

Let Your Heart Be Stupid

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No cinematic experience is quite as humiliating as crying at a bad film. I do it all the time. To date, I've counted eighty-six films that have made me cry, and only about half are, by my judgement, actually any good. It is respectable, even sophisticated, to recall shedding a tear at the ending of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* or welling up at the plaintive ballad sung by the dying civil servant in Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*. It is much less dignified to admit to crying at *Shrek 2* or *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*. Unfortunately, this kind of crying is – like other somatic responses we experience in the cinema (laughter, fear, arousal) – always punishingly involuntary.

It feels all the more mortifying when a film wields this power cheaply, like a conman too lazy to pull off his smartest scam because he knows you'll just as easily fall for a dumb one. Near the end of *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, it is not difficult to recognise the triteness of having Bridget's son pointedly mention a song his dead father loved, only to sing that very song in the following scene. An intelligent viewer can easily see that, to its filmmaker, this moment of supposed sincerity is entirely choreographed and mechanical, no different to rigging a light or recording room tone: about accomplishing a task, and nothing more.

But intelligence offers no protection against the irrational spontaneity of tears. In his book *Pictures & Tears*, the art historian James Elkins recounts watching *Terms of Endearment*, a film so gaudily intent on lachrymosity that its tagline literally contained the phrase 'come to cry'. Elkins expected himself to be immune to its sentimental gimmicks: 'we', speaking of himself and his fellow scholars, 'know how visual art works, and we are accustomed to analyzing how art produces its effects.' But watching *Terms of Endearment*, Elkins – the E. C. Chadbourne Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago – cried anyway. 'Like Pavlov's dogs', Elkins writes, 'we respond to them even when we don't want to.'

Terms of Endearment is a film one might broadly describe as ‘melodramatic’. Its tear-jerking reputation relies entirely on tawdry, excessive sentimentality – a turbulent romance, a cancer death – all precisely engineered to extract maximum pathos with minimal effort. Pauline Kael called this the film’s ‘calculated humanity’. It is, for large stretches, impossible to take seriously: one is expected to sit there and accept Shirley MacLaine falling madly in love with a libidinous, pot-bellied former astronaut, or Debra Winger having her heart broken by a character named ‘Flap’.

What is more puzzling is that while ‘melodramatic’ is almost always used pejoratively, many of the most celebrated films of the classical Hollywood period – *Casablanca*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Rebel Without a Cause* – could be fairly labelled as such. Indeed, melodrama has attracted increasing attention from film historians since the 1970s, when, like film noir, it emerged as a way of interpreting a portion of the film canon united by an intuitively recognisable set of tricks and tropes. Where noir has low-key lighting and gloomy voiceovers, melodrama has exaggeration: swooning romance, tearful anguish, implausible plot contrivances (a recent BFI season on melodrama was simply titled ‘Too Much’).

Yet unlike noir, which today carries with it an air of cinephilic sophistication, melodrama remains a little sullied, a little vulgar. Reading the critical literature on melodrama, one is struck struck by how often the form is described in negative terms (Haskell notes their ‘plot and character implausibilities’; ‘no one could possibly take [them] seriously’, writes Basinger). Yet these same scholars celebrate melodrama as an important and valuable medium that deserves greater respect. It is as if even the genre’s staunchest defenders cannot seem to forgive its vices.

Perhaps this is partly due to the form’s origins. The earliest melodrama films – cliffhanger-laden serials like *The Perils of Pauline*, for example – drew heavily on populist Victorian stage plays that often relied on simple stock characters and sensationalist storylines about death and betrayal. There was, therefore, something lurid and jaundiced about these films from the beginning, always appealing to the lowest common denominator, always trying to shock more than inspire. The acting style of early silent melodramas was particularly theatrical, in part due to the source material,

but also because actors compensated for the lack of dialogue through exaggerated physicality, gestures and expressions that to modern audiences border on parodic.

And yet these films, these plays, were extraordinarily popular. They offered excitement, passion, romance. They depicted a way of living that was not normal, and was therefore frowned upon, but they also revealed that such a way of living might be possible, that the rules of society were not fixed and immutable, that one might really be able to feel such profound extremity of emotion and circumstance. And, of course, they made their audiences cry.

This queasy contradiction between idiocy and poignancy, abjection and the sublime, is perhaps easier for us to digest in a more highbrow form, like opera. When, for example, Violetta takes the entirety of the third act of *La traviata* to die, we know this is ridiculous and extravagant, but we accept that within this absurdity there is a kernel of pure, profound transcendence, that somehow the intensity of emotion on display, with its soaring strings and passionate arias, somehow pushes past its own inanity and becomes beguiling and mystical.

