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MELODRAMA AND THE AMERICAN  
COMBAT FILM

Melodrama has often been defined as the lesser half of some binary opposite: melodrama versus tragedy, melodrama versus realism, or in Film Studies, melodrama versus “classical” Hollywood narrative. Melodrama has also typically been associated with female emotions, narratives, and values against male genres and masculine stoicism.<sup>1</sup> This essay intends to challenge this stereotype by arguing that melodrama is a much broader aesthetic strategy than any of the above dichotomies suggests, and that its role in many other supposedly male genres, such as the western, the action film, and the war film, has been overlooked. I will focus specifically on the American war film in order to show how it relies on the affect-generating and meaning-producing devices specific to melodrama. To this end, I have chosen several well-known combat films from the 1940s to the present. Each had a significant cultural impact, which was invariably viewed as a function of the film’s much-touted realism. I will suggest that the power of these films can be understood better in terms of their use of melodrama. The war film and the combat film are nevertheless two very different kinds of genres, insofar as the war film is defined by a specific kind of setting (war) and action (combat), whereas melodrama is defined by a specific kind of emotional rhetoric. War films can have a range of emotional registers (e.g. satirical, sentimental, comic, dramatic) and still be considered war films as long as war and combat are central concerns. In contrast, melodrama has a consistent emotional register, always seeking to generate sympathy for a virtuous victim and (if successful) moving its audience to tears, but can be adapted to a wide range of settings and background situations. In fact, as Rick Altman and other film scholars have recently pointed out, films, and especially Hollywood productions, are characterized by generic hybridity rather than purity.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Hollywood films typically draw on more than one genre, adapting, redefining, and rearranging elements of familiar genres into new combinations. In this essay, I will show how the American combat film often relies on melodrama. This is not to say that all American war films use melodrama. Clearly, some do not, or only in isolated moments. For example, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) rely on satire and irony instead. Nevertheless, if a war film culminates in a moving death scene, relies on the staging of loss for its emotional impact, and suggests that the soldier was a virtuous and/or innocent victim, then the main operative mode is melodrama.

## Melodrama in Critical Context

I would like to begin by explaining what I mean by melodrama. For this, I turn to Peter Brooks' seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), which argues that melodrama is not just a theatrical genre but a quintessentially modern aesthetic mode that underpins even the work of nineteenth century novelists associated with the emergence of realism. Adopting a kind of anthropological approach that allows him to sidestep the negative value-judgments associated with melodrama, Brooks situates it historically in Europe as a reaction-formation to the weakening of religious and monarchical authority and the resulting collapse of a coherent, shared blue-print for making moral and spiritual sense of the world.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the epistemological and ethical ambiguities that accompanied the emergence of modernity in the eighteenth century, melodrama stages powerful dramas of moral legibility. In its fictional worlds, the moral grays of modern life resolve into reassuring blacks and whites.

Written across the spiritual void that accompanied scientific rationalism and modernity, the specific pleasures of melodrama lie in the temporary fulfillment of the wish to believe that there is a sphere of meaning and justice beyond the material world of surface appearances. Contrary to popular assumptions, melodrama does not systematically show virtue rewarded and villainy punished but makes sure the difference between the two is clearly recognizable. By taking this functionalist approach, Brooks is able to explain the purpose of the features that are most despised by twentieth-century critics: emotional excess, improbable plotting, moral reductiveness, and a reliance on exaggerated gestures and overdetermined bodily signs. These were not simply aesthetic flaws tolerated by more naïve nineteenth-century audiences but aesthetic devices whose specific function was to create moral clarity and to suggest the presence of a spiritual sphere of influence that was both invisible and powerful. In this way, Brooks turned melodrama into a compelling cultural paradigm that is as modern as Romanticism and Realism.

Many critics acknowledge their debt to Brooks, but none have developed upon his ideas as directly and effectively as Linda Williams, who argues that melodrama operates across a wide range of aesthetic forms in American culture. Departing somewhat from Brooks's focus on general moral legibility, Williams identifies the defining feature of melodrama more narrowly as the recognition of the virtue of a victim-hero. She argues that melodrama "invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims" and is primarily "concerned with the retrieval and staging of innocence."<sup>4</sup> Focusing on film melodrama, Williams identifies five key features of the genre: first, a space of innocence; second, a victim-hero and the recognition of his/her virtue; third, realism adapted to the emotional purposes of melodrama;

fourth, a dialectic of pathos and action (or of “too late” and “in the nick of time”); and fifth, characters who embody primary psychic roles organized around Manichean conflicts between good and evil. To this list, I would add a sixth feature, the redeemed and redemptive death, according to which the death of the most virtuous character, usually the victim-hero, is not only represented as embedded in some spiritual or ideological framework that gives it meaning, but also as having a powerful effect on surviving characters (often transforming or saving them somehow). This element, though present in most melodramas, is particularly important for the war film and intersects with its specific problem of representing violent death as entertainment.

### **American Melodrama in Historical Context**

Before turning to the group of films that will occupy most of this essay, I want to look at the history of the melodramatic mode in American culture since such historicization poignantly raises the issue of the genre’s politics. To recapitulate the theories of melodrama discussed so far, Brooks proposes that melodrama serves to bring moral clarity to a modernity steeped in moral ambiguity while Williams stresses melodrama’s concern with the sufferings of virtuous heroes. In practical terms, this means that melodrama has often focused on morally “gray” or socially marginalized characters and recast them as victims. In this way, it has frequently served the progressive social function of fictionally rehabilitating persons who suffer from exclusion, prejudice, and disempowerment, e.g., the poor, seduced women, racial others, slaves. In other words, the moral work of melodrama is often more complex than the conventional wisdom equating it with the status quo and simplistic morality.

