

Savas Patsalidis and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, eds.
Melodrama: Generic and Ideological Transformations.
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“Melodrama is our daily bread,” claims Alejo Carpentier in the epigraph to the Foreword to this impressively weighty and stimulating volume on transformations in melodrama. The outcome of a conference entitled “The Ideology and Aesthetic of Melodramatic Discourse” held at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 1999, the volume attempts to map the field by dividing it into four areas, with examples from the historicity of melodrama and the decoding of the melodramatic. These areas are: “The European and American Paradigm of the 19th Century” (Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Michael Hays, Anastasia Nikolopoulou, Zoe Detsi-Diamandi [pp. 31-162]), “The Greek Paradigm in Theatre and Cinema” (Dimitris Spathis, Ioulia Pipinia, Thodoros Grammatas, Nikos Kolovos, Michalis Kokonis [pp. 163-402]), “The Feminist Paradigm” (E. Douka-Kabitoglou, Elizabeth Sakellaridou, Domna Pastourmatzi [pp. 403-516]), and “The Everyday Paradigm” (Savas Patsalidis, Eliza Koutoupi-Kitis, Marianthi Makri-Tsilipakou, Dimitra Mitta [pp. 517-659]). The focus of the different contributors to this wide-ranging volume, however, remains common: the analysis of the transformational relations between “bread and spectacle,” and of the historicity and decoding both of ideology and of the generic constraints posed by (dramatic) melodrama to the extent that it generated a wider melodramatic impulse.

The emancipation of melodrama from a “contemptible symptom of cultural decline and aesthetic inferiority” into a “cultural space hospitable to a finely-tuned convergence of ideology and utopia” (Grigoris Paschalidis) presupposes a broader critical shift, both in terms of an aesthetic rehabilitation of popular and mass culture and in terms of an ideological suspicion of the aesthetics of “high art.” Whatever their position in relation to this founding moment in Cultural Studies (as well as to its occasional melodramatic excesses), however, the essays collected in this volume share an historical focus which replaces Manichean bipolarities by a reading of melodrama through its generic and cultural specificities – a reading, in other words, which takes on board the significance of certain radical historical shifts. These shifts accompanied the emergence of a popular, urban element from the time of the French Revolution up until that of the globalized, televisual society of the spectacle.

This historical approach takes issue, point by point, with the approach of Peter Brooks in his monumental work dedicated to melodramatic fantasy, to which frequent reference is made by the authors in this volume. Brooks’s reading of melodramatic fantasy, “in spite of its claim to examine melodrama historically, in fact proposes an essentialist discourse which effaces the historical structures of the genre in the name of a ‘modernist core’” (Nikolopoulou). This volume employs a critical strategy similar to that employed in an earlier collec-

tion entitled *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (eds. M. Hays and A. Nikolopoulou. [New York: St. Martin's P, 1996]). In this earlier volume, the support for an historical methodology is expressed as follows:

The capacity of melodrama to simultaneously incorporate the discourses of imperialism, nationalism, and class and gender conflict points not only to the genre's structural malleability but to the role it played in approaching and "resolving" the historical complexities that lie behind its intersecting horizons. Melodrama seems to correspond to what Hans Robert Jaus has called a process-like genre, that is, a genre that does not come to rest in fulfillment but rather, presents a continually renewed realization. (x-xi)

Most of the contributors to this volume emphasize the ability of a strong genre to embody as well as juxtapose a range of suppositions and interpretations. The list of examples could begin with the appearance of Gothic melodramas in the style of Robin Hood in 1790, which linked melodrama to a pre-Modern oral tradition, or with the rural and Luddite melodramas of the early 1830s, which were at times militant in their attack on industrialized capitalism – as in *The Factory Lad* by John Walker, a translation of which is appended to this volume. The convergence of theatre with popular culture provides another point of reference – for example, that during the second half of the 19th century in Greece, which accompanied the advent of professionalism in theatre. Finally, we could mention the analysis of the melodramas of Greek cinema within the context of the formalization of its production during 1960s urbanization, or even the widespread and glaring excesses of television soap opera, which occasionally lends itself to fresh readings.

This volume represents a significant contribution to Greek studies in this field, both as a comprehensive study in the area of historical poetics and as a detailed documentation of individual works; the works referring to the Greek paradigm provide valuable background analysis as well as an historical map of the field. The volume demonstrates in exemplary manner a fascinating and fertile field of study ripe for extension into generic and ideological approaches in other fields, especially within Greek studies, from theatrical and cinematic melodrama or "novelistic drama" to the novel itself, as well as to the romance novel, which on some occasions converged with melodrama and on others competed with it. Perhaps the judgment of Paschalidis, who claims that the novel, "especially in the 19th century, but also in other more recent forms as well ... [should] be regarded as generically distinct from the tradition of melodrama," is in its turn an example of melodramatic excess. I would, however, endorse the implications of this point – that, in other words, the novel and melodrama together make up those forms which, "with the various and constantly renewed and transformed generic modes they have taken and continue to take ... thematize through their character, their ethical problematization and their humanization,

the fundamental re-forms that European society has undergone and continues to undergo ... in the polycentric and homogenized world of contemporary urban, mass and liberal societies.”

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