

Women on the Other Side

Week 3: Melodrama/Family Saga/Historical

Introduction

Before the screening we suggested that *The Namesake* might be a form of 'family saga' and possibly a 'melodrama'. On the blog at <womensfilms.blogspot.com>, Rona queries whether the film is a 'woman's picture', even if its majority audience is likely to be female. So many possible generic categories – what do we make of them and are they useful in thinking about the film?

Definition of a 'woman's picture':

... a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman. (Basinger 1993: 20)

Basinger goes on to suggest that the woman's picture, using this working definition, is a much broader category than the female-centred melodrama represented by films such as those in the 1940s featuring Bette Davis.

What kinds of elements should we look for in the repertoire of the woman's picture? Here are some possible elements of those 1940s films:

- a central female character;
- a female 'best friend';
- male characters who are less important/flawed/'dull';
- a major female star in the lead role;
- a theme that involves romance/marriage;
- a theme that explores issues of career/social status;
- a narrative that involves mother/daughter relationships;
- narrative shape is 'circular' rather than linear?;
- *mise en scène* which shows particular interest in costume and personal appearance.

Basinger (quoted in Neale 2000) makes a very useful observation: "The woman's film was successful because it worked out of a paradox. It both held women in social bondage and released them into a dream of potency and freedom" (1993:6):

If it is true, as many suggest, that Hollywood films repressed women and sought to teach them what they ought to do, then it is equally clear that, in order to achieve this, the movies first had to bring to life the opposite of their own morality. To convince women

that marriage and motherhood were the right path, movies had to show women making the mistake of doing something else. By making the Other live on the screen, movies made it real. By making it real, they made it desirable. By making it desirable, they made it possible. They gave the Other substance, and thus gave it credibility. In asking the question, "What should a woman do with her life?", they created the possibility of an answer different from the one they intended to provide at the end of the movie.

Thus, what emerges on close examination of hundreds of women's movies is how strange and ambivalent they really are. Stereotypes are presented, then undermined, and then reinforced. Contradictions abound, which at first sight seem to be merely the result of carelessness, the products of commercial nonsense. But they are more than plot confusion. They exist as an integral and even necessary aspect of what drives the movies and gives them their appeal. These movies were a way of recognizing the problems of women, of addressing their desire to have things be better than they are offscreen.

Basinger's analysis refers mainly to Hollywood films of the studio period. Do they have any relevance to an Indian/American film from 2006? By applying the analysis to *The Namesake* and noting both how it conforms and how it differs, what do we find useful in this approach to the concept of the woman's picture that came out of feminist film theory?

Melodrama

Partly because of its popular appeal, melodrama has often been despised by critics – 'melodramatic' is seen as a term of abuse, whether it describes a dramatic scene in a film or our behaviour in real life. Definitely linked to this is the association of melodrama with feminine rather than masculine concerns.

Twentieth century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority. (Jane Tompkins (1985), *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction*, quoted by Gledhill (1987))

Melodramas are often mainly about women, very often written by women, and at certain times have been enjoyed by women to a much greater extent than by men. It is not surprising then that much of the 1970s work on film melodramas was undertaken by feminist writers, interested in reclaiming what they saw to be important works which had been neglected because of the assumption that 'women's films' were less important.

Melodramas deal in emotional conflict, much of it centred around family and sexual relationships. There are 'male melodramas' with men in central roles and, crucially, there are themes of racial and class conflict in a wide range of melodramas. Because of this emotional powder keg at the centre of so many melodramas, it isn't surprising that many critics have seized upon specific melodramas as providing examples of 'sites of ideological struggle' with the despised melodrama genre enabling filmmakers and audiences to pursue critiques of contemporary society via popular entertainment.

The most popular forms of contemporary 'moving image culture' in the 1990s, television soap operas and drama series, are certainly derived from melodramas, but they tend to promote narrative content – the issues and human stories – over and above the performance and presentation of the stories – the formal or stylistic aspects. (*Ugly Betty* – an example of the televovela, a Latin American melodrama form – has arguably re-introduced the 'excessive style' that soaps lack). Modern popular cinema on the other hand might be argued to be more about performance and presentation than about story – a return to the sense of spectacle which has always been an important aspect of cinema.

