Cold War Melodrama: Mediating Woman and Nation in Hollywood, Soviet, and Egyptian Cinemas, 1955-1963

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ABSTRACT

Cold War Melodrama: Mediating Woman and Nation in Hollywood, Soviet, and Egyptian Cinemas, 1955-1963

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This project uses melodrama as a critical method for mediating the intersections of gender, genre, and nation in Cold War cinema along and across geopolitical lines. The Cold War period addressed here (1955-1963) covers an important era of revolution, modernization, and nation-building in the wake of World War II. Using historiographic and cultural-historical research, in addition to close analysis of narrative and aesthetics, this project examines the ways that melodrama can be used as a tool for negotiating American, Soviet, and Egyptian transitional cultural periods. Within these film cultures there exist certain overlapping themes of interest that are explored at length: analogies between woman and nation, discourses on domesticity and citizenship, and the role of cultural memory in representations of the recent past.

The case studies in this dissertation show that there is a persistent language of melodrama across issues of gender, nation, and history. By analyzing the connections between these discourses this project contributes to the growing imperative to formulate histories of global feminisms and modernities, while looking to melodrama as a method of political potential. The film analyses in the three chapters provide us with the tools to look both backward and forward to imagine the scope of women's histories and lived experience.

The three chapters correspond to West, East, and Non-Aligned geopolitical positions respectively. The first chapter focuses on the disappearance of the Woman's Film in the 1950s,

and its rediscovery in Hollywood's transnational imagination: a discursive space in which personal and political desire overlap. The second chapter argues that melodrama during the Khrushchev Thaw, influenced by global (neo)realisms, expresses a radical subjectivity and individuality to counter the suppressed understanding of self that had been imposed on a cultural-institutional level during the Stalinist era. Finally, the third chapter examines the role of Egyptian melodrama as a site for fraught analogies between women's liberation and national modernization post-revolution, and the role of Egyptian cinema in a proxy cultural Cold War.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES …………………………………………………………………………vii

INTRODUCTION ………………………………………………………………………………1
Melodrama and History ……………………………………………………………………..4
Theorizing Melodrama ……………………………………………………………………..10
Translating Melodrama Theory …………………………………………………………....20
Cold War Melodrama ……………………………………………………………………...25

CHAPTER ONE- Melodrama at Sea: The 1950s Woman's Film in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination ………………………………………………………………30
Melodrama and (Trans)national Feminist Historiography …………………………………...32
Contextualizing 1950s Melodrama: Beyond Crises of Masculinity and the Housewife-Consumer…………………………………………………………………………...34
Peyton Place and the Trauma of the Domestic ……………………………………………….40
Seeking Love (and War) Abroad: *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* and Cold War Geopolitics……………………………………………………………………………47
Until They Sail and Women's Space in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination ……………...64

CHAPTER TWO- Radical Subjectivity in Soviet Melodrama of the Khrushchev Thaw....73
Melodrama and (Neo)realisms………………………………………………………………...78
Spring on Zarechnaya Street and the Politics and Aesthetics of the Early Thaw……………….83
The Public, The Private, and Morality in Post-Stalin Society…………………………………...95
Trauma and Transgressions in *The Cranes Are Flying*…………………………………...………101

CHAPTER THREE- Modern Women, Modern Egypt: Melodramas of the Nasser Era...112
"State Feminism" On and Off Screen……………………………………………………….118
The Double Bind of the Egyptian New Woman in *I Am Free*…………………………………127
The Open Door and the Freedom to Love……………………………………………………...134
Melodrama, Cultural Memory, and the Method of Contradictions……………………………143

CONCLUSION…………………………………………………………………………..148

BIBLIOGRAPHY………………………………………………………………………..153

AUDIOVISUAL WORKS………………………………………………………………162

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: The rape of Selena (Hope Lange in *Peyton Place,* dir. Mark Robson, 1957)…page
Figure 1.2: Hope Lange in *Peyton Place* (Mark Robson, 1957)
Figure 1.3: The Foreign Correspondent's Club in Hong Kong that serves as Suyin's hospital, and Repulse Bay, in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955).
Figure 1.4: Communism kills love in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.5: Suyin in ecstasy atop the hill (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing,* dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.6: Hong Kong Blue Dress (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing,* dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.7: Mainland Red Dress (Jennifer Jones and William Holden in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.8: Red and Blue on the Mainland (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.9: Red and Blue on the Mainland (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)
Figure 1.10: Skeptical Barbara (Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail,* dir. Robert Wise, 1957)
Figure 1.11: Bazinian Deep Space (Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail,* dir. Robert Wise, 1957)
Figure 1.12: Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail* (Robert Wise, 1957)
Figure 2.1: The warm interiors contrast with the frosty exteriors in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)
Figure 2.2: Connection made and missed ((Nina Ivanova and Nikolai Rybnikov in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)
Figure 2.3: Socialist realist imagery (Nina Ivanova in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Felix Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)
Figure 2.4: The ellipses (Nina Ivanova in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)
Figure 2.5: The missed connection (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.6: Inconsequentiality vs. individuality (Tatyana Samoilova and Aleksandr Shvorin in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.7: Superimposition, melodramatic lighting and tableau (Tatyana Samoilova and Aleksandr Shvorin in The Cranes Are Flying, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.8: The claustrophobia of communal living (Tatyana Samoilova, Aleksandr Shvorin, Vasiliy Merkurev, and Svetlana Kharitonova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.9: The virtuous "fallen woman" (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.10: Canted angle (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 2.11: Expressive chiaroscuro lighting (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
Figure 3.1: The stagey interior vs. the naturalistic city (Lobna Abdel Aziz, Zouzou Nabil, and Hussein Riyad in *I Am Free,* dir.Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

Figure 3.2: Amina (Lobna Abdel Aziz) the shining example in *I Am Free* (Salah Abu Seif, 1959)
Figure 3.3: Sign in Amina's office (*I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)
Figure 3.4: Amina as femme fatale (Lobna Abdel Aziz and Shoukry Sarhan in *I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)
Figure 3.5: Lobna Abdel Aziz in *I Am Free* (Salah Abu Seif, 1959)
Figure 3.6: Dual prisons (Lobna Abdel Aziz and Shoukry Sarhan in *I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)
Figure 3.7: The moment of overlap between newsreel narration and diegetic space in *The Open Door* (Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.8: Mirror imagery (Faten Hamama and Hasan Youssef in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.9: Layla and Hussein on the roof, against the backdrop of war (Faten Hamama and Saleh Selim in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.10: Hollywood film poster on location in *The Open Door* (Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.11: Layla returns to the mirror (Faten Hamama and Shouweikar in *The Open Door*, dir. (Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.12: The reunion, Layla is not yet free (Faten Hamama and Salah Selim in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)
Figure 3.13: Layla leaving the past behind (Faten Hamama in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)

INTRODUCTION

Melodrama shapes narratives of gender, nation, history, and memory. Across genres, borders, and history melodrama persists as a mode of the senses, eliciting our emotions and shaping our experience of the world around us. Yet in Film Studies melodrama has been pigeonholed: at times ignored or derogated as “low” culture, or else relegated to confining national categories that remain mostly western in scope.

This project begins the work of re-theorizing melodrama in a more global context, with a particular emphasis on the role that melodrama plays in mediating cultural politics. By looking to melodrama itself as a method, it is possible to bring existing frameworks of melodrama aesthetics into conversation with more ideologically and culturally specific analysis. The resulting project is an exercise in feminist historiography that embraces the contradictions inherent in melodrama and in the act of translating theory, with the ultimate goal of using a rhetoric of the senses, translation, and memory to probe the existence of a global melodramatic current during the 1950s and early 1960s.

These theoretical quandaries will be examined through case studies in Hollywood, Soviet, and Egyptian cinemas (corresponding to West, East and Non-Aligned geopolitical positions, respectively) spanning the years 1955-1963 and featuring films symptomatic of the interaction between melodrama and cultural politics. This period covers an important era of revolution, modernization, and nation-building in the wake of World War II, as well as a distinct historical moment in Cold War geopolitics from the Bandung Conference (1955) to the Suez Crisis (1956) and eventually the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and cessation of hostilities with the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (1963). Using historiographic and cultural-historical research, in addition to close analysis of narrative and aesthetics, I examine the ways that melodrama can be

used as a tool for negotiating transitional cultural periods. Within these film cultures there exist certain overlapping themes of interest that I explore at length: analogies between woman and nation, discourses on domesticity and citizenship, and the role of cultural memory in representations of the recent past.

These case studies show that there is a persistent language of melodrama when it comes to issues of gender, nation, and history. By analyzing these transnational connections I aim to contribute to the growing imperative to formulate histories of global feminisms and modernities, while looking to melodrama as a method of political potential. I use the term "subjunctive melodrama" to refer to the unique ability of melodrama to mediate gender and nation in a way that allows space for generative potential. The subjunctive is a grammatical mood that embodies the state of being in hope, desire, doubt, and most importantly, possibility. It is in this state that the films from my case studies exist, providing us with the tools to look both backward and forward to imagine the scope of women's histories and lived experience.[1]

If melodrama, as I argue, functions to traverse boundaries of categorization, how then do we begin to theorize the existence of a global melodramatic current? What is unique to melodrama that allows it to exist as a mode that is simultaneously global (in terms of cross-cultural legibility and the perpetuation of particular tropes and aesthetics) and local (existing in very specific regional traditions that are not easily translatable)?

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[1] The term "subjunctive melodrama" is my own formulation, but it is important to note that others have discussed the idea of the subjunctive mood as it relates to melodrama and/or women's historical narratives. See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 11; Monique Rooney, "*Voir Venir:* The Future of Melodrama?" *Australian Humanities Review* 54 (2013): 84; E.L. McCallum, "Not Your Mother's Melodrama: Three Twenty-First-Century Women's Films," *Camera Obscura* 101 (2019): 137.

I hope to reconcile the different approaches of historicizing melodrama and using melodrama as a critical tool. Too often we return to the same canonical melodrama texts, and even when writing about genre scholarship seems to flock to auteur and art cinema. Scholarly works on global melodrama are mostly collections of globally legible auteurs whose films either happen to have elements of the melodrama genre or are an open love letter to it, but do not investigate the modality of melodrama across cultures, and furthermore focus more on the contemporary than the historical.[2] One way to begin addressing this problem is to expand research on global genre histories, which my case studies accomplish through a triangulated approach.

Questions about melodrama as it connects to history, nostalgia, and memory and how it is in turn studied, lead me to consider not just the occurrence but the role of melodrama in popular culture, its actualities as well as its potentialities, and what this might imply for the idea of a global melodramatic flow. To answer this, I am interested in connecting two disparate elements of discourse on melodrama: the discourse on the sensorial (the private body) and the discourse on the political (the public body). Senses and the sensational have always been associated with scholarship on melodrama, but emerging research goes beyond simply discussing the physical response of tears and the excess of emotion on screen. It focuses instead on the "rhetoric of feelings" that reverberates at social-historical levels in addition to textual, and furthermore

[2] See Michael Stewart, ed., *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Carla Marcantonio, *Nation, Body, and History in Contemporary Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). These works offer valuable insights into melodrama as it functions in contemporary and auteur contexts, but could go further into understanding global melodrama historically and in popular cinema. Heike Paul, Sarah Marak, Katharina Gerund, Marius Henderson, eds., *Lexicon of Global Melodrama* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022) does the impressive work of compiling scholarly writing on melodramas from around the world and across more than a century, yet the films included do mostly remain in the category of globally legible auteurs.

connects to theories of mass, popular, and public cultures. This approach would be very much in opposition to frameworks that situate melodrama within the space of the private or personal, and would instead investigate an idea of the personal that is public and political.

As we enter further into the era of globalization, new questions arise in the search to understand how film as a medium has continued to imagine and narrativize identity at national and transnational levels. The emphasis thus far has been on contemporary film, but there is a relative paucity in applying transnational methodology to the past. I bring transnational methods and feminist frameworks together to re-examine or re-purpose material that has been seen in a certain way already (i.e. canonical melodrama theory, Hollywood melodrama), and bring this material into discussion with films that have been overlooked, under-explored, or previously provincialized (non-western melodrama). A global melodrama has yet to be fully conceived, but with melodrama as both subject and method of this project I believe that the resulting research will assist in the inclusion of global feminist histories to discourses of melodrama as a mode of popular culture.

Melodrama and History

Melodrama is a term once derided by traditional film theory, written off as mass cultural, commercial, sensationalistic, popular, and at times gendered female (or at least associated with female, sentimental culture). Since the 1970s the conception of "melodrama" has been poked, prodded, and expanded to mean any and everything in Film Studies—all films are melodramas to the degree that it seems the medium itself might be explained with melodramatic rhetoric: it is life, but bigger. Within these discourses that devolve ever more into generalizations and consequently into a loss of the specificity of melodrama, we can take away one central concept:

melodrama is a tool. A critical tool, a framework, a method. Whether it is the second wave feminists reclaiming the woman's film, the cultural historical re-evaluation of the films of Douglas Sirk, the revisiting of early cinema as symptom and product of the sensationalized world of modernity, or the aesthetic analysis of neo-transnational-melodrama from auteurs such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wong Kar Wai, Todd Haynes, or Pedro Almodovar—one link that connects the work of these filmmakers is the pervasive modality of melodrama.[3] I explore the idea of "melodrama as method" as a means of potentially answering these questions of cultural legibility and specificity—to test the idea that to talk about a global melodrama is to talk about the work of melodrama, the potentialities that flow between the public and the private, the affective and the political.

I use the term "rhetoric of feelings" to refer to the shift in studies on melodrama that extend the discourse on the senses beyond the individual bodily senses, into larger structures of emotion and memory that organize publics. An appraisal of senses and sensation has always been a part of canonical writing on melodrama, particularly with regard to the sensorial shocks of modernity represented in early cinema and the tears shed for the woman's film. This shift towards the "rhetoric of "feelings," however, privileges the role of the senses and emotion in historical as well as textual analysis. This new rhetoric is not referring to the same kind of emotionality previously embodied by tears that link spectator to spectacle in the psychoanalytic terms of subjectivity and identification, as scholars like Steve Neale and Mary Anne Doane have

[3] See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989) or Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987) for second wave reclamation of the woman's film; Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994) for re-evaluations of Sirk; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) for melodrama's relationship to early modernity; Pam Cook, *Screening the Past* (London: Routledge, 2004) for transnational neo-melodrama filmmakers.

asserted.[4] Though these textual, psychoanalytic, approaches provide us with an invaluable framework for understanding the dynamics of melodrama at work in the text, the move to "feelings" constitutes a paradigm shift that examines these dynamics in popular and public culture with an eye to understanding the potential affective currents between and around people, on a socio-political level.

We might categorize this shift within a framework that is distinct to melodrama while upending certain binaries common in its scholarship, namely as a shift from a "private realm" of the senses that is passive, bodily, and linear, to a "public realm" in which the body and the senses are active/mass-mediated/nonlinear. Avoiding bifurcations, scholarship from sources such as Ann Cvetkovich and Krista Lynes, expounding on a critical tradition in cultural studies initiated by Raymond Williams for example, explore nonlinear media and cultural histories that blend the personal and the political.[5] This scholarship investigates and embraces the liminal and the fractured, lending itself to potentially productive sub-public spaces where emotional experience is privileged. These sub-publics exist above the private/domestic sphere (i.e. the home and family) that has long been associated with melodrama, yet nonetheless build upon the personal. This interstitial space is the space of citizenship: where the public and private self overlap.

Central to this project is the way that melodrama engages with the past. Cvetkovich and Lauren Berlant, for example, assert that emotional lives and public female cultures need to be

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[4] Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen 27.6* (1986): 6-23; Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[5] See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Krista Lynes, *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present* (New York: Macmillan, 2012); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

taken into consideration when describing different kinds of citizenship.[6] They are looking for methodologies that incorporate structures of emotion into understanding cultural experience. Alison Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory is a relevant prism through which to understand the way in which the individual, private experience encounters the public historical and cultural consciousness. Landsberg explains prosthetic memory is an experience that comes from an object—it is consumed and integrated from the public consciousness to the private subjectivity, creating the *experience* rather than the fact of authenticity.[7] Landsberg imagines memory as active rather than passive, essentially viewing prosthetic memory as facilitating empathy and breaking down barriers of identity politics; in this melding of public and private, she explains that there is an increased tendency towards empathy across lines of race, ethnicity, and culture.[8] I argue that it is this tendency toward collective historical experience across boundaries that melodrama facilitates.

I connect these cultural-historical uses of memory with the visual, as visual representation of the past is essential to the specificity of the melodramatic mode. The relationship between nostalgia and style as it has been discussed by, for example, Christine Sprengler, is concerned primarily with "visual pastness."[9] For me, the critical question is whether nostalgic imaginings of the past are severing our connection to history or, in fact, establishing connections to the past. I am curious about how these concepts work cross-culturally, how

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[6] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 5-10; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings,* 11.
[7] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 33.
[8] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 24.
[9] Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghan Books, 2011), 2-4.

nostalgia is displaced from space and time, and why connections between melodrama and nostalgia are specifically manifest in depictions of the recent past.

Film Studies as a discipline has regularly inquired into representations of the past and how film imagines history.[10] Research on this topic often does not necessarily claim to focus on melodrama or even popular culture generally, yet the work of Sprengler and Pam Cook, for example, tend to settle around melodrama as a vehicle for theories of cinema and the past—in particular in cases where nostalgia for the past is in a sense ahistorical and more sensorial than representational.[11] Others draw from Fredric Jameson's definition of nostalgia as the definitive mode of postmodernism.[12] In the introduction to *The Past in Visual Culture*, the editors note that scholarship on cinema and the past has been dominated by attention to historical fiction, but it is other forms of "fictional truths" that shed light on a "true historiography."[13] My concern is not so much with the achievement of any kind of truth, but rather of history through expression of the past.

Melodrama has a unique relationship to historical representation insofar as it presents history in, as Peter Brooks calls it, "morally legible" terms.[14] Melodrama translates and transposes moral knowledge onto fictional yet recognizable plots, organizing knowledge around affective or emotional truths rather than representational ones. The woman's film especially

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[10] See Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*; Cook, *Screening the Past*; Jilly Boyce Kay, Cat Mahoney, and Caitlin Shaw, eds., *The Past in Visual Culture: Essays on Memory, Nostalgia and the Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017).
[11] Cook, *Screening the Past,* 5.
[12] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 19-21; Susannah Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132-6.
[13] Kay et al, *The Past in Visual Culture*, 4.
[14] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 43.

contributes to this acknowledgement of collective knowledge and ways of knowing through the double-awareness of the conventional Hollywood plot (and the dominant ideologies that accompany it), and the subversive reading which gives subjectivity to the experience of othered individuals.

This raises the question of what purpose nostalgia for a recent past serves, which brings me back to the idea that understanding the present and preparing for a more inclusive and intersectional future necessitate engagement with not only the past, but the more complex construct of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a defining tenet of postmodernism and therefore a potential roadblock to understanding the truth of history; but of course, Marxist and feminist cultural-historical methods remind us that truth, particularly in the recounting of histories, is subjective and conditional to dominant ideologies and the myriad social, political, and economic factors that confound the transfer of historical knowledge. A more useful purpose for nostalgia, Pam Cook says, might be to think of it as indicative of the changing ways of seeing and knowing the past; if nostalgia is defined as a longing for something that no longer and can never again exist, perhaps it is more "authentic" than memory insofar as it is connecting to desire rather than recollection.[15] Narrativizing a past necessarily reconfigures it for potentially political purposes, but the political potential of shared emotional knowledge influences less absolutely. If we are less concerned with the facts and visual representations of the past (most of the discourse on nostalgia) and more interested in the emotion of a recollection, we are left with a felt history—an affective, experiential history.

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[15] Cook, *Screening the Past*, 3.

Theorizing Melodrama

According to Peter Brooks' *Melodramatic Imagination*, melodrama is a tool to search for meaning in the meaningless—a means of dealing with the trauma and shocks of modern life, helping people to cope by allowing them to relate to the overt displays of pathos; the visceral response of emotionality a way of dealing with a continually frustrating world. He formulates that in a demoralized and secular world there is a desire to attain truth—to seek some spiritual reality and reward for human purity. The moral occult is then the thing that animates life (the search for meaning is a tactic of dealing with disappointment), but is never quite attainable.[16] Thomas Elsaesser similarly writes about melodrama's transposition of public unrest to the private stage. He ruminates on the characteristics that make up the genre of the Fifties family melodrama, differentiating it from the melodramatic tradition that came before it by asserting that Fifties melodrama is less about the catharsis of relating to ills of everyday life (though this is still an element), and more about inserting social commentary into popular culture. He identifies as one main organizing principle of the genre the idea that the political and societal anxieties of the time are directed to and magnified within the realm of the family. The family melodrama according to Elsaesser is then a way of mapping the public and the political onto the personal, therefore containing it. [17] When, however, does the private map onto the public collective experience? How does individual experience bleed into the public, political realm? I would like to think about melodrama as a prosthetic extension of collective experience, leading us to

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[16] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 5.
[17] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 43-45.

question the degree to which melodrama can heal the private wound and facilitate the public political potential.

My research is situated within a rich field of melodrama theory utilizing historical and cultural analysis alike. It is important to acknowledge and properly situate the works of theorists such as Peter Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser, and Linda Williams, for example, yet ultimately I situate my own position somewhere that potentially circumvents, repurposes, or disproves the traditional evaluation of melodrama in Film Studies, looking instead at melodrama as a critical tool in a global context, focusing on how we use melodrama to do the active work of enabling affective currents. In many ways the discourse surrounding melodrama, while always privileging the role of the body, sense and sensation (e.g. Brooks, Singer, Williams), is moving further in the direction of affect, with public, global, and political implications not circumscribed solely to the individual body and psyche. In this sense I am looking for a reversal of the Brooks-Elsaesser tendency to map public unrest onto the private family stage. Instead, I argue that the private and quintessentially melodramatic realm of emotions and personal experience influence or shape the public, political sphere, and it is this specific flow reversal that is necessary for thinking about a global melodramatic current, insofar as we might analogize the global and the local to the public and the private respectively.

Christine Gledhill on the other hand is a transitional figure in melodrama studies who not only has done extensive work to historicize melodrama and investigate it within the Hollywood context, but lays the theoretical groundwork for a transnational approach. Though she comes initially from the tradition of second wave feminists such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane, and to a degree Linda Williams, who work within psychoanalytic frameworks to understand the "desire" at work in melodrama, she bridges the gap between these and the textual-historical

approach of Brooks and Elsaesser to create a cultural-historical appraisal of the field. She writes of melodrama as a pervasive mode across different genres, opening the discussion on melodrama to consider its various cross-pollinating qualities. Though not explicitly doing the work of transnationalizing a concept of screen melodrama, Gledhill's "Rethinking Genre" anticipates the paradigm shift towards global understanding by insisting on the modality of melodrama rather than the sedimented categories of genre conventions. She insists that we must abandon the notion of "reflection" as the main link between genre and society, and instead understand "the life of films in the social," conceptualizing genre "first and foremost [as] a boundary phenomenon."[18] Less concerned with delineating categories of and between genres, Gledhill writes of modality as an "industrial mechanism" that rather than reinforcing boundaries actually encourages disputes and dissolutions between them, as it is these "crossings" that become "productive sites for cultural activity."[19] It follows then that she asserts the primacy of historical-cultural specificity in discourses on genre to account for the various trans-Atlantic iterations of the mode. She is calling ultimately for a fluidity in understanding genre, referring to a double modality whereby ideology feeds into the generic aesthetic process and, through melodrama, this process flows back into the socio-cultural imaginary.

Rey Chow is another transitional scholar in the field, bringing together theories of what melodrama means in specific local film markets in an increasingly globalized film culture, setting the framework for how we talk about both national identity and a global melodrama by actively doing the work of negotiating different schools of theory and geographies with a consciousness towards the political meaning of translation. She maintains the specificity of film

[18] Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 221.
[19] Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," 224.

melodrama and its reliance on the visual, as she writes about the visuality of national identity and how this is incorporated in or articulated by melodrama's relationship to modernity. On the importance of understanding this visuality, she says:

> Any attempt to discuss film and cultural identity would therefore [sic] need to take into account the multiple significance of filmic visuality in modernity. This is especially so when modernity is part of post-coloniality, as in the case of many non-Western cultures, in which to become "modern" signifies an ongoing revisioning of indigenous cultural traditions alongside the obligatory turns towards the West or "the world at large." In this light, it is worth remembering that film has been, since its inception, a transcultural phenomenon, having as it does the capacity to transcend "culture"—to create modes of fascination which are readily accessible and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities.[20]

Her argument remains rooted in the specificity of film form, identifying it first and foremost as a medium of technology and aesthetics, which should not be ignored amidst the myriad of criticism that has focused on the politics of representation and identity. She points out that classical film theory such as Bazin's points to the idea of cinema as a unique medium to look back at time passed or elapsed.[21] This concept is literally and metaphorically important to melodrama and to my own examination of representations of the recent past, as well as the scholarly project of creating global histories. Chow does some of this work herself in her study of contemporary Chinese cinema and the locally specific but globally visible sentimental mode that explores themes of time and the past, filial obligation, migrancy, disenfranchised populations, and unconventional affective connections.[22]

Other scholars such as Anupama Kapse, Zhen Zhang, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, and Agustín Zarzosa ask questions about the global and transnational as well as the historical, and the

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[20] Rey Chow, "Film and Cultural Identity," in *The Rey Chow Reader,* ed. Paul Bowman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 91.
[21] Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)*,* 5-6.
[22] Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations,* 20-21.

tendency of melodrama scholarship to imitate its object in terms of forming histories that are potentially oral, unofficial, messy, and a conflation of public and private.[23] These differences and commonalities underlie the very diverse nature of melodrama itself and how we might begin to study it across cultures. Globally there exists what I call "the problem of naming" that has surrounded melodrama in both its western and non-western instantiations. In the unbounded nature of melodrama across film genres and in its inability to be defined even within individual cultural contexts, there emerges a paradox inherent within the melodramatic mode—its simultaneous global and localness, its transplantations coupled with its untranslatable specificities. Kapse describes melodrama in similar terms as Gledhill, calling it a "connective tissue" linking different genres and film cultures.[24] In formulating her own research, Kapse encounters some productive roadblocks in searching for a framework to write about the history of Indian melodrama—first, the aforementioned problem of naming, and second, an inability to transplant Peter Brooks' theory. Kapse explains that in searching through archival sources (periodicals, personal accounts) she realized that there existed no one word that translated to "melodrama," but rather several words that approached her conception of the term, and in no cases did these traditions reflect a Brooksian notion of a "post-sacred" world.[25] This impossible translation points to what I see as the simultaneous global and local paradox of melodrama—here Kapse proves archivally that the local tradition of melodrama is one that cannot be translated but

[23] Anupama Kapse, "Melodrama as Method," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media 54.2* (Fall 2013): 146-151; Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-Cultural Analysis: Chinese Wenyi Film and Melodrama," *Asian Journal of Communication* 19.4 (December 2009): 438-452; Zhen Zhang, "Transplanting Melodrama: Observations on the Emergence of Early Chinese Narrative Film," in Yingjin Zhang, ed., *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012): 25-41; Agustín, Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013).
[24] Kapse, "Melodrama as Method," 147.
[25] Kapse, "Melodrama as Method," 148.

is culturally and historically specific, yet it is noteworthy that this particular problem, the problem of naming, arises cross-culturally as well.

