

# Introduction

## Stirring Emotion, Assessing Progress

*Melodrama is not so much exaggerated as uninhibited.*

Eric Bentley

*You cannot define Drama and Melodrama so that they shall be reciprocally exclusive; great drama has something melodramatic in it, and the best melodrama partakes of the greatness of drama.*

T. S. Eliot

*If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering, then the operative mode is melodrama.*

Linda Williams

We have seen this story a hundred times over: star-crossed lovers pledge faithfulness as they are torn apart by forces greater than themselves as we bravely hold back our sympathetic tears. Or, in another case, a hero escapes peril at the last possible second while the villain swears revenge, and we gasp, then either nervously chuckle or let out an incredulous groan, recognizing that we have fallen for the bait of melodrama. To be sure, the signatures of melodrama are familiar to all of us, even though we often struggle to articulate a clear understanding of what melodrama entails or to recognize its very pervasiveness. Yet, on any given day, we are bombarded from all angles with melodrama in many different forms, each of which applies dichotomic reasoning while striving to affect its public by conjuring emotion.

We perceive the ineffable quality of melodrama in the thrill of cliffhanger action movies. When reading or watching the daily news, we are repulsed by the abject horrors of crime, but equally are absorbed by the sentimental joys of human-interest pieces. We re-live the exuberance of romance and the pangs of rejection when we listen to sappy love songs on the radio. We are intrigued and give ourselves over to the plots of whodunit mystery novels, and, inevitably, we are goaded one way or another by polarizing political discourse aimed to tug directly at our patriotic heartstrings, provoke fear, or conjure up a deep sense of moral indignation. Indeed, the impulses of melodramatic narrative seem to be everywhere we look. Melodrama is located equally in a longing search for some greater meaning beyond the surface of an ever more superficial, technologic hyper-present where historic time is accelerated progressively and desired truths are increasingly ephemeral, as well as in an auto-reflexively ironic form as has become fashionable in the postmodern era.

But as the resort to melodrama as a basic frame of discourse grows in the postmodern epoch where the negative stigma attached to mass media culture is progressively erased, a methodological conundrum surfaces as we are left with a diagnostic category so overly applied that it runs the risk of losing its interpretative strength. If everything may be interpreted through the lens of melodrama, or if everything is somehow inherently melodramatic, how can we then define where the basic narrative of drama (or that of “reality”) ends and melodrama begins? If we generally understand melodrama, a hyperbolic form of expression, to be that which exceeds everyday reality and basic narrative conventions, then it would follow that it should be possible to properly isolate melodrama from the quotidian, realist experience. But is it? Is it feasible to interpret both textual and actual events independently of their often-unconscious melodramatic underpinnings, or should we consider the melodramatic as that which fundamentally conditions our conception of the real and, in turn, artistic representations of that reality?

We might begin to answer these questions by noting that the connotations of reality –always multiple, always fragmentary, always partisan– are made clear only when inserted into narrative, and as Peter Brooks has lucidly noted, the narrative mode which fundamentally informs our modern sensibility is none other than that of melodrama (*Imagination* 21). It becomes apparent, then, that melodrama functions not only as a mode for comprehending dramatic action in a given text, but also as a modern means of understanding social and historical processes that are too abstract to grasp in any sort of quantitative manner. Melodrama thus provides a narrative structure that facilitates an un-

derstanding of the social. And it is through an active emotional dialogue with the melodramatic text (understood in its broadest sense) that the reader participates in the production of comprehension. Artistic and actual events, perceived through the melodramatic cipher, are grasped as emotionally accentuated episodes to be read as a sequence of interrelated occurrences, engaging the public's understanding of social order and the means by which it may be altered and bettered.

As an inescapable frame of reference for the comprehension of quotidian and larger historical events alike, the ubiquity of melodrama is a basic fact of our contemporary globalized reality, and clearly, Latin American society and its cultural products are not impervious to melodramatic influence. The melodramatic components of the (post)modern Latin American social experience indeed are readily evident to even the most casual observer. For instance, even an audience unfamiliar with Latin American television programming (including sit-coms, conventional dramas, reality shows, news programs, etc.) can easily identify the emotional theatrics of the region's most popular melodramatic export, the *telenovela* (the Latin American equivalent of the United States' soap opera).<sup>1</sup> Yet, when viewed more closely, we may observe that the persistent appeal of melodrama in Latin America goes well beyond that which may be accessed in contemporary television programming. From the era of the wars for independence during the first decades of the nineteenth century onward, melodrama has played an essential role in the process of how Latin America narrates its fictions and how it conceptually organizes and works through conflicts embedded in its very social fabric. Moving fluidly between the spheres of fictional and actual events, melodrama's adaptability is evidenced in the contemporary Latin American context when it is located equally in "serious" or "high" literature grappling with political and social conflicts, as well as in the bombastic rhetoric voiced by the region's most outspoken political figures.