The concept of 'excess' is present in many melodramas, 'melos' (music) being a central feature. It has been argued that the expressionist possibilities of the cinematic image allow colour, lighting and camerawork, as well as costume, decor etc. to express the inner emotions of characters. This central feature allowed 1970s, mainly feminist, critics to argue that in Hollywood family melodramas, a subversive message was being 'smuggled in' to a mainstream film through the use of an excessive style.

Melodramas in Europe and thus Hollywood date from the 'illegitimate theatre' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which began to explore the tensions in the development of industrial societies and the bourgeois revolution. Class conflict and the changing positions of women in society provided fertile material for melodrama narratives. Similar melodrama ideas can be found in other film industries with long cultural traditions and which have faced similar upheavals. India, China and Japan have all seen widespread melodrama production, often with female stars directed by men (sometimes gay men). Our choice of two Indian (and one Chinese) films made by women needs to be seen in this context.

Monsoon Wedding (India/US/Fra/Ger/Italy 2001, dir. Mira Nair)

A big hit around the world (for a specialised film), *Monsoon Wedding* is very 'modern' in terms of aesthetics and content, depicting the wedding celebrations of an upper middle-class, 'globalised' Indian family. It is also a family melodrama in which there are several love stories. At the centre is the actual wedding of a young and 'modern' Delhi bride and her American-based groom. In the background is the marriage of her parents and, as a contrast, the 'real love story' between the family maid and the wedding organiser. The film uses colour, music and dance to express emotional turmoil focused

on a dark family secret, which erupts (along with the monsoon rain) during the wedding celebrations. In the extract, the roving handheld camera picks out the several relationships which criss-cross in the web of coincidences so common in melodrama. In a way, the camerawork contradicts the idea of a theatrical melodrama, but the excess is re-inserted through the colour and liveliness of the interactions. Later in the film, costume, decor and especially song and dance take over to a much greater extent.

Fire (India/Canada 1996)

Deepa Mehta's film is also a melodrama. Though less stylistically expressive, the central narrative is much more tightly focused on a specific family and a limited number of relationships. In the starring roles taken by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das it is also closer to the notion of melodrama as a woman's film with strong central characters such as those described by Basinger. It draws on American/European modes of acting and direction, but also on the 1980s 'Parallel Cinema' in India and the older tradition of the Hindi 'social issue melodrama'. The issue is what do modern Indian women do who are trapped in a loveless marriage? The film was heavily criticised by Hindu lobby groups in India.

The Soong Sisters (Hong Kong/Japan/China 1997) (dir. Mabel Cheung)

Produced in the year of the return of Hong Kong to China, this is the extraordinary true story (with several elisions) of the three Soong sisters who married the three most powerful men in China's early twentieth century history: the major banker, the leader of the 1911 Revolution and Chiang Kai-shek, leader of Kuomintang or Nationalist forces. The main story ends in 1949, but the women lived on until the end of the century.

Michelle Yeoh and Maggie Cheung are major stars of Hong Kong Cinema, Yeoh as an 'action heroine' and Cheung in a wider range of roles, including playing Ruan Ling-yu, the great melodrama star of 1930s Shanghai Cinema in the unusual biopic *Actress* (1992). They play the two older Soong sisters and all three sisters are powerful figures deferred to by men and able to change the course of history. The film draws on several genre repertoires. In the extract there are indications of melodrama, romance, political intrigue and action.

References

Janine Basinger (1993) *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-60*, London: Chatto and Windus
Christine Gledhill (ed) (1987) *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, London: bfi
Steve Neale (2000) *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge

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Next screenings:

30 October, *L'Intrus* (France 2004)
13 November, *The Day I Became a Woman* (Iran 2000)
27 November, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (UK 2006)