In "Melo Talk" Steve Neale's thorough investigation of Hollywood trade journals yields results proving that melodrama is not in fact a term that was ever used to describe films that we have come to think of as melodramas.[26] Along similar linguistic-centric lines, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh writes of the de-westernizing efforts of Chinese film scholars to bypass western film theory terms. She deals specifically with the case of Chinese *wenyi* films and western melodrama. Yeh eschews any kind of synonymizing between *wenyi* and melodrama, but points nonetheless to a transnational, properly historicized connection between them.[27] Somewhat in contrast, Zhang Zhen situates early Chinese narrative film in conversation with D.W. Griffith melodramas, opining that treatises on the East-West axis such as Wimal Dissanayake's introduction to *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* fall into the rhetorical trap of assimilating all of Asian cinema into one category via their relation to the West (problematically in an exclusively post-war, solely textually-analytic context), and insists instead on the importance of "systematic historical tracing of the respective melodramatic traditions and their possible interrelations."[28] I am struck by the constant vacillation between assertions of local specificity and global legibility that echo throughout these pieces—always an assertion of both despite rhetorical placement initially on one side of the argument or the other. This speaks ultimately to the fluidity not just of melodrama and its related forms, but of its scholarship as well.

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[26] Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term Melodrama in the American Trade Press," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993), 66-67.
[27] Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-Cultural Analysis," 438-440.
[28] Zhang, "Transplanting Melodrama," 26.

When putting melodrama in conversation with cultural politics, a useful starting point is the work of Raymond Williams, which focused the critical lens on everyday life and the "ordinariness" of culture, and it is this turn that opened doors for revisiting the past and investigating nonlinear, fragmented histories in a variety of fields from queer to feminist to postcolonial studies. Williams says that the "making of every society is the finding of common meanings yet made and remade in every individual mind."[29] This speaks to both the liminal space of culture and the wide scope of its influence through circulation of media at local, national, and global levels. In this sense culture becomes an organizer of the national imaginary, particularly in the wake of modernity bringing people from the country to the city where mass culture emerged and the institutions of mass culture yielded economic and political influence. This ethos of reconfiguring historicity and decentering subjectivity I see as fundamental to an understanding of the function of feelings and emotion in a study of popular culture.

The idea of history is central to the shift toward the rhetoric of feelings in discourses on melodrama and popular culture, as much in the revisiting of history as in the active formation of history. Cvetkovich and Kapse show us that there is a correlation between object and method with regard to emotional history and its place in scholarship. Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* both explores and arguably collects and creates histories of queer public cultures rooted in the experience of trauma. This project treats queer sexual trauma, and the feelings associated with it, as a method unto itself for thinking about queer trauma and experience of the everyday.[30] That is to say that this is not an attempt to include or integrate queer experience into trauma studies or public histories, but rather she is actively thinking *through* it, much in the same

[29] Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* 93.
[30] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings,* 7.

manner that Krista Lynes is using feminist perspectives as a way for thinking about media histories, or Raymond Williams is looking through the culture of everyday life as an explanation for how publics are formed. This method, of course, is imprecise in nature, and Cvetkovich herself points out that feelings and trauma are in a way antithetical to the archive insofar as they can be invisible and not leave physical traces (we need to redefine "artifact" when speaking of the archive of feelings).[31] However, it is exactly the ephemeral nature of feelings that make this method specific to queer public cultures, which have existed in the spaces around and in-between official public memory and with recent scholarship in queer history, memory, and time continue to embrace nonlinear paths through cultural studies.[32]

Now the question becomes one of how these methods of thought and their subsequent productions of culture exist and are used in the public political realm. Sara Ahmed and Elisabeth Anker each write about the power of emotions and emotionality, both the affective bonds that they create and the political discourses that they shape. Sara Ahmed tells us that "emotions *do things,* and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachment."[33] This connection between the individual and the collective body animate her work as she examines the way that emotions articulate public life and contribute to the social-political imagination, creating their own "affective economies." In this sense the history of emotions as she explains it is both political and politicized, the value of emotions traditionally ignored or understudied, considered low on a hierarchy in relation to thought and reason, which corresponds to analogous hierarchies of good and bad emotions,

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[31] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings,* 7.
[32] See e.g. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[33] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text 22.2* (Summer 2004): 119.

leading her to formulate a theory of emotions as a power dynamic. A key point to take from Ahmed's assessment is that emotions are subject to hierarchies of power in terms of who is feeling them, but also that they carry with them connotations of power themselves, the consequences or potentials of which are innately political.

Ahmed is an important figure for recognizing the pervasiveness of emotional capital and the free flow of experience between individual and collective bodies. Elisabeth Anker's work continues in this tradition while connecting more explicitly to theories of melodrama and its role in an increasingly public and political discussion, in accordance with the shift toward a rhetoric of feelings. She effectively uses melodrama as a method for reading the dominant political climate of the United States post-World War II and post-9/11, proposing that the idea of "freedom" and the affect that it elicits have been commodified and placed into a "melodramatic political discourse [that] casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action."[34] Anker explains that the emotions driving melodrama's hold over public consciousness and the national body are effectively doing the work of legitimating state power. She says that these feelings are emphasized through public discourses (such as the framing of "the war on terror") that aim to connect people on a personal level, at the level of lived experience, through empathetic affective bonds, placing an entire nation within the melodramatic narrative of freedom as virtue, contrasted with the "unfreedom" of globalization in which individual agency is obscured.[35]

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[34] Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.
[35] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling,* 14.

Another theorist to consider who has contributed to the re-theorization of melodrama on a global scale is Agustìn Zarzosa, whose position affirms the idea of an active potential of melodrama. He suggests that melodrama in fact influences human experience, rendering it a global form, whereas the insistence that melodrama is an "artistic response to specific social experience," presents problems of cultural translation.[36] He uses philosophical tactics (primarily Hegelian ethics) to construct hypothetical scenarios that progress in the direction of the active work that melodrama produces (rather than looking to the past to historicize and contextualize), arguing primarily that melodrama is a space for testing the efficacy of ideas about morality. These seemingly disparate methodologies, the historical-cultural specific (e.g. Landsberg) and the didactic-ethical (Zarzosa), can work well together to arrive at an understanding of affective flows and potential political solidarity.

In response, perhaps, to some of the questions raised by the above scholars that were left unaddressed in their earlier work, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams co-edited a new monograph on melodrama, *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (2018). In their introduction they acknowledge that discourses on melodrama have remained western in scope and problematically focus too much on the *form* of melodrama, and all of the rules that go along with it, leading to a meta-discourse wherein all scholarship ends up being in conversation with Peter Brooks, who never set out to write a definitive treatise on melodrama in the first place.[37] Their collection follows a more organic approach, refocusing attention on the distinct yet overlapping histories, industries, and aesthetics of melodrama in different cultural contexts.

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[36] Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama*, 241.
[37] Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds. *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4-8.

Translating Melodrama Theory

In Film Studies, genre often serves as a productive site of inquiry for discourses on globalization and transnational flows.[38] I argue that melodrama, by nature of its modality, is particularly useful in facilitating these inquiries. If the transnational is, as Nataša Durovicová claims, "above the national but below the global," I contend that melodrama, by its nature transmedial and transhistorical in its dynamics, is in a unique position to mediate the idea of "permeable borders" that Durovicová mentions: there is neither a global nor a local imaginary, but a space in between the two, where state institutions still hold power but boundaries of this power are permeable.[39] Or in other words, as Shirley Lim says, a discourse of globalization is not one of global and local in opposition to each other, but as part of the same discourse.[40] However, I do not wish to assert any kind of western Film Studies supremacy, so an understanding of cross-cultural translation is needed to responsibly analyze the function of melodrama across borders. I aim to facilitate the "translation" of western melodrama theory rather than its "application" to non-western contexts, so that the directionality of critical inquiry does not flow exclusively from one point to the other, but productively back and forth between the two. As Talal Asad writes, "The process of 'cultural translation' is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power."[41] Similarly, Rey Chow points to the asymmetry in the relationship between western

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[38] See Silvia Dibeltulo and Ciara Barrett, eds., *Rethinking Genre in Contemporary Global Cinema* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2018); Elena Gorfinkel and Tami Williams, eds., *Global Cinema Networks* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).
[39] Nataša Durovicová, "Introduction," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives,* ed. Durovicová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), ix.
[40] Shirley Lim and Wimal Dissanayake, "Introduction," in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Shirley Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 4.
[41] Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* ed. James Clifford and James E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 163.

languages and non-western languages, noting that the latter is "more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around."[42]

When it comes to translating western film theory (the concepts, more so than the language of the texts) to non-western contexts, the only translation that can be done is an incomplete one or one that is different than anticipated—there is no one to one translation of theory, and this is neither a good nor a bad thing. Melodrama has traditionally been seen as a "bad object," ignored for years by film scholars because of its popular and sentimental appeal, and as it does exist in film theory, it is often marked by many jarring contradictions—melodrama is the space where pathos and action coexist, dramatic irony flourishes, and mixed messages thrive. The very public perception of melodrama is a contradiction. Melodrama is seen simultaneously as high modernism and low camp, stylistically/thematically conventional and subtly subversive, defined by both excessive expressivity and internality. I am interested in the places where theory does and does not fit in various contexts—not evaluating the accuracy of the translation, but rather performing something more akin to discourse analysis—making a method of these contradictions, and searching for potentials of cross-cultural understanding in the negative space of that which cannot sufficiently be translated between different cultural contexts. I explore the idea of translation further in the chapter on Egyptian cinema, and explain that the method of contradictions is critical to understanding non-western melodrama modalities. Though I only discuss the Egyptian context specifically (and the Arab cinema context more generally), this chapter establishes a framework for further research in melodrama cinema from the Global South.

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[42] Rey Chow, "Film as Ethnography; or Translation Between Cultures in the Postcolonial World," in *The Rey Chow Reader,* ed. Paul Bowman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 151.

In looking to whether certain critical frameworks may or may not apply, fail, or give productive context to other film cultures and histories, we first must consider the work of translation and language itself. Translation is itself a bundle of contradictions—it is at once impossible, necessary, passive, active, aesthetic, political, good, and bad—all of which emerge from the difficulty of language in the first place. Rey Chow presents us with the critical questions at work in the context of translating within academia and using theory outside its supposed context. She examines the widespread use of European post-structuralist thought in American-Anglo academia, questioning the linguistic turn or what she deems the linguistic "torture" in the humanities.[43] Chow acknowledges that in a post-Wittgensteinian world French theorists like Foucault decry the fall of language, its amputation from inherent meaning and knowledge and loss within the world of modernity and representation. In revolt against language's loss of agency she identifies a veritable mise-en-abyme in literary self-referentiality—the increasing interiority of this post-structuralist turn and the resulting problem of how to confront "demands of critical multiculturalism."[44]

In the translation of French theory into English, and its afterlife in American-Anglo academia, how does the role of the theory change? Chow wonders whether the continued use and applications of Foucault and others will remain forever a symptom or whether it is possible that it can shed new light on different contexts of injustice and inequality. She is pointing to ways of exteriorizing rather interiorizing the self-referential turn in academia, and questioning categories like "European Theory in America" or "Comparative Literature." If, for example, postwar

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[43] Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.
[44] Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, 11-12.

America is a very specific area that cannot be taken out of its global hegemonic context, transcultural exteriority is a necessary method to mediate the translation of theory.

It is these larger questions of the role of translation that place me in a position to consider the traction, relevance, or even possibility of a critical film framework specific to one cultural context applied to another. Nataša Durovicová's work exists at the nexus of thinking about the nature of translation, the medium specificity of film, and the transnationalizing of discourses on film history. She uses the term "translatio" rather than "translation" to refer to a concept larger than the act of linguistic transcoding, but as a social and political act as well.[45] She situates cinema itself as an uncanny space of closeness and distance, which transitions well into the following sets of paradoxes and spaces of liminality that she sets up—the sound "film" that is increasingly mediated by nation vs. the sound "cinema" increasingly dependent upon international cultural flow, and the idea of translatio itself as a double articulation of both the work of translation and all that is obscured in the "unevenness of power relationships in which all translation is inevitably implicated."[46] I want to focus on the paradoxical space in which Durovicová situates translatio, where we are able to imagine this second articulation of translation, where that which has been lost becomes found. The work of translatio is then most interesting in its re-evaluation of history—in looking for those moments of tension that would bring about a discussion of what translation is occurring, when, and how. The method of contradictions could contribute to the work of a transnational history, by not seeking to eliminate borders but rather explore the times and spaces in which borders are crossed or blurred.

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[45] Nataša Durovicová, "Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic *Translatio*," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives,* 94.
[46] Durovicová, "Vector, Flow, Zone," 94.

Thinking through Durovicová's framework is a useful link between these key concepts of transnational film studies and melodrama. In terms of directionality, is a discussion of melodrama categorically transnational and/or are transnational discourses inherently melodramatic? Christine Gledhill anticipates these questions in her analysis of melodrama as a fundamentally "trans" form. In the Durovicová-edited collection, Mette Hjorte questions the idea of the transnational as a term of virtue. Hjorte explores the use of term "transnational" and all that it has come to stand for in recent scholarship, noting the problematic way in which it becomes a blanket term with a value attachment of virtue. She says, "The assumption, much of the time, seems to be that 'transnationalism' is the new virtue term of film studies, a term that picks out processes and features that necessarily warrant affirmation as signs, among other things, of a welcome demise of the ideologically suspect nation-states and the cinematic arrangements to which they give rise."[47] This leads me to wonder the degree to which transnational discourses can be analyzed as discourses of melodrama wherein the virtue of the transnational is an antidote to the villainy of the nation-state, and how such a construct might have narrativized scholarship on the topic. I would extend her claim to say that by nature of the transnational as virtue we are discussing it in explicitly melodramatic terms, and this method of discourse juxtaposed with, for example, Christine Gledhill trans-ing melodrama, meet somewhere in the middle to inextricably link the two, such that a discussion of one is tied to or at least opening to possibilities of discussing the other.

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[47] Mette Hjorte, "On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, 14.

Cold War Melodrama

This project uses melodrama as a critical tool for mediating the intersections of gender, genre, and nation along and across Cold War-era geopolitical lines; each chapter represents a different axis of geopolitical interaction: West (Hollywood), East (Soviet), and Non-Aligned (Egypt). Melodrama mediates transitional periods in these cinemas that are at once culturally specific but also negotiating many of the same societal changes through a conflation of woman and nation, in localized modes of modernity. Each of the films included in this analysis foreground this issue, using melodrama as a political vehicle that is at times didactic or propagandistic, but one that also provides openings to alternative readings that make space for women's lived experience.

In order to understand the ways in which melodrama acts as a critical method for mediating gender and histories, I examine several aspects of melodrama that persist as aesthetic and narrative forms in a global context, each of which is rooted in the connection between the political and the affective: analogies between woman and nation, discourses of domesticity and citizenship, and cultural memory and representations of the recent past. My three case studies utilize close readings of films and historiographic research from different geopolitical contexts to explore these tropes and begin to theorize how melodrama functions to allow us to imagine and experience our worlds. The historical parameters of this project range from 1955-1963 and the three cultural-historical cinematic moments are: Hollywood post-war melodrama, Soviet melodrama during the Khrushchev Thaw, and Egyptian revolutionary melodrama.

The Cold War period during the 1950s and 1960s was a charged time geopolitically as well as culturally, during which the politics of gender and nation were particularly manifest in popular cinema. This period represents a moment of crisis and/or reimagination for melodrama

in each of the abovementioned cinemas, when definitions and uses of melodrama began to shift from previous melodramatic traditions. In Hollywood, a staple sub-genre of melodrama, the woman's film, waned in popularity, replaced by male and family dramas in tandem with the postwar re-domesticization of American women. Conversely, in Soviet cinema melodrama gained traction and critical approval during this time (after derogation during the Stalinist era), as the wartime generation sought an outlet for subjectivity and emotionality following the trauma of the war. In Egypt (a geopolitical nexus between East and West, faced with negotiating competing interests), melodrama, which was previously more apolitical in nature, became an active tool of propaganda used to stir nationalist fervor following de-colonization. In terms of film style and cultural expression, melodramas of these three cinemas can be seen as a bridge between the conformity of the 1950s and the innovation of the 1960s.

My case studies represent a distinct era of modernization in each of these loci, where the reverberations of this social-political context can be seen in film, particularly with regard to the role of women in the nation on and off screen. Melodrama is a unique prism for understanding the possible connections between these case studies because of its particular connection to modernity, female representation and spectatorship, popular film, and national cinema, as well as memory and nostalgia. In each chapter, modernities manifest differently, yet melodrama serves as the critical framework for making sense of changed worlds. The Cold War era lends itself particularly well to this methodology, but my framework could be used to analyze other geopolitical phases of melodrama as well.

The method of triangulation serves to offer different points of entry into melodrama theory and history, and positions for comparison. This research goes into a degree of cultural specificity appropriate for historiographic rather than historical research or reception studies, as

the main focus of this project is the modality and political purposes of melodrama. It takes shape from a combination of close analysis of the films in each case study, and a synthesis of primary and secondary sources regarding the cultural-historical context. The close analyses examine the aesthetic and narrative elements of the films that are symptomatic of the theoretical quandaries that I am investigating. This method of close analysis combined with historiographic research is motivated by my inquiry into the shape of a global melodramatic current and the potential for making cross-cultural connections through melodrama.

While part of the purpose of this project is to explore non-western iterations of melodrama, I nonetheless explore the influence and global hegemonic position of Hollywood. Hollywood of this era has already been heavily researched, which proves useful for this project insofar as Hollywood has become its own methodological model—a space where theories of melodrama have been tested and replicated, to the point that we can ask if or how these structures could contribute to a comparative cultural study. In this sense Hollywood melodrama would be approached not as a classical modality, but in Miriam Hansen's terms, as "vernacular modernism."[48] Her reflexive approach to how cinema helps explain modernity and modernity in turn reframes histories of cinema relies upon a notion of studio-era cinema as successful not because of its global translatability, but because of the way in which it actually means different things domestically and abroad—the notion of a global mode that relies on local specificities.

My first chapter, "Melodrama at Sea: The 1950s Woman's Film in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination," offers an alternative perspective to existing research on 1950s Hollywood melodrama, namely by focusing on the perceived disappearance of the Woman's

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[48] Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *MODERNISM MODERNITY 6.2* (1999): 59-78.

Film during this period, and its possible rediscovery in what I call Hollywood's transnational imagination: a discursive space in which personal and political desire overlap and a new concept of female citizenship, as mediated by melodrama, emerges.[49]

Next, "Radical Subjectivity in Soviet Melodrama of the Khrushchev Thaw" argues that cinema during the Thaw, influenced by global (neo)realisms, expresses a radical subjectivity and individuality to counter the suppressed understanding of self that had been imposed on a cultural-institutional level during the Stalinist era, and that, particularly in the case of women's representation, melodrama functions as a tool for understanding and articulating this new subjectivity.

Finally, "Modern Women, Modern Egypt: Melodramas of the Nasser Era" places existing discourses on Egyptian cinema, revolution, and global feminism in conversation with theories of film melodrama to examine Egyptian melodrama as a site for fraught analogies between women's liberation and national modernization in the wake of the 1952 revolution.[50] It situates this local phenomenon in the global context of competing political and industrial influences from Hollywood and Soviet cinemas engaged in a proxy cultural Cold War.

I hope that this work will make a significant entry into the project of historicizing melodrama and crediting the influence of global feminisms and modernities. This will all be done with the goal of facilitating cross-cultural connections and filling, or at least beginning to fill, the gap in melodrama studies when it comes to theorizing and historicizing the notion of a global melodramatic current. If melodrama allows for the expression of a morally legible world,

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[49] An earlier version of this work was published as "Melodrama at Sea: The 1950s Woman's Film in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination," *Testo a Fronte* 61 (Winter 2020): 67-78.
[50] An earlier version of this work was published as "Modern Women, Modern Egypt: Melodramas of the Nasser Era," *Feminist Media Histories* 3.1 (Winter 2017): 5-24.

I show that it can also make legible a global language for expressing the relationship between gender and nation during the 1950s and early 1960s. I hope that this framework will be of use to scholars of Cold War-era cinema and melodrama alike.

CHAPTER ONE

Melodrama at Sea: The 1950s Woman's Film in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination

Feminist film discourses on Hollywood melodrama often gather around familiar film periods and cycles—notably the fallen women of early silent film, the maudlin mothers of the 1930s weepies, or perhaps the subjugated housewives of the Fifties family melodrama. These first two categories of women resemble more closely the characters we have come to know as heroines of the woman's film—an often-contested term that roughly refers to films that deal with "women's issues" within the greater melodramatic mode. Early feminist film theory has done the important work of "reclaiming" these films, applying a retroactive feminism not only to the interior or emotional lives of women depicted on screen, but also to the hitherto unexplored economic influence of women on the film industry, be it through the dominating star power of certain actresses or the box office power held by the female audience. However, the third category remains something of a mystery: what exactly happened to the woman's film in the 1950s?[51]

Melodrama was alive and well in Hollywood at the time. This period constituted the height of the family melodrama and the male melodrama cited canonically by Thomas

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[51] This chapter focuses on the medium and industry specificity of film melodrama. An alternative location to search for the post-war woman's film is in television in the form of the soap opera. For more on this, see Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," in *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies For Women* (London: Routledge, 2008, 2nd ed.); Christine Gledhill, "Speculations on the Relationship Between Soap Opera and Melodrama," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14.1-2 (1992): 103-124; Lynn Joyrich, "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," *Camera Obscura 6.1* (January 1988): 18-153. These works explore similarities in form and ideology between melodrama and soap opera, as well as soap opera's origins as a gendered vehicle of consumer culture.

Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury.".[52] It was the definitive Sirkian decade of high modernism and excess, of subversive political messages for a conformist postwar society. Melodrama took these among other forms during this transformative decade of film history, yet the woman's film waned as a popular sub-genre, often subsumed into the emerging cycles of "adult" or "social problem" films that spoke more unanimously to the social upheaval of the postwar period.

This chapter approaches the study of Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s from two new and alternative perspectives: 1) Hollywood's transnational imagination, and 2) female citizenship as mediated by melodrama. The bevy of existing research on Hollywood melodrama and histories of the 1950s respectively have become their own methodological models—spaces where theories of melodrama and culture have been tested and replicated, to the point that we can ask if or how these structures could contribute to a comparative cultural study or a revised feminist history. A more intersectional approach to Fifties film history gives way, I argue, to not only proto-feminist but proto-transnational imaginings.

Through an analysis of three films, *Peyton Place* (Mark Robson, 1957), *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955), and *Until They Sail* (Robert Wise, 1957), I explore the spaces of female citizenship mediated by melodrama, within the broader postwar and Cold War geopolitical landscapes. The concept of a transnational imagination functions here as a metaphorical model: a microcosm of larger socio-political trends and contact points for the intersection of personal and political desires at the heart of the woman's film tradition. Key to this model is the idea of domesticity in both its micro (the home) and macro (the nation) definitions. Through *Peyton Place* I explore the trauma of the domestic and the need for the

[52] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43-69.

woman's film to move elsewhere, into the transnational imagination. *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* helps to actualize these possibilities yet introduces the complications that came from the Orientalism of Hollywood's imagination, as informed by a uniquely Fifties sensibility that aimed to rebrand the wartime "yellow peril" and begin crafting a narrative of what a postwar geopolitical superpower looked like. Finally, *Until They Sail* brings us to an understanding of the outsourced woman's film tradition and the political purposes of nostalgia, whereby romance and desire convey the deep ambiguity at the intersection of woman and nation.

Melodrama and (Trans)national Feminist Historiography

Melodrama has always played a part in articulating cultural identities on screen, yet in Film Studies we often discuss melodrama in confining national categories that remain mostly western in scope. This chapter continues in the vein of recent scholarship aimed at re-theorizing melodrama in a global or transnational context, with a particular emphasis on the role that melodrama plays in mediating cultural politics.[53] Of course, we need to acknowledge that the "transnational" is not a panacea for proscriptive categories of national cinema. Overused and underexplained, at times the concept of the transnational reads more as a response to the idea of the national, only to arguably replace it in critical discourse.[54] Furthermore my use of "proto-

[53] For re-evaluations of melodrama in the global and transnational contexts, see Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations: Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Agustín Zarzosa, *Refiguring Melodrama in Film and Television: Captive Affects, Elastic Sufferings, Vicarious Objects* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013); Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
[54] For more on the various forms that transnational approaches to cinema encompass and their respective shortcomings with regards to overcoming the idea of borders, see Mette Hjort, "On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives,* ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12-33.

transnational" refers only to current discourses that use the transnational as a method of critical inquiry (actual transnational movement between film cultures has, of course, always existed). Nonetheless the transnational is a conceptual tool that we can use to bring discourses of the national and sub or supra national into conversation with each other, connecting to the global, particularly in contemporary climates in which populist resurgence against globalization has permeated the realm of culture as well as politics. Genre is the logical locus of transnational discourse, and melodrama specifically, for both are inherently messy and resistant to tidy categorization, despite decades of attempts to the contrary.

Retroactive feminism often accompanies feminist film theory's interventions into melodrama (the woman's film in particular) and global histories. Scholars like Jane Gaines remind us to constantly re-evaluate the goals of historiography and the directionality of feminist inquiry. The feminist historiography project must reconcile the successes and failures of the past—asking not just what histories are told, but who gets to write those histories, and whether that history is valid. While early feminist film theory did the work of revising the "great men" version of [film] history, it focuses mainly on the text—reclaiming archetypes (e.g., the fallen woman)—and engaging with post-structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks. While indeed doing important work and finding agency in these characters and re-narrativizing women's representations on screen, they often neglect the cultural-historical context and significance of film as a cultural object in attempting to narrativize history.

Gaines utilizes the organizing principle of melodrama as a mode or prism through which to understand the condition of cinema. Her "melodramatic theory of historical time," which posits an experiential approach to the "everyday uncertainties of historical time," uses

melodrama as a schematic to relate the moral to the temporal.[55] We see this in the tropes of *almost* or *too late* that generate melodramatic tension, or in the moral legibility of actions and consequences that form the narrative structure of fallen women films, forcing the question of an uncertain future rooted in a desire to return to the categorically impossible past of "what was." She sees melodrama as a mode distinctly suited to a circular rather than linear view of historical time, insofar as it is driven by that desire to return to the impossible past; much in the same way that it is the moral/temporal responsibility of any historian (film, feminist, or otherwise) to return over and over to the past, and avoid the tendency to narrativize the past by framing it in false equivalency to the present.

I invoke Jane Gaines here for two reasons: first to offer a caveat for myself and others against retroactive feminism (i.e. applying current feminist frameworks to history in a facile way or without historical contextualization) and the directionality failures of previous feminist inquiry (namely the myopia of early feminist film historiography specifically and second wave feminism more generally); second, to highlight the unique link between melodrama and discourses of real and imagined pasts, and melodrama as a way to mediate temporal guilt and desire.