To this end, we may note two distinct examples: Peruvian author Alonso Cueto's novel *La hora azul* (2005), and President Hugo Chávez's use of what *New York Times* reporter Simon Romero has identified as political theater in

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly the producers of the recent Will Ferrell film *Casa de mi padre* (2012) were counting on the audience's melodramatic recognition and understanding of parodying Mexican films spanning from the so-called "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema up to the blood-soaked narco thrillers of present day. However, the film, which was directed by Matt Piedmont, reportedly grossed just less than 5.9 million dollars, failing to recoup its production costs and evidencing what we might call a melodramatic discounter.

exhuming the remains of Venezuelan forefather Simón Bolívar. In the first case, Cueto's novel attempts to account for the period of political violence suffered in Peru from 1980 to 2001 through the narrative of family melodrama.<sup>2</sup> To this end, Cueto utilizes an emotionally charged lexicon and repertoire of images to analyze the family as a site of veiled identities and affective bonds, two hallmarks of domestic melodramatic narration. In the latter example, Hugo Chávez employed his melodramatic theatrics—scouring the past for hidden truths, revealing the guilt of a villainous other—in attempts to evidence a Colombian plot to murder the Andean region's founding father, so stirring up the rivalry between Venezuela and its ideologically opposed neighbor during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe. My point is not that these are somehow base or trivial ways of coming to grips with social strife or conceiving political discourse. To the contrary, Cueto's novel is rightly among the most critically recognized works of recent Peruvian fiction, and Chávez's political legacy holds an indisputable position of importance in deciding the course of contemporary Latin American politics. Rather, what these two disparate examples manifest is the wide range of formats that melodrama may assume when informing the Latin American social imaginary.

Melodrama's unique ability to narrate and make sense of the Latin American social experience is fostered by an understanding of social relations in keeping with the historical development of the region. Melodrama thrives in the Latin American context because its ostensibly all-or-nothing categories of narration (good and evil, fidelity and betrayal, suffering and vindication) attempt to impart a hopeful outlook, while simultaneously playing upon what the public remembers and has learned from the polarizing social realities that gave form to the region's history.<sup>3</sup> And the tale that is Latin America's history is indeed rife with melodrama. The traces of what we will later recognize as key elements of melodramatic narration are central to the basic posits of the problematic foundational love story between Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his indigenous mistress Doña Marina, "la Malinche." In this case we may read history as a tale of romance between an imposing adventurer and an ill-fated indigenous woman, which ultimately produces a trail of destruction and an illegitimate child. Accordingly, the means by which this historical event is

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<sup>2</sup> I have written elsewhere on Cueto's novel and its relation to Iván Thays's *Un lugar llamado Oreja de Perro* (2008) through melodrama. See bibliography for complete information.

<sup>3</sup> For an engaging discussion of modern history and its relationship with melodrama, see Matthew S. Buckley's "Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss."

frequently accessed has all the makings of a successful *telenovela*, which is to say that Latin American history proper indeed begins with the components of stories told time and time again in serialized melodramatic fiction: adventure, passion, and the ramifications of love gone wrong.

Moreover, in recent historical times, boom/bust agricultural cycles together with growth and regression in mineral exploitation—both of which continue to shape contemporary Latin American economies without entirely complying with the promise of sustained import substitution industrialization—gave birth to varying sectors of social and political elite, some conservative and some revolutionary. These cycles also gave rise to a proliferating underclass that dared only to dream of acceding to the domain of social power. The abyss that has separated, and continues to separate, the *haves* from the *have nots* fomented an understanding of social interactions and a form of social imagining that is common to melodrama: an “us” against “them” form of viewing society that may easily adopt different ideological positions, depending on the social milieu in play. But the limitations of such dichotomic comprehension of social interactions—a schematic perception reflected, but challenged, in artistic works of Latin American melodrama—leads to blind spots in understanding the nature of social workings. Things are never quite as simple as they seem, yet, through melodrama, every attempt is made to present a world in stark black and white contrast.

