘bad boy’, who shows them ways of subverting the
‘ridiculous’ rules insisted upon by the repressive
female teacher/nurse.

Even though Smith’s categories help elucidate
certain films, they are based in traditional theatrical
melodrama. For the American cinema, however, we
need to be able to relate notions of melodrama to the
various genres, and these were fed by the whole
range of literary and theatrical traditions in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a variety of
combinations and a complex of multiple determinations.
To trace the roots of the various genres this
way is complicated, as Thomas Elsaesser’s article
indicates, and I shall refer only to the most obvious
or significant sources.

Action/Passion

Appropriating these terms from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s Screen article on melodrama—in which he
employs them rather differently—one can use them
to distinguish, albeit crudely, between two broad
categories of melodrama which have operated from
the earliest (mostly pre-cinematic) emergence of the
distinctive generic forms:

1) Action melodramas—swashbucklers, war stories,
westerns, crime thrillers, adventure stories—in which

2) Melodramas of passion, in which the concern is
not with the external dynamic of action but with the
internal trauma of passion (the emotions), audience
involvement being held and articulated through the
‘agonies and ecstasies’ of intense personal feelings
and relationships. Although one finds elements of
such concerns in most films (the cinematic melo-
dramas of action find more opportunities than their
pulp predecessors to introduce a love interest, for
example), four generic groups are essentially
melodramas of passion. i) Melodramas in which
the narrative focus is on a woman. The simplest
designation for this group is ‘woman’s melodrama’,
with the ‘woman’s film’ as its cinematic form,
although I use the terms with the reservations
expressed by Molly Haskell in ‘From Reverence to
Rape’ (Penguin, 1974). ii) Romantic melodramas, in
which a love story provides the main dramatic
concern. These first two groups are the heirs of the
eighteenth century, a pulp literature which, after
the birth of the movies, flourished in a
dialectical relationship with the cinematic genres,
each both contributing to and drawing from the
other.

Although these genres are mainly action
as a structure, which individual works
can possess to a greater or lesser extent. It is then
complemented by the second broad category, which
should similarly be viewed as a structure.

melodrama as a structure, which individual works

1) Action melodramas—swashbucklers, war stories,
westerns, crime thrillers, adventure stories—in which

Stills: John Ford’s The Searchers. Above: the Edwards
family—Ethan (John Wayne) with Martha (Dorothy
Jordan). Lucy (Pippa Scott), Debbie (Lana Wood) and
Aaron (Walter McCoo). Right: Ethan after the funeral.

sexual or racial terms—is dramatised in emotional
terms. iv) Melodramas in the Gothic horror
tradition.

The action/passion division is a way of focussing on
the second category—which has been the main area
of interest in discussion on melodrama and is my
main concern here—although the hero-centred action
melodramas are no less part of the melodramatic
tradition. And, although ‘action’ and ‘passion’ are to
an extent labels of convenience, certain general
observations on their use may be made. In the action
melodramas, whilst passion is evidently not absent, it
tends to be channelled into the dynamic path of the
hero: melodramas of revenge—Rancho Notorious
(1952), The Big Heat (1953), The Searchers—provide
a good illustration. Similarly, in the melodramas of
passion, ‘explosive action’ may well occur, but the
generals are generally much more constrained: by
gender (as women), social position, psychological
make-up (the heroes in this category are more prone
to impotence, inner torment and neurotic fears) or
simply the environment in which they move.

Another characteristic of this category is that, though
the groups do represent different structures of
concern, they may overlap. Queen Christina (1933) is
both a woman’s film and a romantic melodrama,
while All That Heaven Allows (1955) is both a
woman’s film and a family/small-town melodrama; in
both films the structures which represent the
different groups are to an extent in conflict.
Films in the second category are melodramas in the Heilman sense when the protagonists are 'whole', battling against external threats—monsters, oppressive societies—or the prohibitions and repressions of parents and other authority-figures: the laws of patriarchy. Where the protagonists are 'divided', torn by conflicting loyalties or impulses, more careful analysis is required to determine whether, according to the reformulated model, they can then genuinely be described as 'tragic', or they are no more than 'blindly' acting-out ideological tensions in the material. Also relevant here is Laura Mulvey's notion of melodrama as a safety valve for ideological tensions in society: the extent to which the films dramatise 'sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration'.

Generic Groups

Despite its roots in the sentimental novel, woman's melodrama did not surface on the Victorian stage until 'East Lynne' to the 1860s. This suffering heroines were, by then, a staple ingredient of melodrama ('Maria Marten', for example, dates from 1638). 'East Lynne' marks a radical break with the melodramatic tradition of action (Rahill even feels that it is not a 'true' melodrama) by shifting to the bourgeois ladies' world of home and garden and the more internalised 'concerns of the heart'. But the heroine remains a victim, suffering the 'awful consequences' of submitting to the villain's deceptions. 'East Lynne's' rival in popularity at the time, 'Lady Audley's Secret', centres on a villainess-heroine, an embryonic femme fatale, but the former established in a single character the archetypes which survived: the 'wronged' heroine and the suffering, sacrificial mother.

However, it would be a mistake to see the archetypal 'simply' appropriated by the woman's film. The latter is able to investigate the ideology of patriarchy—the very structures which locate women as victims—far more searchingly than was possible on the Victorian stage. Thus, if one compares 'East Lynne' with Stella Dallas (1925 and 1937), one notes the crucial difference: the villain has been eliminated, and in his (structural) place is the amiable, working-class Ed Munn, from whom Dallas recoils with such refinement. Here it is Dallas, the husband, who 'wronged' the heroine, in his bland assumption of patriarchal arrogance, and if both versions finally slot Stella into the sacrificial mother role, en route the Vidor version (at least) has ruthlessly exposed the contradictions in the material.