Contextualizing 1950s Melodrama: Beyond Crises of Masculinity and the Housewife-Consumer

In Fifties melodrama, postwar anxieties of masculinity and fear of femininity manifest in the rearticulation of traditional gender roles and narratives focused on the family and within the

[55] Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 95-6.

family home.[56] For all of the outward attempts to reclaim a heteronormative patriarchal order, melodrama of this period often reveals the fracturing of societal structure within a time otherwise associated with conformity. Thomas Elsaesser in "Tales of Sound and Fury" ruminates on the characteristics that make up the genre of the Fifties family melodrama, differentiating it from the melodramatic tradition that came before it by asserting that Fifties melodrama is less about the catharsis of relating to ills of everyday life (though this is still an element), and more about inserting social commentary into popular culture. He identifies as one main organizing principle of the genre the idea that the political and societal anxieties of the time are directed to and magnified within the realm of the family. The family melodrama according to Elsaesser is essentially then a way of mapping the public and the political onto the personal, therefore containing it.[57] In my research, as aforementioned, I am often trying to explore the inverse of Elsaesser's and Brooks' assessments—looking instead at when the private maps onto the public collective experience.

We already understand melodrama as more than a genre—it is a mode in fact encompassing many genres. We use the term to describe films that overflow with pathos and overwrought emotion, replete with Manichean dichotomies and perhaps contrived plots reliant upon overdetermined senses of fate or chance. Yet these elements combine to form an operative mode that is pervasive throughout various genres—encompassing the western, the "adult picture," the "social problem film," and even film noir. Through investigation of more complex

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[56] See Janet Walker, *Couching Resistance: Women, Film, and Psychoanalytic Psychiatry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) for Fifties cinema's discourse with popular Freudianism, and Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1991) for a comprehensive appraisal of the gender politics at work in Fifties Hollywood cinema, through the lens of early feminist film theory.
[57] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 55.

histories of 1950s film we can try to locate women's roles in melodrama of this time—beyond the subjugated housewife to James Mason's quintessential male ego in crisis in, for instance, *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956), a film that has long held a prominent place in Film Studies pedagogy for its acutely distilled representation of postwar masculinity and traditional gender roles.[58]

Rather than focus on Mason's masculine crisis, I would like to turn instead to Barbara Rush (who plays James Mason's wife in *Bigger Than Life*) and her cadre of Fifties housewives, overshadowed by men in their own cinematic worlds, as well as in the critical inquiry that delineates Fifties melodrama as "family" or "male." In *The Female Complaint,* Lauren Berlant explores the intersection of citizenship and sentimentality. Among her case studies is the "character-consumer" of the Fifties housewife, her paradoxical power and restriction. Berlant theorizes that there is an "intimate public space" through which women communicate shared knowledge and collective experience: a sub-public where the currency of trade is secrets, gossip, and intimate knowledge traded from woman to woman. Berlant theorizes that this space is akin to Peter Brooks' "moral occult"—that thing which organizes life and provides truths to be sought in place of religion.[59] The intimate public space emerges from women's relegation to what Berlant refers to as the sphere of love or romance, insisting that romance has functioned to amputate women from the public political sphere, creating a need to engage in the intimate public space of melodramatic consumption. In other words, women's culture, in the form of melodrama or what Berlant refers to often as "romance," becomes a way to explore female

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[58] See e.g. David N. Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s," in *Home is where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 268-282.
[59] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

sexuality and strength in a consumerist society, wherein female longing for commonality has been on one hand exploited, but can nonetheless be used for political agency.[60]

I mention Berlant to highlight the importance of melodrama to the collective experience of female consumers of melodramatic media in the Fifties, in terms of both their influence over popular mass culture with the production of "romantic" and therefore feminine or "intimate" narratives, and also in the consumption of these narratives, effectively conflating the private and public realms of experience in an inverse of the male melodramatic tradition of transplanting the public, political trauma to the private realm of the family. Discourse on women's culture of the Fifties is instead defined by collective experience, not simply reflective of cultural problems of the period. In our current times, it is more important than ever to acknowledge, validate, and study the complex and subversive means through which women share intimate knowledge at the sub-public levels of gossip, rumors, and oral tradition. The woman's film is therefore potentially a method for escaping the family on multiple levels of discourse: the actual family, the family melodrama (Sirk, Minnelli, Ray), and the rhetoric of Fifties scholarship that focuses on the family.

The woman's film—so popular in the Thirties and Forties, bolstered by the transmedia presence of actresses like Barbara Stanwyck and Bette Davis whose larger-than-life personas dominated the screen as well as the press—waned in the Fifties, subsumed by other cycles that thrived during the cultural moment of postwar cinema and societal shifts. 1957 is a year uniquely positioned to explore the industry in transition: following the demise of the studio system in 1948 (in the Supreme Court antitrust case versus Paramount) and loosening of the production code, poised on the brink of the incoming art and new wave cinema movements, as well as the

[60] Berlant is referring specifically to American, mostly white, middle-class women.

invasion of television, 1957 was a year of identity crisis for Hollywood. The constantly shifting popular film cycles attest to this shake-up.

In response to the changing postwar societal landscape, as well as the more daring and permissive possibilities available to the post-studio system, "adult" pictures emerged as a popular cycle. The term refers roughly to films in the 1950s that focused on "adult," meaning serious or risqué, topics. In 1957 alone there was *The Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin), *Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick), *Baby Doll* (Elia Kazan), *Slander* (Roy Rowland), *The Helen Morgan Story* (Michael Curtiz), and *The Three Faces of Eve* (Nunnally Johnson), which deal with issues such as hypersexuality, moral turpitude in the entertainment industry, popular Freudianism, trauma, and rape. Indeed these films have little in common in terms of form and aesthetics of genre (these aforementioned films alone encompass noir, melodrama, camp, and comedy), yet can be grouped together for their thematic content.

This period furthermore overlapped and coincided thematically with the increasing availability and popularity of international and domestic art cinema. 1957 brought to cinemas work by Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*), Akira Kurosawa (*Throne of Blood*), Billy Wilder (*Witness for the Prosecution, Love in the Afternoon*), Stanley Kubrick (*Paths of Glory*), and Frederico Fellini (*The Nights of Cabiria*). The marketing of these "foreign films" was often sexualized, contributing to their places within the "adult" cycles, while also reflecting the period's sexualization of the racial and geographic other.[61]

The American domestic film market in 1957 was increasingly global in scope. After the demise of the studio system and the rise of independent film production companies, the influence

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[61] Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: a History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 96.

of various new waves (particularly from Europe and Japan), and the solidification of television as a significant cultural medium, Hollywood was in a state a flux, experiencing an identity crisis. The woman's film, a hallmark of studio-era filmmaking, as mentioned earlier, seemed to disappear in its more familiar form. As we know from Steve Neale's study of the term "melodrama" in the film trade journals, there has never been a stable category of "melodrama" or "woman's films."[62] For example, in the 1957 trades the term "melodrama" appears in reference to films about prison, war, and even auto-racing. *Until They Sail* meanwhile is described as a "tear-jerker" in *Film Bulletin*, indeed connecting to the sentimental affect assigned to the woman's film.[63]

The Fifties and 1957 in particular constituted peak saturation of the Hollywood film market in terms of what Elsaesser would refer to as family melodrama, but what I would call "ensemble" or "small town" melodrama. These films are not relegated solely to the realm of the family, but to the intrigues of multiple intertwining characters in a circumscribed space (i.e., the small town of *Peyton Place* or the mental home of *The Cobweb*). Douglas Sirk, prolific as ever, helmed three films in 1957: *Interlude, A Time to Love and a Time to Die,* and *The Tarnished Angels*. Suffice to say melodrama persisted as a popular mode during this period, but without the singularity of pathos and emotion typical of the woman's film of the Forties.[64]

[62] See Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term Melodrama in the American Trade Press," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993): 66-89, for thorough cross-referencing of trade journals. Neale concludes that the term "melodrama" has never had a set descriptive meaning across different time periods, and is rather a retroactive term that film academia has come to define retroactively.
[63] Film Bulletin Staff, "Until They Sail," *Film Bulletin,* January 7, 1957.
[64] Another example indicative of this shift is the case of the two adaptations of *Imitation of Life* in 1934 and 1959 respectively. The first is a quintessential woman's film and the second more of a stylized family melodrama.

***Peyton Place* and the Trauma of the Domestic**

The dichotomies of public and private spaces, or intimate and shared experience, are hallmarks of melodrama and the woman's film. This paradox exists in the seemingly contradictory tropes of the melodramatic mode: public and private, pathos and action, physical interiority and emotional (excessive) exteriority. Berlant conceives of an intimate public space when it comes to female consumption of melodramatic media, and it is from this idea of imagining collective female experience that I want to think about the relationship between onscreen trauma (specifically violence against women) in postwar American cinema and the culturally and temporally specific experience of 1950s female domesticity.

Trauma is often linked to memory on film, and many films explore this explicit connection, imagining filmic space and narrative as a means to highlight or unearth the trauma. However, I am not interested here in the deployment of memory as a visual or narrative tool of understanding trauma, but instead I read screen trauma of this period as a microcosm for collective experience—as prosthetic memory. Alison Landsberg conceives of prosthetic memory as a form of public cultural memory that, facilitated by mass-mediated technology such as cinema, allows for communal or collective experience for events that are not specific to the person perceiving them. This is not mere false memory, however, but the potential for communal empathy extending beyond the boundaries of individual experience.[65]

In exporting this theory to the context of 1950s American melodrama, I seek to forge a connection between the melodramatic tradition of conflating public and private trauma, the practice of melodramatic consumption in postwar female society, and the resulting collective

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[65] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 49.

experience of on-and-off-screen struggle. Trauma theory has limits, most notably in its reductive nature and the degree to which it overexposes and therefore deemphasizes the trauma, according to E. Ann Kaplan, but my aim here is to conceive of trauma more as allegory, and melodrama as a tool of perpetuating it—a way of understanding filmic representations of struggle, assault, and psychological manipulation as constituting a prosthetic memory and a microcosm, in this case, of an individual character's "female trouble" standing in for the greater collective female experience of postwar domesticity.[66] I situate Fifties melodrama as a prosthetic extension of collective female experience, leading us to question the degree to which melodrama can heal the private wound and facilitate the public political potential.

Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory examines the way in which the individual, private experience encounters the public historical and cultural consciousness. She formulates her concept around American culture in general, but identifies technologies of mass mediation as particularly conducive to the production of prosthetic memory and the subjectivity of identity formation. She explains prosthetic memory fundamentally as an experience that comes from an object—it is consumed and integrated from the public consciousness to the private subjectivity, creating the *experience* rather than the fact of authenticity.[67] There is a symbiosis between the personal and the public cultural memory, which is what I would like to extend to the experience of Fifties domesticity, so as to emphasize the potential of melodrama to traverse boundaries of public and private identity.

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[66] For more on the limitations of trauma theory see E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
[67] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory,* 14.

To look at examples of traumatic events, particularly events of violence against women in Fifties melodrama, is to look at melodrama as a mode in fact encompassing many genres. In looking at examples of female experiences of trauma across these ever-shifting borders of genre, we can draw from both direct and indirect acts of struggle. There are the scenes of actual or attempted rape in *Peyton Place* (1957), *River of No Return* (1954), and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), as well as what we might read as rape in, for example, *In A Lonely Place* (1950) when Humphrey Bogart's character invades the locked space of Gloria Grahame's bedroom, or *Kiss me Deadly* (1955) when Cloris Leachman, an escaped mental patient, is tortured and killed on a table by a gang of men. In *River of No Return* Marilyn Monroe is subject to Robert Mitchum's forceful advances because she is not a domesticated woman; *Kiss me Deadly*'s Christina (Leachman) is institutionalized for the plot device of knowing a secret, though the allusion to popular Freudianism's treatment of "hysterical" women is unavoidable. These films act as microcosms, containing on a smaller scale the greater trauma of the expectation of containment and domesticity forced upon female sexuality and independence in the wake of postwar crises of masculinity.

Elsaesser discusses the male melodrama that focuses specifically on the stresses placed upon the husband to support his family and exist in middle class anonymity, the favored example being Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956), in which James Mason plays a teacher who goes insane under the thinly veiled allegory of cortisone, the miracle drug. Similarly, Steve Cohan explains that Humphrey Bogart's character Dix Steele from *In a Lonely Place* is emblematic of a trend in Fifties male protagonists who suffer from a bordering on psychopathic displaced rage

after the war.[68] I am interested in the traumas of male melodrama described by Elsaesser and Cohan insofar as these crises of masculinity initiate peripheral trauma for the women in these films, and the question of female spectatorship that arises. It is of course reductive to claim that women identify only with women on screen, but for those female spectators who do identify with Gloria Graham in *In a Lonely Place* or Barbara Rush in *Bigger Than Life*, there is another trauma at hand other than the crisis of masculinity postwar—there is the trauma of domestic violence.

Peyton Place, first a novel by Grace Metalious published in 1956, then adapted for the screen by Mark Robson in 1957, and eventually for television in 1964, has occupied a distinct place in sensationalist American culture for its enduring popularity, and in the canon of American melodrama for its excessive exploitation of scandal in a small, middle-class New England town. The film version experienced commercial and cultural success, eliciting a large budget cast and crew from 20th Century Fox headed by Mark Robson as director and starring reigning melodrama queen Lana Turner. It garnered Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Director, Actress (Turner), Supporting Actor (Arthur Kennedy and Russ Tamblyn), Supporting Actress (Hope Lange and Diana Varsi), as well as Adapted Screenplay and Cinematography. The excess and epic scale of the film is uniform across its production, popularity, sprawling narrative, sumptuous visuals, as well as its enduring reputation as a paragon of Fifties melodrama.

The film adaptation of *Peyton Place* follows the residents of the small town over the course of the years leading up to and surrounding World War II, as told through the voiceover narration of Allison MacKenzie, a senior at Peyton Place high school and an aspiring writer. The

[68] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 67. See also Steve Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 103.

story follows her relationship with her mother as well as the other intertwined stories of the townspeople, including most notably the subplot of the "lower class" Cross family, consisting of Allison's angelic friend Selena, her timid mother, and her abusive stepfather Lucas. Various scandals arise in the small town involving sex, illegitimacy, rape, abortion, miscarriage, and vengeance murder—in other words, "female" problems which, though spread amongst all the characters, seem to find their main vehicle in Selena Cross, the embodiment of the melodramatic ideals of innocence and purity abused in an unjust world.

The trauma that besets Selena manifests in two main plot points for the film, arriving narratively at the boiling point for the prewar and wartime sections of the film respectively—first the rape of Selena by a drunken, belligerent Lucas, and second, Selena's murder of Lucas upon his return from the Navy and second attempt at rape. Both scenes of trauma are shot graphically, the trauma existing in the narrative present and not through the device of flashback—not to be unlocked, but to be *experienced*. The typical melodramatic flourishes of overwrought music are instead replaced by the auditory explicitness of thwacking flesh and pounding fists. The unique experience of empathy with Selena continues in the film's rhetoric of gazes, namely the downward gaze of female shame. During the high school graduation scene that immediately follows the rape, we see Selena dressed in the vivid red graduation gown (red, as in so many melodramas of the period, is a pervasive expressive tool in the film), her eyes downcast, separating her from her peers. There is no diegetic return gaze for the downward countenance of shame, therefore the only gaze capable of return is that of the viewer, who acknowledges and understands the meaning of Selena's interiority, establishing a prosthetic link of communal comprehension.

Figure 1.1: The rape of Selena (Hope Lange in *Peyton Place,* dir. Mark Robson, 1957)

Figure 1.2: The gaze of shame (Hope Lange in *Peyton Place,* dir. Mark Robson, 1957)

Similarly, in the final courtroom scene in which Selena stands on trial for the murder of Lucas, refusing to reveal the truth of the rape and pregnancy that would mean her acquittal, Selena gazes down while the various institutions of the political realm continue to abuse not only her, but each of the female characters in turn who come to the witness stand in her defense. They insist upon her innocence with "female intuition" that is consequently negated by male law and logic, and it is not until the authority figure of Dr. Swain takes the stand (knowledge is power in the wake of popular Freudianism-obsessed society) to prove that Lucas raped Selena,

but also to assert the voice of reason to the community at large, informing them that their petty gossip and prejudices create fissures in the community. Upon hearing each of their truths revealed, each character in the audience in turn looks down as Selena does, the look inward constitutive of the collective link between them, and the viewer as well. Witnesses in the courtroom and film spectator-witnesses alike partake in the collective experience of their individual traumas.

I would like to think about *Peyton Place* as an exemplar of the allegorical work of screen trauma within the context of the film's resonance with female viewers, and the intimate, shared space created by the collective experience of consuming the film and experiencing empathy for the characters. Evan Brier relates the novel to the postwar literary critics' anxiety with mass culture and femininity:

> Not only was the novel authored by a woman and largely about women, it was also produced in hardcover and paperback editions by publishing houses headed by women. Thus the gendered subtext of the modernism/mass culture debate seems particularly relevant to a discussion of the novel's reception, and the novel itself seems an obvious symbol of the problem that a feminized mass culture represented to postwar intellectuals.[69]

The gendering of mass culture that Brier refers to is yet another product of the postwar crisis of masculinity and fear of disruption to the patriarchal status quo, and is furthermore particularly relevant to thinking about anxieties of a capitalist commodified society in which women are the primary consumers. This is also true of Berlant's housewife-consumer figure in women's culture, about which she says, "As a market domain where a set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly, women's culture solicits belonging via modes of sentimental realism that span fantasy and experience and claim a certain

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[69] Evan Brier, "The Accidental Blockbuster: *Peyton Place* in Literary and Institutional Context," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 50.

emotional generality among women."[70] Women's culture, in the form of melodrama becomes a way to explore female agency in a consumerist society. This highlights the importance of melodrama to the collective experience of female consumers of melodramatic media in the Fifties, in terms of both their influence over popular mass culture with the production of "romantic" and therefore feminine or "intimate" narratives, and also in the consumption of these narratives, effectively conflating the private and public realms of experience in an inverse of the male melodramatic tradition of transplanting the public trauma to the private realm of the family. These archetypes of melodramatic women's culture form a collective realm for women to relate to one another, but in a postwar culture saturated with domestic trauma, this space becomes a place to process pain rather than explore desire, forcing the woman's film tradition to move beyond the domestic home and nation.

Seeking Love (and War) Abroad: *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* and Cold War Geopolitics

Films that belong to what I call the "love in exoticized locales" cycle often use the premise of the recent past, namely the wartime period, to position their transnational imaginings of other spaces and cultures. Films that fall into this category, released in or around 1957, include: *Love is A Many-Splendored Thing* (King/Lang, 1955), *From Here to Eternity* (Zinnemann, 1953), *South Pacific* (Logan, 1958), *The World of Suzie Wong* (Quine, 1960), and *Stopover: Tokyo* (Breen, 1957). These films are undeniably melodramas, encompassing overwrought and often impossible romances, set against the morally legible backdrop of Manichean dichotomies divided along cultural, national, and racial lines. They are also

[70] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.

undeniably and problematically Orientalist in their depictions of the world through a narrowly western lens, egregiously fetishizing non-western women and enforcing patriarchal treatments of the other.[71] I interrogate whether these women's representations can yet be reclaimed and read against the grain of their problematic representations towards the possibility of an, albeit unintentional, intersectional retroactive feminism that might fulfill the promise of the political potential of the woman's film.

The concept of "Red Love" originates from the writings of Russian author Alexandra Kollontai, a writer and political activist during the Bolshevik period whose work is seminal to the field of Marxist feminism. Her essays focus on women's everyday lives under Communism and how the personal and the political intersect. In 1923 she published her views in the form of a novel, *The Love of Worker Bees,* which follows the lives of different women before, during, and after the Revolution, focusing on their passion for both politics (Marxism and support for the party) and personal sexual equity (in the household, the workplace, and in romance).[72] The novel was translated into multiple languages and circulated widely throughout Asia, contributing to political thought, literature and film, and even came to America in 1927, where Seven Arts Publishing Company printed it under the new title of *Red Love*.[73]

In *Red Love,* Kollontai positions her project in, retrospectively, transnational terms: "Many of the problems presented are not exclusively Soviet-Russian; they are world-wide facts,

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[71] See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Delia M.C. Konzett, *Hollywood's Hawaii: Race, Nation, and War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017) for more on Hollywood's stereotyping and fetishization of Asian places and people.
[72] Susan Barrowclough, "Review: The Love of Worker Bees," *History Workshop* (Spring, 1981): 182.
[73] Alexandra Kollontai, *Red Love* (New York: Seven Arts, 1927), 1.

which can be noted in all countries."[74] The novel is a treatise on the inexorable link between political revolutions and sexual revolutions, which in this case refers to the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent freedoms that allowed women to leave the private realm of the home and enter the public realm of political thought and non-domestic work, but easily translate to revolutions in other times, places, and imaginaries. Key to her message is the idea that revolution frees women from the confining role of bourgeois moral compass (of the home, of the nation, and of the love affair). A Marxist society "puts new demands on the women. Their ability to respond to the social duties of a citizen begins to have more value than their 'goodness' and 'stainlessness' in family-morals."[75] The novel itself is not particularly remarkable for its literary qualities, but it became a best-seller across Asia and North America mostly for its ability to give an epithet to a concept, an ideology, even a lifestyle: Red Love. Red Love encompasses all of the societal changes for women that could potentially accompany a non-capitalist global modernity; it is the (sometimes imagined, sometimes realized) possibility for women's equality in love, work, and family under socialism.[76]

This is how Kollontai describes the concept, but Red Love as an ideology took on a life of its own across the globe in all of the respective cultural contexts where the novel planted its seeds. In the North American context it inspired Leftist intellectuals to ask questions about how race, gender, and class overlap and inform each other, while in the budding socialist movements in Asia Red Love became a rallying cry for political and sexual revolutions, both inherently tied

[74] Kollontai, *Red Love,* 1.
[75] Kollontai, *Red Love*, 1.
[76] See Ruth Barraclough, Heather Bowen-Struyk, and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Red Love Across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) for a collection of essays that examine the influence of "Red Love" on political and sexual revolutions, as well as popular culture over the course of the Twentieth Century.

to the desire at the heart of Kollontai's writing: the desire for a new, more equitable future.[77] For me, Red Love is a tool for understanding the convergence of woman and nation at the heart of *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing,* a film that juxtaposes two kinds of desire: transgressive romantic desire and the political desire of a region in the midst of revolution.

Love is a Many-Splendored Thing, directed by Henry King and released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1955, opened to mostly critical acclaim and went on to be nominated for numerous Academy Awards. Based on the autobiographical novel by Han Suyin set in Hong Kong during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1949-1950), the film features Jennifer Jones and William Holden as the requisite star-crossed lovers Han Suyin, a Eurasian doctor, and Mark Elliot, an American correspondent; the two are star-crossed on multiple levels: cultural differences, Mark's marital status, and the general undercurrent of geopolitical upheaval resulting from the Cultural Revolution and the impending Korean War. The film's cultural half-life has proven significant as it continues to appear on television and various "best of" lists for its portrayal of a complex but ultimately doomed love affair, while it's the film's often egregious Orientalism that features into scholarly and critical discourses.[78]

Splendored both perpetuates and is critical of the sort of sights, sounds, and attitudes that contribute to Orientalist representation. The film's generically Asian sets and reductive Orientalized score do indeed contribute to an unavoidably reductive view of Hong Kong; they perpetuate Fifties Hollywood's problematic fetishization and appropriation of Asian culture, which Delia Konzett says is "rooted in escapist fantasy and white melodrama, negating any historical accountability of the United States."[79] She is referring specifically to the America

[77] Barraclough et al, *Red Love Across the Pacific*, xiv.
[78] Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* 6.
[79] Konzett, *Hollywood's Hawaii*, 217.

colonization of Hawaii, but we can translate this issue of accountability to the United States' wartime and postwar military presence in the Asian Pacific more generally, and the melodramas that erase the cultural violence and appropriation (e.g. *From Here to Eternity, South Pacific*) by focusing instead on the culture-traversing power of love.

Further contributing to Orientalist representation is Jennifer Jones' casting as Suyin, in an incontrovertible instance of yellowface, even if devoid of facile caricature. Jones brings with her to the role a star image built partially on another role as a biracial figure, Pearl Chavez (Jones in brownface as half-Mexican) from *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1945). These roles, dubiously connected by their racial minstrelsy, connect to the common melodramatic trope of the tragic biracial heroine—the woman who, by nature of belonging to neither world, often dies, or else survives by "passing."[80]

The film quite clearly conforms to the conditions of the melodramatic mode, from the overwrought emotion of the affair to visual and musical excess. Stylistically speaking the bright colors and dramatic angles recall the high modernism of Sirk and Ray, while the titular, Academy Award-winning song/score ("Love is a Many-Splendored Thing," by Sammy Fain and Paul Francis Webber) plays prominently throughout the film, both diegetically and non-diegetically, during key moments of emotional excess. How, then, can we read this film as a descendant of the woman's film specifically, in addition to its broader place among Fifties high modernist melodrama? I want to look more closely at two aspects of the film: the unfettered female desire as it connects to the star image of Jennifer Jones, and the distinctly political (and sometimes progressive) undercurrents that throughout the film align concepts of woman and

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[80] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 180-1.

nation in a way that takes us beyond the domestic (domestic in terms of both the nation and the home) melodrama.

The politics of race, gender, sexuality, and ideology at play in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* are complex and at times contradictory. As mentioned earlier, the Hollywood-ification of Han Suyin's novel resulted in an often Orientalized, oversimplified view of Asian culture. However, the film is for its time surprisingly progressive in the ways that it seems to push back against the very Orientalist representation it perpetuates. The film was indeed shot partially on location in Hong Kong, which was unusual for the time and demonstrative of the film's attempt to maintain a semblance of authentic representation. *Variety* remarks that it's "an unusual picture, shot against authentic Hong Kong backdrops and offbeat in its treatment, yet as simple and moving a love story as has come along in many moons."[81] In a scathing review for *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther expresses general distaste for the film's sentimentality and the eponymous "unctuous love ballad," praising only the film's "colourful backdrop of Hong Kong."[82] Across the spectrum of critical praise or disdain for the love story, the location-shooting remains the universally noteworthy element of the film: enticing for its authenticity rather than its exoticization. Indeed, *Splendored* even ventures into "city film" territory, as opposed to the homebound domestic melodramas more common at the time.

[81] Variety Staff, "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing," *Variety*, December 31, 1954.
[82] Bosley Crowther, "Love is a Few Splendors Shy," *The New York Times,* August 19, 1955, 10.

Figure 1.3: The Foreign Correspondent's Club in Hong Kong that serves as Suyin's hospital, and Repulse Bay, in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955).

From an early scene, which takes place at a party held at the home of one of the hospital's British administrators, Dr. Palmer-Jones, the viewer is invited to identify immediately with Suyin's frustration at Mrs. Palmer-Jones' ignorant remarks about her gender, profession, and nationality—woman and nation(ality) already conflated with each other. Suyin must instruct the hostess that she is in fact a doctor, not an artist (the assumption that she is an artist represents Palmer-Jones' exoticization and sensualization of Suyin), and while Palmer-Jones tries to insinuate that being Eurasian is really just like being European, Suyin explains that she is proud of her Chinese heritage (she comes from Chungking) and considers herself Chinese. Throughout the film the Palmer-Jones character stands in for all that is intolerant in the stuffy British colonial class. Suyin, conversely, continually asserts not just her biracial identity, but her various political leanings as well, which often contradict each other at different levels of analysis.

