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Introduction

Melodrama: Staging Emotions in the Anglophone World

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At the heart of this collection of articles[1] stands a simple observation: melodrama is omnipresent in everyday culture. As a form of entertainment that has always put emotions centre-stage, melodrama is just as popular today as it was in its early days on European and North American stages in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or during the peak of classic Hollywood film melodrama in the 1940s and 1950s. No matter whether we are looking at TV series or drama, news coverage in the print media and on TV, cinema and musicals, video clips or the medial staging of celebrity myths: melodrama is ubiquitous and a prominent engine of today's cultural production. For more than 200 years it has been a crucial mode of expression, branching out far beyond the stage, adapting to new medial forms, reappearing in myriad contexts, and shaping the cultural representation of social conflict.

Melodrama emerged from the margins of the academic landscape and university curricula and claimed its position as a relevant and worthy subject of scholarship, critical discourse and canon revision in the 1970s. Since then, melodrama has played a significant role in English and American literary and cultural studies, but also in other, neighbouring disciplines, such as musicology, film and theatre studies. This special issue of *Anglia* aims to bring together current trends in melodrama research and to shed light on the changes and revaluations that important concepts and approaches to melodrama have undergone in the last couple of decades. It also means to sharpen and renew these discourses, thereby giving evidence of the continuous re-imagination of melodrama in new and diverse settings and to connect melodrama studies to recent theoretical debates.

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It is not difficult to argue the case for melodrama as a field of research that calls for more scholarly attention. Its relation to today's critical discourse is still acute. Melodrama now counts as

> a central element of modern narrative culture, [...] an essential mode of consciousness in the post-sacred world; a core rhetoric of emergent mass discourses of community and identity; a foundational aesthetic in the development of the novel, film and television; a dominant language in the modern conceptions of family, gender, race, and nation. No longer exiled from cultural history, melodrama seems now central to it, an essential thread in the warp and weave of global modernity. (Buckley 2009: 176)

In a few lines Matthew Buckley has accomplished the feat of putting melodrama's versatility and topicality into a nutshell. Once unpacked, this quotation offers a whole number of reasons why melodrama still matters. To begin with, melodrama's traditional denomination as a genre does not do it justice, 'genre' implying a formalistic rigidity which is incompatible with melodrama's ubiquity and flexibility. Buckley here agrees with Linda Williams, who maintains that melodrama has become the basic narrative mode underlying American culture and not an aberrant form of mass entertainment (1998: 50). The melodramatic imagination, to use Peter Brooks's term coined in his eponymous study (1976/1995), provides discursive patterns which are employed outside the arts and inform journalistic writing, news coverage and the depiction of social conflict, for example. Melodrama provides a "public stage" (Hadley 1995: 21) for at first sight non-melodramatic conflicts or occurrences, be that news coverage of important law cases for example, the death of Lady Diana, instances of political rhetoric in election campaigns or legislative processes.

The function of melodrama has always been twofold. From its early days on it has been a form of rehearsal: melodrama re-enacted on stage the experience of chaos, trauma and terror that the population had experienced during the French Revolution (see Buckley 2006 and 2009, Brooks 1976/1995). Melodrama did both: while in Pre-Revolutionary days it had incited social change (representing the heartless cruelties inflicted upon the helpless individual by the arbitrary rulings of aristocratic regimes, see Elsaesser 1985: 168–169), it also acted as a deterrent after the Revolution (i.e. supporting a conservative, anti-Revolutionary cause by playing with the populace's fear of chaos or at least by consolidating a traditional value system). While the French Revolution was the trigger, the by far more comprehensive backdrop, which can only be hinted at in this introduction, are underlying processes of modernization. The long nineteenth century was characterized by interrelated social, economic and political phenomena such as individualization (i.e. the individual's detachment from traditional communities), domestication (including the human mastery of nature

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as well as the individual's estrangement from it) and secularization (often melodrama is said to take place in a post-Providential or, to use Peter Brooks's (1976/1995) term, "post-sacred" world). Melodrama has thus been a testing ground for conflicts arising from these massive cultural and social changes.

Another function of melodrama is abbreviation. Melodrama compresses complex social conflicts. It responds to social change and its challenges, wherein also lies its recipe for survival and renewal: melodrama knows how to adapt its form amidst new social configurations and cultural shifts. While following simple structures and employing somehow predictable formulae, melodrama has always managed to re-energize itself by clothing its more serious concerns in palatable, if not downright fashionable, shapes making it reconcilable with the taste of a mass audience.

As the articles brought together in this special issue show, today's melodrama studies tend to some of the pressing concerns of current scholarly debate such as concepts of intermediality (i.e. reflections on the relations between different media such as film and literature, the use of music as an important aspect of melodrama), the divide between high culture and 'low brow' entertainment (which raises the question of the canon and the place of melodrama), emotion and affect studies and aspects of globalization. The articles presented here throw light on each of these and other critical points of interest.