In general, the woman's film does not show the heroine as a passive victim in the traditional melodrama vein, but as a victim of patriarchy. For example, the early 'thirties cycle of confession films' (to borrow Griffith and Mayer's description) in which the heroines suffer 'the wages of sin', exposes the double standard which inscribes women as 'fallen' once they have indulged in 'illicit' sex. Later, the genre goes further, as films explore to what inevitable complications (frustrations, misunderstandings, jealousies, suspicions) to the way of 'true love'. In themselves, such complications are rarely viewed in terms of a tragic dividedness, but rather as an expression of the emotional confusion and 'excess' generated by passion, which is of course viewed somewhat suspiciously by the ideology (hence the 'unthinkable' concept, in a Hollywood movie, of l'amour fou in marriage). But the components of romantic melodrama are regularly found in other generic forms, including, of course, melodramas of action, which may raise the classic conflict between love and duty. In fact, in most films, the two are not really in conflict, but are compartmentalised within the plot, which then has a happy ending, (re)uniting the lovers. Conflict occurs where the hero or heroine's call to duty and his/her romantic commitments are necessarily incompatible, as in certain historical romances/swashbucklers, such as Mary of Scotland (1936), The Prisoner of Zenda (1935 and 1952), The Exile (1947). Now, in such films, it is virtually predetermined, for ideological reasons, that duty will prevail and that the hero or heroine will, ultimately, give up his/her lover. (In Queen Christina, in which Garbo dares to put love before duty, she is punished by the death of her lover.) Whether or not this is felt as 'tragic' depends on the extent to which the hero or heroine, in making this final decision, is genuinely committed to love and is thus genuinely torn. And so the potential for tragedy here is not just a function of the plot, but of the way in which it is handled.
Certain romantic melodramas centre on an extra-
martial love affair: Anna Karenina (1935), Intermezzo
(1939), When Tomorrow Comes (1939), That
Hamilton Woman (1941), New Voyager (1942),
Humoresque (1946). This tendency to privilege the
adulterous relationship over the marital one—and
Break of Hearts (1934) is the only example I know of
a romantic melodrama which clearly swings the other
way—necessarily generates ideological problems,
which the films are obliged to try to resolve in their
endings. (And one notes the very different fates of
adulterous wives and adulterous husbands!) But the
syndrome itself is the product of ideological tensions:
the tendency, by no means confined to Hollywood, to
desexualize marriage, with its logical consequence of
the lure of the lover. (This derives, of course, from
the courtly love tradition, likewise the product of
ideological tensions.) And yet, despite the endings,
the love affair is what primarily concerns us in these
films, and it is not in itself ‘discriminated’. The film’s
potential for subversion lies in the extent to which
the love affair disturbs the coherence of the
ideological position the films are obliged—under the
Production Code—to adopt: ‘The sanctity of the
instituted marriage and the home shall be
upheld’.

Other films move towards a criticism of
romanticism, for example those in which the love
affair is heavily one-sided: The Devil Is a Woman
(1935), Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948),
Leave Her to Heaven (1945), The Heiress (1949). And
these films bring to a head the contradictory notions
about passion and romance inherent in romantic
melodrama. On the one hand, the single-minded
passion of the protagonist who commits him/herself
to love is criticized: it tends towards masochism (in
the first two of these films) or undergoes a self-
destructive metamorphosis into neurotic possessiveness
(Leave Her to Heaven) or bitterness and revenge
(The Heiress). On the other hand, the films’ emotional
commitment to this protagonist criticalises in turn the
emotional detachment/shallowness/indifference
of the recipient of such passion.

In the ‘forties, two further, important, generic
groups in the melodrama of passion category emerged:
the film noir and the psychological
melodrama. The former, as an elaboration of
the crime thriller, certainly has significant action
components, but its greater interest lies elsewhere. In
‘Women in Film Noirs’ (ed E. Ann Kaplan, BFI,
1978), which contains a number of useful essays on
the area from a feminist perspective, Christine
Gledhill writes: ‘Rather than the revelation of socio-
economic patterns of political and financial power
and corruption which mark the gangster/thriller, film
noir probes the secrets of female sexuality and male
desire within patterns of submission and dominance’
(p 15). It is in these films that the power of the femme
fatale—the dangerous form of the ‘sexual woman’—is
most fully elaborated. By contrast, the hero is
frequently correspondingly “weak”, as, for example,
in the films which structure him between the femme
fatale and the ‘good woman’: Double Indemnity
(1944), Out of the Past (1947), Sunset Boulevard
(1950), Angel Face (1952), Phantom牧场er (1954).
In all but the last, his attempt to liberate himself from
the femme fatale fails, and she kills him. In these and
Still: Leave Her to Heaven—the possessive heroine
(Gene Tierney), excluded from the family group,
watch her husband Cornel Wilde chat up her cousin
(Jeanne Crain).

Still: Letter from an Unknown Woman—Lisa (Joan
Fontaine) and Stefan (Louis Jourdan).

The awareness of Freud feeds, in turn, into the
family/small-town melodrama, and analyses of this
area of cinema readily resort to psychoanalytical
models—see, for example, the ‘Dossier on
Melodrama’ in Screen, Summer 1977. In fact, since it
contains a number of the films considered to be the
finest Hollywood melodramas—notably those of
Sirk, Minnelli and Ray—the ‘fifties family/small-
town melodrama has occasioned some admirable
analyses, e.g. the articles by Thomas Elsaesser and
Laura Mulvey. The group has a peculiarly American
tradition, excellently charted by Andrew Britton in
his Mandingo article in Movie 22 and his Meet Me in
St Louis article in Australian Journal of Screen Theory
3. And here the scope of the tradition allows for
significant action components within the films: e.g.
the planes turning the pylons in The Tarnished Angels
(1957), the hunting scenes in Home from the Hill,
the chicken run in Rebel without a Cause (1956). In these
scenes, the tensions and conflicts within and between
the characters are externalized, which aligns them—
on a distinction Thomas Elsaesser makes between the
western/adventure film and the domestic melodrama
(by extension, the action melodrama and the
other films noirs, one also notices the prevalence of a
displaced Oedipal structure: the hero rivalling the
femme fatale’s (usually much older) husband or
husband-figure: see also The Killers (1946), Gilda
(1946), The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946).
(That the equivalent ‘rival’ in Angel Face is the
 heroine’s father is a typically Preminger variation.)