On the one hand, Suyin is a mouthpiece for the film's dominant political narrative: that the Revolution in China is misguided and destructive. Interspersed throughout the film are scenes in which she treats a young girl injured on the mainland and brought to Hong Kong among the many victims and refugees of the civil war. Suyin's husband, we learn, was a Nationalist killed by the Communists, and she laments multiple times that the Communists are killing their own

people. Through these criticisms she affirms the Cold War political message that America, through Hollywood's representations of Asia in the Fifties, espouses: Communism is bad, and in this case, antithetical to love. Through the language of melodrama—the language of "too late" and doomed romance—*Splendored* shows us that Communism kills love: a husband killed, a child injured and orphaned—it is too late for Suyin to find love and have a family. She of course does find love again with Mark, but Mark dies while on assignment in Korea where he is sent to cover the fomenting war. In a moment of melodramatic tension whereby the viewer knows what the character does not, Suyin reads a letter from Mark while she sits at a desk, where she is using red paint to write Chinese characters on a piece of paper. Mark's voiceover narrates the letter while we watch him at his battlefield makeshift writing desk, but he stops writing the letter when an enemy plane approaches, ready to drop a bomb. At the moment when the bomb should make contact, the camera cuts abruptly back to Suyin's space, where a child knocks the bowl of red paint to the ground and cries in a frightening manner. The message is clear: Mark is dead, and once again Communism is the culprit that has taken love away from Suyin.

Figure 1.4: Communism kills love in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

In this way, Suyin represents the dominant American Cold War ideology of cultural imperialism in postwar Asia. As Christina Klein points out in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the*

Middlebrow Imagination, this period was not just about fighting Communism, but about searching for allies among non-Communist Asian countries/territories, particularly those with an American military presence post-war, and integrating them into a Western democratic model, both politically and culturally.[83] From this point of view, Suyin is an ideal messenger of American cultural imperialism, as well as a point of entry and instruction for American viewers, making Asian culture legible; she often does this quite literally through her explanations of Chinese cultural practices to Mark. Klein furthermore identifies a salient trend among middlebrow cultural actors of the time (namely star of *The King and I* Yul Brynner and the musical/film's producer's Rodgers and Hammerstein) who publicly encouraged child adoption from Asia and adopted Asian children themselves, contributing to what Klein calls America's "maternalist" or "adoptive" approach toward Asia.[84] Klein does not include *Splendored* in her analysis though the film does indeed perpetuate this theme of politicized adoption: Suyin effectively adopts the orphaned Chinese refugee child she cares for at the hospital, as would Mark, had he survived.

Suyin expresses her politics, and we see their correlation to her romantic life, in sometimes diametrically opposed ways. She espouses the requisite anti-Communist sentiments that we expect of a Hollywood film, for all of the aforementioned reasons, but she also is resolutely insistent that her Chinese identity is dominant over her European identity, refusing to be fully Westernized. She almost exhaustingly discusses the choices that her Chinese side would make versus her European side, namely when it comes to whether she should indulge her desire

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[83]Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16. Klein focuses her analysis on middlebrow musicals like *The King and I* and *South Pacific* as vehicles for spreading democracy and Americanization.
[84] Klein, *Cold War* Orientalism, 174.

for Mark, a white American who is technically still married. Multiple instances of stereotypical cultural conflicts ensue—the Chinese side is more traditional, the European side more permissive; this is what we expect from a Hollywood film set in Asia. However, the film pushes back against the stereotypes that it itself perpetuates; in the end it is Suyin's Chinese family that gives their approval for her to marry Mark, while the critique of the affair comes from Mrs. Palmer-Jones and the Western sensibilities of propriety that she represents. In fact it is the Western institutions that rejected the then-controversial love story; the MPAA objected to the film's depictions of adultery and miscegenation, neither of which the 1955 code explicitly forbid, though it did demand that such material "be treated within the careful limits of good taste."[85] Furthermore censors in Ireland and pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec issued recuts of the film that avoided the topic of divorce altogether.[86] The treatment of "morality" on and offscreen is just one instance in which the film challenges its own Orientalist representation. Suyin ultimately is not a Madame Butterfly figure (in fact it is Mark who dies), and she is not forced to westernize herself to escape this fate. Furthermore, we learn almost in passing that Suyin's father was Chinese and her mother European, combatting Orientalist stereotypes of Asian masculinity that often portrayed Asian men as sexless while hyper-sexualizing women.[87]

There are too many overlapping and contradictory conflations of race, love, and politics in *Splendored* to make any definitive reading of the film, or to attempt an understanding of the real Han Suyin's opaque political views. Suyin, in the film, is as much a proponent of "Red

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[85] Motion Picture Association of America, *The Motion Picture Production Code: 1955* [publisher not identified], 6.
[86] Variety Staff, "Censor changes plot!," *Variety,* January 18, 1956, 1.
[87] Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* 5. She explains that in the US these representations stem from fears of 19th century Chinese rail workers who were forced to immigrate alone, without wives or family, encouraging a fear of miscegenation

Love" as she is an anti-Communist mouthpiece for the West.[88] Her denunciation of the Revolution does not stem from any political or ideological opinion, but rather from her Hippocratic responsibility to preserve life. Despite even her husband's death at Communist hands or her Chinese family's fear of the Revolution, she never espouses distaste for the Marxist cause, only laments the violence, and even touts Marxist ideology herself, albeit through coded language rather than explicitly. When Mrs. Palmer-Jones asks if she is a Communist, Suyin replies measuredly, "No, but I became a doctor to help my people." Her rhetoric of "the people" and "my people" punctuates her language throughout the film, and in no way are we as viewers meant to identify with the boorish, classist, and Commie-hating Palmer-Jones.

Suyin believes part of her mission as a doctor is to combat "race snobbery." She transgresses boundaries not only as a biracial woman (her duality is indeed the duality of Hong Kong itself), but also as a doctor she is uniquely capable of traversing divisions of class as well. She moves between different social groups from the hospital administration upper-crust, to the crowded refugee ward, and from the streets of Hong Kong to the lofty hilltop (literal and figurative) of her love affair with Mark. Daniel Sanderson sees Suyin, the author and the character, as a bridge between East and West that is a testament to the power of "Red Love" to encourage empathy and understanding between cultures, to make legible to the west the "Revolutionary other."[89] From this perspective, Suyin's seemingly apolitical stance that a doctor cares only about saving lives is actually indicative of a distinctly Red Love: a love for the people and for the cause. This love is complementary to her transgressive Red Love for Mark, which

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[88] Daniel Sanderson, "*Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*: Han Suyin and the Image of Asia," in *Red Love Across the Pacific*, 83.
[89] Sanderson, "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing: Han Suyin and the Image of Asia," 83.

traverses the boundaries not just of race and nation, but also the dictates of the traditional bourgeois morality that Kollontai rails against and Mrs. Palmer-Jones upholds.

Sanderson focuses more on the real Han Suyin as a political and popular culture figure than on her fictionalized self, tracing her public appearances and interviews to assert that she was an embodiment of Red Love itself. In the post-Bandung Conference (1955) Cold War climate she represented to the worlds of both East and West in a way that made more palatable the post-colonial rhetoric of the newly independent or soon-to-be independent nations of Asia and Africa. In Bandung these nations met to establish economic and cultural cooperation among themselves as a means to further abjure the influence of colonial and neocolonial powers.[90] I agree with his reading, but want to focus more on the filmic side of *Splendored* and how Red Love might lead us to a greater understanding of the woman's film in the love-abroad category. Han Suyin, the author, is as Sanderson claims an embodiment of Red Love, but Han Suyin the character exists within Hollywood's transnational imagination, which means that we need to take into account the representational filters through which her character is processed, chief among them the star image and subsequent connotations of the woman's film that Jennifer Jones brings to the role.

As mentioned earlier with regards to *Duel in the Sun*, Jones carries with her an established link to the melodramatic mode and a reputation for an excessive emotionality conveyed through her facial expressions. Jones' perhaps most well-known and acclaimed role is as the titular character in *The Song of Bernadette*, also directed by Henry King, for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1943. The film, which we might categorize as a religious melodrama, relies on Jones' ability to convey divine intervention and religious epiphany through her face, not unlike Maria Falconetti and the famed close-ups in Dreyer's *Le*

[90] Sanderson, "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing: Han Suyin and the Image of Asia," 82.

passion de Jeanne d'Arc (1928). Jones' star image also carries with it the role of Emma Bovary in Vincente Minneli's 1949 adaptation of the melodrama ur-text, *Madame Bovary*, which was highly influential to the theme of unfettered (and ultimately impossible) desire that runs as a thread throughout the romantic women's films of the Forties.

Returning to *Splendored*, a review from the *Motion Picture Daily* focuses on Jones as the selling point of *Splendored* with her "magnificent" performance and her "arresting study of human nature."[91] It is her unique humanism that conveys depth, emotionality, and authenticity, mostly through her face. *The Independent Film Journal* similarly singles out Jones for her ability to "wrest every bit of emotion from the proceedings" and *Splendored* in general for its ability to "[punch] across a maximum of emotion with utmost conviction," the result of which is that "tears are certain to be shed."[92] Jones' performances were a result of her intense role preparation process, a process that annoyed William Holden on the set of *Splendored.* The two purportedly hated each other, Holden often irritated with the length and depth of her emotional process before shooting a scene, and Jones wary of Holden's notorious womanizing.[93]

Jones' full range of facial expression is most notable during the scenes at the hilltop meeting place where Suyin and Mark meet to consummate their romance (consummation through words and embraces rather than sex). At their first rendezvous Suyin arrives before Mark, an overwrought moment of extreme tension for Suyin and the viewer as it is unclear whether Mark will appear and return her affections: has she made herself vulnerable to love (which she swore she would never do again after the death of her husband) for nothing? In this

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[91] Samuel D. Berns, "Review," *Motion Picture Daily,* August 10, 1955, 6.
[92] The Independent Film Journal Staff, "Review," *The Independent Film Journal*, August 20, 1955, 27.
[93] Edward Epstein, *Portrait of Jennifer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 321.

moment the guttural emotions of anticipation, pain, and longing are writ large across her face. Once Mark does arrive, Jones as Suyin gives her desire free reign and relishes it. There is an excess of emotion and physical craving not just in her face but in her movements: now that she has crossed this line, she accepts her sexuality.

Figure 1.5: Suyin in ecstasy atop the hill (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing,* Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

Jones exhibits a quality of decadence that is almost indecent or intrusive for the spectator and therein lies the pleasure of the performance. Mark is basically incidental, Holden's clipped and unemotional style of expression overshadowed by Jones'. In this moment and throughout the film Jones evokes the emotionality and excess of the womean's film heroines of the Forties heyday.

Visually, the film employs a high modernist use of color similar to what we see in the melodramas of Sirk and Ray, where the colors are deeply expressive and symbolic, true to the melodrama practice of using the visual to evoke the emotional.[94] The interplay between blue and red features significantly throughout the film, particularly during moments of heightened

[94] See e.g. Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

emotion or tension. Blue is the more ubiquitous color; the blue of the water from Repulse Bay appears in most of the location shots and is mirrored in the blues of Suyin's clothes and her friend's home. It becomes synonymous with Hong Kong itself, a visual marker of the island's geographical, political, and ideological distinction from the mainland, which, during Suyin's trip to visit her family there, appears bathed in varying hues of red, from the lantern lights to Suyin's dress.

Figure 1.6: Hong Kong Blue Dress (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

Figure 1.7: Mainland Red Dress (Jennifer Jones and William Holden in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

The color scheme on the mainland is not in total opposition to the ubiquity of Hong Kong's blues. Rather, red and blue intermingle in the home of Suyin's temperate Nationalist family. This depiction of Mainland China still draws from a blue color scheme similar to Hong Kong, but the

accents of red appear as stark indicators of the brewing political tension; the red steadily encroaches on the blue, suggestive of communism's insidious influence, a growing threat to the freedom of Hong Kong (and by proxy, the freedom of the West), as well as an omen of Mark's fate.

Figure 1.8: Red and Blue on the Mainland (Jennifer Jones in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

Figure 1.9: Red and Blue on the Mainland (Jennifer Jones, William Holden, Donna Martell, Philip Ahn, and Aen-Ling Chow in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*, dir. Henry King and Otto Lang, 1955)

Blue is also the color of Suyin and Mark's love. Marriage between the two is impossible unless Mark gets a divorce, so what we get instead is a metaphorical marriage that occurs when the two meet at the beach, strip down to their bathing suits, and swim across the bay to the home

of Suyin's friends: an untethered liminal island space where Mark and Suyin can be together, not judged, among progressive friends who blur the lines between East and West. Their island home is not the high-colonial English home of the Palmer-Jones, nor is it the Orientalized space of the mainland or the streets of Hong Kong. Here, in these blue spaces, their love seems not only possible, but natural and effortless.

However, as we know, their romance is doomed. If Red Love, conceptually if not visually in this case, is the transgressive, transnational force that, as Alexandra Kollontai asserts, creates possibility—the possibility for a more equitable political and romantic future—then what I call "Blue Love" is the death knell of inevitability, of fate. Fate is a key tenet of melodrama and the woman's film in particular—desire deferred, love thwarted, ambiguous endings, and impossible futures. Of course, Brooks and Elsaesser argue that melodrama is defined primarily by societal forces that impose themselves on the helpless individual, with coincidence acting as a driving narrative force, in contrast to the idea of fate more commonly attributed to tragedy. I would argue, however, that the melodramatic trope of coincidence is simply the tool that carries out the will of fate, that the tragic and certain forms of tragedy (e.g., Greek, Shakespearean) fit under the umbrella of the melodramatic mode, particularly with regard to the concept of excess. Furthermore, melodrama temporality and the temporality of the woman's film are cyclical and known, as in the case of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948) or *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) wherein the flashback is used to determine what was "almost" but is now "too late." This is Blue Love, as is the deferred desire of *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942). This temporal language of melodrama would be familiar to contemporaneous viewers of *Splendored*, and as such there would be no illusions as to the ending of this story. Suyin and Mark's love should be everything that Red Love promises—a union of mutual respect freed of

restrictive gender roles, yet it's been Blue and doomed from the start. In this case the visual and the conceptual do overlap—blue is in either case synonymous with this love that cannot exist.

Suyin's duality is the duality of Hong Kong itself and an embodiment of the possibility of Red Love to engender solidarity across lines of sex, gender, race, and nation. But just as Suyin and Mark's romance is doomed, so is the promise of Red Love on the Cold War geopolitical stage. Kollontai eventually left the party, unhappy with the developing dictatorship, and her writings were co-opted and manipulated by the state to propagandize the value of work above Kollontai's original message of equality, de-emphasize the importance of love and sex, and to reinstate the double standard by which women should be responsible citizen-workers as well as domestic paragons of morality.[95] The project of Red Love, though it would indeed inspire sexual and political revolutions in perpetuity, for all its subjunctive promise and potential, like Suyin's romance, inevitably turns Blue.

Until They Sail and Women's Space in Hollywood's Transnational Imagination

Until They Sail (Robert Wise, 1957) is a WW II-set melodrama, one of many during the cycle of wartime-in-exoticized-locale films: *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), *South Pacific* (1958). Despite an A-list cast that includes an early romantic role for Paul Newman and general critical praise, the film was a box-office flop and has remained relatively untouched by film scholarship on the period, which focuses on more enduringly popular films of the genre. However, as research shifts more towards understanding the global imagination of film studies, a film such as *Until They Sail* provides an ideal canvas on

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[95] Maria Zavialova, "Red Venus: Alexandra Kollontai's *Red Love* and Women in Soviet Art," in *Red Love Across the Pacific*, 221.

which to explore the postwar Hollywood imaginings of transnational spaces. Set in New Zealand during the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the film focuses on the interactions between local women and American marines. It follows four sisters as they embark on inevitable romances with the American visitors, and probes the shifting dynamics of sisterly bonds during the politically and romantically tumultuous period: the romantic, as is often the case with melodrama, serves as surrogate to the political tensions.

The four New Zealand sisters are played by Jean Simmons, Joan Fontaine, Piper Laurie and Sandra Dee—Dee in her first film role, and the only actor who attempted to perform the New Zealand accent, however poorly. Indeed the "Britishness" of the other sisters is often emphasized—visiting American officers remark on the charm of Christchurch resembling an English village, and the sisters several times mention their education in the UK. Already the film is situated as a doubly colonized space—first by the British and second by the American soldiers using it as a way station. This New Zealand is therefore not only a transnational space, but a transitional one, and it is this context of liminality that allows for othered figures (in this case, "a nation of women who exist without men," as the film's original theatrical trailer proclaims) to assert agency.

An important caveat to mention with regards the "transnationalism" at work here: it is of an allegorical rather than literal nature. *Until They Sail* was filmed mostly on the MGM studio lot, though much B-roll was captured on location in New Zealand. This is very much a Hollywood film (and anything different would have been very uncommon for the time), so when I refer to Hollywood's transnational imagination I am discussing Hollywood's representation rather than the reality of these spaces.

Brian McDonnell, who has written on postwar Hollywood representations of New Zealand has an altogether different approach to this film, placing it not within the "wartime exotic romances cycle" but rather in the "women on the home front" cycle with films such as *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) and *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944).[96] However I view these films as inseparable from the distinct wartime contexts in which they were conceived, produced, and marketed, just as *Until They Sail* is a distinctly 1950s re-imagining of the war, indistinguishable from its own context of Fifties postwar film, television, and political cultures. The unique transitional landscape of 1957 Hollywood is characterized primarily by a series of temporally specific cycles, rather than the larger categorization of retrospectively applied genres.

There are, of course, elements of the traditional Hollywood woman's film in various melodrama sub-genre films throughout the Fifties. In the examples I have provided from 1957 alone we see melodrama woven throughout the cycle of "adult films," which seem to have appropriated many of the "issues" central to women's pictures (i.e., sexual and psychological trauma, romantic excess, obsessions with the truth or "moral occult"). What is noteworthy about *Until They Sail* and the specifically Fifties iteration of wartime overseas films, however, is the way in which this sub-generic space seems to provide a unique home for the trope of women's suffering and all its affective possibilities.

The original theatrical trailer for the film very clearly markets itself as what would have been recognized as an "adult picture," the opening cards reading "loneliness and sex are universal themes," and the narrator even refers to the film as a "very adult drama." The

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[96] Brian McDonnell, "Postwar Hollywood Representations of New Zealand," *Film Criticism* 25.3 (Spring: 2001), 9.

proceeding clips from the film emphasize its mature themes of sex, infidelity, murder, pregnancy, and teenage rebellion. Yet there are also subtler undertones of the woman's film—the emphasis on sisterly bonds and domestic relationships, clearly setting the story as being about women and the spaces they inhabit.

Until They Sail is in many ways a very typical melodrama and even slightly outdated stylistic hangover of the studio era. It is a visually conservative film during a time when experimentation was gaining momentum even in Hollywood melodrama (i.e., Sirk, Minnelli, Ray), while exhibiting plot devices familiar to the woman's film. There is the bad marriage, the fallen woman, the unexpected pregnancy, the sex pot (each of these embodied separately in the four sisters—though also all are present in the one "problem" sister, played by Piper Laurie). However, the film is exceptional insofar as it is emblematic of a subtle sea change occurring in late Fifties cinema amidst the "adult picture" provocations: the overt, excessive, even abject display of a specifically feminine pathos. In other words, "women's needs," but in reality rather than euphemism.

This takes its most explicit form in the film's depiction of women's loneliness. From the onset, through Jean Simmons' character's voiceover, the film describes New Zealand at the time as "a country of women without men." This is hardly unusual in the literal sense for a wartime community, but this phrase takes on a double articulation throughout the film. In a scene towards the end of the film, after Barbara (Jean Simmons) and Jack (Paul Newman) have cautiously entered a romantic relationship out of the aforementioned "loneliness and sex" that are "universal themes," both agree to remove themselves from the relationship to avoid becoming overly attached to one another. Simmons' performance reveals the doubling typical of both her character and the film's treatment of women's issues: she is meant to be performing sadness but

also strength as she has been meant to perform throughout the war (sadness and strength for her country, for her men) but there is more beyond these compulsory, externalized feelings. Through a slight zoom on Simmons that aligns us to her perspective, we also glimpse her internal emotional commentary. Simmons' performance provides a glint of irony in her eye as Jack exclaims, "Hanging around the house, watching you and your sisters—just living—it's a way I never got to know a girl before."

Figure 1.10: Skeptical Barbara (Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail,* dir. Robert Wise, 1957)

It should be noted that Paul Newman's Jack is essentially eye candy in this film—a fetishized romantic object whose bond to Barbara carries less narrative or affective agency than the relationship between the sisters. Yet it is this line delivered by Jack that unknowingly encompasses the film's gesture toward the emotional reality of women and the spaces they inhabit.

To further contextualize Jack's ineffectualness, I would also point to the typical melodrama resolvedly unresolved ending, wherein the requisite coupling (in this case Jack and Barbara) resonates with emotional falseness. We can read this as a means to preserve the bittersweet flavor of desire unfulfilled, as Mary Ann Doane might contend, or as a subversive

commentary on the tendency of the romantic plot to amputate the female viewer-character from the political realm, as Lauren Berlant would maintain.[97] Either way, this kiss, as well as the coupling at the end of the film, is ancillary to Barbara's own earned agency and her more affectively resonant relationship with her sisters.

By the end of *Until They Sail* it is the younger Piper Laurie and Sandra Dee characters who have exhibited the more frivolous trappings of boy-craziness, but the older Jean Simmons and Joan Fontaine display profound and deeply felt loneliness. This privileging of internality makes visible the complexity of female emotional reality, played out in the deeply personal space of their home. There is a Bazinian notion of deep space here—achieved visually, but also temporally insofar as the viewer is able to absorb the reality of women's spaces by returning continually to it.[98]

Figure 1.11: Bazinian Deep Space (Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail,* dir. Robert Wise, 1957)

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[97] Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Berlant, *The Female Complaint,* 5.
[98] André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism,* ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford, 2009), 50. Bazin famously credits the concept of deep space (i.e. deep focus and/or increased depth of field within the frame) with contributing to cinematic realism.

Through these displays of feminine pathos and melodramatic suffering, we see part of the answer to this question of what happens to the woman's film at this time: it is outsourced to Hollywood's transnational imagination.

The more "American-themed" Hollywood melodramas throughout the Fifties typically exist within the confines of the postwar nuclear family and "closed" American community—e.g., the madness of the male melodrama (*Bigger Than Life*), or the complexities of the "ensemble melodrama" (*The Cobweb, Written on the Wind*) or even the intrigues of the small-town melodrama (*Peyton Place*). However, the "sentimental" form of the woman's film extends beyond Hollywood's imaginary borders. The war had political and cultural repercussions that resulted in a postwar closing of cultural borders—an isolationist period leading into the Cold War in which the notion of Americanness was valued and encouraged, particularly in film. However, the realities of a world war and its aftermath are inherently transnationalizing, in the most literal sense.

Below we see two images of the map that plays a significant role in the film. It holds a prominent spot in the sisters' home, and they constantly refer back to it, moving around the pins that mark the locations of their various men. Towards the end of the film, Jean Simmons burns it. The romance-in-exotic-locales cycle, and *Until They Sail* specifically, provide one route for tracing the threads of female desire at the heart of the woman's film. While the film may seem on one level to be a straightforward conflation of woman and nation via melodrama—allegorizing or mapping public political discourse onto the private realm—the private here overshadows the public. The story of sisters and the interior lives of women carries more affective agency than the fate of the men represented by the pins on the map—a map that burns, curling in upon itself, until nothing is left at all.

Figure 1.12: Jean Simmons in *Until They Sail* (Robert Wise, 1957)

The question of what happened to the Fifties woman's film is, of course, more a rhetorical exercise than a question with a discrete answer. Elements of the woman's film exist in undercurrents of films that span the gamut of various genre classifications. One thing, however, that this exercise makes clear, in the context of postwar American society—and all of the socio-geopolitical baggage that goes along with it—is that the woman's film in the 1950s can only really thrive in an imagined time or space. The imaginaries are necessary to recreate the agency of wartime women and break free of Fifties domestic conformity, in terms of both the domestic home and the domestic nation.

Peyton Place provides an example of the trauma of these two domestics and the corresponding need for the woman's film to move elsewhere. However, there is no straightforward solution to this problem, as evinced by the complex geopolitical implications of

the transnationalized heroine, Han Suyin in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*. Finally, *Until They Sail* illustrates the outsourced space of the transnational imagination. These spaces of imagined female citizenship are one answer to where we find the woman's film, because arguably this is the role that the woman's film has always played—as an outlet, a place of commonality, catharsis, and collective imagination—or in other words, as a community or citizenship unto itself. In this space it is possible to yield power outside national, institutional structures. Melodrama is the site for and perpetuator of this potentially global female citizenship, wherein citizens are free to move through a world in which their experience is recognized and they can seek social belonging accordingly.

CHAPTER TWO

Radical Subjectivity in Soviet Melodrama of the Khrushchev Thaw

At the 1958 Brussels World Fair, the CIA devised a covert operation to smuggle Russian language copies of Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* into the Soviet Union, where, though Pasternak finished the novel in 1954 and successfully smuggled a copy out of the country, it had yet to be published in Russian and distributed to Soviet readers. Banned by Soviet literary authorities for material that might be deemed critical of the regime, the novel appealed to the Cold War Arts and Culture division of the CIA, which strove to enact international influence through "political-psychological" channels, in this case, literature. Operatives determined that *Zhivago*, a sweeping emotional melodrama about love and humanism, was an ideal vessel for changing "hearts and minds" in the USSR. The smuggled manuscript traveled from an Italian Communist publisher to British intelligence to the CIA, and finally to the Brussels World Fair, where the relatively loose border restrictions at the international event allowed it to finally land back in Russia.[99] The transnational movement of art and ideas, the politicization and weaponization of melodrama, and the idea that something deeply of Russian culture—emotional humanism—can be lost and found again, serve, in microcosm, to set the stage for this chapter's approach to the cinema of the Thaw, and the socio-political possibilities unlocked therein.

Following the Stalinist era of political persecution and limitations on liberties, under which art and culture were often subjugated to the aesthetics and values of socialist realism, the Khrushchev Thaw (roughly 1953-1964) heralded a period of cultural renaissance in the USSR. A new language was needed during the Thaw to understand the changing cultural landscape and the

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[99] Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book* (London: Pantheon Books, 2014).

subsequent subjectivity newly afforded to its citizens. I argue that melodrama functions as a tool for understanding and articulating this new subjectivity, by renegotiating identity and emotional expression through cinematic language.

This chapter examines specifically the roles and representations of women during this period, through the examples of *Spring on Zarechnaya Street/Vesna na Zarechnoy ulitse* (Marlen Khutsiev and Feliks Mironer, 1956) and *The Cranes are Flying/Letyat zhuravli* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957). These melodramas, typical of Thaw ideology yet differing in aesthetic approach, provide their heroines with the emotional language necessary to express their own radical subjectivity. I discuss other films representative of this era, but these two films juxtaposed represent a conflict at the heart of Thaw melodrama: how to reconcile the excess of the melodramatic tradition with the ideals and aesthetics of realism. *Cranes* and *Zarechnaya* are uniquely situated to contribute to this debate; the former is regaled globally as a masterpiece of art cinema, while the latter, stylistically more conventional, toils in greater obscurity internationally, though it is locally ubiquitous and much-beloved by viewers for over sixty years. At their core, both are melodramas speaking to the distinct Thaw climate that must reconcile any number of contradictions beyond just that of realism and melodrama: the crimes of the past and hope for the future, as well as individual subjectivity and collective social responsibility.