Focusing on melodrama’s dual capacity to narrate stories about Latin American society and to provide a means of comprehending social structure, this volume analyzes melodrama’s problematic attempts to configure social narratives of the twentieth century in the literary genres of regionalism, *indigenismo*, urban realism, socialist realism, and the novel of the Mexican Revolution. Reading melodrama as a postcolonial aesthetic, this study observes how the melodramatic mode at once represents new forms of identities resulting from the (post) colonial process, while at the same time taking on the precepts of the melodramatic aesthetic itself. Influenced by the historical developments that shaped the region, Latin American melodrama reformulates the most basic characteristics of the aesthetic in order to make it more applicable to the social realities of the Latin American reader/spectator. Latin American melodrama is thus revealed as a malleable structure that is adapted and readapted so as to provide a means of comprehending social change across narrative genres. But in recognizing the wide-ranging applications of melodrama, this study presents neither a condemnation nor a glorification of melodramatic aesthetics. Rather, my aim is to show just how melodrama attempts to demonstrate the possibilities for social justice, but at the same problematizes and often unwittingly betrays the tenets of the

melodramatic mode, thus showing the dynamic complexity of Latin American melodrama as a representational paradigm of social narrative.

It is worth noting that the aesthetic mode that so essentially figures into the comprehension of Latin American art and reality should come not from the autochthonous wellspring, but from a foreign context. Such an observation cannot help but highlight the postcolonial character of modern Latin American melodrama, but it also serves as a point of departure to consider the region's adaptations of the melodramatic format. Before it provided the aesthetic foundation for the *telenovela* so widely consumed on a daily basis, melodrama passed through numerous social contexts. It was sometimes praised and just as frequently stigmatized as a "low" narrative mode because of the ostensibly simplistic vision of reality that it presented.

As is generally recognized, melodrama was born in late eighteenth century Europe, specifically during the French Revolution, the historical moment that "marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch)" (Brooks, *Imagination* 15). This definitive break is crucial as it creates a social and ethical void in which no dominant moral perspective holds sway as the voice of reason, a chasm that the melodramatic aesthetic will attempt to fill. In the aftermath of the Revolution, popular theater set to music and heavily reliant on pantomime became one of the privileged sites where a new morality, in tune with the social views of the newly ascendant bourgeoisie, shored up what it meant to be a citizen in the new state and what values should be upheld in an age of social instability.<sup>4</sup> This new morally and socially didactic theater would later be recognized as melodrama, and Guilbert de Pixérécourt's play *Coelina ou l'enfant du mystère* (*Coelina or the Child of Mystery* [1800]—an adaptation of a popular novel by Ducray-Dumini) is often credited as being the founding work of classical French melodrama (Marcoux 55). Formulaic works filled with angelic characters born to suf-

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's comments on melodrama as a bourgeois aesthetic form are particularly illuminating. Nowell-Smith comments, "In so far as melodrama, like realism, supposes a world of equals, a democracy within the bourgeois strata (alias bourgeois democracy), it also supposes a world without the exercise of social power. The address is to an audience which does not think of itself as possessed of power (but neither as radically dispossessed, disinherited, oppressed) and the world of the subject matter is likewise one in which only middling power relations are present. The characters are neither the rulers nor the ruled, but occupy a middle ground, exercising local power or suffering local powerlessness, within the family or the small town. The locus of power is the family and individual property, the two being connected through inheritance" (269-70).

fer, mustachioed villains bent on swindling the innocent, hidden family ties, and justice exercised in the nick of time quickly found favor beyond France with audiences in the “Minor Houses” of English theater. A host of English playwrights continued to build on the melodramatic repertoire of British theater and, perhaps not surprisingly, melodramatic aesthetics found acceptance in England’s North American colonies. Yet the United States’ first great work of melodrama would not come in theatrical format (though it was quickly adapted to the stage), but as a novel in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist classic, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852).

The common critical tendency has been to focus on the French/English/United States’ triad when discussing the growth and proliferation of melodramatic aesthetics. This is true in spite of the fact that melodrama had an uncomplicated route to Latin America given Spain and Portugal’s continual contact with French culture—particularly in the Napoleonic occupations of the Iberian Peninsula, the historical moment in which the seeds of melodramatic narrative are sown in the “Nuevo Mundo.” And though critical inquiry on melodrama has frequently tended to focus on the analysis of theater, and more recently film, it is important to note that concepts of melodrama across all narrative genres, national boundaries, and historical periods aid in the understanding of the melodramatic mode as it is analyzed in this study. Indeed, the early international constellation of both stage and literary melodrama mentioned above shares certain formulaic characteristics that shape our general understanding of melodrama from this initial point in history up to present day.