Since they also act as pointers towards possible directions of melodrama research in the future, it is worth elaborating on the following seven questions in more detail:

1) *What gaps are there in melodrama studies?* Despite ample research on the history and development of melodrama, its different forms and ramifications, we argue that there are niches and blind spots in melodrama research that still need to be elucidated. Thus, some of the articles included in this issue put melodrama into a historical perspective. They thereby do not seek to retell its historical development but examine the forms of melodrama in hitherto little explored contexts such as the theatrical subgenre of the allegory or melodrama's connections with the novel. Valentine Cunningham's contribution "Melodrama and Victorian Fiction" discusses melodrama as a mode of urban Victorian reality. Realist novels by Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot give much room to melodramatic moments in their emblematic plots and actions, Manichaean character depiction and theatrical description of spaces and places such as London streets, interiors of lodging houses, graveyards and underworlds, simply because "Victorian reality being what it is means that to do realism is inevitably to do melodrama". With his essay Cunningham develops a new category of melodrama research that could be called 'spatial melodrama'. In her article "Melodrama and Narrative Fiction" Julia Straub, too, treads new ground by suggesting a typology

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of melodrama in narrative fiction in order to chart this complex, ubiquitous and notoriously versatile mode of literary expression, paying special attention to processes of metaization (see question 7 below). Erik Redling's article "Passionate Allegories: Staging Romance in Civil War Melodrama" deals with playwrights from the North and the South of the US and their use of pictorial allegory in civil war plays. Neglected until now by research, these amateur playwrights discovered that "the conventions of melodrama had immense allegorical potential that could be used to further their passionate propaganda: The Manichaean worldview, the moral polarization (good vs. bad), the romantic triangle (hero, heroine, and villain)". Civil war melodrama and allegory formed a new coalescence in order to heighten the emotional appeal which was also supported by allegorical tableaux. Redling demonstrates that these passionate allegorical tableaux were also used in early silent films such as Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) and D. W. Griffith's civil war epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), but to different ends.

2) *What is the place of melodrama in today's visual culture? Where does melodrama need to be located? What is its aesthetic impact? And are the categories of high culture and 'low brow' entertainment relevant for discussions of melodrama*? The recent popularity and critical acclaim of richly produced TV series such as *Homeland* and *Breaking Bad* have twisted genre expectations and suggest that changes in the media landscape (such as the reappraisal of TV as the new 'big screen') will affect modes of story-telling and our understanding of what constitutes quality entertainment. Generally speaking, for the last decades it has been in visual culture that we find the most productive engagement with melodrama. In his contribution "An American Odyssey of Suffering: Aesthetic Strategies in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*", Scott Loren's starting point for his discussion of McQueen's Oscar-winning film melodrama is Linda Williams's seminal study, *Playing the Race Card* (2001), on racial melodrama as a mode which enables mass American culture to talk about unresolved social tensions and race. Through an examination of the narrative and aesthetic strategies as well as the generic conventions of McQueen's film, this article "considers the ways in which the film, as a racial melodrama, negotiates ambivalences and contingencies of historic national trauma through a narrative of Manichaean moral legibility". Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's contribution "Militarism and Melodrama: The Cultural Work of Combat Death" is likewise dedicated to the medium of film and examines the role of melodrama in three popular American war films of the post-WW II era: *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Platoon* (1986) and *Top Gun* (1986). The dynamics of the melodramatic death have so far not been in the focus of scholars of melodrama. Soltysik's claim is that there are fundamental affinities between melodrama and war film due to their "shared intolerance for

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the notion of death as meaningless and in vain"; both film genres try to ascribe meaning to suffering, martyrdom and death, war film by turning dead combatants into virtuous victims and heroes of the nation.

3) *What is melodrama's position with regard to the current surge of interest in the intersections of literary studies, philosophy, psychology and cognitive science?* The study of affect and emotion has elicited interdisciplinary co-operation. The place of melodrama in these debates, as a form of expression relying on an aesthetic of effects, still needs to be clarified and made more prominent; its association with these debates and advances, in particular with regard to film studies, is justified and calls for further research. Alexa Weik von Mossner's article "Melodrama, Emotion, and Environmental Advocacy: A Cognitive Approach to *Erin Brockovich*" explores the emotional and political impact of melodramatic storytelling in Steven Soderbergh's acclaimed biopic on environmental hazards. The affective appeal as well as the emotional fabric and contagion of the movie are investigated using recent cognitive film theory and cultural studies, since it is cognitive approaches to film emotion which "give us a much better understanding of these emotionalizing techniques than psychological concepts and thus help us to understand more fully how film melodramas engage with viewers".