In this chapter as in the others, it is necessary to reconcile the global and the local—to identify that which is globally legible in the melodramatic forms that emerge in most early cinema cultures dealing with modernity, with the locally specific traditions of melodrama rooted in pre-industrial literature and theater. Brooks identifies the French Revolution era theater as the basis for popular western melodrama, but many have critiqued the degree to which this seminal work can or should be applied to other histories of the mode. Indeed, the Soviet melodrama

tradition is preceded by a complex history in stage and literature that is deeply ingrained in the specifically Russian circumstance of class struggle and intellectual ideology, as well as the later cinematic aesthetics of socialist realism.

In many ways the landscape of early 20th century pre- revolutionary Russian melodrama does resemble the one described by Brooks, insofar as the plots are replete with Manichean dichotomies of good and evil that provide a cathartic experience for scorned masses under tsarist rule. What is noteworthy however is the way in which these themes and structures of melodrama are appropriated during the revolution and post-revolution periods, and contorted to bolster the ideals and aesthetics of socialist realism, the predominant mode of art (and cinema) at the time. The 19th century concept of the private individual life is the predominant locus of the melodramatic imagination, but during the Stalinist period it is confounded by changing ideologies that conflate nation with individual. Manichean dichotomies still reigned, but their points of reference changed. Where once stories of, for example, individual martyrism and personal justice dominated, now these themes are shifted to implicate martyrism not for the self but for the nation and the ideals of socialism. This of course speaks to the flexibility of melodrama as a mode of expression.

During the Great Patriotic War (i.e. the Second World War), the canvas of Soviet melodrama in many ways anticipated the familiar form of the family melodramas of postwar Hollywood cinema in the 1950s—the private sphere of the family, as Thomas Elsaesser writes, became the site for negotiating greater public socio-cultural upheaval.[100] The family melodramas of 1940s Soviet cinema are inextricably connected to the war and the war's impact on the family

[100] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart is,* Ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987): 43-69.

unit, in this case expressed through the good/evil distinction of the capitalist "them" and the Soviet "us."[101] This shift is an important precursor to the events of The Thaw, as it was WWII and the ensuing cultural politics that led to a discursive shift in melodrama discourse, from the events of the revolution to the events of the more globalized world war. The wartime melodramas were indeed extremely popular and often critically-acclaimed, though Soviet critics disparaged the label of melodrama and often denied that Russian filmmakers even made melodramas—a flawed assertion, considering that Socialist Realism itself can be read as melodramatic excess.[102]

My analysis interacts mainly with the work of Josephine Woll, whose *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* constitutes a significant intervention into the field of Soviet film scholarship, through the unique lens of Thaw politics and aesthetics. Her research (along with others such as Maia Turovskaia, Rimgaila Salys, and Anna Lawton, among others) provide contextual information for the societal changes of the Thaw as well as the manifestations of these changes in popular culture and critical discourses.[103] Woll's scholarship is prolific and thorough,

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[101] Alexander Prokhorov, "Soviet Family Melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s," in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, ed. Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2002): 208.
[102] Elena Shilova, ''Melodrama,'' in *Kinoslovar'* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsi- klopediia, 1986), 264.
[103] I consulted these sources for general historical information and reference to primary sources pertaining to popular culture: Anna Lawton, *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003); Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, eds., *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Maya Turovskaia, *Red women on the silver screen: Soviet women and cinema from the beginning to the end of the Communist Era* (London: Pandora, 1993); Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina, eds., *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (London: Anthem Press, 2011); Rimgaila Salys, ed., *The Russian Cinema Reader* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013); Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd,

a guidepost for any research on Soviet cinema of this era. I refer to her research for its historical contextualization and engagement with primary sources, but diverge from her when it comes to in-depth analysis of the films, where her writing is succinct (likely owing to the sheer scope of the project). Though she covers wide-ranging topics such as cultural-historical context, production, reception, and narrative and stylistic analysis, she does remain rooted in the time and place of Thaw cinema. I explore this period and the films in question through the lens of melodrama, with an eye to the locally specific cultural changes of the Thaw as well as their connection to the greater global legibility of melodrama as a tool for expressing and understanding cultural change. Interestingly Woll does not connect the concept of "melodrama as a mode" to the cinema of the Thaw, instead using the term as a sort of shorthand for the genres of either sentimental films or films with clear heroes and villains.[104] She furthermore uses the term somewhat disparagingly to pass rare qualitative judgment on the films, adopting the common line (along with Turovskaia) that melodrama is somehow contradictory to or detracting from the artform of neorealism that informed the stylistic innovations of Thaw cinema.[105] Though not without merit in certain circumstances, this treatment of melodrama is reductive and ignores the opportunity to use the language of melodrama to convey the unique hope and possibility of the Khrushchev era.

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eds., *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

[104] Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 26 and 33. Woll gives the examples of *Lesson of Life* (1955) and *Unfinished Tale* (1955) for the former and *The Rumianstev Case* (1956) for the latter.

[105] Woll, *Real Images*, 78.

Melodrama and (Neo)realisms

Melodrama during the postwar period existed in a space of genre liminality, neither part of the early cinema melodramatic tradition, nor yet a part of the new Soviet popular genres (Science Fiction, Westerns) that emerged in the late 1960s and into the Stagnation period of the 1970s. Viewed retrospectively, the melodramas of the Thaw blurred the line between melodrama and what we would now call art cinema, carefully experimenting with a new language of emotionality. Influenced in particular by audiences' favorable reactions to imports from Indian and Italian Neorealist cinema, Thaw melodramas responded to the need for stories that deal with the personal, the experiential, and the emotional.[106] These films express a radical subjectivity and individuality to counter the suppressed understanding of self, imposed on a cultural-institutional level during the Stalinist era.

This particular overlap between melodrama and conventional categories such as "art cinema" or "neorealism" (neither of which is an essentialized category, but always changing in different cultural contexts) is one that has generally been overlooked in critical discourses that place melodrama in restrictive categories of genre, wherein descriptives such as "low brow," "popular," or "emotional" are deployed as pejoratives. As such, we lack sufficient critical histories of the relationship between melodrama and these categories in which aesthetics are not antithetical to popular appeal nor are they irrelevant to an investigation of the political significance of the mode.

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[106] See e.g. Masha Salazkina, "Soviet-Italian Cinematic Exchanges, 1920s-1950s," In *Global Neorealism: The Transnational History of a Film Style,* ed. Robert Sklar and Saverio Giovacchini (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); or Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-going After Stalin* (United States: Indiana University Press, 2008).

Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, among others, have done the important work of reclaiming various genre staples in studio-era Hollywood cinema such as the woman's film and the maternal melodrama. Their work has become gospel to the growing field of melodrama studies and melodrama has become a common critical tool for examining issues of gender, nation, and queerness, by nature of its expressivity, and as an alternative theoretical framework to the limitations of genre.[107] However the acceptance that has come with the mainstreaming of critically significant terms like excess, affect, and experience nonetheless leaves certain gaps concerning the fraught relationship between melodrama and realism(s), in particular postwar neorealisms.

Since its genesis in the critical lexicon, melodrama has been defined as much by its own syntax as by its contradistinction to realism. Gledhill critiques the assertion that the two are antithetical, claiming instead that we need to re-think the idea of melodrama as categorically opposed to realism. Gledhill criticizes the structuralist neo-marxist practice of linking popular forms inextricably to "bourgeois ideology" and the "capitalist cultural industries."[108] Such assertions are, of course, necessary in any discussion of popular cultural practices, but the degree to which this angle creates a false dichotomy between melodrama and realism needs to be reconsidered. Literary and dramatic criticism formulated a concept of realism from the late nineteenth century onwards defined mainly by the concept of attaining authenticity, particularly authenticity of class struggle and experience, while the mediums of theatre and literature aimed

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[107] See e.g. Patricia White, "Changing Circumstances: Global Flows of Lesbian Cinema," In *Global Cinema Networks*, ed. Elena Gorfinkel and Tami Williams (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018).
[108] Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 8.

to reclaim their status as art rather than entertainment (i.e. melodrama) for the masses.[109] The project of realism and its reception as art endured into postwar critical analyses of neorealist cinema, often at the expense of melodrama, mimicking the same binary formulation whereby realism need eschew melodrama in order to seek critical affirmation as art or authentic representation. Gledhill notes the problematic way in which this discourse becomes gendered, as drama and realism become associated with "masculine" restraint, rather than the "feminine" expressivity and excess of melodrama.[110]

The distanciation between melodrama and realism is, of course, rooted in a false, and as Gledhill asserts, gendered dichotomy. This is not to deny the indeed significant differences between the two. For instance, where realist stories favor verisimilitude and events determined by "natural" progression, melodrama tends toward overwrought visuality and events determined by coincidence. These differences, however, are mainly semantic, while the ideological facets of melodrama and realism remain rather similar: both are tools for attaining a level of authenticity or truth, be it authenticity through verisimilitude (realism) or authenticity of emotion/Brooks' moral occult (melodrama). These similar ideological goals and dissonant visual and narrative styles converge in the case of postwar neorealism, particularly surrounding the topic of class struggle. We can examine this phenomenon also in the Thaw melodramas, which were heavily influenced by Italian neorealism, and furthermore exist at the unique intersection of emotionality and verisimilitude.[111]

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[109] Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 19.
[110] Christine Gledhill, "Speculations on the Relationship Between Soap Opera and Melodrama," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14.1-2 (1992): 133.
[111] During the 1950s, audiences and filmmakers were exposed to Italian neorealism and French New Wave cinema through film festivals, such as the "Week of French Cinema" in 1955 and the

Before examining these examples from the Thaw, I will first continue to dismantle the discursive binds placed upon melodrama in critical discourses relating to cinematic realisms. If Gledhill asks us to re-think melodrama as anti-realism and instead to see it as a cultural category, Linda Williams similarly re-evaluates the distinction between melodrama and "classical cinema." She points out that it was André Bazin who first began to use the term "classical" to describe Hollywood cinema, creating a blanket term that obscured both the individual distinctiveness of various genres (western, comedy, noir, romance) as well as the unifying powers of modes, melodrama in particular. Williams posits that there is a "classicality thesis" that much like Bordwell's "modernity thesis" (which wraps various scholars' writing on the radical changes brought about by modernity into one package), mistakenly makes a claim for an encompassing concept of the "classical" that does not exist contemporaneously in cinema, and therefore should not be applied retrospectively. Rather, she counters the classicality thesis with a metaphor she calls "the elephant of melodrama," claiming:

> Though it is tempting to make cinema itself the all-important vector of [Hansen's] vernacular modernism, it was really melodrama—long before the term "classical" was imposed upon its cinematic manifestations—that was the true global matrix for the experience of modernity.[112]

In making such a claim Williams knowingly nods to Gledhill, whom she credits with identifying the entirety of the "elephant" long before her colleagues. It was indeed Gledhill who, in both

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"Week of Italian Cinema" in 1956. Alexander Prokhorov, "Cinema of the Thaw: 1953-1967," in *The Russian Cinema Reader,* ed. Rimgaila Salys (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 20.
[112] Linda Williams, "The Elephant of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures,* ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 205-218. Williams describes the progression of melodrama scholarship as akin to the story of the blind man and the elephant. Brooks and Elsaesser touch the "excess" of the trunk, Doane and Mulvey the "tears" of the eyes, Gunning the "spectacle" of the circus, and so on.

"The Melodramatic Field" and "Re-thinking Genre," anticipates the transnational significance of melodrama as a global and fully historicized mode.

Taking these critiques side by side we can see a pattern emerge between the discourses begun by Gledhill and Williams in the 1970s to their most recent collaboration (and much of the work done in between): the inability to place melodrama firmly in a single category, and the enduring critical work of liberating melodrama from its discursive split with the "art of the real." Continuing in this vein, I question another false dichotomy that remains stubbornly persistent in discourses on postwar neorealisms: the idea that neorealist film constitutes art *despite* its relationship to and dependence on melodrama narratives, ideologies, and aesthetic forms. This will lead me back to the specifically Soviet context of midcentury melodramas that have been retroactively regarded as art cinema, such as the works of Kalatozov, as well as a reckoning with the verboten claim that Soviet socialist realism could in any way be considered melodrama.

The emerging cine-culture of the 1950s, spearheaded by André Bazin and the contributors of *Cahiers du cinema,* took up the mantle of asserting realism as art, seeking legitimacy once again through the tactic of denigrating melodrama. Bazin is famously critical of melodrama, associating it with fascist and capitalist influences in Italian cinema. He laments the "commercial necessity" to which Rossellini and De Sica were forced to "sacrifice" themselves during the wartime studio era, before pursuing their auteurist visions that would become what we know as the neorealist movement. He asserts that the "social descriptions of everyday life," which he claims were not present before the war, are what make neorealist cinema so significant.[113] In this sense Bazin is inadvertently linking Italian neorealism with the

[113] Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume II,* Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkely: University of California Press, 2005), 18.

melodramatic tradition, which has always delt in the currency of the ordinary and the everyday. He claims, "Unfortunately the demon of melodrama that Italian film makers seem incapable of exorcising takes over every so often, thus imposing a dramatic necessity on strictly foreseeable events."[114] One problem with Bazin's and others' logic is that they acknowledge the presence of melodrama, but only in terms of either its aesthetics (e.g. baroque, bourgeois) or its connection to popular/commercial appeal. What they fail to acknowledge is the political connotations of melodrama, which is an inherently political mode particularly in relation to class struggle. Italian neorealist films are perceived as having political resonance and this comes from their melodrama as much as their realism.

***Spring on Zarechnaya Street* and the Politics and Aesthetics of the Early Thaw**

Following Stalin's death in 1953 and the subsequent rise of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union experienced a period of rapid reversals of many of Stalin's policies of repression at the political as well as cultural levels (known as de-Stalinization). This heralded a cultural renaissance in the USSR, featuring formerly oppressed voices as well as transnational influences.[115] This period in cinema saw a progressive opening to smaller and independent film production companies, unions to protect filmmakers, and emphases on smaller, more personal stories. Vladimir Pomerantsev published his influential essay, "On Sincerity in Literature," in the December 1953 issue of *Novy Mir*, a much-read literary magazine that has been in publication from 1925 until today. This piece caused a particular stir at the time, and since has

[114] Bazin, *What is Cinema?,* 31.
[115] For more on this topic see Olga Bulgakova, "Cine-Weathers: Soviet Thaw Cinema in the International Context," in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Kozlov and Gilburd (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

come to be seen as a sort of manifesto of Thaw ideology in art and culture. In short, the piece is highly critical of socialist realism and its privileging of historical events and nationalist ideals over the needs and individuality of the everyday lives of the people.[116]

Although Khrushchev came to power in 1953—filling the power vacuum left by Stalin's death and lack of directions for a successor—Thaw cinema did not begin to take shape, ideologically or stylistically, until 1956. This was not the case for other forms of cultural expression, namely literature, that could respond more quickly to the changing political climate and follow the "call to arms" sounded by Pomerantsev's "On Sincerity." Cinema, however, was more slow-moving to adopt change due to the structures of power and production still in place from the Stalinist era. Cinema production following the war was particularly stagnant as the brief opening of the door to influence from the West during the wartime years was quickly shut by the Party's propaganda campaigns that impugned individual directors and reimposed an isolationist attitude towards cultural production. The film industry suffered further when an anti-cosmopolitan and anti-Semitic line set by the Party led to intellectual purges and the industry fell in line, dependent on state funding for production and distribution.[117]

Censorship during this period remained high, fear and intimidation stifling any pushes toward innovation.[118] This was the case from the end of the war through to the year following Stalin's death, but in 1954 things began to change. Through an analysis of film criticism journals, primarily *Iskusstvo kino* (*Film Art*), which was aimed at intellectual industry

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[116] Kozlov and Gilburd, *The Thaw,* 50-51.
[117] Woll, *Real Images,* 3-4.
[118] Woll, *Real Images*, 5. She notes that even minutes taken from studio board meetings at Mosfilm show no arguments or discussions straying from the Party line even in the months following Stalin's death. Bureaucrats would measure reels of film to account for a standard length. Such was the climate of conformity.

professionals, Josephine Woll notices the increasing frequency with which certain key words appeared, such as “authenticity” (*dostovernost*) and “unvarnished” (*neprikrashennaia*). The discourses circulating among professionals and critics began to settle around ideas of the ordinary and the everyday, stories with warmth and sympathy, and vocal appreciation for the “authenticity” of Italian neorealism; there was an appetite for stories about the real everyday heroes of Soviet society rather than stories filled with nationalistic bluster.[119]

The year 1956 marked a significant shift in the way that Khrushchev’s Communist Party interacted with the Soviet people to outline the distinct goals and cultural landscape of the period, as well as to right the wrongs of the past. On February 25th of this year Khrushchev spoke before the 20th Party Congress to deliver his speech “On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences” (known colloquially as “the secret speech”), which was then distributed to the public in March. In the speech Khrushchev denounced the atrocities committed under Stalin and warned against the dangers of being enthralled to a cult-like leader, which he claimed went inherently against the principles of a Marxist-Leninist collective society.[120] The speech of course had its detractors but nevertheless gained popularity and proved influential particularly amongst the youth cultures, as young people (Soviets and across the world) sought to articulate their places and identities in the new world order during the postwar period (this was a global trend for youth culture during the postwar period). Following the Party Congress the impact on the arts was substantial, perhaps none benefiting from the new sanctioning from the Party more so than cinema.

[119] Woll, *Real Images*, 7-8.
[120] Kozlov and Gilburd, *The Thaw*, 31-32.

The content of Khrushchev's speech served as a clear message to filmmakers that this was a new dawn for Soviet cinema and that there was new freedom to create and express. The Party even authorized an expansive plan to bolster support for the film industry through funding, the construction of more cinemas, and the creation of more film festivals.[121] The new freedoms benefited not only the production side of the industry but the creative as well. Filmmakers were allowed wider margins for exploring themes of individuality over conformity, the ordinary over the great, as well as to pursue artistic visions that might previously have clashed with the prescribed vision of Stalinist-era socialist realism. As one writer in *Iskusstvo kino* put it, the industry was moving away from portraying the Russian people as a "static and unindividuated mass, dressed up in brilliant costumes," and towards a more nuanced portrait of individuality, expressed through any number of visual styles beyond what the Party mandated.[122]

These changes were somewhat slow to be implemented for reasons both practical and ideological. Practically speaking artistic expression cannot change overnight, and ideologically there was still lack of clarity as to what constituted stories of everyday heroism and how much verisimilitude should play into representations of Soviet life. The Ministry of Culture and the studios alike were wary of equating real life and art in a way that negated cinema's unique language for conveying cultural truths.[123] The studios were slow to take up the mantle of overtly criticizing Soviet society, as the state still controlled the means of production and distribution of films, as well as the film journal *Iskusstvo kino*; the complex hierarchy of production placed the

[121] Woll, *Real Images,* 11.
[122] *Iskusstvo kino* quoted in Woll, *Real Images,* 12.
[123] Woll, *Real Images,* 45.

studios in the middle between the creative/production side and the higher ups who liaised with the state on ideological matters, essentially as “patrons” of the studios.[124]

It is within this climate that *Zarechnaya* premiered, and Woll explains that reception to the film forecasted the cultural battle that would define the following several years. There was a sense of ambiguity surrounding what the mission of Thaw cinema should look like and the stories it should tell. In western contexts it would perhaps be bizarre to think of institutions or governing bodies that dictate yearly a mission for the coming year’s cultural endeavors, but this was the case with, among other institutions, the Ministry of Culture, which worked closely with the studios. Representatives of these institutions’ views were often at odds with each other, as well as those of critics and audiences alike. The director of Mosfilm, Ivan Pyrev, for example, declared *Zarechnaya* to be “sentimental rubbish” and decried the excessive focus on the everyday and the use of neorealist techniques.[125] Yet, the film experienced box office success (30 million tickets sold), and the folk theme song proved immensely popular and soon became culturally ubiquitous, not unlike the theme song from *Love is a Many Splendored Thing.*. *Zarechnaya* in many ways opened the door for the films of the Thaw to follow.

Released in 1956, S*pring on Zarechnaya Street* was written by Feliks Mironer and directed by Mironer along with Marlen Khutsiev, a first-time director fresh from film school (where Italian neo-realism was popular), who would become a prolific director of films that captured the spirit of the Thaw. Though it has less enduring global presence than the better-known *Cranes* and is perhaps not as visually arresting, *Zarechnaya* was hugely popular at the

[124] Galina Gornostaeva, “Soviet Filmmaking under the 'Producership' of the Party-State (1955-1985),” in *Working in the Global Film and Television Industries: Creativity, Systems, Space, Patronage,* ed. Andrew Dawson and Sean Holmes (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012): 4-5.
[125] Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 129.

time and is seen as the first move away from Stalinist-era filmmaking insofar as it privileged the everyday and the authenticity of human interactions over the nationalistic obsession with greatness. The film is typical of the new humanism of the era. The interactions between the characters are personal rather than allegorical, existing in a private sphere that relates more ambiguously to the historical trauma that structured the wartime melodramas. The characters are granted the radical gifts of subjectivity and complexity, their stories serving to represent real life, not facile elucidations of state propaganda (though there is still a requisite amount of this at several points in the film).

Zarechnaya tells the story of young teacher Tania Levchenko who, fresh out of school, travels to a rural factory town to teach literature to the adult student-workers. The opening sequence features a clear reference to Italian neorealist cinema; Tania arrives off the train saddled with luggage and caught in the rain and mud after having missed her bus. Khutsiev seems to go out of his way to avoid showing us her face, allowing her to remain one among the many, a potential everywoman. The location shooting and the fact that actress Nina Ivanova was a relative non-actor at the time (her only previous film experience was in 1944 when she was a young child) convey the general look and feel of the neorealist impulse towards portraying not just the ordinary but the down-on-their-luck. However, when she is offered a lift by a local truck driver, her outsider status becomes apparent. After having previously been denied a view of her face, we now see Tania observe herself in the truck's mirror: what is her place in this new world? She is not the everywoman, but the *exemplary* woman, performing her civic duty as an educator.

Displaying equal parts excitement and trepidation, Tania arrives in town where she meets the warm and colorful, if sometimes insouciant, inhabitants of Zarechnaya Street, of whom most are welcoming. Tania approaches her work with enthusiasm but stumbles when it comes to the

social life of the town. Though kind, she is also aloof and at times superior, unaccustomed to the intimacies of small-town life and reluctant to let her guard down outside of her classroom; she exists in the liminal space of the heroine of the Thaw—it is not clear what her role is. Is she there to teach or to learn? To become part of the community or to leave and return to her prescribed place within the Moscow intelligentsia class? Tania is subversive insofar as she doesn't fit neatly into any of the strict categories that defined roles for women of the Stalinist era. The space of contradictions and confusion that she inhabits is a new privilege of the Thaw. None of this is to say that Tania is a particularly remarkable or complex character—if anything she is the opposite and rather flat—but it is exactly this privilege of being ordinary that is itself a radical act.

Tania arrives in town in the autumn, but the majority of the film takes place during the deepest depth of winter, her "icy" demeanor reflected in the mise-en-scene: the streets snow-covered, trees dripping with icicles, and the townspeople bundled in sundry hats and scarves against the punishing wind—a contrast to the warm, baroque interiors. The viewer can rest assured that the winter will eventually end—that there will be a Spring "thaw" on Zarechnaya Street, and in Tania's heart.

Figure 2.6. The warm interiors contrast with the frosty exteriors in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)

This charge is led primarily by Sasha Savchenko, a charming rogue in Tania's class, who is eager to expand his mind, but is also self-conscious of being below Tania's status—she is an educated, cultured woman of Moscow whereas he is from the provinces. The two spend most of the film in a sort of tug of war with each other and with their own emotions. Tania tries to maintain her frosty veneer, but also longs to connect with the warm townspeople, who seem so much more open and alive than she. Sasha is attracted to both Tania and all of the openings to art and culture that she represents, but he is also intimidated by her and convinced of his own inferiority.

In a key scene from the middle of the film, Sasha goes to visit Tania in her apartment, seeking help with his schoolwork. Led into her room by the landlady before Tania arrives home, Sasha observes all of her belongings—the books, trinkets, and other trappings of individuality. His first glimpse of her interior life is through her possessions. She occupies this space more with her absence than she does other spaces with her presence. Tania returns, pleased by Sasha's initiative, and, showing an enthusiasm hitherto unseen, invites him to listen to a symphony performance with her on the radio: Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. The piece is deeply evocative of strong emotions and carries with it complex cultural connotations. Rachmaninoff composed the concerto at the turn of the century, when Russian society and culture were beginning to move away from the preceding period of Romanticism (and melodrama in the Brooksian sense) and into the Revolutionary era. Rachmaninoff represents a nostalgia for this period of heightened drama, and the sense of possibility that it engendered.

The directionality and intentionality of intertextual references are often difficult to parse, but it bears mentioning that Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 threads a link between *Zarechnaya* and David Lean's 1945 film *Brief Encounter*, a film about a doomed affair that is

canonical to melodrama studies.[126] In that film, Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 playing on the radio triggers Laura's memory of her affair with Alec, setting in motion the narrative arc of the film. In *Zarechnaya* the same concerto plays on the radio, its emotional heft doing the work of expressing the feelings that cannot be contained, the words that cannot be articulated—in this case, forging both a bond and a wedge between Tania and Sasha. The pair are initially shot in different depths of field, underscoring the disconnect between them, but as the music plays there is a "thaw" for them both; in his case the music awakens passion for art while in hers it awakens passion for potential love, both revelations evident in the following close ups of their respective faces. However, as the symphony builds to crescendo, Sasha stirs from his emotionally experiential state and his face falls, suddenly filled with insecurity about his inadequacy as a partner for Tania, and perhaps with jealousy for her easy connection to the world of art and culture, of which he is not a part. While she is still entranced by the music, Sasha moves back to his previous plane of depth, and with a final tortured gaze leaves the room. The two continue this emotional tango throughout the remainder of the film, moving in and out of each other's orbits, flirting and sharing longing gazes, both of them seeming to fight or deny their feelings, or to realize these feelings at times when the other is denying them. Here we have the typical melodrama trope of the missed connection, of poor timing. The film will eventually end with a thaw on both sides as they swallow their respective prides and finally connect, having each served as teacher and student to the other in different ways.

[126] See e.g. Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 100-104, for a discussion of the enduring relevance of *Brief Encounter;* Elena Razlogova, "The Politics of Translation at Soviet Film Festivals During the Cold War," *SubStance* 44.2 (2015), 68. *Brief Encounter,* as the winner of the Grand Prix prize at the Cannes Film Festival of 1946, would have been known to Soviet film circles as there was a Soviet presence at the festival at the time, and simultaneous Russian translation (as subtitles were not featured yet).