In the most general sense, melodrama depends fundamentally on the clash of polarized foes, and most importantly, of opposing forces of virtue and vice. The metaphysical forces of good and evil are embodied in characters whose outward appearance is presented as a spectacle of their inner values—the good are physically attractive while the evil’s exterior ugliness mirrors their inner corruption. In this same sense, everything about those characters is presented as an extension of their polarized moral values, including their names, their personal histories, and their physical gestures.<sup>5</sup> This dichotomic confrontation is posited in such a way as to draw an emotional response from the audience: in seeing virtue threatened, the public is pushed to fear; in seeing the momentary

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Brooks has commented at length on this last aspect of characterization noting that the “bodies of victims and villains must unambiguously signify their status” (*Revolution* 18).

triumphs of villainy, the spectator is meant to be enraged; and, in seeing the eventual triumph of good, the audience experiences the satisfaction of justice.

These emotional guideposts reside at the core of the melodramatic project, but it is equally important to note that melodrama is perceived as following a predictable narrative scheme. Melodrama is commonly understood as beginning in a tranquil setting just before serenity is upset by an unethical action perpetrated by the villain. Injustice then reigns as the hero/victim attempts to reestablish order, and discord is finally resolved as good inevitably triumphs over bad, allowing for recognition of the hero's moral virtue and a happy ending. These basic characteristics of melodrama have brought about much critical discussion questioning if melodrama may be defined as a particular genre unto itself, which is inevitably plagued by the proliferation of settings in which melodrama may be detected (mystery, romance, the western, etc.).<sup>6</sup> We may note, however, that although the characteristics mentioned above are recurrent in melodrama, they are not necessarily present in all melodramatic tales. Such is noted by Robert Heilman in *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (1968) when he observes that melodrama need not end in happiness and may indeed end in disaster, so complicating a static definition of the narrative scheme intrinsic to melodrama (82).

Given the problems inherent to the generic definition of melodrama, it has become the norm to consider the aesthetic following Peter Brooks's criteria of melodrama as a narrative mode, which he first presented in his seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976). Brooks is explicit on the consideration of genre, and he regards melodrama not as "a theme or set of themes, nor the life of the genre per se, but rather melodrama as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force" (xvii). For Brooks, the melodramatic mode works as a "theatrical substratum" (xiii) resid-

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<sup>6</sup> In the discussion of melodrama as a genre, works like Michael Booth's *English Melodrama* (1965), David Grimsted's *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater & Culture* (1987), Frank Rahill's *The World of Melodrama* (1967), and Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou's edited volume *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (1996) have played a pivotal role in the debate. This topic has also been highly volatile in the field of film studies and has informed studies like Rick Altman's article "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," Christine Gledhill's "Rethinking Genre" and Ben Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (2001), to name just a few of the many important contributions.



ing at the heart of a text. Textual theatrics performed through gesture, heightened registers of recorded speech, and hidden meanings decoded from everyday interactions are the measures by which highly emotional messages are communicated and where the “moral occult” is evidenced. Brooks proposes that this “moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth,” summoned up in the text to introduce ethical meaning in a world devoid of any cohesive guiding light (5). Brooks’s characterization of the melodramatic mode also evidences that it is deeply invested in the socio-ethical normativity, which melodrama intends to convey under the stresses of post-sacred society. Providing assurance when political and ecclesiastic authorities are unable to present sufficient explanations for the pressures and social paradigms that envelop the common citizen, melodrama, as a narrative mode, recounts tales that propose to illustrate what are believed to be communal truths surpassing material reason: suffering is part of life, hope springs eternal, the just shall prevail.

It is because of its capacity to speak to the basic hopes and needs of the human condition in the face of social strife that melodrama has played such an integral role in the development of Latin American narrative genres. As Nina Gerassi-Navarro has argued in *Pirate Novels: Fictions of Nation Building in Spanish America* (1999), the melodramatic capacity to convey visions of social stability, as well as to define the external forces that threaten concepts of order, is very much present in the nineteenth century Spanish American novel. As is to be expected, those works that Gerassi-Navarro analyzes are far from ideologically neutral, and the critic comments that such texts were primarily utilized by the ruling elite to conceive its relation to popular classes in the nation-building projects of those fledgling states recently liberated from their colonial yoke (149-51). This fact may serve to evidence the underside of melodrama, an exclusive enterprise concerned primarily with its own retention of power, only tangentially interested in any broad acceptance of social democracy.<sup>7</sup> So much is evidenced by Gerassi-Navarro’s observations regarding the exclusion of women, indigenous, mulatto, and

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<sup>7</sup> In referring to the “underside of melodrama” I am drawing on Benjamin Arditi’s concept of the “underside of populism” as presented in *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (2006). Arditi here recognizes the sometimes undemocratic impulse of populism as it seeks to affirm individual power instead of the broad democratic rights that serve as the rallying cry that mobilizes the populist base. I believe that that same undemocratic populist impulse may be located in those foundational national romances that propose to represent a vision for all, but speak only to a few.

mestizo figures from the plots of these melodramatic works (160, 177). Nonetheless, the presence of what may be read through the optic of the melodramatic mode in these early works of Spanish American literature analyzed by Gerassi-Navarro is significant, as it establishes melodrama as an aesthetic of primary importance in the development of Latin American literature.