4) *Melodrama's roots go back to the Revolutionary upheavals in late eighteenth-century Europe. Its success has traditionally been explained as a consequence of the gradual loss of religious belief in the Western world (see Brooks). How can we reconcile its Western origins with the globalized structures underlying many forms of cultural production today?* By making reference to the "Anglophone world" in the title of this special edition, we take into account a lively and multifaceted transatlantic melodramatic tradition. But even more so, we suggest that melodrama is not merely the product of Western figures of thought, medial forms and modes of representation, but that it has also led to the production of interesting culturally hybrid formats such as Bollywood cinema. Birgit Neumann's contribution "The Politics of Staging Emotions in Contemporary Bollywood Films: Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* (2010)" investigates how melodrama as a filmic genre and mode prestructures the articulation and interpretation of emotions, their circulation in and between cultures as well as how they affect the recipients in contemporary Bollywood cinema in which this prime global cultural form for staging emotions and structuring the recipients' affective economies finds an extremely powerful expression. She argues that "Bollywood films exploit melodrama's excessive emotionality to gauge pressing social and political issues of contemporary India", which they help to regulate. At the same time, both films she analyses use melodrama's emphasis on feeling, excess and grandiose gesture for renegotiating Indianness and the validity of Indian values in an era of globalization.

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5) *How does melodrama today respond to changing world orders and increasingly complex economic crises of a global scale that exceed the black and white pictures that melodrama tends to draw?* Melodrama has always provided meaningful commentary on social conflict and crises. For example, gender relations and roles have figured prominently in the melodramatic imagination right from the start, the melodramatic heroine being closely entwined with notions of female virtue and gender propriety. Melodrama dwells on various forms of social ostracism that cast individuals in the role of outsiders who do not comply with society's normative expectations. In the recent past, the costs of globalization and the economic crises of the new millennium have become the subject of melodrama. Despite its abbreviation of social conflict, melodrama does not blunt the edge of social conflicts or its criticism as Ralph Poole's contribution "Wasting God's Gift? The Ruined City and the 'Melodramatic Penis'" on the HBO television series *Hung* (2009–2011), with its setting in Detroit, demonstrates. While this contribution looks at a range of photographers, musicians, cityscapists and filmmakers who have dealt with the ruined city of Detroit in a gendered way (Detroit as a case of 'fallen' victimhood associated with female virtuousness gone awry), it is the highly melodramatic and "ludicrously comic" *Hung* and its working with and against notions of decay that is the hub of Poole's investigation. The male body as commodity and the feminization that goes with it are discussed as a tangible sign of economic and spiritual crisis as well as a sign of the series's conflicting gender politics: *Hung* exemplifies in a unique way "those conflicting implications of representing Detroit in disturbingly gendered melodramatic terms".

6) *What interactions between different media does melodrama depend on and instrumentalize to ensure its continual renewal?* Since its beginnings as a theatrical genre with ties to other mixed media artefacts such as the operetta, melodrama has embraced a medial and formal hybridity. The ease with which melodrama switches between media reflects its general adaptability and potential for transformation. Very often, melodramatic films are based on bestselling books; many melodramatic plays in the nineteenth century had first been successful novels or were then turned into films. Verbal communication tends to be outperformed by non-verbal means of expression. While we endorse a generous and flexible understanding of melodrama as a mode, we would argue that the processes of transmission between e.g. a play and a film and the required transgression of media boundaries should not be glossed over (see e.g. Neumann's, Redling's and Straub's comments on *tableaux*).

7) *As a mode of expression historically closely entwined with processes of modernization, how do melodramatic structures superimpose themselves on practices of representation?* Julia Straub highlights the philosophical implications of melodrama's use of conspicuous coincidence and contingency as we find them

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in Hardy's and James's fiction. Her use of the term 'meta-melodrama' enriches its technical meaning, i.e. self-reflectivity (see e.g. Schäfer et al. 2013: 15–16; Straub 2014), by touching upon the more philosophical concerns that feed into melodrama and its representation of social realities which often clash with characters's dream worlds – melodrama's main source of conflict or crisis. Since its beginnings, melodrama has explored the human desire to make sense of the unexplainable and to seek justice in times of perceived arbitrariness (in a secular but ultimately spiritual or moral sense). The psychological strings that are pulled by melodrama thus refer back to the human longing for mastery of the uncontrollable or at least for an understanding of the random. Into this philosophical side of melodrama is inscribed a meta-fictional element since melodrama's response to the modern experience of contingency echoes processes of fiction-making.

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The eight articles assembled here offer fresh approaches to our topic "Melodrama: Staging Emotions in the Anglophone World" and have been written by scholars from various disciplines and fields: literary scholars, cultural critics as well as film critics. Each of these scholars approaches the topic of "melodrama" from a different angle, investigates different subjects and media and does so with different methods – they all help to chart the rich range of old and new melodramatic modes. The common denominator of all contributions is their investigation into writers' and film makers' interest in creating emotional impact and enhancing the expressivity of their works. As editors of this special issue of *Anglia* we would also like to use this opportunity to publish a call for members from the "Melodrama Research Consortium" presided by Matthew Buckley (Rutgers University). The MRC aims to bring together scholars from all over the world working on melodrama and actively recruits new members. A project description is included at the end of the article section of this special edition.

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