Figure 7.2: Connections made and missed (Nina Ivanova and Nikolai Rybnikov in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)

The "re-education" plot is a common one throughout Soviet film history, in which labor can improve or reform wayward Soviet citizens, opening their eyes to the value, and indeed beauty, of socialism. Soviet society is the answer to a meaningful life (a point often made to members of the intelligentsia who needed reminding).[127] More heavy-handed during the Stalinist era, the trope of re-education nonetheless appears in *Zarechnaya*, in a sequence rather incongruous with the visual style of the rest of the film. Towards the end of the film Tania leaves the diegetic space of Zarechnaya Street where almost the entire film has taken place—its schoolhouse and bar/social venue and the individual apartments of its residents, most of which we have been invited into in all of their warmth and individual character—and arrives at the factory where her students work, for the first time, in search of Sasha to declare her feelings. The sequence, in breaking with the rest of film, which shows mostly baroque interiors that convey intimacy and individuality, returns to the classic and recognizable aesthetics of socialist realism. The machinery of the factory is rendered in stark elegance, larger than life, its many moving parts a wonder to Tania. Dramatic shadows and angles convey the sense of greatness more

[127] Woll, *Real Images,* 45.

typical of socialist realism and socialist modernity more generally; the sum of labor and the success of socialism is greater than all of its individual (human) parts. Tania arrives as a teacher but ends up learning more from her students, who show her the importance of community and the wisdom of the humble worker.

Figure 1.8: Socialist realist imagery (Nina Ivanova in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Felix Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)

However, there is also a second re-education plot reading of the film. Directors Khutsiev and Mironer seem determined to articulate the new world of the Thaw, and while beholden to some of the old ways, they nonetheless refuse the facile tidiness of the traditional plot. Tania provides an education as well. She is literally there to provide an education, yes; this much does not require analysis. However it is significant that she is, of all kinds of teachers, a literature and language teacher, with interests in poetry and classical music as well. In this way she represents the opening to culture that the Thaw made possible, as well as to the new language of emotionality that it facilitated. Tania and Sasha are therefore the "ideal woman" and "ideal man"

of their cultural moment, the learned teacher and the earnest worker.[128] They link the past, present, and future of Soviet potentiality.

The film's final scene utilizes the language of melodrama, visually and thematically, to convey the sense of hope and possibility of the Thaw. After racing through the streets—now full to bursting with the blooms of Spring—Sasha arrives at the schoolhouse to express his feelings of love to Tania. As he climbs through the window to the classroom a gust of wind sends the stack of exam papers flying, engulfing the two in an expressive halo of papers while they gaze at each other, connecting at last. The camera pans to one of the questions and answers on the exam sheet: "Ellipses: in what case do we use these? Answer: At the end of a sentence or even a whole story, if it isn't finished…and if there will be many things in the future." We do not see any kind of consummation of Tania and Sasha's feelings, but there is the ellipsis—the promise of things to come, the possibility of love; for Tania and Sasha as for the Soviet people, there is hope for the future.

Figure 2.9: The ellipses… (Nina Ivanova in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, dir. Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956)

[128] Dmitry and Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991: Ideological Conflict and Social Reality* (London: A. de Gruyter, 1993), 139.

The Public, The Private, and Morality in Post-Stalin Society

Interactions and demarcations between the public and the private in Soviet culture are particularly fraught; fundamental to the Marxist-Leninist agenda is the project of transferring that which is private to that which is public, at a very literal level, such as land and property. When speaking to the notion of public and private cultural spheres, however, the border between the two becomes increasingly opaque, especially in the postwar period. The private, the everyday, the interior/domestic, and the family are traditionally the stuff of bourgeois melodrama that characterized the pre-revolution period. During the Thaw there was a relaxing of these borders and an inversion wherein certain postwar Soviet cultural markers could be mapped onto a collective cultural history—e.g. trinkets, plants, pets, etc. and all of the ornamental indicators of an individualized life and the notion of taste.[129] In discussing *Zarechnaya* I focused on the everyday and the hybrid public/private spaces of village life. My discussion of *Cranes* focuses more on the idea of the Soviet family and Soviet womanhood, and the radical subjectivity realized therein, where those lines between public and private take on new meaning in a changing Soviet world.

In the years following Khrushchev's Secret Speech, public debates among the intelligentsia coalesced around the identification, definition, and significance of truth—truth to counter Stalin's lies, truth to the representation of the human condition and authentic emotion, truth of scientific inquiry, and truth to be found in art. Truth also is fundamentally a fixture and functionary of melodrama, operating at the levels of both reality and representation. In

[129] See Andrew Jenks, "The Art Market and the Construction of Soviet Russian Culture" and Susan E. Reid, "The Meaning of Home: 'The only Bit of World You Can Have to Yourself," in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia,* ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

discussing the structure and socio-cultural applications of melodrama we speak often of moral truths, or what Peter Brooks would call moral legibility; melodrama creates a language for identifying innocence and virtue, particularly in a society that oppresses the individual and invalidates the significance of the everyday.[130]

This search for truth can be found in Thaw cinema, which was as contradictory as it was progressive, at turns aesthetically and ideologically reflecting introductions to cultural liberalism while also maintaining a certain degree of status quo with regard to Marxist-Leninist ideals and representations of Soviet nationalism. Examples are clear in both *Zarechnaya*'s and *Crane*'s use of socialist realist imagery peppered throughout these stories of individual subjectivity. The contradictory nature of thaw ideology is evident in a public discourse at the time on the respective merits of science and poetry to post-Stalin Soviet society. At the heart of both sides of these tendencies though is the unifying concept of truth.

Poetry and science corresponded to the two main categories of the Soviet intelligentsia at the time: the creatives and the scientists/engineers. Under Stalin, adherence to scientific norms was loose, not so much in the methodological sense but in the societal and moral one, meaning that the impact of scientific advancement on the public was second to advancement for advancement's sake. The authority of the scientist and science itself were absolute.[131] During the Thaw, however, there emerged more nuanced attitudes towards the purposes and ethics of scientific inquiry. The launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, while at once a source of national pride and testament to Soviet scientific achievement, also fomented a debate between members

[130] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 43.
[131] Marko Dumančić, "De-Stalinizing Soviet science: rethinking the moral implications of scientific progress in Khrushchev-era film," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 6.1 (2012): 75-92.

of both branches of the intelligentsia about the respective values of art and science in Soviet society. Public thought began to take into account the moral and ethical questions attached to scientific inquiry, effectively placing a human face on the Stalinist-era fascination with scientific efficiency, a model under which the individual was a cog in the greater machine of Soviet society. These changing attitudes are reflected in Thaw films about scientists, a common trope of Soviet cinema.[132] These changing discourses surrounding science and art are important contextual touchstones for understanding the connection between Thaw ideology and the political currency of melodrama in the public imagination.

I argue that melodrama became the language for mediating the increasing overlap between public and private in post-Stalin society. Public and private have long been coded terms to represent the masculine and feminine, and the rational and emotional, respectively. One natural progression of this logic is to group the public with the scientific and the private with the literary or poetic. This, of course, is a generalization and in different cultural-historical situations one could argue a case for the opposite or for the fallacy of this binary altogether. For the purposes of this particular historical moment, however, it is useful to think in terms of what was called the *Liriki-Fiziki* (Poets-Scientists) debate of 1959, named for the Boris Slutskii poem that responded to this very discourse.[133] Fueled by shifting Party messaging on truth versus lies and the resulting focus on (relative) transparency, authenticity, and morality in the work of the cultural and scientific intelligentsia, as well as influential popular culture such as *Zarechnaya* and *Cranes*, public discourse explored more private concerns. Susan Costanzo identifies one

[132] Dumančić, "De-Stalinizing Soviet science," 76. He examines this as reflected in films of the era featuring scientists, including *Nine Days* (1962) and *Into the Storm* (1965).
[133] Susan Costanzo, "The 1959 *Liriki-Fiziki* Debate: Going Public with the Private?," in *Borders of Socialism,* 251; Boris Slutskii, "Fiziki I Liriki," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* October 13, 1959.

journalistic discourse particularly symptomatic of this moment: an article by writer Il'ia Ehrenburg in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda,* written in response to a letter from a reader identified as "Nina V."[134] Nina sought advice (in her personal life, via public forum) regarding her broken engagement, which she terminated after her engineer beau claimed that, in the "atomic age," her interest in art and culture were invalid forms of leisure. She also faulted him for being more concerned with his career than his personal relationships, including his romantic relationship with her and his filial obligations to his ailing mother. Ehrenburg, a well-known writer at the time, responded with a vehement defense of the role of art in the betterment of public society, not just at any given time but specifically during the contemporaneous moment of scientific advancement. He says, "[P]rogress in the sphere of the hard sciences [and] technology and ignorance of social problems leads society to decay or catastrophe."[135] Ehrenburg's full-throated defense attributing value to emotions and culture in equal measure with reason and science kindled public support for his stance, giving validation to the private beliefs of the paper's readers and highlighting a shift not just in this "poets-scientists" debate, but in the greater concept that in post-Stalin society the private could assert influence over the public.

Costanzo points out through an analysis of archived correspondence between editors at *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*—a popular daily with wide distribution—that the newspaper was actually reluctant to give space to such private affairs. Reporting on official public sphere news was considered a quantifiable undertaking, and perhaps more importantly, was more amenable to controlled messaging from the Party; the private sphere was messier and beyond this control, and the revelation that all was not right in the home of Soviet citizens could reflect badly on Party

[134] Il'ia Ehrenburg, "Otvet na odno pis'mo," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda,* September 2, 1959, 2-3.
[135] Costanzo, "The 1959 *Liriki-Fiziki* Debate," 251.

policies.[136] Another factor of note is that most of the letters from readers were written by women, discussing problems in which men were the transgressors, most often by shirking their relational or domestic responsibilities. Costanzo notes that the newspaper was not interested in "domestic discord." She says:

> In a society in which the private sphere was represented as feminine and subordinate to public life, journalists were sympathetic to men who were not attuned to the private sphere's feminine rules and rituals. Men needed to be judged in the public sphere, where they understood the rules of male behavior.[137]

This delineation of public and private is globally legible and only granted more power to the private by stoking interest in public discourses on private problems. Marginalizing the concerns of women and the domestic highlight only that there was a need to bring the private into the public domain. Therefore, if the public institutions such as the press were not serving the private needs, how were people educated? I argue that the cultural consumption of melodrama (a space where the invisible becomes visible) created networks of understanding emotion and solving societal problems neglected by the public sphere. This is not mapping the public onto the private like Brooks or Elsaesser, this is creating space and a language for connection and solving problems.

Returning to the public-private discourse and its specific relationship to melodrama, I would like to focus on the seemingly contradictory connection between the Soviet family and the bourgeois family melodrama. During the postwar period in the USSR, much as in the United States, there was a renewed focus on the family and the family home, though admittedly through respective messaging that was quite different. Khrushchev's regime launched a new housing program in 1957 that initiated new construction of prefabricated apartment buildings, which

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[136] Costanzo, "The 1959 *Liriki-Fiziki* Debate," 260-1.
[137] Costanzo, "The 1959 *Liriki-Fiziki* Debate," 261.

notably featured single-family apartments rather than the more communal model (*Kommunalki*).[138] The question remained, however, of how to spin this seemingly contradictory interest in decidedly private spaces that had hitherto been deemed bourgeois. This question underscores some of the unique cultural contradictions of the Thaw. Through her analysis of housing and furniture catalogues from the period, Susan Reid alludes to this paradoxical privatization of the family home, identifying discourses that refer to the necessity of privacy for the health and development of the ideal worker-citizen. Reid's thesis compellingly suggests that this supposed privatization is not an example of the regime's liberalization, but indeed of its ability to finally place the dictates of the private within the purview of the public.[139]

This period overlaps neatly with characterizations of the family and the home in family melodramas. The concept of "the big family" is a key tenet of Soviet cinema, particularly in the early days of the Thaw when there was a tender balance between distancing the Party from Stalin while maintaining some of the Stalin-era nationalism. The film appropriately titled *A Big Family/Bolshaya semya* (Kheifits, 1954), adapted from the novel, effectively conveys this message by portraying the Zhurbin family of shipbuilders as ideal laborers working towards a common good, while also telling the more personal stories of their quintessential family melodrama—this balance appealed to the desires of policymakers and audiences alike.[140] The trend began to shift away from this mollification, particularly with regard to the topic of war and the family, which was previously a site for overt patriotism. The topic of the war was fodder for studios during both the wartime and postwar periods, yet more often from the point of view of the greatness of Soviet leadership and the noble sacrifices of the Soviet masses. As the cinema of

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[138] Reid, "The Meaning of Home," 147.
[139] Reid, "The Meaning of Home," 152.
[140] Woll, *Real Images,* 16.

the Thaw progressed, war and the family became the site of conflict, adding to the increasingly fraught relationship between individual and nation.

Trauma and Transgressions in *The Cranes Are Flying*

Though released twelve years after the end of WWII, *Cranes* is among the first post-Stalin films to address the unique trauma of the war.[141] It speaks to the trauma and pathos at the individual level of the average citizen—the political upheaval and fight for survival unfold alongside basic human needs and desires and shifting interpersonal relationships, rather than nationalistic fervor. This shift in narrative ideology is evinced in the character of Veronika, whose impetuous actions are driven by her emotions and desires. Veronika contrasts starkly with the image of the ideal Soviet women who populated the wartime weepies, such as Liza in *Wait for Me/Zhdi menya* (Stopler, 1943), who is the epitome of feminine faithfulness and sacrifice on the home front. Alexander Prokhorov points out that *Cranes* in many ways is a narrative re-telling of *Wait for Me*, but with a Thaw heroine, and a more complicated approach to the "us" vs. "them" mentality of wartime films.[142]

Cranes, directed by Mikhail Kalatozov and shot by cinematographer Sergei Urusevskii, was released in 1957, and is based on the play by Viktor Rozov.[143] The film opens in June of 1941 on the eve of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Veronika and her fiancé Boris are blissfully in love, but the patriotic Boris quickly volunteers for the army once he hears the news of impending war. This places Veronika in the familiar role of the faithful fiancé, but as the

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[141] Woll, *Real Images*, 61.
[142] Prokhorov, "Soviet Family Melodrama," 214.
[143] Prokhorov, "Soviet Family Melodrama," 215. Prokhorov points to the Urusevskii's role as one of the few influential cinematographers of the period, with an eye towards experimentation and revival of expressionist style of the 1920s.

reality and tragedy of war intervene, her trajectory changes. First, she is unable to see Boris off with the rest of the volunteers, in the tried-and-true melodrama trope of the "missed connection" and "too late" temporality. A slow tracking shot pans across a fence separating the army recruits from their teary-eyed families saying their goodbyes. We see Boris and Veronika searching for each other to no avail, but more than once the camera shifts away from their perspectives, focusing instead on all of the others in turn, briefly providing a window into the emotions of each goodbye—these are not characters in the film and the camera lingers only briefly on each in turn, but we understand that this is their story too, their trauma. There are mothers and sons, young lovers, children—no one individual or family escapes from the war unscathed, and the viewer can see their own family's history reflected in the faces of each of these everyday, non-actors. The camera's movement away from Veronika and Boris is pointed; we are invited to detach from the film's narrative, from Veronika's searching gaze, to find our own gazes searching and unsure of where to look. When the camera settles on each of these individual goodbyes, the viewer can see themselves and confront the trauma of their own pasts, knowing the hardships that lay in wait for these everyday citizens—everyone has their own story, their own wounds to heal.

Figure 2.10: The missed connection (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

This is a visual theme throughout—the interplay of Veronika's individuality and her inconsequentiality. She is one of many, literally either lost in the crowd or else dwarfed by the exaggerated depictions of the city that recall socialist realism in their composition—stark yet exaggerated, idealized and impersonal; her smallness contrasting with the enormity of the historical circumstances. However, these images dwindle throughout the film as we come to be more aligned with Veronika's perspective. Where once she was dwarfed by the world around her, she instead begins to take up more space within the frame, namely through intense close-ups and lighting that highlight her subjectivity. Her image becomes one of melodramatic excess, filled to brimming with emotion and intimacy. Had it been made during the wartime period, the film's messaging would likely be that the war is bigger than any one person. In the Thaw context, however, the experience of the individual cannot be suppressed and is worthy of representation in its own right.

Figure 2.11: Inconsequentiality vs. individuality (Tatyana Samoilova and Aleksandr Shvorin in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Throughout the film, in terms of style and story alike, the juxtaposition of socialist realist, neorealist, and melodrama influences are evident, the lines between them blurring. After the

missed connection with Boris, Veronika experiences tragedy after tragedy in quick succession. Her parents die when their apartment building is bombed and then, after seeking sanctuary with Boris' family, she is raped by Boris' duplicitous cousin Mark, a pianist who has bribed his way out of military duty, unbeknownst to Veronika and his family. An experimental and expressionistic sequence intercuts the violence of the shelling of Moscow with both the rape of Veronica and Boris' death on the battlefield. The three events occur simultaneously, in overlapping images. The public and private as well as the collective and individual comingle, each trauma valid in its horror, and each inextricably linked through super imposition of the images. Furthermore this sequence demonstrates clearly the stylistic confluence of Soviet montage, western (e.g. German) expressionism, and melodramatic staging or tableau.[144] The cutting between and superimposition of images are prototypical examples of Soviet montage, which is primarily defined by movement, while the expressive lighting and placement of Veronika in the foreground, lost in her sadness, and Mark in the background, his hunger for her apparent, invite us to interpret the scene through stillness, in this case alerting us to the impending violence of the rape. The three styles meld into one to convey the confusion and messiness of the overlapping traumas.

[144] In stage and screen melodrama the term "tableau" refers to an expressively frozen image that invites interpretation in the same way as would a still painting. See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 48.

Figure 2.7: Superimposition, melodramatic lighting and tableau (Tatyana Samoilova and Aleksandr Shvorin in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir.Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Once outed as having "betrayed" Boris, still traumatized and detached from herself following the rape, Veronika marries Mark in an act of nihilism. As the war escalates the family relocates to Siberia where Boris' father Fyodor, a doctor, serves at a hospital for wounded soldiers. Though in Moscow the families lived in bourgeois middle class apartments, in Siberia they are forced into cramped communal living quarters. Had this been a film made during the war, such sacrifice would be nobly accepted and depicted; however, through the eyes of 1957 ideas of the family home, the communal space is depicted as claustrophobic. This is indicative of the film's generally murky attitude towards patriotism, and shifting values of private and public spaces during the Thaw.

Figure 2.8: The claustrophobia of communal living (Tatyana Samoilova, Aleksandr Shvorin, Vasiliy Merkurev, and Svetlana Kharitonova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Veronika, still miserable, her balletic movements and exuberance from the beginning of the film muted, puts herself on a path of quiet redemption. She throws herself into the war effort by working hard for the community of displaced civilians and volunteering at the hospital. However, her misery in her marriage and the continued stigma of unfaithfulness lead her to attempt to throw herself under a train, when she stops herself in order to rescue a young orphan who is almost hit by a car—whose name just happens to be Boris. The film concludes once innocence and virtue are revealed: the family discovers Mark's duplicity and stop blaming Veronika, Veronika learns of Boris' death and devotes herself to the orphan that she regards as hers and Boris', reaffirming her devotion to him, following the *Letter from an Unknown Woman*-like plot wherein she discovers Boris' final love letter to her—hidden in a toy, lost for years. Another connection missed, but also another opportunity for love created.

Figure 2.9: The virtuous "fallen woman" (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Cranes is a unique combination of universally legible melodramatic tropes (the fallen woman, coincidence and fate, virtue revealed, the "almost" and "could have been"), while nonetheless being very locally specific to traditions of Soviet cinema. Furthermore, it exhibits stylistic experimentation that garnered international attention, including the Palme d'Or at the 1958 Cannes Film Festival. The film is a heady mix of iconoclasm and tradition, emotion and politics, trauma and hope. Woll points out that *Cranes* was not a sporadic creation of cinematic genius, but rather that its ingenuity can be traced to the nexus of several interconnected turning points in style, politics, and production: the influence of *Zarechnaya* (which created opportunities for Italian neorealist influence), the relaxing of state control over matters of culture, and a finer focus on the lives of everyday citizens.[145] These topics I have discussed already with regard to *Zarechnaya*; *Cranes* owes a significant debt to *Zarechnaya* for foregrounding the importance of the private individual experience.

I would like to focus further on the concept of the private over the public, and the decision to look back on the recent past of the war with new, differently-informed eyes. Woll says:

> Everyone saw *Cranes*: veterans, their wives and widows, young people ready to grapple with the significance of their own orphanhood. *Cranes* forced viewers to first respond to the film's emotional demands and then to think about the war with their own experiences. The film's refusal to pass judgment on Veronika also compelled viewers to form their own judgment of her, and by extension of themselves.[146]

She importantly highlights the deep humanism of the film and the empathy and reflection that it inspired in audiences. Her argument speaks to what I would call the didactic nature of melodrama—the active role that the mode plays in mediating peoples' relationships to their

[145] Woll, *Real Images,* 71.
[146] Woll, *Real Images*, 74.

collective and individual pasts. Woll, however, seems to see melodrama more as a collection of sub-genres than as a mode. To me this is a missed opportunity given that melodrama is in many ways the mode (and indeed the subjunctive mood) of the Thaw, a period defined by hope and possibility, individual desire, and recognition of the virtue of the ordinary over the great.

In closing I would like to return to the concept of morality in relation to both melodrama and the cultural context of the Thaw, so as to explore the unique connection between melodrama and socialism. At the crux of the Soviet experiment is the enduring and ever-shifting relationship between the collective and the individual; that which is best for the individual is simultaneously superseded and engulfed by that which is best for the collective. This ideological polemic endures even as the definitions of the respective poles shift according to socio-political context, be it the revolution, collectivization, world war, or de-Stalinization. What constitutes "the good life" for the Soviet citizen versus the Soviet ideal? In his writing on ethics, Plato outlines a system of virtue-based ethics whereby morality and happiness are intertwined and the individual is driven by knowledge, emotion, and desire (corresponding to the three parts of the human soul: reason, spirit, appetite).[147] The ideal citizen and by extension the ideal society is one that follows not rules of law but of morality and interconnectedness, and the seeking of the "good life" benefits all categorically, negating the need for law and order as such. Under this premise the concepts of happiness and morality are inextricably linked forming a sort of utopia.[148] However, this utopia is false; the personal invariably becomes subordinated to the collective and it is this erasure that necessitates the expression of subjectivity via alternative means. Melodrama, therefore, is both a component of and an antidote to the Soviet project. Both have in common the

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[147] See Terrence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[148] For more on this see the introduction to *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

search for a utopia, a fundamentally melodramatic endeavor wherein truth is revealed. In Peter Brooks' terms this refers to moral legibility and the search for the moral occult—something to believe in and organize life other than religion. This too is a goal of Soviet society; Khrushchev's party, mostly concerned with distancing itself from the doctrines of Stalinism, nonetheless doubled down on its stance against religion. Khrushchev's Secret Speech reiterated this point while putting an emphasis on the importance of morality and truth to Soviet society.[149] Where, then, can the Soviet citizen turn to understand how to live in their new world? I would not argue that melodrama, in cinema or any other form of cultural consumption, is the answer to this question necessarily, rather that melodrama facilitates mediative cultural discourse. In the case of *Cranes*, Veronika embodies the inner turmoil and confusion—the moral ambiguity—of a Soviet people uncertain of how to reconcile their past, present, and future.

The depiction of Veronika's subjectivity is therefore radical insofar as her morality is allowed to be complex. She transgresses traditional morality yet also lives by her own. In this way she is a figure not unlike the hard-boiled private detectives who populate film noir—a very western individualistic figure, and I do not assume any intentionality on this connection from the part of the production—but the similarities bear consideration.[150] Veronika is a loner—orphaned from her own family and an outsider in Boris' family—who exists in a liminal space that allows her to traverse different strata of society. Her checkered past has left her cynical and impersonal, yet she nevertheless devotes herself to helping others as a form of personal redemption; her sense of justice is her own and not beholden to societal norms. Stylistically the film confirms this

[149] Bulgakova, "*Cine-Weathers,*" 436.
[150] See e.g. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991) for the moral ambiguity of the hard-boiled detective, who follow their own notion of justice above that of the law.

connection—the canted angles, chiaroscuro lighting, and expressionism recall images directly informed by noir and German expressionism.

Figure 2.10: Canted angle (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Figure 2.11: Expressive chiaroscuro lighting (Tatyana Samoilova in *The Cranes Are Flying*, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)

Veronika, like the private detective before her, is a morally ambiguous creature of the private sphere, radically transgressing boundaries of public sphere ideals of Soviet womanhood; her

loyalty is neither to her given family nor that of the Soviet “big family,” but to the family that she chooses to make with the young Boris, on her own terms.

Veronika is representative of the power of melodrama during the Thaw to act as a parallel discourse with politics, providing the tools to express and understand emotion. Her character’s radical subjectivity is both the direct beneficiary of and contradiction to *Zarechnaya*’s Tania. *Zarechnaya* paved the way for films like *Cranes* to exist by taking the first step through the door created by the Khrushchev regime’s stance on cultural expression and reformed gender roles; it negotiated the complicated shift in production practices from the censorship of the Stalinist era to the relative freedom of the postwar period. In short, *Zarechnaya* typifies the era’s frisson of hope and possibility—the idealistic belief that Soviet society could shed the pall of Stalin’s suppression and return to the Marxist-Leninist society that was the initial promise of the revolution. But the wounds inflicted by years of oppression and the devastation of the war could not be so easily healed. If *Zarechnaya* is the promise—the ellipses—then *Cranes* is the murky reality of facing the past, and melodrama the language for confronting these truths.

CHAPTER THREE

Modern Women, Modern Egypt: Melodramas of the Nasser Era

The previous two chapters have explored relationships between woman and nation from the main poles of Cold War geopolitical conflict: East and West. In this chapter I move to the Non-Aligned perspective, which is not so much Non-Aligned as it is straddling the line between conflicting US and Soviet ideological, economic, and foreign policy interests, while also trying to engage in solidarity with other de-colonizing nations. Egyptian cinema is at the front lines of this cultural conflict, where the allegory of woman as nation is so multi-layered that actual women's experience in the actual nation can get lost, but melodrama vernacular helps to recover it. I discuss two films that dramatize the period of Egyptian liberation and modernization following the 1952 revolution, *I Am Free/Ana hurra* (Salah Abu Seif, 1959) and *The Open Door/al-Bab al-maftuh* (Henri Barakat, 1963), both of which actively articulate the Egyptian post-colonial agenda while speaking to the delicate balance of competing political and industrial influences from Hollywood and Soviet cinemas engaged in a proxy cultural Cold War.

The concept of an "Non-Aligned" nation during the Cold War connotes a sense of passive neutrality, though in the case of Egypt and Egyptian cinema the reality is far more complex, encompassing an intricate web of interconnected and conflicting political, stylistic, and industry interests. In terms of foreign policy, Egypt was not an external observer of the Cold War hoping to engender peace. Rather, President Gamal Abdel Nasser's stance was one of actively utilizing the geopolitical conflict to further his own policies within Egypt and the Arab world—a tactic foreign policy scholars refer to as "positive neutralism"—which in this case meant the

adoption of pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, and Arab socialism.[151] Indeed Egypt was ideologically more closely aligned with the USSR; Nasser's pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism drew upon socialist values and shared in the Soviet denouncement of the West and western influence. At a meeting of his Free Officers party in January 1954, Nasser called for unification and solidarity, saying:

> We the East, confronting the greed of the West, are one Nation! […] We do not desire a tribalism of religion, nor one of race, nor one of land… Instead we desire—we the Arabs, the Muslims, the people of the East—to become one bloc, supporting the call for what is right, for good and peace, and resisting the ambitions of oppression, aggression and destruction.[152]

The distanciation from the West and the influence of socialist principles is clear, but it is clear even at this point in 1954 (one year before the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia where Egypt would formally adopt a positive neutralist stance) that Nasser's party, while ideologically espousing socialist principles, was deploying them for the anticolonial cause, for the interest and strength not just of Egypt but of all the Arab and African countries decolonizing from western power and influence.[153]

Soviet foreign policy support for Nasser's regime was nevertheless ambiguous, often torn between the short term goals of enacting cultural and political influence (mostly as a means of

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[151] See Leonard Binder, "Egypt's Positive Neutrality," In *The Revolution in World Politics,* ed. Morton A. Kaplan (New York: Wiley and Sons 1962), 175-191.