What is so different, one might ask, about melodrama? Today, we are so unaccustomed to the baroque gesturality of silent movie acting in a film like, say, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, that it shocks us to see Janet Gaynor weeping so effusively, to see the whites of George O'Brien's eyes wrenched wide open as he gasps. It might shock us so much that we find it stupid or laughable. But we might find that the tears flow regardless. For melodrama, this response – revulsion and profundity all at once – is indeed no contradiction at all, but rather a fact of life: that the things that disgust or appal us may also be the things that move us most deeply.

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Of those eighty-six films that have made me cry, five of them star Barbara Stanwyck, who was the subject of a retrospective at this year's Festival Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna. These are: *Stella Dallas*, *There's Always Tomorrow*, *Ball of Fire*, *The Lady Eve* and *All I Desire*. The first of those

has made me cry more than any other film; when I watched it at the Cinema Arlecchino, I was crying so much that the person next to me – a somewhat crotchety middle-aged man who had earlier told me off for inadvertently taking someone else's seat – was compelled to place a clumsily sympathetic hand on my shoulder.

Stanwyck's melodramas were famous for inducing this sort of reaction in her audiences, making them cry to the point of embarrassment – notably, not only women, the principal audience for melodramas (sometimes referred to as 'women's pictures'), but also men. As film historian Molly Haskell has pointed out, critics reviewing Stanwyck's films 'acknowledg[ed], somewhat shamefacedly, what would become a common theme in subsequent reviews: Here was a woman who could make grown men cry.'

Of course, Stanwyck's best strength was her versatility – two of those five films are comedies, not melodramas. She was equally comfortable in both screwballs and noirs, both weepies and westerns. Nonetheless, there is what you might call a Stanwyck 'type'. She is often a working woman, a nurse (*Night Nurse*) or dancer (*Ball of Fire*); perhaps later she becomes a housewife (*Double Indemnity*). In any case, she generally comes from a humble background but has achieved, through work or marriage, some kind of upward mobility (*Stella Dallas*: 'I don't want to be like me [...] but like the people in the movie, doing everything well-bred').

But despite – or perhaps because of this – she never quite manages to fit in. No matter how hard she tries, she is always the woman who is judged as the 'wrong type' or 'not good enough'. As a result, she is worldly-wise, straight-talking, tough-as-nails – yet she has a lonesome tenderness within her, if only someone would let her show it (*The Lady Eve*: 'you don't know very much about girls [...] the bad ones aren't as bad [as you think they are]').

If Stanwyck was versatile, then she was also consistent (the above roles span from 1931 to 1956), and she suffused even the blithest of her comic roles with this pathos, this indignant unbelonging. The contrast may be clearest with Marilyn Monroe, who, like Stanwyck, often played women who wielded their beauty and sexuality to secure wealthy husbands. Monroe's charm, however, lies in her playful, breezy insouciance: even when she appears out of place in a rich man's world, she is never out of sorts.

In a Monroe comedy, although she finds herself in frequent and obvious jeopardy, one never feels that she is ever in any real danger, precisely because *she* never feels that she is in any real danger: so an arrest for theft in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* becomes instead an opportunity for mischievous identity swapping; a dubious dalliance with a fake oil baron in *How to Marry a Millionaire* eventually leads to a wholesome meet cute.

But in a Stanwyck comedy, one is painfully aware that the fall is always just around the corner; the danger is not only real, but imminent, unless she can do something about it. Another way of saying this might be that while Monroe's characters seek wealth for the sake of fun and pleasure, Stanwyck's characters seek wealth for the sake of status and security. And while a person might not suffer greatly from a lack of fun, one can certainly suffer greatly from a lack of security.

Likewise, if there is something dramatic about Stanwyck's comic roles, there is also something comic about her dramatic roles. In fact, several of them are really quite stupid. In *All I Desire*, the third-act turn hinges on Stanwyck's character accidentally shooting her handsy ex with a rifle, an incident that turns the entire town against her – with the ever-so-convenient exception of her estranged husband, who decides he loves her after all. One scene in *Night Nurse* involves a bootlegger stealing milk so a dying child can be given a 'milk bath' cure. The defining image of *Stella Dallas* is perhaps Stanwyck adorned with a puff sleeve dress, gigantic bow headband, polka-dot veil, arctic fox fur stole and no less than thirteen bangles.

This over-the-top absurdity is, again, characteristic of melodramas of the period. Take William Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, whose ending entirely flouts the novel in order to show us Cathy dying in Heathcliff's arms, asking with bulging doe eyes to see the moors one last time. Or Juanita Moore on her deathbed in *Imitation of Life* – her egregious suffering matched only by the angelic patience with which she endures it – saying of her cartoonishly callous estranged daughter, 'if I loved her too much, I'm sorry'.

All of this is stupid: its beauty too gaudy, its morality too Manichean, its tragedy too outlandish to possibly be read with a straight face. In melodrama, though, such stupidity is a virtue. Melodrama has no room

for ambiguity, depth or complexity – these are the vices of bland, staid, white-bread bourgeois realism, which leaves the senses unstirred and the heartstrings unplucked.