For the purposes of analysis, the film noir, like
other generic groups, should be seen as a complex
of structures, which may interact or even compete with
authorial structures, or those arising within other
generic areas. Similarly for the psychological
melodrama, arising, as Thomas Elsaesser observes,
from America’s discovery of Freud. Certain films
feature psychoanalysts/psychiatrists and are directly
concerned with mentally disturbed characters:
Spellbound (1945), The Dark Mirror (1946), Possessed
(1947). But a particularly significant group-structure
Elsaesser isolates is the wife-in-distress cycle initiated
by Rebecca (1940) and the British Gaslight (1940)
(which he rather misleadingly dub ‘Freudian
feminist melodrama’). In my Ophuls article, I discuss
this structure as one of a number of generic
components of Ophuls (1948). In general, the ‘forties
were a particularly rich period for the over-lapping
and combination of different generic traditions in
individual Hollywood films.
melodrama of passion)—with a central characteristic of the action melodrama. However, the form of the externalisation is not ‘simply’ what Elsaesser calls the ‘unrelentingly linear course’ of the action melodrama protagonist. In these films the scenes of action, as cathartic experience, tend to be ironised and undermined. Not only does Roger Schumann fly in circles round the pylons, he dies doing it. The success of Theron’s first hunt is rendered ironic by the success of his second, which ends with his killing a man and going into self-imposed exile. Jim’s victory in the chicken run (like Theron’s bear hunt, an initiation ceremony, and hence emotionally ‘charged’) is at the expense of another’s death. Again and again in the scenes of action channel the obsessions and tensions towards self-destruction, humiliation and defeat.

Divided Characters

Now, in these films, the protagonists are frequently flawed and divided: torn within themselves. Accordingly, they may usefully be considered along the lines of the suggested reformulation of the tragedy/melodrama model. *A propos Written on the Wind* (1956) and *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk himself refers to the characters played by Robert Stack as ‘split’. And, as Laura Mulvey suggests, Kyle Hadley and Roger Schumann do indeed seem like tragic figures. Kyle has the fears of Othello, but they are much more complexly founded. And though, like Othello, he is denied full tragic awareness (in Heilman’s words), we are conscious that he similarly has the power to see what he’s doing—to himself, his wife, his best friend—even as he neurotically refuses to do so. (Reference to Robert Wilder’s novel is instructive: Kyle’s prototype is a much weaker figure, conspicuously lacking any such power.) This, the familiar ‘blindness’ of the Sirk protagonist, is shifted further towards tragedy with Roger, who does see, but won’t admit it: it is to Burke Devlin that he says ‘The blind man isn’t blind,’ whilst Laverne remains a victim of his fears and obsessions—until the magnificent reconciliation, just before his death. (Even here, Fred Camper—*Screen*, Summer 1971—has argued that Roger is merely pretending to understand. Whilst this is a moot point, it nevertheless endows Roger with an alternative tragic characteristic, hubris: in Camper’s words ‘Roger makes the mistake of having pride, of thinking he can be human . . .’)

By contrast, Theron and Jim are characters of melodrama. They are trapped within ideologies which oblige them to behave in certain ways whilst denying them the possibility of either understanding why (Theron) or of freeing themselves (Jim and his friends). Theron’s rite of passage from ‘boy’ to ‘man’ merely inscribes him totally within a given ideology, defined for him by his father and ‘the men of the town’, and he acts out his destiny in this role (from impregnating his girl-friend to killing her father in revenge for the death of his own) with a sense of helplessness, unable to comprehend what’s happening to him. Jim, less blinkered, at least asks questions, but, receiving at best evasive answers (from his parents) is obliged to try and find his own way out of his moral dilemma. But the conflict of imperatives—his duty to society, the code of honour of his peers (thou shalt not squeal)—is weighted so that he is not really ‘torn’ (as he would be, for example, if they were all his friends) and instead he becomes a ‘victim’ of both the local kids and the law, the latter betraying him in not trusting him to handle Plato. Yet, as a portrait of a society, *Rebel without a Cause* has definite tragic overtones, the society creating the very conditions in which, out of fear, it kills one of its children, just as Kyle’s misplaced violence against Lucy leads to the death of the child which would have been his. Both *Rebel without a Cause* and *Home from the Hill* have ‘hopeful’ endings, in which the generations are in some sense
reconciled, but the more stable future to which they look is one from which the more obviously problem characters have been eliminated, whilst the societies, of course, remain the same. However critical the small-town melodramas are of their societies, there is rarely the sense that anything can be done to change them. From this point of view, however, Written on the Wind follows the pattern of classical tragedy: with Kyle, his father and his unborn child all dead, the Hadley dynasty is doomed to extinction.

In his article, Thomas Elsaesser writes: 'In the Hollywood melodrama characters made for operettas play out the tragedies of mankind (or at least those of American civilization). If one translates this into characters of melodrama, performing out the tragedies, the argument above about Rebel without a Cause illustrates his point. But this, clearly, contradicts the Heilman model. Thus one arrives at a second significant point of reformulation, where one takes into account the point of view of the work, independently of that of the protagonists. Where, in a portrait of a society, we see, not just the point of view of the victims, but the society creating, through its own failings, anxieties and ideological 'flaws', the very conditions which lead to there being victims, then we can speak of a 'tragic' view of the society. This may be illustrated by comparing Roots and Mandingo, both centrally concerned with the tyranny of slavery. In Roots, the world is polarised such that we do only see and identify with the point of view of the victims: the melodramatic perspective. But in Mandingo, there is a broader view, in which the white oppressors, rather than being simply characterised as 'villains', are presented more complexly, as a group of people 'blinded' by a monstrous ideology. In the violent climax to the movie, we see the self-destructive consequences of this ideology, the society (the Falconhurst plantation) tearing itself apart as a result of the tensions generated by its racial (and sexual) exploitation and oppression. Here we have a tragic perspective. And this may, in fact, focus upon a character who becomes, even in his/her blindness, the vehicle whereby the tragic view is expressed: Hammond, Theron. Not in themselves tragic characters, they nevertheless serve to express the films' tragic view of the worlds they inhabit. (It would be a neat solution if this were to account for the 'tragic sense' I mentioned in Mandingo as being a problem not allowed for on Heilman's model. However, other examples would need to be investigated along these lines before one could be confident of accounting for all shades of 'tragic feeling' in terms of structural models.)