[152] Quoted in Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nationmaking: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 147.

[153]The Bandung Conference of 1955 was a meeting of Afro-Asian nations—some postcolonial and others still under colonial rule—many of which would eventually become part of the Non-Aligned Movement, a formation of nations Non-Aligned with any global superpowers, particularly in the context of the Cold War. The conference focused on issues of postcolonialism and liberation, and offered a space for cultural exchange in the spirit of peace and cooperation. See A. Appodorai, *The Bandung Conference* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); A. Acharya and See Seng Tan, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

counteracting any corresponding American influence) and the longer term view of opposing the "bourgeois nationalist" principles/leaders.[154] The two were hardly ideological bedfellows, yet key for the Soviets was the necessity of exposing American cultural imperialism, particularly via Hollywood, which they claimed was as harmful as the colonial imperialism from which the Middle East was emerging. Key for the purposes of this chapter is the notion of not just the political but the cultural contest between East and West, whereby popular culture (film, literature, theatre) in particular was considered a site for politicization: namely, the Soviet policy was to place blame on the West for failing to respect other cultures, themselves taking the stance of promoters of cultural freedom.[155] Soviet support for the singularity of Middle Eastern (as well as African and Asian) cinema at this time was demonstrated through its diplomatic support for the Afro-Asian Film Festival, first held in Tashkent in 1958. The festival was formed partially as a socialist counter to the American-supported and more commercial Southeast Asian Film Festival, ostensibly to support Afro-Asian nations' de-colonization, but also to establish a Soviet presence in the film festival circuit to counter American influence.[156] Film in Non-Aligned nations—as both form of expression and as industry—constituted a site for a proxy Cold War.

US policy, on the other hand, could indeed be read as cultural imperialist during this time, mostly under the auspices of promoting modernization—in this sense Nasser was positioned uniquely between socialist ideology and US support for national modernization. The

[154] Karen Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1979), 422. The quote from Khrushchev: "Is Nasser a Communist? Certainly not. But nevertheless we support Nasser. We do not wish to turn him into a Communist and he does not wish to turn us into nationalists."

[155] Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt*, 424.

[156] Elena Razlogova "Cinema in the Spirit of Bandung," in *The Cultural Cold War and the Global South: Sites of Contest and Communitas,* ed. Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine A. Zien (London: Routledge, 2021), 115-116.

US-Egypt relationship during this time was one of contentious cooperation. There was no ideological love lost between the two—Nasser's regime was decidedly anti-western and the US was wary of revolutionary politics in a region where it had many economic interests. The focus of US policy therefore was to attach these economic interests to Egypt's modernization project, especially following the failed Western military intervention in the Suez, following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal.[157]

US cultural imperialism was particularly evident within the cinema industry, mainly in terms of exhibition practices. When it comes to the relationship between the Hollywood and Egyptian film industries, moviegoing was always an inherently political act. Both MGM and Twentieth-Century Fox held significant presence in Egypt's exhibition scene (the Cairo Palace and the Metro Theatre respectively) leading up to as well as during the Nasser era. These theatres served dual symbolic roles: they represented the possibility of a thriving, glamorous, cosmopolitan cine-culture, but they were also emblems of the increasingly encroaching influence of western culture during a time of anti-Western decolonization. The latter culminated more than once in anti-western protests held at the Metro.[158] Nasser's government vacillated between restricting distribution of Hollywood films for socio-political reasons—in response to US military intervention in the Suez for example—and supporting US owned theatres and distributors for economic reasons, as a thriving film-going culture also benefitted the Egyptian film industry.[159] These geopolitical conflicts at the levels of cinema industry and exhibition

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[157] For more see Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
[158] Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 49.
[159] Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies*, 345.

provide contextualization and a framework with which we can understand and analyze the films themselves, taking into account the conflicting Soviet and American influences on cinema as a cultural institution.

Despite being the predominant Arabic-language film industry, widely circulated and watched across the Arab world, Egyptian cinema remains largely under-explored or marginalized by western film criticism. In this chapter I place existing discourses on Egyptian cinema, revolution, and global feminism in conversation with theories of film melodrama, to examine the role of Egyptian melodrama as a site for fraught analogies between women's liberation and national modernization in the wake of the 1952 revolution. Through an examination of Nasser-era (1952-1970) melodrama I hope to do comparative work that will open up productive contradictions between the modernity of cinema, the nation, and women.

In order to begin to answer the questions that arise from this sometimes comfortable, sometimes uncomfortable collision of methodologies, this chapter has three main goals. First, to examine the tradition of Egyptian melodrama as a site for analogizing woman and nation post-revolution, which is an analogy facilitated by the careful manipulation of melodramatic vernaculars of emotionality, and the endurance of affective cultural memory. I aim to use melodrama as a specific critical tool for understanding the way in which popular film culture then and now organizes people both politically and affectively. I define this intersection of politics and affect as parameters of the realm of female citizenship, a space to understand the pervasiveness of emotional capital and the free flow of experience between individual and collective bodies, on and off screen.

Second, through my examination of Egyptian melodrama from this period, I investigate what I call the "method of contradictions" that seems necessary to think critically about

comparative melodrama. Therefore I will be discussing contradictions, collisions, and openings that arise at three levels of discourse: in the nature of melodrama in general, in the Egyptian melodramatic tradition specifically, and within melodramatic scholarship. At this point melodrama itself becomes a method for scholarship; it is a way of studying film, history, and culture that awards the same privilege to emotion and individual (often female) experience as to the more public record of linear history.

Third, I critique the paradoxes inherent in the body of work that does the cultural-historical work of relating gender and nation both globally and in the specific case of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s. The image of the Egyptian woman is the image of Egyptian national modernity itself. The juxtaposition of female and national liberation and modernization have been explored by historians such as Laura Bier and Mériam Belli and scholars of cinema such as Kamran Rastegar, each providing a distinct historical intervention.[160] They use film as one of many "historical utterances," to use Belli's term for popular or collective media that is symptomatic of political phenomena, but are more concerned with the message than the medium.[161] I am interested in the political potential of melodrama as it is used in this instance as a tool of the state, and how we might develop different layers of remembering and recounting this history beyond assertions of the woman-nation allegory. This problem permeates this chapter: the degree to which women's liberation bolsters the nationalist movement but is always subordinate to it, and whether this ultimately matters in a feminist historiographic project.

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[160] Kamran Rastegar, *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011); Mériam Belli, *An Incurable Past: Experience and Remembrance of Nasser's Egypt* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).
[161] Belli, *An Incurable Past,* 9.

“State Feminism” On and Off Screen

When discussing the Egyptian instantiation of melodrama in both its global and local contexts, we should note that much of what is “legible” to global consumers of melodrama is present—indeed we are facing issues prevalent in for example American, Indian, or Japanese melodrama that, while arising from wholly different cultural-historical circumstances, nonetheless organize, however loosely, around themes including the clash of tradition and modernity, the role of women in society, and the condition of both filial and romantic love.

One of Egyptian cinema’s most prolific periods is the post-independence era of the 1950s and 1960s, when Egypt succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy and the British colonial powers. The Revolution of 1952 heralded a new government led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser and was followed by a period of political nationalism, escalating social change, and support for pan-Arabism, the idea of Arab unity under one socialist state.[162] In Nasser’s “Charter,” the discourse is distinctly melodramatic in its appeal to the people, stating that “The value of a true revolution lies in its degree of popularity, in the extent to which it is an expression of the wishes of the vast masses, in the extent to which it mobilizes their forces to rebuild the future, and also in the extent to which it enables these masses to shape their own destinies.”[163] There is a connection to be made here with Peter Brooks’ *Melodramatic Imagination* and his discussion of the French revolution’s influence on the fermentation of the melodramatic mode in European theatre. Brooks looks to the popular public theatre of the time—a theatre of melodramas brimming to excess with the extremes of good and evil, purity and virtue—that

[162] Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood,* 2.
[163] Gamal Abdel Nasser, “The Charter,” in *Nasser Speaks, Basic Documents,* trans. E.S. Farag (London: Morsset Press, 1972), 90.

would have appealed to the demoralized masses looking to escape into the catharsis of the mode. Brooks formulates that these popular masses are connected by their desire to attain the "moral occult" at the heart of their tumultuous lives, which he defines as a desire for truth and meaning in a post-sacred world.[164] For Brooks the melodramatic mode is a condition of the revolution, a reflection and expression of a political-cultural climate. This idea of melodrama as a condition of revolution is a significant and relevant one, but as I will discuss shortly, not necessarily one that can or should be transplanted to non-western cultures. My interest, however, is not in the question of "can" and "should," but in the productive collisions that occur in the process of translation.

In *Revolutionary Melodrama* Joel Gordon traces the period of the Nasser era in film and history in detail, identifying melodrama as a tool of the Revolution, and referring to this period as a benchmark for public recollection and debate that is reflected in the melodramas of the time.[165] Gordon emphasizes that this period in Egyptian history is impossible to characterize definitively as positive or negative for the Egyptian people, as it is rife with binaried extremes (in particular of class and gender)—a breeding ground for melodrama, indeed. Gordon's book, though something of a well-intentioned love letter to the films of the time, does not fully achieve his goal of assessing Egyptian revolutionary civic identity, as it often relies too heavily on readings of the films as merely culturally reflective of their circumstances. Gordon has done extensive research into the films of this period and presents valuable historical information, however he does not do so in a particularly critical mode. He mainly discusses the popularity of

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[164] See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
[165] Joel Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama: Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser's Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2002), 22.

the melodramas of the era with female viewers, particularly the film adaptations of novels by Ihsan Abd al-Quddus. He identifies the potential feminist intervention made by these films but fails to interrogate the complicated and gendered dynamics of who is making these politically charged statements: in this case the hugely popular male author al-Quddus who was later honored by Nasser himself with an Order of Merit. Gordon's labeling of al-Quddus with the pun, "ladies' man," ostensibly for his popularity with female readers, in this case falls somewhat flat.[166]

We can better understand the extreme divisiveness of the Nasser era, particularly with regard to the national molding of the "ideal Egyptian woman," in the work of historian Laura Bier. She explains that following the 1952 Revolution "postindependence political and social projects, which were increasingly inclusive of women as political subjects, also produced new sorts of gendered and classed hierarchies exclusive to the process of forging a particularly Egyptian vision of modernity."[167] This sentiment pervaded public political discourse and influenced the myriad of public initiatives aimed at modernizing the state.[168] The main tenet of this new public policy was to liberate women from the home, educate them, and create a new class of women workers and women citizens—these initiatives heralded a period of "state feminism."[169] This institutionalized "state feminism" takes the woman out of the home and shapes her as a new ideal citizen, an exemplar of untapped potential and productivity, a symbol of the nation-building project itself. This post-revolution discourse is then centered on new

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[166] Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama,* 133.
[167] Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood,* 2.
[168] Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood,* 21.
[169] See Mervat Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberation and the Demise of State Feminism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24 (1992): 231-251.

practices of citizenship and the image of the idealized Egyptian woman who is both the symbol and the site of revolution.

However, as Bier and others have argued, attempts at national modernization could only succeed with widespread popular support. Therefore female liberation was necessary to the national cause only insofar as the state required new citizens. The problem here, of course, is the matter of intention: modernization turned women into appropriate national subjects for the sake of the nation and not for any inherent interest in women's causes.[170] Women's liberation supported and reinforced the nationalist movement, but was problematically secondary to it. What I argue is that there are multifaceted layers of inversion of public and private at many levels of these discourses, and melodrama became the means of translation and mediation of these shifting dynamics.

In *Popular Egyptian Cinema* Viola Shafik provides a thorough history and critical evaluation of the Egyptian popular film industry, noting that it is not an exclusively "national" cinema. From its origin in the 1920s it has been defined by the melting pot of Egyptian racial, religious, national, and community-based identities that characterized the industry's artists and workers. Moreover, popular Egyptian films experienced veritably unrivalled distribution and circulation throughout the Arab speaking countries of North Africa and the Middle East.[171] This being said, we can somewhat ironically juxtapose this non-national quality of the industry with the nation-building project that coincided with one of its most prolific periods, the post-independence era of the 1950s and 1960s. As discussed above, the revolution was followed by a period of political nationalism, escalating social change, and support for pan-Arabism. Indeed

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[170] Rastegar, *Surviving Images,* 68.
[171] Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: American University Press, 2007), 18-19.

many of these films, like *I Am Free* and *The Open Door,* dramatize the Revolution itself, in proper melodramatic fashion through the juxtaposition of public/political turmoil (the events of the revolution) and private/experiential struggles (familial and romantic conflict).

I discuss these films in the context of melodrama specifically, rather than popular cinema in general, because melodrama is formally and thematically critical to a discussion of women and nation in Nasser-era Egypt, for reasons both global and local. Whether returning to Peter Brooks' connection between the melodramatic mode and the political unrest of the French Revolution or discussing the subversively modernist style of Douglas Sirk in Hollywood cinema, the link is consistently one in which melodrama is used as an aesthetic tool for political expression, an object popular with the public that through overt displays of emotion and visual or thematic excess is both relatable and pointedly critical of the socio-economic status quo. This is as true in Egyptian cinema as in countless others, yet the specificity of melodrama in the Egyptian context lies in its historical pervasiveness in Egyptian popular cinema. We see this in the thematic resonance of the "love marriage," which is at the heart of the woman-nation discourse, and in the industry context in which women and women's film have been influential since the cinema's inception, particularly through the star image of popular actresses and singers such as Layla Murad and Uum Kulthum.[172]

The film credited as "the first" Egyptian Film, *Layla* (Wedad Orfi and Istifan Rusti, 1927), is undeniably a melodrama: Layla is an innocent village girl seduced by a man who leaves her pregnant and disgraced: a "fallen woman" plot familiar across national cinema boundaries (for example in Griffith's *Way Down East,* 1920 or Mizoguchi's *Naniwa ereji*/Osaka Elegy, 1936). Kay Dickinson, in her article on the peculiar historical presence of *Layla* (the film print

[172] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 22, 37.

has been long lost, yet it is often referenced and indirectly documented), writes mainly of the film's star and producer, Aziza Amir. Dickinson notes that Amir is an historical feminist figure responsible for initiating the project, starring in it, and partially directing it.[173] The film was a popular success, but Dickinson suggests that Amir has only recently been recognized for the full impact of her contributions to the industry by Arab feminist researchers, citing the fact that she has only been written about by male scholars within a greater anti-imperialist narrative as evidence that women were used to buoy the anti-colonial discourse.[174]

This oversight of significant female influence on the film industry is again a symptom of nationalist historical narratives. This is not a matter of complete erasure, but rather sublimation beneath the nationalist cause. Joel Gordon provides this 1966 statement from Gamal al-Laythi, a former Free Officer who left the army for film production and distribution:

> Any film that serves a political, humanistic, national or social cause serves our new society, and is by intent a socialist film. However, one must place this aim within a framework of a good, stimulating cinematic story. Because if the public is to like the film it must be able to both absorb the content and be entertained. There are people who believe that a socialist film should be nothing but speeches and preaching, but in my opinion such films serve no socialist cause. […] It is necessary that when we see such a film we walk away happy, so that we may accept our lives with enthusiasm and joy.[175]

These words echo those from Nasser's earlier-cited "Charter," in which he declares that a successful mobilization of the masses lies in the popularity of the movement, such that the interests of the state and those of the people are one, while furthermore explicitly underlying a Peter Brooksian notion of the relationship between melodrama and revolution. However such readings again enforce the invisibility of female experience perpetuated by the melodramas of

[173] See Kay Dickinson, "I have one daughter and that is Egyptian Cinema: Aziza Amir amid the Histories and Geographies of National Allegory," *Camera Obscura* No. 64 (2007): 136-177.
[174] Dickinson, "I have one daughter," 139.
[175] Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 205-6.

this era that tend to use female characters as vehicles for expressing the traditional melodramatic motifs of innocence and victimization insofar as they allegorize the nation but not the women in their own right.

This symptom of the post-revolution era cinema is manifest in a truly prolific number of films from a familiar faction of filmmakers and actors. Henri Barakat made multiple films on the topic, including *Banat el yom/Girls of Today* (1957)*, Hassan and Naima* (1959), *Fi baitina rajul/A Man in Our House* (1961) and*, The Open Door* (1963). The same is true of Salah Abu Seif, whose post-revolution films include *La anam*/*Sleepless* (1957), *El wessada el khalia*/*The Empty Pillow* (1957), and *I Am Free* (1959). Actress Faten Hamama (*The Open Door, Sleepless, The Empty Pillow*) and novelist/screenwriter Abd al-Quddus (*I Am Free, Sleepless, The Empty Pillow, A Man in Our House)* are two others heavily associated with this period. These films mark only a modicum of the collaborations between this group and others during this period, all of which experienced popular success at the box offices.[176] The plots of the films are varied, but more often than not they feature a young heroine on the brink of breaking from her traditional family and embracing her "modern womanhood," in her search of love but also civic identity and inclusion. With the exception of some films set in the country (e.g. *Du'a'al-karawan*/*The Call of the Curlew*—a 1959 Henri Barakat and Faten Hamama collaboration about the rape of a rural girl), this group of films overwhelmingly are set and filmed in the streets of Cairo. These settings often juxtapose the cramped and baroque interiors of apartment-living, which delineate the realm of family and its impositions of tradition, with the openness and freedom of the Cairo city streets where modernization is visible.

[176] Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama,* 136-141.

Situated within this climate of (con)fusion of nation and gender is where I would like to move into a critique of the proto-feminism at work in these films, as it relates to the formation of a more global melodramatic current and the ongoing complex practice of formulating feminist histories. Many of the Nasser-era melodramas such as the abovementioned works by Henri Barakat and Salah Abu Seif are overtly pro-woman projects that not only set stories of female education, professionalization, and love marriage against the climate of the 1952 Revolution, but equate them, or portray female liberation as explicitly necessary and conducive to the goals of the Revolution. I do not use the term "feminist" here—these films would not have been described as such nor would the term have come into popular usage until later, yet nonetheless there is no doubt that the films are, within their historical context, intentionally pro-women's liberation. It is not my intention to apply a retroactive feminist reading to these films, but rather to acknowledge the ways in which this period coopts women's liberation in the service of the national.

The pro-woman messages of these films may indeed be bold manifestations of an evolving social climate, but their implications are more complex. Shafik, for example, offers a criticism of this heavy-handed progressivism, noting that the alignment of nationalist and feminist liberation in fact flattens any expression of the individual female experience in service of the nationalist agenda. She explains that these films fail to give credit to "individual independence and self-determination," and furthermore "exclude polysemic identities," offering the example that motherhood and women's liberation are often constructed as oppositional to each other.[177] The common trope of the "revolutionary school girl" is undeniably a capable, passionate character who would fall into the category of "strong" woman who 21st century

[177] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema,* 122.

feminists might look to in order to recover and reclaim femininity from periods of historical oppression under patriarchy. A problem arises, however, when the "strong" woman is merely a straw woman, ventriloquized by the very system from which we endeavor to reclaim her.

There is a tendency in industry histories as well as film narratives to either overlook or re-purpose the role of women. With the critical discourses surrounding *The Open Door* this phenomenon exists as well: the role of women critical to the film's production is not so much ignored as unexamined. Specifically I am referring to the adaptation of the screenplay from Latifa al-Zayyat's widely read and successful novel of the same name, and the influence of the star image of Faten Hamama. Al-Zayyat was a novelist, activist, and professor yet in Joel Gordon's critical assessment of *The Open Door* her role is minimized, especially compared to the aforementioned praise that he heaps upon *I Am Free* author Abd al-Quddus.[178] As for Faten Hamama, Gordon devotes much attention to her prolific career without truly interrogating her influence on the industry.

Shafik, however, introduces the question of how to theorize Faten Hamama's star image from a critical perspective. She cites Christine Gledhill's work on stardom as a point of reference for understanding the interplay of melodrama, myth, and modernization in the Egyptian context. Gledhill asserts that the star is the physical manifestation of Brooks' "moral occult" at the heart of melodrama: the ordinary person made extraordinary whose everyday battles are given a fantastical moral weight, which then imbues the star with mythical qualities.[179] Shafik confirms that the star image of Egyptian actresses such as Hamama saturated newspapers, gossip magazines, and advertisements in ways similar to actresses in the classical Hollywood period

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[178] Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama,* 133.
[179] Christine Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991), 209.

that Gledhill describes, but she insists that the reading of her star image in the Egyptian context is more complex than can be explained by Gledhill's formulation. Though Egyptian film stars contributed to the "imagined community" of female identification that melodrama perpetuates, modernization affected the population at very different rates depending upon circumstances of environment, ethnicity, class, and gender, rendering it difficult to translate theories of star image to a non-western context without further ethnographic research.[180] These kinds of soft-power and influence are not generally part of the history of women's liberation in the revolutionary melodramas, as they exist outside of the state-approved space for women to be free and useful to the nation.

The Double Bind of the Egyptian New Woman in *I Am Free* (1959)

The films that I discuss in more detail here, *The Open Door* and *I Am Free*, are particularly important to the Nasser-era for three reasons: they epitomize the abovementioned characteristics of the sub-genre, they were hugely popular with audiences and have experienced second lives in television and other distribution markets, and most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, they directly dramatize the recent past of the revolution period itself. Both films feature remarkably similar and familiar melodrama plots: young women from wealthy, traditional Cairo families struggling with their ideals and desires, both in love with radical revolutionary men who convince them that they should escape the binds of tradition and be free to love themselves, their men, and especially their country.

I Am Free is the most overtly political of the two films. In many ways it serves a similar purpose as *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* in Thaw cinema—a changing of the guard that would

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[180] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema,* 197, 205.

influence a cycle of films to come, including the better known and more enduring *The Open Door*, a film that exists in perpetuity similarly to *The Cranes are Flying*, both heavily influenced by their somewhat less polished predecessors. All four of these films conflate the fate of women with the fate of the nation during a politically significant recent past (World War II and the Egyptian Revolution respectively), and all, at least ostensibly, emphasize the liberation of women, though notably with the caveat that there is a "right" way to be a free and contributing member of a modern society. *I Am Free*'s protagonist, Amina, is forced to discern that liberation is not attained through personal means (a social life, personal desires) but through political activism.

When the film begins, in Cairo during the recent pre-Revolution past, Amina is a precocious school girl, bored and looking for stimulation outside of the traditional life laid out for her by her conservative aunt and uncle, with whom she lives after her more liberal parents' divorce. She engages in some light juvenile delinquency by spending time with her westernized friend, dancing, and exclaiming that she wants to be free to do whatever she wants, or in this case to decide what she does not want: marriage. The film captures Amina's otherness by removing her from her traditional, stuffy apartment filled with the trappings of the bourgeoisie where she is berated by her overbearing Uncle, and transplanting her to the streets of Cairo, where, after ditching school, she walks and absorbs her surroundings and temporary freedom. She moves from the claustrophobic still frames of the oppressive apartment to the open streets where she wanders as a flaneuse, filmed in a French new wave-evoking tracking shot along a Cairo shopping street, on location, with non-actors in the background. She passes the deco-style Cinema Radio where a Hollywood film is playing (*The Lineup*, a noir released in 1958 during the period of filming, not the years immediately pre and post 1952 revolution in which the film is

set). Amina’s first taste of freedom is clearly coded western, emphasized later by her friend who likes to dance to Western music.

Figure 3.1: The stagey interior vs. the naturalistic city (Lobna Abdel Aziz, Zouzou Nabil, and Hussein Riyad in *I Am Free,* dir.Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

Amidst the Nasser-era’s sweeping expansion of rights for women, welcoming them into the public sphere, there emerged the question of how to control the newly liberated woman. There could only be one “correct” way to be free, to merge the traditional and the modern. This is the challenge posed to Amina, which she spends the middle act of the film negotiating, led by the guiding hand of her friend Abbas. He criticizes her initial desires to be free, to do truly whatever she wants, claiming that freedom is a privilege and a responsibility—dancing and creating a reputation for herself are not freedom. Amina takes this rebuke to heart and focuses on more serious matters. She goes to live with her bohemian father and attends university. We next see Amina as a proud graduate, no longer the aimless party girl, a testament to the power of education and modernization, an exemplar of the ideal Egyptian woman. The interstitial years passed in montage, each year marked with a date until we arrive at 1952—the year of the revolution.

Figure 3.2: Amina (Lobna Abdel Aziz) the shining example in *I Am Free* (Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

After graduating, Amina works for the Arab Petroleum Company—not a coincidence given the geopolitical tug-of-war over oil and the Suez Canal, and Nasser's subsequent nationalization of the industry. Pre-revolution this was not yet the case, and the office is portrayed as a capitalist, colonialist endeavor. There are plaques in the office that read, "Your time belongs to the company" and "do not use phones for private calls," the latter printed conspicuously in English as well as Arabic.

Figure 3.3: Sign in Amina's office (*I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

Amina feels alienated and aimless at her new job, not finding fulfillment in the freedom from the traditional binds that she so craved. When coincidence places her back in the path of her friend Abbas, she soon falls in love—with Abbas, yes, but also with his new revolutionary activities.

At this point Amina has now cycled through various versions of freedom—juvenile delinquency, university education, gainful employment, equality with men—but according to Abbas none of these constitute real freedom, not unless they are put towards a greater purpose: national liberation. Abbas' didactic entreaty reinforces the set of contradictions that have been woven throughout the film thus far—the warring western and non-western sentiments. Modernization is coded western through the clothing especially, but anything that is *too* western, i.e. frivolous partying or capitalist greed, is aligned with the colonial powers that must be overthrown. The Egyptian new woman is trapped between these impossible sets of standards and she must straddle the Cold War geopolitical line that Egypt holds—between socialist ideology and western-aided modernization. The film itself embodies these contradictions between its revolutionary, collectivist ideology, and its more western stylistic influences.

Figure 3.4: Amina as femme fatale (Lobna Abdel Aziz and Shoukry Sarhan in *I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

In the scene when Amina re-encounters Abbas, he explains to her that her individual freedom is not enough. Despite her achievements she is still portrayed as the bad girl, evoking the femme fatale with her defiant expression, bathed in the chiaroscuro light from the venetian blinds—a common noir visual motif to convey moral ambiguity. Yet in a dream sequence immediately following this scene, Amina is called upon by a disembodied voice to use her freedom for a purpose, to repent for her selfishness and individuality. The style here is notably different from the previous scenes, evoking socialist realism this time, where the individual is cowed before the greatness of the cause.