Melodrama is, in fact, a basic building block in the foundation of Latin American literature as it emerges concurrently to the inception of the Latin American nation states and, therefore, serves as the first narrative mode through which the tales of the new Latin American nations are told. For this reason, it is necessary to begin to consider melodrama, not as the exception, but as the rule of Latin American literature –not as the dramatic oddity, but as an inevitable contributor at the core of Latin American narrative, the “high” and the “low” all at once. To better conceptualize the centrality of melodrama in Latin American narrative, we may draw upon Linda Williams’s approach to United States’ popular narrative in *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (2001) when she comments, “melodrama can be viewed, then, not as a genre, an excess, or an aberration, but what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film, and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions” (17). Following Williams’s example, I would propose a parallel thesis: as an aesthetic prevalent during the era of independence in Latin America, when the new modern nations sought to affirm and consolidate their sovereignty, melodrama stands historically at the foundation of the Latin American literary canon. This is not to say, however, that all Latin American literature utilizes melodrama, or that there is some melodramatic exceptionalism inherent to the region on the whole. Rather, I would argue that melodrama is the dominant narrative mode when Latin American literature speaks about politics and social development. Melodrama, then, must be rethought, not as a base or simplistic narrative form of poor taste, but as that which essentially informs the Latin American aesthetic imaginary in the spheres of high and mass media formats alike.<sup>8</sup>

The coexistence of ostensibly separate “high,” “low,” and popular cultures in Latin America has been outlined clearly in cultural theory.<sup>9</sup> Néstor García

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<sup>8</sup> As an aside, it is interesting to note that, in his approach to melodrama, Peter Brooks utilizes, perhaps paradoxically, highly canonical works of European literature. This fact would once again suggest the pervasive nature of melodrama and the permeability of the high/popular paradigm.

<sup>9</sup> Noting the permeability of “high” and “popular” art forms in Latin America, José Ignacio Cabrujas comments that because the high/low dichotomy is lived out with-

Canclini's *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990), for one, laid the groundwork for a radical rethinking of the simultaneity of varying historical epochs and cultural formations, bound together by the uneven modernity lived throughout Latin America. This concept of historical and generic heterogeneity is also fundamental to the conception of the postmodern and its literary formulations. Ana María Amar Sánchez's *Juegos de seducción y traición: Literatura y cultura de masas* (2000) takes on this problematic as the critic examines how contemporary literary works make use of elements of mass media culture and thus erode the high/low boundary. The suspension of long held beliefs regarding the hierarchy of genres is particularly relevant to this study, which develops lines of contact between literature, film, and television, and authors whose highly-recognized works have yet to have been classified as melodramatic, perhaps for fear of the stigma that such a connotation might carry.

Yet, within the perspective of this study, to be categorized as melodramatic should not be viewed as an insult to the integrity of a work. Melodrama has bolstered more than two centuries' worth of Latin America's literary production as a common mode of revealing social and political desires, necessities, and shortcomings, a fact evident in a quick glance at the history of foundational Latin American narratives. From José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851) in Argentina to Ignacio Manuel Altamirano's *Clemencia* (1869) in Mexico, from Bernardo Guimarães's *A Escrava Isaura* (1875) in Brazil to Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* (1889) in Peru, melodrama serves as an essential mode of foundational literatures throughout Latin America. Indeed, formed within the romantic imaginary in which values of individual and artistic liberty were the order of the day, each of these works draws upon stark dichotomies of race, class, and political positioning in an attempt to convey an emotionally charged vision of social justice in keeping with the ideological thrust of the text. And, as Doris Sommer has illustrated in *Foundation Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991), in order to comply with their particular socio-political aims, works of classic nationalist fiction like those mentioned above make frequent recourse to romance as a means of illustrating harmonious visions of social order. Yet as a consequence of Sommer's readerly approach, melodrama for many readers has become almost synonymous with the idea of romance, which is not entirely the case.

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in the individual through his or her interactions with narrative and culture, it necessarily leads to contradictions and fusion of the two different spheres as the individual reconciles his or her relationship to cultural events (127).