Female Protagonists

For female protagonists in small-town melodrama, an area of potential division is the conflict between husband and lover. In these films, the lover-figure is not the hero (as he is in romantic melodrama and the certain woman's films) but presented rather as a threat to the marital relationship: Cass Timberlane (1947), Madame Bovary (1949), Beyond the Forest (1950), Clash by Night (1952), All I Desire (1953).

(Lover-figure is the appropriate term, since the plot may contrive to keep the heroine from having sex with him, as in Cass Timberlane.) The lover-figure here is the descendant of East Lynne's villainous seducer, but with a significant modification: he now offers the heroine a (usually) desired escape from the entrapment of marriage. Following Laura Mulvey's notion of melodrama as a safety valve for ideological tensions, the lover-figure can be seen as a character created in response to the frustrations felt by married women in small-town society. However, the 'sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home' is clearly threatened by such a figure, and so it is not surprising that the films' endings demonstrate the Code-approved resolution - its most reified and repressive: recuperation into the marriage/family for wives who repent; death for those who don't.

Equally, one would not expect the heroines to experience too great a sense of divisiveness over their actions. Adultery, according to the Production Code, is simply wrong, and in its puritanical rigidity on such matters the Code fits the observation of Moses Hadas in his introduction to The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca (Norton, 1968): 'Christian tragedy is impossible; when there can be only one right, the man who defies it is a villain'. Thus the heroines scarcely agonise over their transgressions (a partial exception is in Cass Timberlane) for their husbands and/or societies and, even as this leads to their becoming, to a greater or lesser extent, victims, their aspirations/energies/feelings are strongly and against the restrictions and repressions of the worlds which surround them. Even Rosal Moline in Beyond the Forest, the most problematic of these heroines from the point of view of audience
transformed offers a challenge to the prurient puritanism of the small town. In asking her to stay, Henry has already risked his position in the community: a rare example of a hero putting love before duty. And so, while her leaving would be a defeat, both for her and the family, her decision to stay ("They'll have us face; the two of us together") is an act of courage and commitment.

A rare example of a tragically divided heroine is Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* (1959). Determined to be seen as 'white' in a bid to escape from the position of oppression accorded to Negroes in American society, she can only achieve this at the expense of denying the person closest to her, her mother. The considerable intensity of the second half of the film derives almost entirely from this situation, complicated and ironised by Sirk's insistence that Sarah Jane's route of 'escape' is nevertheless into oppression—that of women at the burlesque end of show business. Yet, although she is desperate, Sarah Jane knows what she's doing, and it is part of Sirk's audacity that her grasp of her predicament should be contrasted so forcefully with the total lack of awareness of Lora, the official (white, star-enacted) heroine. Moreover, he follows through the hopelessness of Sarah Jane's position. Stills's 1934 version, 'contained' by the ideology, ends by recuperating Peola (Sarah Jane's predecessor) who goes off, after

sympathy (not least because she reacts to the pressures with murder) achieves a 'heroic' death as she literally drives herself beyond endurance.

Thus, once again, the films are at least implicitly subversive of patriarchal ideology. And one could argue that it is the very lack of dividedness of the heroines—the directness of their challenge to patriarchy—which constitutes, here, the films' subversive edge. It is ultimately a *class* challenge: all the heroines are from lower-class backgrounds. (Archetypally signalled, in the American small town, as from 'the other side of the tracks'.) And, whatever their reasons for marrying, their findings are very similar: that middle-class marriage constricts and frustrates their energies.

The effectiveness of the films' subversive edge is, however, ultimately dependent on the filmmakers' control of the material. *Cass Timberlane* simply disintegrates into incoherence in its last fifteen minutes as the ideology, belatedly and melodramatically (the device of the car accident is discussed later), attempts to contain/censure the heroine's sexuality. By contrast, *Clash by Night* recognises and dramatises the irreconcilable tension: Mae's aspirations for a 'better' (richer, more exciting) life and the decisions she makes out of fears of loneliness and insecurity are never resolved, and the ending, in which her husband firmly returns her to the role of mother ('Go take your child home') is obviously profoundly unsatisfactory. Both films illustrate the disrupting of narrative 'closure'—the attempt of the ideology to fix a final, 'safe' reading of the film—but the incoherence at the end of *Cass Timberlane* is very far indeed from Fritz Lang's conscious dramatisation here.

At their most exciting, however, these films use the 'passions' of the heroine to mount an attack on the petty-minded small-town ideology. The heroines outrage moral decency, violate propriety and generally upset the patriarchal order, but in a way which reveals the sheer intolerance, exploitation and repressiveness of the order. *Madame Bovary* may, on the surface, cast Emma as a victim of her romantic fantasies, but underneath we see her as very much a victim of male exploitation of those fantasies. *All I Desire* mounts a double attack. On the one hand, Naomi scandalises the censorious small-town society, on the other she challenges and re-creates her hitherto rather conservative family. Remarkably subversively, the film shows her actively (and successfully) encouraging her daughter Joyce's sexuality. And so, Naomi's decision to stay at the end is surely not the 'false' happy ending that Sirk critics invariably assert. (There are problems with the ending, but they relate to other issues, such as what happens to Lily's dreams of becoming an actress.) Without Naomi, life would return to its former state; with her, the family she has so remarkably

Stills: Right: *Imitation of Life*—Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) and her mother (Juanita Moore). Below: Madame Bovary—Emma (Jennifer Jones) in her attic.
her mother’s funeral, to the approved ‘Negro School down South’. Sirk’s film ends bleakly, and the image of Lora ‘becoming’ the white mother that Sarah Jane had always wanted (a point missed by Richard Dyer in his description of the final car scene in Moro 25) seems, in the light of Lora’s personality, little more than a final irony.