Figure 3.5: Lobna Abdel Aziz in *I Am Free* (Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

After this point Amina's character becomes even more muddled as she devotes herself simultaneously to Abbas and to his cause, diminishing her own subjectivity in the process. The film ends with the staunchly anti-marriage Amina finding herself in love, married, and quite literally in prison, locked up for her political activities. (However, the film includes a shot of her marriage contract, clearly dated only several days before the arrival of the revolution on July 23, 1952. After this point the viewer would infer that Amina and her new husband would both be

released.) Amina claims to be happy in both of her new prisons—the prison of domesticity and actual prison, where she claims to gladly serve her sentence in the name of the revolution.

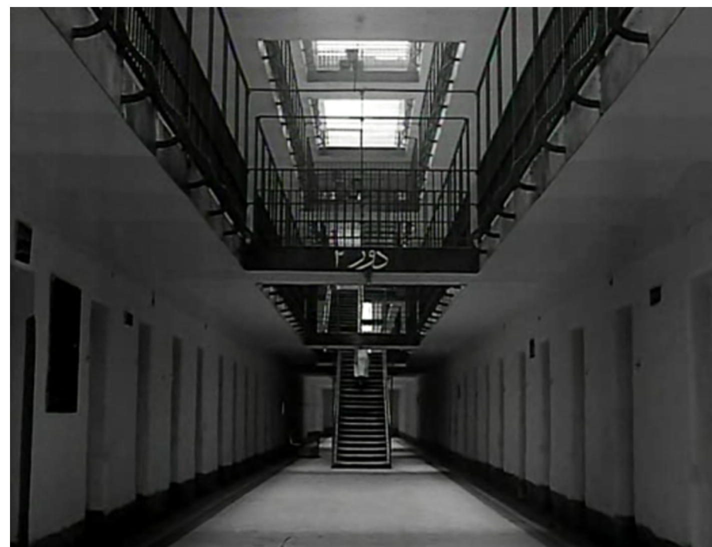

Figure 3.6: Dual prisons (Lobna Abdel Aziz and Shoukry Sarhan in *I Am Free*, dir. Salah Abu Seif, 1959)

These juxtapositions of messages relating to love and freedom neatly encompass all of the complex contradictions that arise from the conflation of woman and nation, through a melodrama vernacular that is simultaneously translatable and tied to the specificities of the time and place of Nasser-era Egypt. The Egyptian new woman is free, but not too free.

The Freedom to Love in *The Open Door* (1963)

I Am Free and *The Open Door* serve roughly as bookends to the revolutionary melodrama cycle, similarly to the way *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* and *The Cranes are Flying* do for the Thaw. In both cases the first film functions to articulate the possibilities of a new political era, while the second both codifies and diverges from the set of ideological and aesthetic frameworks outlined by the first, highlighting where cracks are beginning to show. The second films are also the more enduring in the cultural imagination, due mainly to being more polished stylistically and to the presence of megawatt female stardom in Tatyana Samoilova and Faten Hamama respectively (as well as the larger name directors in Mikhail Kalatazov and Henri Barakat). Between Barakat's reputation as a woman's film director (he was a prolific director of melodramas and popular cinema that focused on women's perspectives) and the fact that the book on which the film was based was written by a woman, Latifah al-Zayat, *The Open Door* could have made for a more genuine representation of women's experience, and it does insofar as the protagonist is more realized (based loosely on Zayat herself) and the nationalist ideology slightly less heavy-handed. However the authentic female experience at times gets lost in the same Cold War socio-political muddle through which the nation itself must navigate.

Viola Shafik argues that the realist works of Salah Abu Seif and Henri Barakat went underappreciated due to their association with melodramatic themes and mise-en-scène, and that what global critical praise they did earn was a result of their focus on the "urban lower classes," in the fashion of Italian Neorealism.[181] In accordance with my discussion of melodrama and realism in the previous chapter, I believe this view reinforces the false dichotomy between the two, while also obscuring the influence of Cold War-era political and industry interests. Shafik

[181] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 258.

agrees that melodrama is the engine that fuels the themes of liberation from western influence, as it fuels any number of previous revolutions (French, Bolshevik), through narratives of victimization and virtue, particularly in regard to the disenfranchised masses or else the fallen woman.[182] This fits with the concept of woman and nation wherein the victimized woman is akin to the colonized nation, and the liberated woman to liberated nation. However, the very way in which this is articulated, particularly in *The Open Door*, is through the melodramatic elements that Shafik sees as hindering realist expression. I argue that this is symptomatic of the tightline that Egyptian cinema walks as an Non-Aligned nation; the goal is liberation but the means are bourgeois. The heroines of *I Am Free* and *The Open Door* are distinctly middle class, simultaneously tasked with achieving revolution as well as modernization. The two are hardly mutually exclusive, of course, yet in this Cold War context they do align with eastern socio-political goals and western economic goals respectively.

*The Open Door'*s unique blend of realism and melodrama offers a potential outlet for the viewer to experience the film beyond its overtly political context. Indeed Henri Barakat was known for the signature "poetry and emotion" that he evoked through his work.[183] In *The Open Door*, Layla is a young woman who can only find the strength to transcend her familial and societal binds by throwing herself into nationalist political protesting—a plot similar to *I Am Free* and other revolutionary melodramas—yet the film's frequent shift between the visual languages of realism and melodrama creates openings for more emotionally experiential viewing. During the opening sequence, before meeting any characters, we are presented with newsreel footage of the pre-revolution protests and armed struggles, narrated by a voice-of-god

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[182] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 130-131.
[183] Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama*, 148.

narrator, which then shifts immediately into a shot of the schoolyard demonstration where we will meet Layla. The editing seamlessly connects the real world with the diegesis by overlapping the last of the narrator's speech with the first image of the schoolyard. This is not a prologue but a direct link between the realism of the political context and the melodrama of Layla's individual story, which sets the tone for the film.

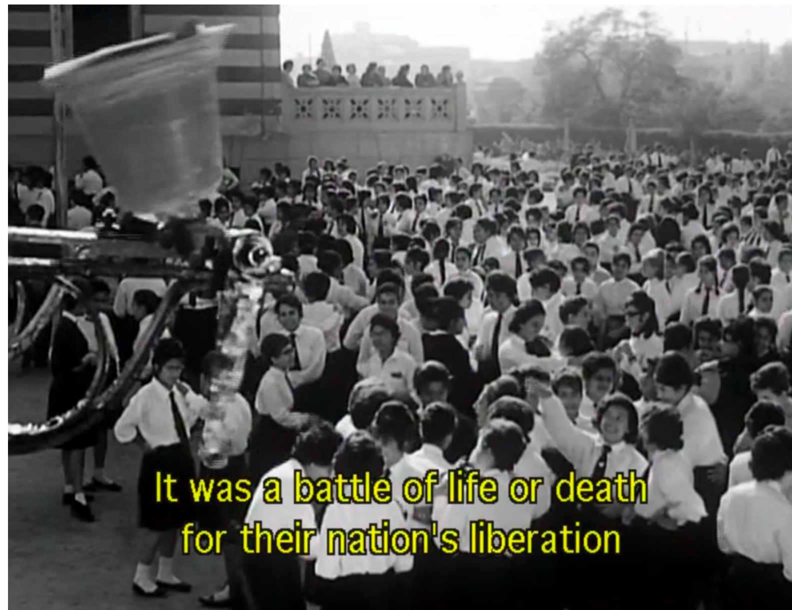

Figure 3.7: The moment of overlap between newsreel narration and diegetic space in *The Open Door* (Henri Barakat, 1963)

Amongst the uniformed students Layla is an everygirl, but she alone raises her voice in protest to counter the headmistress, who asserts that a woman's place is in the home and not on the front lines. Layla embodies both the ordinary and the extraordinary. She is one among the masses, yet it is her story that we experience.

The film shifts quickly to Layla's home life where, like Amina, she is bullied and beaten by her traditional father, the fighting spirit we saw in the schoolyard now cowed by patriarchal overbearance. Also like Amina, Layla's family lives in a Cairo apartment lavished in middle class bourgeois furnishings, the cluttered mise-en-scène creating a claustrophobic quality. The

two women's stories continue to overlap narratively and thematically, but stylistically they diverge; Layla's is more often articulated through melodramatic tableau. Mirrors feature throughout the film at times when Layla's private life (family and romantic) and public life (political) are at odds with one another, creating a crisis of identity for her. In a scene where her mother berates her for supporting the protests, we see Layla through the mirror in her bedroom where she stares intently at herself, while her mother and cousin, Isam, look at her in a tableau of tension. As the viewer, we see Layla as she sees herself—through the mirror, an outsider in her confining traditional world. Shortly afterwards, however, Layla and Isam share a flirtatious moment and almost kiss—suddenly it is love on her mind rather than revolution. Alone again in her room and overwrought with romantic excitement, she returns to the mirror, pressing her flushed cheek to the cool surface. This time the doubling effect is even stronger—which Layla will prevail?

Figure 3.8: Mirror imagery (Faten Hamama and Hasan Youssef in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)

Where Amina was forced to learn that there is a right and a wrong kind of freedom, so too does Layla learn that there is a right and a wrong kind of love; both correspond to the right

and wrong ways to be a liberated woman and citizen. To refer again to similarities with *The Cranes are Flying*, Layla and Veronika make the mistake of falling for the wrong man, namely the unpatriotic and selfish man. In *Cranes* the duplicitous Mark rapes Veronika and shirks his duty to his country by avoiding the war. Here, Isam pledges to accompany Layla's brother to the front lines of the battle for independence, but he reneges on his offer, threatens to kill Layla when she flirts with other men at parties, attempts to rape her, and cheats on her. Once again it is through the mirror that Layla comes to these realizations about her cousin and by extension the closed world of bourgeois life. Immediately after her moment of clarity, she rushes to the roof of her building with her brother, and his revolutionary friend, Hussein—the city streets are on fire after further conflict between the imperial police and the resistance. Layla has left the myopia of the apartment and her small life inside it, and moved to the open rooftop, shot on location. This is another visual shift from the individual world of melodrama to a form of realism, in this case more akin to socialist realism in the sense that the individual is eclipsed by the needs of the collective society. Layla decides that there are greater problems than her love life, and vows to eschew love from this point on.

Figure 3.9: Layla and Hussein on the roof, against the backdrop of war (Faten Hamama and Saleh Selim in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)

Layla continues to disavow love often and exclaims to her friends that their parent's generation of arranged marriages at least knew where they stood, whereas her own generation does not know "whether love is right or wrong." She is courted by Hussein—the good, patriotic love interest, who respects her and believes in freedom: for women, for love, and for the nation—but Layla is still unconvinced and tells him that she does not believe in love. In a scene straddling the line between western and anti-western sentiments, Layla and friends drive past a cinema where *The Gift of Love* (1958) starring Lauren Bacall is playing (another necessary anachronism given the location shooting, as in *I Am Free*). While the friends show interest, jaded Layla says, "Love is nonsense; it exists only in novels." Here love is associated with bourgeois Hollywood, as well as with French colonialism (French sits alongside Arabic on the poster)—both worthy of Layla's disdain, but nonetheless of interest to her ticket-buying companions, who themselves support the fight for independence.

Figure 3.10: Hollywood film poster on location in *The Open Door* (Henri Barakat, 1963)

Hussein, however, is not convinced that there is no such thing as love, nor no purpose to love, but rather that there is a right kind of love. In a letter to her, he writes: "When I think of Egypt, I think of you." He wants both to be free and independent. Years pass from 1952 (pre-revolution) to 1956 (post-revolution) in the midst of the Suez Canal conflict. Layla attends university where she ends up engaged to her older, controlling professor, a looming villainous figure accompanied always by a dark and ominous version of the film's usually romantic score. Layla is far from the freedom she thought she was seeking. At a mirror once more she is getting fit for a dress for her engagement party with her mother and aunt. The shot is composed in triangular tableau similar to the earlier mirror scene, but this time we cannot see Layla's reflection, nor can she see herself, except for a tiny sliver—that which has remained of her former passionate persona is not yet gone forever.

Figure 3.11: Layla returns to the mirror (Faten Hamama and Shouweikar in *The Open Door*, dir. (Henri Barakat, 1963)

As Layla contemplates her predicament, Hussein continues to write to her, espousing his love and his desire for her to be free, while he fights in the Suez conflict. The film once again intersplices newsreel and radio footage with shots of Layla in the Cairo streets; reality brings Layla out of her overwrought personal life. During an air raid she reunites with Hussein, but is ashamed before him—she is still engaged and furthermore feels useless in the war effort. Visually imprisoned by the elevator gate, she is not yet free.

Figure 3.12: The reunion, Layla is not yet free (Faten Hamama and Salah Selim in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)

The film ends at a train station, the site of many a melodramatic coming and going. Hussein has informed Layla that he is leaving first thing for Port Said, the site of the fighting. He invites her to join him, for love of him, yes, but more so for love of her country and her people. He will be at the station, waiting. By coincidence, Layla's family and fiancé decide that the time has come to leave Cairo, to wait out the constant air raids in safety. They arrive at the train station, where Layla is faced with a choice: to board the train away from the fighting, with her

family, or towards it, with Hussein. She expresses her decision via an internal monologue, shared only with us, wherein she finally sees her family and fiancé clearly; she says, "Life to you is a door closed on your selfishness. Life to me is a door which opens onto hope. To the future." She chooses love, in all its conflated forms. In a tracking shot that follows Layla as she literally leaves each member of her family behind, one by one, out of focus in the background, Layla, in focus in the foreground, looks forward: to hope, to the future, to love.

Figure 3.13: Layla leaving the past behind (Faten Hamama in *The Open Door*, dir. Henri Barakat, 1963)

Throughout *The Open Door*, Layla's story may have been used to perpetuate a nationalist agenda, but it does so less didactically than in *I Am Free*. Love is still conflated with civic responsibility, but through Faten Hamama's performance and the visual language of melodrama, Layla conveys the emotional truths of lived experience. She is not erased in the process of nationalistic myth-making. Though tools of melodramatic expression are used throughout the

film to denote the ways in which Layla is confined, in this final scene they serve as an opening to possibility, allowing us to engage with Layla's emotional reality and those of the women she represents.

Melodrama, Cultural Memory, and the Method of Contradictions

The allegorical relationship between woman and nation has dominated scholarly work on the history and film of the post-Revolution period. Once this connection has been made and interrogated, however, we are left with questions of how to make sense of a period of history and cinema that so overtly asserts its own identity. Can alternative readings of or interventions into "state feminism" be found?

One re-examination can be found by Kamran Rastegar, who provides a more nuanced look at the transactional relationship between cinema and memory, specifically in the context of wounds and trauma born from conflict in the Middle East. He utilizes basic formations from cinema trauma theory, such as the idea of cinema itself becoming memory, but ultimately moves away from the psychoanalytic structures that frame these readings.[184] He instead theorizes an idea of "gendered memorialization" that he applies to the process of gendering the cultural memory of the Egyptian anticolonial struggle.[185] Most relevant for the purposes of this chapter is his claim that post-independence cinema that promotes a state feminism is actively "occluding" memory of women's experience during this time.[186] This form of cinematic memorialization

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[184] See Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
[185] Rastegar, *Surviving Images,* 68.
[186] Rastegar, *Surviving Images,* 91.

effectively washes away the various individual traumas of a time of political upheaval and replaces these experiences with an idealized allegory that, as with any allegory, is reductive.

On the topic of allegory, Kay Dickinson, among others like Rey Chow, has criticized Fredric Jameson's theory of reading third cinema through the lens of allegory, citing the oversimplified nature of this formulation and the resulting fetishization of cultural objects in the service of expressing national identity.[187] Dickinson, in discussing Egyptian cinema, asks how we might handle a film or group of films that actively deploy allegory rather than passively create an opening for the viewer: in other words, films that equate woman and nation as part of a message of national modernization such as the Nasser era melodramas. She connects allegory to the practice of veiling, saying, "Allegory, like veiling, opens up the opportunity for that which should not be recognized to enter into the public sphere in an accepted form of disguise; in a strategically compromised mode, it ushers the private into the public."[188] How, then, should we interpret allegory that is not veiled? I think we can look to the idea of "the medium is the message." In short, we can look to melodrama itself as a critical tool for mediating the disconnect between the [private] female experience of cultural liberation during the post-independence period and [public] manipulation of this experience to support a nationalist agenda. In this sense melodrama is a tool for mediating private and public, but I would argue a more useful one than allegory. It is less a veiling than a translation, and a flawed one at that, far less direct than the dualistic structure of allegory. It opens instead to polysemic possibilities, prismatic feminist perspectives—it is here that we can begin to look to processes of making

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[187] See Dickinson, "I have one daughter," 142; Rey Chow, "Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together,*" *Camera Obscura* No. 42 (1999): 30-48; Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.
[188] Dickinson, "I have one daughter," 142.

history from memory. The unique role that melodrama plays in this process is in exactly this mediation between private and public, wherein melodrama becomes a method.

In terms of the relationship between woman and nation, we have established through critiques such as Rastegar's that films such as *The Open Door* and *I Am Free,* while on one level progressive, are ultimately problematic in the way that they rely upon women's liberation to bolster the nationalist movement, while remaining subordinate to it. This is especially evident in *I Am Free* in Amina's "confusion" about the meaning of freedom, namely that freedom does not mean dancing and dating and living a life outside the home as she thought, but rather it means devotion to the cause of freedom for the nation. The didactic nature of the allegory deployed by a patriarchal system seems in this case to counteract the surface level assertions of feminism, yet at the same time there must be an alternate way of viewing these films. How can we read them outside the labels of "feminist" because they promote female liberation or "not feminist" because they do so in the service of nationalism? One way in which to escape this confining binary is to employ melodrama as a method in all its messiness and contradictions, with its emphasis on private vs. public female experience. From this entry point we can perhaps think of the Nasser-era melodramas less in terms of the patriarchal system that is producing them and recognize that these melodramas function independently of their creation, serving as nodes that connect the women who watch them, providing a network of feelings and shared collective experience that draws from the interiority of female life.

Raymond Williams shifted critical discourse to the importance of everyday life and the "ordinariness" of culture; these basic concepts open doors for revisiting the past and investigating nonlinear, fragmented histories in a variety of fields from queer to feminist to postcolonial studies. Williams, for example, says that the "making of every society is the finding

of common meanings yet made and remade in every individual mind."[189] This speaks to both the liminal space of culture and the wide scope of its influence through circulation of media at local, national, and global levels. In this sense culture becomes an organizer of the national imaginary, particularly in the wake of modernity bringing people from the country to the city where mass culture emerges and the institutions of mass culture yield economic and political influence. In the wake of Egyptian modernization, the notion of the everyday and the ordinary pertains less to the individual and more to a broader concept of public citizenship—the free education and services newly offered, the films and songs widely consumed, the urban spaces renewed and frequented, the food received via state subsidies. These state-provided pillars of public life are inseparable from any feelings and emotions that would contribute to a notion of female citizenship in Egypt at this time, whether individual or collective.

Now the question becomes one of how these methods of thought and their subsequent productions of culture exist and are used in the public political realm. Sara Ahmed and Elisabeth Anker each write about the power of emotions and emotionality, both the affective bonds that they create and the political discourses that they shape. Sara Ahmed tells us that "emotions *do things,* and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachment."[190] This connection between the individual and the collective body animate her work as she examines the way that emotions articulate public life and contribute to the social-political imagination, creating their own "affective economies." In this sense the history of emotions as she explains it is both political and politicized. The value of emotions is traditionally ignored or understudied and considered low on a hierarchy in relation to

[189]Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Everyday Life Reader,* ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2001), 93.
[190] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text 22.2* (Summer: 2004), 119.

thought and reason, which corresponds to analogous hierarchies of good and bad emotions, leading Ahmed to formulate a theory of emotions as a power dynamic. A key point to take from Ahmed's assessment is that emotions are subject to hierarchies of power in terms of who is feeling them, but also that they carry with them connotations of power themselves, the consequences or potentials of which are innately political.

Returning to the specific context of applying this methodology to Egyptian melodrama, I would like to point to historian Mériam Belli's work on the Nasser era. She describes the "chimera" of trying to recreate a history of this time using alternative historical sources such as oral history obtained through her own interviews.[191] She considers herself part of the tradition of theorists following Pierre Nora's impetus towards histories that privilege the individual as well as the collective experience, while acknowledging that there is a contradiction inherent in these accounts (and accepting this contradiction). This notion of contradictions is necessary to forming a multifaceted feminist history of this period, wherein there is a "spectrum of experience" that evaluates the historical in light of the personal, rather than the other way around. Belli claims, "The accent here is on the present tense of experience, the past tense of remembering, and the interconnectedness of both past and present."[192] This fluidity and acceptance of contradictions leads me to apply this method to film in order to move towards the possibility of a global melodramatic current at work at the intersection of woman and nation and the political potential available therein.

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[191] Belli, *An Incurable Past,* 2.
[192] Belli, *An Incurable Past,* 5.

CONCLUSION

As I have established throughout this project, melodrama shapes narratives of gender, nation, history, and memory. Across genres, borders, and history melodrama persists as a mode of the senses, eliciting our emotions and shaping our experience of the world around us. However, I have tried to avoid the over-generalizations and embrace instead the contradictions of melodrama—to begin to think about the implications of a global melodrama, the possibility and impossibility of it. What is unique to melodrama that allows it to exist as a mode that is simultaneously global, in terms of cross-cultural legibility and the perpetuation of particular tropes and aesthetics, and local, existing in very specific regional traditions that are not easily translatable? I have explored the idea of "melodrama as method" as a means of potentially answering these questions of cultural legibility and specificity—to test the idea that to talk about a global melodramatic current is to talk about the work of melodrama, the potentialities that flow between the public and the private, the affective and the political.

After engaging with the specificities of the melodramatic political discourses between woman and nation, how then do we transition into situating this knowledge into an understanding of a global melodramatic current? I believe that the answer lies in an attempt to understand one cultural instance of an interaction between melodrama and modernity in relation to other modernisms and feminisms, each with its own cultural-historical specificities, yet potentially linked by global rhetorics of entrapment, freedom, and desire.

We cannot simply apply western melodrama theory to other contexts, but we can utilize certain critical methods that are overarching—the idea of using melodrama itself as a critical tool, a lens through which to read constructions of cultural identity—while noting the mistranslations and contradictions. As Christine Gledhill writes, melodrama is an "industrial

mechanism" that rather than reinforcing boundaries actually encourages disputes and dissolutions between them, so that these "crossings" can become "productive sites for cultural activity."[193]

I would call attention to the manifestation of various qualities of melodrama that exist at the fusion of the "crossing space" and the "impossible translation" that are present both in the nature of melodrama itself as well as in scholarship on melodrama, for it is at the site of this collision where we find the potential for opening a cross-cultural discourse. Contradictions, to a certain degree, are inherent to melodramatic modes of expression. Melodrama is the space, after all, where pathos and action coexist and mixed messages thrive. It encompasses high and low culture, the conventional as well as the subversive. These arguably globally legible qualities are interwoven through Hollywood, Soviet, and Egyptian melodrama, but I am more interested in the points at which these similarities at first appear to occur, but ultimately do not. One such example is the topic of love and marriage, which constitutes a large portion of the corpus of Hollywood melodrama. Indeed many a Hollywood and Egyptian melodrama alike end in a marriage or similarly traditional heterosexual coupling, but the connotations of romance and the institution of marriage itself mean very different things in for example Lauren Berlant's reading of romance as a means to curb American women's political potential, and the idea of the love marriage as politically subversive in an evolving Egyptian social context.[194]

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[193] Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," in *Reinventing Film Studies,* ed. Christine, 240 Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 224.

[194] See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint, The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008*),* 5. Berlant explores the paradoxical power and restriction of women in modern and postmodern American culture as inextricably linked to mass cultural consumption. Her "intimate public space" is then the place of collective female experience that is mass-mediated by institutions of art and culture such as cinema.

What might this method of contradictions mean for us at the level of scholarship and how might we begin to think of contradiction as a method unto itself? When do comparative approaches produce new ideas and when is there a missed or impossible translation? Viola Shafik keenly points out (similarly to the argument that Anupama Kapse makes when trying to consider Peter Brooks in the context of Indian cinema) that Laura Mulvey's explanation of melodrama does not translate to an Egyptian context, insofar as a Mulvey-esque critique of problematically separate gender spheres would come across as Orientalist in many non-western contexts where gendered spheres are a result of "bourgeois social formation" rather than "regional cultural practices."[195]

We can extend this to Lauren Berlant as well insofar as her theory that romance serves to amputate women from the public realm does not apply to the "state feminism" at work in the Nasser era melodramas, in which the love story is not a diversion but is actively conflating love and politics, in fact utilizing it to encourage civic engagement. Nor does Berlant translate to a Khrushchev Thaw context in which love and public ideal citizenship are at once conflated, as in *Zarechnaya*, and a morally ambiguous conduit of reality in *Cranes*. It is therefore generative to read Berlant in these contexts in as much as the translation is missed, but nonetheless raises the question of how to understand global structures at work in melodrama and in allegories of woman and nation. The contradictions are inherent in melodrama and these collisions allow us to make a different kind of translation—not one in which western theory is globalized and applied elsewhere, but one in which difference is acknowledged and made productive. It is the emergence of these mistranslations and repurposing of traditionally held views on melodrama

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[195] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema,* 159; Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 69. Anupama Kapse, "Melodrama as Method," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media 54.2* (Fall 2013): 148.

that provide potentially valuable insights into the field of melodrama studies as it contributes to reception, the formation of affect, and the potential for melodrama to constitute meaningful or productive discourses cross-culturally.

Throughout this project I have aimed to identify a melodrama vernacular of woman and nation that, albeit imperfectly, persists across borders. Though the culturally-specific applications of melodrama shift in Hollywood, Soviet, and Egyptian contexts, in each melodrama is a means for conveying and understanding transitional cultural periods, and in each it achieves this through the language of the subjunctive mood: hope, desire, doubt, and imagination. The films included in this project convey the sense of uncertainty but also of possibility that underscores the culturally and geopolitically precarious moment that is the early Cold War.

There are, of course, questions still unanswered and further research to be done towards the historiography of a global melodrama. It is necessary to explore other Cold War perspectives beyond the three poles that I discuss, and to do so from across the spectrums of gender and sexuality. There is space for further research into how other regions of the Global South and the Soviet East negotiate the relationship between gender and nation through melodrama, and where this fits into a Cold War geopolitical context. I hope that my methodology will prove useful for scholars already addressing these topics such as Samhita Sunya, who researches Indian melodrama and modernity in a transnational context, Hye Seung Chung, who works on South Korean melodrama as well as Hollywood Orientalism and cultural imperialism, Anke Pinkert, whose work on East German cinema links postwar trauma to masculinity in crisis, or Jasmine Nadua Trice, whose study of Southeast Asian women filmmakers is aimed at gendering regional

history and creating an imaginary for women's filmmaking.[196] I hope that my work will contribute to the growing corpus of research at the intersection of melodrama, modernities, and feminisms that further the historicization of a global melodramatic current.

[196] Samhita Sunya, *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Hye Seung Chung, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* (New Brunsick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Anke Pinkert, "Can Melodrama Cure?: War Trauma and Crisis of Masculinity in Early DEFA Film," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 44.1 (2008): 118-136; Jasmine Nadua Trice, "Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries: Three Southeast Asian Women Filmmakers," *Feminist Media Histories* 5.1 (2019): 11-38.

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