Nor does melodrama have any room for irony or self-consciousness. This is, perhaps, how we might distinguish a melodramatic sensibility from a camp one. Both make a virtue out of exaggeration, but the pleasure of camp comes from its droll, detached appreciation of a work's lavishly absurd excess, of what Susan Sontag (who mentions Stanwyck in her famous essay on the subject) calls 'a seriousness that fails'. By contrast, a true appreciation of melodrama refuses to admit any such failure. To the melodramatic viewer, the correct response to such excess is to embrace it wholeheartedly, to accept it on its own terms no matter how silly or sentimental. It is an emotional, not an aesthetic response; text, not subtext; simply 'good', not 'so bad it's good'.

Melodrama is shameless, then, not in the sense that it is conscious of its own ridiculousness and simply brazen and unapologetic about it, but rather because it is wholly unconscious of its own ridiculousness, and in fact believes wholeheartedly in the truth of the emotions it expresses. This is stupid, yes, but what emotion that makes life worth living is not stupid? Longing for something unattainable is stupid. Grief for someone who cannot be brought back is stupid. Love is the stupidest of all; Roland Barthes was right to ask, 'What is stupider than a lover?' Melodrama says: let your heart be stupid, and thereby accept the delights this submission can offer you.

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What's so realistic about realism anyway? About the mundane routines of everyday life, mimetically rendered? These types of scenes may be recognisable in a literal sense, but think about how much of one's inner life they leave out. Unlike a novel, where interiority can be expressed explicitly within narration and thereby externalise internal emotions, a realist film can only imply or suggest it. But in a melodrama, interiority *can* be externalised. Joy, sorrow, desire: all of these emotions manifest physically. A character swooning, fainting, clutching their face in tears, making grand

declarations of love or hate. They also manifest in the form of the film itself: take Douglas Sirk and his reliance on lurid, iridescent lighting that frequently defied the laws of optics. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, himself a great melodramatist, said of Sirk's cinematography that 'shadows where there shouldn't be any make feelings plausible which one would rather have left unacknowledged'.

Perhaps this is why melodrama makes us cringe so much: it is willing to say out loud the emotions we would prefer never to be acknowledged; the sentences we whisper into diary entries or trusted friends' ears but would be horrified if they were shared with a colleague or distant relative.

No film of classic Hollywood embodies this more than *Stella Dallas*. Its title character, born Stella Martin, is the daughter of a factory worker, desperate to escape poverty and 'get in with the right people'. She finds a way out by marrying Stephen Dallas, one of the factory's upper management, for whom she completely transforms herself in order to fit into this new upper-class world – yet from the beginning, he cannot help but look down at her, complaining about her dancing and her earrings and her 'cheap imitation necklace'.

This becomes the pattern that continues throughout her adult life: tireless attempts to impress the wealthy milieu she now finds herself in, repaid with snide contempt. She is scorned by Laurel's teacher for the crime of laughing too much with a male friend on a train carriage; she prepares a dazzling birthday party spread for Laurel's classmates, but no-one shows up; she steps out in her most glamorous outfit at a luxury hotel, only to be viciously mocked by Laurel's friends for what they perceive as her offensive garishness ('I didn't know they let that kind of woman loose anymore,' one of them scoffs).

Stella, in her bows and bangles, is the epitome of embarrassing excess; she embarrasses everyone except her daughter, who sees what is truly in her heart: 'It's when you've cried together and when you've been through things together, that's when you seem to love the most,' Laurel opines. And yet it is this humiliation that drives Stella to make the ultimate sacrifice – not of her own life, but of this very love between herself and her daughter, the only thing that has brought her any joy in a life of constant mistreatment, because she believes that doing so will protect her daughter

from the mockery she has suffered. In the end, she believes that the best thing she can pass on to the person she loves most is not love, but freedom from shame.

I feel sick thinking about Stella's decision. I feel sick partly because I don't know that I would decide differently. In my worst moments, I also think I could accept no-one ever truly knowing or loving me, as long as it meant never feeling the disgrace of opening yourself up to someone and finding they hate what they see.

This is an awful, ugly thought, not one I feel happy to say out loud – even sharing it here feels like a sordid confession. I know that I should know better, that it is wrong to think something like this. But I think that you, too, must have an ugly thought of your own, something horrible that you know to be wrong and untrue, yet which you nonetheless believe. But you don't tell this to anyone, do you?

If nothing else, this is something that makes melodrama valuable: that it so readily and unequivocally makes the unsayable sayable, that it can – as Sirk points out – 'bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is all inside them and can't break through'. It cannot redeem you for this, because life will not redeem you for this. But it can offer you a way out of the debilitating, unwieldy complicatedness of daily life, with all its tangled subtleties and ambiguities, and remind you that, when you get to the bottom of it, things are in fact very simple: you are happy or you are sad, you love or you have your heart broken, you win or you lose, you live or you die.