Ideology and Melodrama

In summary, the two points of reformulation of the Heilmann model are that it should take account of 1) the operation, in given works, of ideological discourses, and make a distinction between films in which the protagonists are impelled, ‘blindly’, by these discourses (melodrama) and those in which a protagonist is able, in some sense, to grasp the implications of the conflict within him/her, which opens up the possibility of tragedy; and 2) the point of view adopted overall by the work, which, in cases where a society is viewed ‘in the round’, may present the social/ideological tensions such that the audience is able to grasp the implications of the divisive conflicts: the tragic perspective. Whilst this clarifies the structure of melodrama on one grid (tragedy/ melodrama), it doesn’t elucidate the complex of ways in which melodrama, once distinguished from tragedy, functions in the American cinema. Smith’s categories are sometimes useful here (Waterloo Bridge (1940) as a melodrama of defeat; King’s Row (1941) as a melodrama of triumph) but tend to be over-

shadowed by the generic categories. Only the melodrama of protest has survived as a melodramatic category which dominates and subsumes the generic groupings, its power to arouse emotional reactions undimmed, as Midnight Express (1978, UK) and The China Syndrome (1979) have in their different ways recently demonstrated.

In formulating a model for Hollywood melodrama, the concept of ideology provides a useful starting-point. In general, the American cinema gravitated to melodrama, in the historical/Heilmann sense so far described, for economic and historical reasons (the structures proved commercial, as they had been in the theatre; the tradition was there to be pillaged) as well as complex social/ideological ones. The aesthetic which evolved, dominated by action, spectacle, dynamic narrative, theatrical heightening and the externalising of emotions, is formally ‘melodramatic’ (see Mark LeFanu’s Pagants of Violence in Monogram 6) and is designed to arouse the same kind of intense emotional involvement as traditional melodrama—hence the relevance of David Moro’s observations. But, in particular, the melodramatic tradition in Hollywood movies is articulated by the ideology and vice versa. (For my conceptualisation of ‘ideology’, I am indebted to Stuart Hall’s article ‘Culture, The Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’’ in ‘Mass Communication and Society’, 1977).
both its own contradictions and those contradictions to it that arise from alternative or oppositional ideologies. Since films are a key instrument in the assertion of ideological hegemony, these efforts are constantly manifest in them: in the ways characters are constructed, narratives patterned and ideological tensions and contradictions resolved. But, in American cinema, in particular, such operations are not only by playing, but are dramatised by the melodramatic aesthetic of the movies: the formal heightening mentioned above. In effect, the ideological operations are rendered as melodrama, or, at least, lie behind the melodramatic structures and strategies in the films. Thus ideological analysis may be used to illuminate these strategies and structures.

A Provisional Model

The model that emerges is best viewed in terms of ‘levels’ in an individual film. (This is partly to get away from the less helpful notion of different ideological categories of film, proposed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in ‘Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism’ in Cahiers du Cinema 216, translated in Screen, Spring 1971. At the very least their categories should be seen as structure, which may compete with one another in the same film.) These ‘levels’ are purely critical constructs, derived from analysis of the film. It is assumed that each film will be organised to present a dominant ideological perspective, but that this may not hold sway over all the elements in the film. Then, in brief, one may see a film as comprising a dominant level (level I), representing its diegetic “surface” and consisting of material relating to its dominant ideological perspective, and a number of subordinate levels which function as sub-texts. The two main sub-texts will normally be i) the ideological, incorporating material which is ‘contained’ within the framework established by the dominant ideological perspective, and ii) the psychoanalytical. However, other sub-texts may be generated, consciously or unconsciously, in the way the narrative is dramatised, such as mythical allegorical sub-texts. (One would nevertheless expect such sub-texts to be ideologically contained.) In almost every Hollywood movie, level I registers the extent to which the film is in the service of the dominant ideology, with any contradictions and problems generated by the process of dramatisation safely ‘contained’. The level is thus constructed by the film’s inflection of the dominant ideological discourse operating in society, an inflection effected ‘safely within’ Hollywood’s established codes of representation. Hence, in addition to a general conformity to the technical codes (eye-line match, ‘invisible’ editing, 30 and 180 degree rules, etc) one would tend to find, at this level, a) a conservative use of narrative and generic conventions (so that the audience is not ‘confused’ by complex narratives or ‘inappropriate’ generic juxtapositions), with particular emphasis on narrative closure, b) the construction of character-types to affirm certain stereotypes, or similarly ideologically-loaded “types” and c) the use of

the star persons to embody certain general ‘ideals’: toughness, expertise, charismatic authority for male stars; attractiveness, reliability, emotional commitment for female stars. (The sexist implications of such ‘ideals’ are immediately obvious.) In particular, the inflection of the dominant ideological discourses will generally be analysable in terms of the inflection of a specific ideological project (or cluster of projects) in the film. Whether overt (e.g. crime does not pay) or covert (e.g. Rick/Bogart “representing” the US in Casablanca, the unresolved question of the history of Rick’s relationship with the country he is ideologically “representing”. (In The Exile, the film’s use of the ‘romance’ plot to reinforce its dominant project makes the romance itself problematic.)

The ideological sub-text is not a precisely defined area, but a complex ensemble of elements which lie outside the space defined by the dominant level I. One element of potential significance here is mise-en-scène, in the sense that it can be articulated, consciously or unconsciously, as an aesthetic ‘discourse’ which comments on/undermines the coherence of the dominant ideological discourses. (This is, of course, just one way in which directorial authorship can significantly affect a film.) One would also include as part of the province of this sub-text the (subjective) use of certain conventions. The then-honoured melodramatic convention of women as victims is used, as mentioned, to expose the very structure which locates them as victims: patriarchal ideology. The nightmare world of film noir is not confined to representing realms which are safely ‘other’ (the underworld, mental illness etc) but, in certain films depicting soldiers returning from World War II, is used to characterise the America they

Photographs a publicity shot for King’s Row—Gothic lighting for Claude Rains as an evil doctor.
Confess, 1952) innocent persons. In Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939), the outburst not only occurs in the US Senate, but highlights the gullibility of the great American public: the 50,000 telegrams which have just arrived attacking the hero.

