

Introducing Melodrama

For an average reader/viewer, melodrama is, and at the same time is not, a first-choice genre. This oxymoronic approach to melodrama results from the fact that, in mass perception, the convention performs as, first and foremost, a text whose underlying aim is to reveal emotional truths via dramatic action. Melodrama's affective provenance is, therefore, to blame for the popular demarcation of the genre in 'womanly' terms. Considering the still unequal, if not degraded, position of women in the global patriarchal system, such a delimitation entails, in turn, the further conceptualisation of the melodramatic convention as a provider for simplified emotions, stereotypical characters, and, last but not least, Manichean philosophy as determinants of the said 'emotional truths' to discover. It is no wonder, then, that audiences do (not) favour melodrama: its excessive binary drive – which tends to allegedly re/construct the world envisioned as an extensive network of moral absolutes hence of clichés and formulas – seems to confine viewers of melodramatic fictions, too, in the category of the undemanding, even the debased; thereby an embodiment of the victimisations which melodrama typically stigmatises and with which it at the same time sympathises.

Yet, there is more to melodrama than in its above mentioned thumbnail sketch. Film scholar Barry Langford is of an opinion that even if we assume that it indeed translates itself primarily into the so-called 'drama of passion' – and, by extension, of e.g. crime, injustice or revenge – we cannot but envision melodrama as a mode of cultural production rather than a stiff narrative convention because the 'drama of passion' is constitutive for a host of classical genres, from

western to crime thriller to adventure story.¹ In her groundbreaking article “Melodrama Revised”, film scholar Linda Williams confirms such a modal reinvention of melodrama when she refers to this formula as fundamental “of the classical Hollywood movie” and hence, of America and democracy (Williams: 42).² Bearing in mind that comparatist Peter Brooks, when analysing melodrama in his seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination...* (1976), speaks of it as of a cognitive faculty³, for he identifies the convention with a certain type of imagination, then it becomes clear that melodrama can (and actually does) perform as a peculiar – transcultural – worldview; one whose semantics depends on an angle from where to approach our diversified: individual, social, political etc. ‘realities’.

This special issue of *Rocznik Komparatystyczny / Comparative Yearbook* seeks to demonstrate how, contemporarily, scholars try to make sense of the amorphous, experimental ‘nature’ of melodrama. That this is not an easy task may be illustrated by the fact that we, the editors, had trouble trying to somehow ‘categorise’ the scholarly material to be included in the issue. Eventually, we have come up with the tripartite structure of “Melodrama and Beyond” / “Melodramat i kontynuacje”, of which the first section entitled simply ‘What Is Melodrama? / Czym jest melodramat?’ aims at delineating, both diachronically and synchronically, the convention’s contemporary identity. Starting from its, broadly understood, history (“Melodrama – the Most Extensive Hybrid Theatrical-Dramatical Structure of the 19th Century” by Dobrochna Ratajczakowa) through the presentation of several of its diversifications (“In the Shadow of the Guillotine: On the Aesthetic, Moral, and Social Circumstances of the Emergence

¹ For an extended discussion of melodrama conceived as a ‘modal’ genre see e.g. Langford: 29–50.

² The above mentioned quotation from Williams proceeds as follows: “Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures. It is not a specific genre like the western or horror film; it is not a ‘deviation’ of the classical realist narrative; it cannot be located primarily in woman’s films, ‘weepies’, or family melodramas – though it includes them. Rather, melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation or moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie.” For William’s entire account on melodrama in the perception as above see Williams, 1998.

³ For Brooks (1976), melodrama seems to be a mental/affective process which he believes informs a wide variety of the 19th century cultural practices the world over.

of Melodrama” by Tomasz Wysocki; “From Melologo to Melodrama and Beyond, or the Story of Dubious Identity” by Iwona Puchalska) to the demonstration of some of the convention’s performative skills (“Following the Cultural Heritage of Dance-Like Melodramas” by Anna Reglińska-Jemioł), Section One offers a clear and far-reaching view of melodrama as an embodiment of modality.

Section Two entitled “Melodrama as a Transcultural Phenomenon / Transkulturowość melodramatu” aims to elaborate on the notion of melodrama as a transcultural mode of cultural production. Accordingly, we offer our presentation of the convention in its above discussed perception of the ‘phantom genre’ in the form of texts where melodrama is tested against its traditionally defined bounds (“Melodrama as a ‘Rewritten’ Genre [on the Example of the 19th Century Dramas Inspired by the Works of Hugo, Mickiewicz, Scott]” by Ewa Szczepan), in particular of the theatre play (“Fratricide in Melodrama *The Guiding Angel, or The Female Demon* of Guilbert de Pixérécourt” by Aleksandra Kamińska), novel (“Between Erotic Story and Lyrical Experience. On the Melodramatism of *Daphnis and Chloe* [2nd Century AD] by Longos” by Beata Gaj, “Melodramatic Features in *Almayer’s Folly* by Joseph Conrad” by Anna Szczepan-Wojnarska), film (“Signs of Passing Time in Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* [1987] and Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* [1998]” by Ewa Wojno-Owczarska), and opera (“An Aristotelian Frame Story, or Melodrama in Opera’s Embrace: A Case Study of the Grave-Digging Scene in Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Fidelio*” by Katarzyna Lisiecka) only to show how these ‘inherently’ melodramatic frames actually spur the non-typical, for playful, circulation of the generic elements within. The resulting inner fluidity, even volatility of melodrama, deployed within the genre’s ‘non-native’, as it were, context of translation (“*Pygmalion’s* Metamorphoses: Translation and the Transformations of the Text-Archetype [Rousseau, Baudouin, Węgiński]” by Michał Bajer) thus once again attests to the conclusion that melodrama is not there for us to feel suffocated, entrapped or oppressed by it; its primary role is to make sense of the oppression, entrapment, and suffocation that ‘traditions’ understood as sets of norms – or crises of such traditions – typically bring about.

That is why Section Three entitled “Beyond Melodrama / Poza melodramatem” leaves the straightforward discussion of melodrama in favour of showing the phantom genre’s liberatory impact on and exchange with other

cultural productions. Be it a southern writer's 'dramatic' detachment from the 'Faulknerian themes' ("Appalachian, Southern, Universal, Global: The Case of Fred Chappell" by Marcel Arbeit), or a revolutionary (so also 'dramatic') take on the genre of western ("From the Action-Packed Film to the Stealth Strategy: A Controlled Revolt against the Tradition of Western in *Desperados III*" by Dagmara Kottke), film noir ("Film Noir: [Re]Constructing the Definition" by Krzysztof Antoniuk) or heavy metal music ("The Ever-Evolving Maze – The Analysis of Metal Genres" by Krzysztof Skórski), in each of these cases melodrama – this time understood as a need to confront an old-time 'villain' (i.e. the tradition of a given cultural phenomenon) offers itself as an essential tool for responding to and comprehending the cultural climate of the twenty-first century global reality; a worldview indeed. Not only that; as a mindset whose power rests in that it combines aspects both of evoking and avoiding violence, melodrama becomes performative of conflict itself and, thereby, addresses it as the foundational aspect of the 21st century value-system. Our journal's last section entitled 'Books Sent / Książki nadesłane' which, this time, offers the review by Samane Madhuri of *Glass Walls: Stories of Tolerance and Intolerance from the Indian Subcontinent and Australia*, a collection of stories "demystifying", to use the words of the author of the review, "violence that has become an undeniable part of our 'everydayness'", corroborates the above mentioned view on melodrama.

Works Cited

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