The question of the construction of alternative or subversive character-types, and of the extent to which characters and star personas can become 'problematic', the repository of conflicting ideological impulses, is discussed in Richard Dyer's 'Stars'. Finally, under the ideological sub-text, it should be noted that the operations of melodrama can disrupt narrative closure. The instances cited earlier arise partly from ideological contradictions—unconsciously registered in Cass Timberlane, consciously dramatised in Clash by Night—and would fit Laura Mulvey's description of the way in which the melodramatic form generates 'overdetermined irrecocilables which put up a resistance to being nearly settled in the last five minutes'. But, specifically, what is 'disturbing' here is the heroine's sexuality, and the 'excess' generated by this threatens closure in a different sense. In Sheila Whitaker's words (Framework 9): 'The . . . excess produced by sexual containment is shown as leading to apparent hysterical symptoms when the repressed threatens to rupture the surface.' This leads to the psychoanalytical subtext.

Melodrama, for the reasons already suggested, allows freer access to psychoanalytical discourses than, say, the realist aesthetic of much European cinema, which is more trammelled by preoccupations with plausibility, psychological coherence and a conscious articulation of a view of the world. However, the discourses function as a sub-text because, although they can affect the character-construction, narrative patterns and emotional operations of the films, this is an unconscious process, requiring a psychoanalytic approach to reveal them. These discourses, too, are subject to transformation under the operation of censorship mechanisms, which repress, mask and disguise material to render it 'acceptable'. In other words, the discourses are processed by the ideology. For example, no Hollywood movie could present a 'pure' Oedipal narrative, Psycho (1960) perhaps being as far as it is possible to go. But displaced Oedipal narratives are very common: e.g. the hero rivaling the father/older husband of the heroine (examples cited earlier); the heroine rivaling her step-mother/father's fiancée (The Furies, 1950, Angel Face, Bonjour Tristesse, 1958), to name but two of many possibilities.

Where a film explicitly handles Freudian themes, e.g. through the medium of a psychologically disturbed character, as in Spellbound, Secret beyond the Door (1948), Whirlpool (1949), Marnie (1964), a great deal of psychoanalytical material is organised, according to the requirements of the film's project, in level I. This should not be confused with the psychoanalytical sub-text of the film. In these examples, the
project affirms that, with the appropriate therapeutic concern of a committed partner and through the appropriate psychoanalytical processes, the disturbed character is curable. However, the sub-text, which in such films tends to have to accommodate an excess of psychoanalytical material generated by the explicit concerns, may well set up disturbances to such a reading. And so this sub-text, too, needs to be seen as in competition with level I. One should also note how ‘loaded’ the projects themselves are. For a hero (Spello, Secret Beyond the Door), the process of psychological recovery is carried through until he is at least well on the road to a cure; for a heroine (Whirlpool, Marnie), it is sufficient merely for her to have openly confessed/expressed her mental disorder and surrendered herself, child-like, to a man (her husband).

As suggested earlier, a psychoanalytical model—suitably recast—is of particular value in interrogating characters in states of emotional crisis. This is facilitated by the melodramatic tendency to dramatise the effects of the tensions and pressures operating on the characters: the ‘theatrical heightening’ of the form. Whereas, in the action melodramas, the dramatisation takes the form of outer-directed action (enacting vengeance, fighting wars, combating villainy, etc), in the melodramas of passion the resultant expressions of emotion tend to be inner-directed. Frequently, a male character reacts to a certain kind of stress with (usually ‘inadvertent’) self-laceration: archetypally, the sudden breaking of a glass in his hand: Blood and Sand (1941), Secret Beyond the Door, Pinnency. Almost invariably, such moments can be read as expressing castration anxieties. Other moments may similarly be read as a ‘surrender’ to the death instincts: for example, the heroine who lapses into psychosomatic illness in response to the traumatic loss of her lover/fiancé: Forly (1936), Waterloo Bridge, Madame Bovary, A Place in the Sun (1951). In my Ophuls article, I discuss Ophüls’ heart attacks in Caught from such a psychoanalytical perspective.

The hysterical symptoms mentioned by Sheila Whitaker—the return of repressed sexuality—may on occasions disrupt a film’s coherence to the extent of rendering its closure problematic. In Carr Timberlane, the multiple displaced expressions of the heroine’s sexuality (a cat; flying a plane with the ‘lover-figure’; surrendering to the ‘excitement’ of New York) testify to the film’s increasing problems of containment, and coherence breaks down in the end because the ideology resorts to ever-more-desperate measures to regain control. But, more usually, psychoanalytical discourses are ‘held’ within the narrative of a film and do not ‘rupture the surface’. This is because generic forms have been found to accommodate such discourses, and the key to these forms would seem to be melodrama. The psychoanalytical discourses find expression in melodrama, from the basic structures of the horror film to the sophisticated dramatisation of the return of repressed sexuality in Black Narcissus (1947, UK). Thus such discourses are as vital to a model for melodrama as the ideological discourses.

The above model can be applied within the different generic groupings, to analyse their emphasis and ‘appeal’, as well as across them, to investigate the ideological and psychoanalytical forces which have generated these groupings, and their common structures and motifs. Application of the model should also determine more precisely the relationship (or the permutations of relationships) between the various levels I have specified, as well as the place and importance of other levels (discourses). Nevertheless, it would be premature to consider that this model will exhaust the field of melodrama. The melodramatic tradition covers a vast range of material, relating both to form and content, and some of this material will almost certainly require further conceptual categories to organise. The model also needs to be related to the various authorial discourses which may be identified in individual films and which interact with the melodramatic forms and conventions. These discourses are not just directorial, but may relate to stars (Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Garbo), scriptwriters (Casey Robinson, Frances Marion), even producers (David Selznick, Ross Hunter). And the interaction may take a number of forms: a full-blooded use of the conventions (Vidor, Selznick); their foregrounding—in Sirk’s case to criticise and subvert the material, in Russ Meyer’s to parody it hysterically—or the deliberate creation of an aesthetic distance from the material which serves ‘to comment on’ the melodramatic conventions (Ophuls, Preminger). The model may, of course, help elucidate the ways in which such authorial discourses emerge from the spectrum of Selznick’s (in my Ophuls article I discuss Since You Went Away (1944), which he scripted and produced, as an example of a ‘level I movie’, completely in the service of or dominated by the ideological subversive dimension, which needs to be analysed according to different criteria, they are clearly not contained by the model. Mise-en-scène is not only of interest when it is working against the dominant ideological discourses.

**Historical Development**

Missing from this account is a proper historical perspective on melodrama, particularly on the evolution of the genres. The melodramatic tradition was itself continuously developing, with new forms being produced through dialectical interaction with the historically evolving generic groups. A few exemplary developments may, however, be cited.

1) Whereas in traditional melodrama, the villain provided what Smith calls ‘the motor power’ of the form (but for the villain(s)—or, more rarely, ‘natural’ disasters—there would be no story), in later Hollywood melodrama this vital function is taken over by ideological ‘institutions’: the laws of patriarchy (especially, as mentioned, in woman’s melodrama); class structures (especially in small-town melodrama). The prohibitions and repressions which these generate are in the place of the villain’s wicked deeds. And such a shift inevitably introduces problems. On the one hand, the ideology endeavours to affirm the laws of patriarchy, the class and gender determined positions, as ‘good’, and punishes transgressions; on the other, audience sympathy is usually with the transgressing characters. When the punishments, most often directed against female characters, lead to the same sort of sufferings as in traditional melodrama, the ideology is unconsciously functioning as the villain.

2) The characters are still, to an extent, at the mercy of ‘fate’. Morse’s characteristic f– the unmovitated, unprepared, unexpected and immediate—is transformed into a formal dramatic structure, but one which still suggests that events ‘have a life of their own’. Thus one encounters frequent anticipations/premonitions of what is to happen (the prologue of King’s Row is a brilliant example), situations are repeated at different stages of the drama, particularly the beginning and the end (emphasising the circularity of movement of the characters in melodrama), and occasionally, all the way through the film: Letter from an Unknown Woman. The ‘cruel’ intervention of fate is manifested above all in the ‘if only . . . ’ aspect of woman’s melodrama: ‘If only that hadn’t happened when it did, all would have ended happily’. . . Back Street (both 1932 and 1941) and The Passionate Friends (1949, UK) actually have fantasied ‘if only . . . ’ sequences and the feeling permeates the whole structure of Waterloo Bridge.

3) Rahlff describes a standard structural device of traditional melodrama as ‘a figure out of the past, returning to his familiar haunts after a long absence in disaster, and his reappearance serving to bring to a head a situation growing out of his disappearance’ (32). In traditional melodrama, this situation invariably relates to a villain, either to introduce an aesthetic dimension, or to provide a means of holding the narrative together, or to buttress the action in the present. Whereas, in the family/small-town melodrama, the device (without the disguise) serves to force into the open suppressed feelings, emphasising the sublimations and suppressions which have gone on ever since: H. M. Pulham, Esq (1941), All I Desire, East of Eden (1955), There’s Always Tomorrow (1956), Some Came Running (1958). When parental conflicts, the effects of which erupt and traumatis the children in the present (Pursued, 1947, East of Eden), the device of the returning character is not even necessary: see Home from the Hill.

**Comedy**

Another omission in this account is a perspective on comedy. It is only since completing the account that I have read Heilman’s latest work, ‘The Ways of the
of such ‘ways of the world’ in a given drama, and hence in the idea of ‘acceptance’. Heilman’s failure to understand the operation of ideology (a necessary failure in view of his own political position) leads him simply to ignore this issue. According to this model for comedy, in the reformulated tragedy/melodrama one, it, too, needs to be ‘re-thought’ in ideological terms. The resultant triple-sided model for drama can then be investigated in terms of its potential for the cinema.

From the point of view of categorisation, e.g. the distinction between comedy and melodrama, the model seems useful. In a small-town family melodrama, such as Miss Me in St Louis (1944), the characters accept, resist, and finally resolve. Mr Smith’s sudden announcement that the family is moving to New York produces an initial chorus of protests, and breaks up the family gathering, but it is only a short time before everyone re-groups, thereby signalling their coming to terms with the proposal. This may be contrasted with a parallel scene in All I Desire, when Henry breaks up the happy family breakfast by announcing that Naomi is staying on with them. The family here never re-groups, and the film finds no way of accommodating Lily’s frustration at having lost her opportunity to get out of the small town. Heilman’s reading of Miss Me in St Louis points to the cost of such acceptance by the characters in the movie. (A cost which may equally be seen in other ‘acceptances’, e.g. Esther and Rose’s acceptance of their marital duties under patriarchal authority) While, on the one hand, the film’s dominant ideological discourse, in keeping with the comedy mode, ‘centres’ the familial tensions and frustrations, on the other, a persistent challenge to the mode and the process of containment is provided by Tootie and the energies she releases. It is Tootie who changes Mr Smith’s mind about moving, by her attack on the snow people; her resentment at the move displaced into an angry assault on symbolic parent-figures. Now, this is clearly an incursion of melodrama into the movie. It ruffles the comedy tone, but it also changes the course of events: for the sake of the family, Mr Smith decides that they should remain in St Louis. (In other words, he, too, ‘accepts’ and the cost here is registered in the uneasy tone of the ending.)

Thus melodrama, in this instance, is indeed the mode that effects change. And, although it is a change that reinstates the old order, it is also one that defies the patriarch: a balance of reactionary and progressive impulses. But the more general point about the ‘incursions of melodrama’ that Tootie instigates in the movie (e.g. also the Halloween sequence events, including the ‘killing’ of Mr Brockoff and Esther’s assault on John) is that they provide an outlet for the frustrations felt by the characters as well as a sub-text to the film which constantly threatens the process of containment. In this respect, they may be contrasted with the songs in the film, which, as Andrew Britton argues, ‘suggest moments of licence’ but which are rather more firmly ‘contained’ by the dominant discourse. (This would not necessarily be true of all musical numbers in film musicals. Certain numbers in, for example, The Pirate (1948) suggest such a powerful release of sexual energies that they function very similarly to the incursions of melodrama into comedy.)

Extending these observations to Heilman’s (mainstream) comedy mode in general, one would anticipate that the very effort of accommodating and compromising in the interests of accepting ‘the ways of the world’ would necessarily generate a surplus of suppressed, frustrated energy under the surface. In ignoring this problem, too, Heilman argues himself into a highly reactionary position, in which ‘acceptance’ is seen as an ideal, ‘civilised’ response. Few American film comedies would seem to be so ‘civilised’. Dramatic revelations of outliers for the frustrated energies are almost invariably found. In addition to the strategies adopted in Miss Me in St Louis, one could mention as manifestations of the cost of ‘comic acceptance’ characters being reduced to hysteria (e.g. Mortimer Brewster inArsenic and Old Lace, 1944), having nightmares (e.g. Stanley in Father of the Bride, 1950) or getting historically drunk (e.g. Doug/Dan Dailey in It’s Always Fair Weather, 1955). And occasionally a film will register a spectacular example of ‘the return of the repressed’, e.g. the monster napadified emotion in The Thrill of It All (1963), testament to Gerald James Garnier’s sexual frustration. In Billy Wilder’s comedies, the protagonists regularly go to absurd lengths to accommodate themselves to the ways of the world, often to the extent of assuming false identities. They are then obliged to live out the consequences of this over-ambitious accommodation: The Major and the Minor (1942), Some Like It Hot (1959), The Apartment (1960), Irma La Douce (1963), Kiss Me, Stupid (1964). The results may be (though not unequivocally) liberating, as in Kiss Me, Stupid, but they may, equally, be traumatic, as in Baxter’s

Still: Irma La Douce – Nestor (Jack Lemmon).
furbished, provides a useful starting-point. Since tragedy seems to have been largely expelled from the American cinema, these are the two main generic areas of interest. In Peacocks of Violence, Mark LeFauw writes that the cinema’s ‘formal basis is still over and above everything intensely theatrical’. This would seem to be especially true of the American cinema, and this discussion, while necessarily sketchy, has been designed to further theoretical debate of the area which seems to me to have some of the closest links with a theatrical tradition and to occupy a central generic place in American film history: melodrama.

Michael Walker

Still: The Apartment—Baxter (Jack Lemmon) finds the overdosed Fran (Shirley MacLaine).

Rather than considering Ophuls’s American movies from an auteurist perspective, this article looks at their place in the ‘melodramatic tradition’ traced out in my melodrama article. Its primary focus is on the complex of determinants (archetypal, generic, ideological, psychoanalytical) feeding into each of the films, with the place of Ophuls as author within this complex as a secondary consideration. One industrial consideration should be borne in mind: none of the films was the (direct) product of one of the Hollywood ‘majors’. The Exile and The Reckless Moment were made by independent producers: Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Walter Wanger respectively. Letter from an Unknown Woman was made by Rampart Productions, an independent company formed by Joan Fontaine and William Dowier, her husband, and, although the company operated under the ‘umbrella’ of Universal, both it and John Houseman as producer indubitably mediated the studio’s control. Caught was the last film made by Enterprise, a small and short-lived studio which employed a significant number of left-wing people (see Allan Eyde’s article ‘Films of Enterprise’ in Focus on Film 35). And, although there were ‘problems with the studio’ on Caught, especially regarding the script, it is to the credit of Enterprise that the movie was made at all, even though the ending is clearly a botched-up job. (The official studio synopsis of the movie also describes a completely different beginning.)

But, until more is generally known about the industrial set-up in Hollywood, it is difficult to gauge the consequences of this relative freedom from studio interference. Certainly the fact that Ophuls had ‘sympathetic’ producers must have lent him a certain amount of artistic freedom, although the producing-and-starring combination (Fairbanks, Fontaine, Joan Bennett in the sense that Wanger was her husband and regularly produced her films) must equally have complicated this to some extent—evidently to a large extent on The Exile. But Ophuls, like Renoir—and unlike, say, Lang or Sirk—never really became ‘integrated’ into the Hollywood system. His films are not mainstream products, and thus have rather more space to stand back from and comment on such products.

The Exile (1947)

The swashbuckler as a generic form is rooted in nineteenth century melodrama. In ‘The World of Melodrama’, Frank Rahill devotes a chapter to ‘The Cape-and-Sword Hero’ who swept to popularity in the 1840s, stimulated by (inter alia) Dumas’s dramatisation of his own ‘The Three Musketeers’. In Focus on Film 27, Jeffrey Richards traces the evolution of this tradition, through Dumas’s literary successors (Hope, Orczy, Sabatini) whose works were similarly successfully dramatised, the introduction of the genre into the cinema via Fairbanks Sr, the major swashbuckling cycles of the ‘thirties and the post-war years to the recent (largely parodic) revival of the form. And, although Richards does not say so, the characteristics he isolates in the genre are essentially those of the melodramatic tradition. He describes the genre’s romanticisation of history; the displacement of historical events by ‘a ritual of action-pieces (duels, chases, escapes); the stylisation of form and content (e.g. the balletic sword-play, the romanticised settings); the archetypal characters—hero, villain, damsel in distress; the triumph of good over evil and the meting out of punishment to evil-doers’. He also stresses the ideological conservatism of the form. The swashbuckler has its archaological (mythical) roots in romance and the chivalric code, with its gentleman hero who ‘fights for King and Country, believes in truth and justice, defends the honour of a lady’ and its villains are frequently attempted usurpers of the fixed, hierarchical order. With the ‘rigorous enforcement’ of the Production Code from 1934 this conservatism became completely reactionary. The French Revolution was now virtually taboo as a subject; when it did appear, it was ‘depicted in terms of dictatorship rather than democracy’. Films featuring the British Civil War invariably favoured the Cavaliers and even outlaws were recuperated: they fought the injustices of petty tyrants rather than