For example, one of the first important instances of literary melodrama in the United States was Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1792). Although this novel had sold only passably well in England, it quickly became a bestseller and a major cultural event in America (for reasons that Cathy Davidson explores in her introduction to the novel).<sup>5</sup> Going through several editions within a few years and selling well into the nineteenth century, this story of a middle-class adolescent, who is seduced by an English gentleman-soldier and subsequently abandoned in America, clearly touched a nerve in the fledgling republic. Combining the values of the sentimental novel with a melodramatic framework, *Charlotte Temple* seeks to rehabilitate the fallen woman as an object of pity rather than contempt and illustrates the powerful progressive function that melodrama had from its earliest history.<sup>6</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) is another milestone in literary melodrama. Stowe wrote this novel in order to undermine cultural

stereotypes of slaves as comical or brutish by representing them as human subjects worthy of sympathetic identification. She challenges patriarchal values by privileging maternal family bonds, common humanity, and emotional truth over the logic of property, racial hierarchy, and law. Readers may feel superior to the guileless Tom (as they do to the naïve Charlotte Temple), but this superiority is cast by the novel as entailing an attitude of compassion and protectiveness towards the helpless slave rather than justifying his bondage (as paternalistic slavery advocates argued). Recognition of the terms of justice are stressed over their implementation through retribution or revenge, and the reader is invited explicitly only to “feel right” on the issue of slavery.

D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is one of the first major film melodramas and an indirect reply to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>7</sup> It is also a striking example of how the political tenor of melodrama does not need to be progressive in any common sense of the word since this film is probably one of the most reactionary, racist, and sexist films ever made. The social outcast that it seeks to rehabilitate is not a person but the American South, which had been marginalized and morally ostracized by the rest of the country for its unapologetic commitment to slavery. By representing the South as innocent, chivalrous, and benevolent during slavery times, and vividly depicting its “agony” during Reconstruction, Griffith casts the South as virtuous victim. The villains are: first of all, the slaves themselves, because they brought “the seed of disunion” with them from Africa;<sup>8</sup> secondly, avaricious carpetbaggers, and thirdly, vengeful blacks who want to “put the white South under the heel of the black South” during Reconstruction.<sup>9</sup> The story of Southern martyrdom is figured in the film by the spectacle of Flora's or “Little Sister's” (Mae Marsh) pursuit by a sex-mad black soldier and her dramatic leap from a cliff before dying in the arms of her brother. While the girl's trials are drawn out and lingered over, the subsequent lynching of her attacker, Gus (a racist answer to Uncle Tom), takes place quickly and off-screen. When criticized by the NAACP for its racism, the filmmakers insisted that the film was historically authentic and even educational, repeatedly denying that its representations were biased in any way.<sup>10</sup> Thus, draping itself in the mantle of realism, the film rewrote the history of the United States by casting the white South as a victim characterized by its virtue and suffering.

## The American Combat Film

Films about war were made from the earliest decades of film production on, as *Birth of a Nation* illustrates. However, the genre known as the combat film developed only during the Second World War, emerging from the Hollywood industry's overwhelming embrace of the war effort after 1941 (especially since

patriotism turned out to be highly profitable and spectators proved eager to watch them). Russell Earl Shain estimates that Hollywood released 340 war films between 1941 and 1945, or about one in five films produced during this period.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Schatz notes that the World War II film became one of Hollywood's "more durable genres" in the decades after the war, and Jeanine Basinger traces the evolution of the WWII combat film all the way to Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998.<sup>12</sup> We have recently been reminded by Clint Eastwood's well-received diptych *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) that the war film, and even more specifically the WWII film, is as compelling as ever.

Jeanine Basinger's *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (1986) is one of the most ambitious attempts to wrestle with the question of the war film as a genre. Drawing on a pool of several hundred films, Basinger makes combat and WWII her limiting parameters, positing *Bataan* (1942) as the paradigmatic film of the genre, assembling its key features together for the first time in a memorable way.<sup>13</sup> These number no less than sixteen and consist mainly of narrative devices (such as the "no-women-after-opening-scenes" rule) and representational strategies (such as "the-faceless-enemy" rule).<sup>14</sup> Although the sixteen features are listed as more or less equivalent, Basinger spends more time on some than on others. She also lists "death" as a feature but does not develop it in any detail. Here is where the different critical objectives of genre studies of the "war film" and "melodrama" emerge clearly. Whereas Basinger's goal is to dissect the war film (anatomically, as her title suggests, evoking a post-mortem perspective), my interest in examining it through the critical lens of melodrama is to see how it works *in vivo*. In other words, melodrama helps to bring the emotional effects, and as I will show, the ideological implications, of combat films more clearly into focus.

In the sections that follow, I will examine several American war film in terms of the five key features identified by Linda Williams, plus a sixth one that I have added, the redeemed and redemptive death. The films that I draw on for this discussion include *Bataan* (1942), *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *The Green Berets* (1968), *Platoon* (1984), and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). This cross-section of WWII and Vietnam War films includes some that were made during and after the conflicts depicted and range from the 1940s to the present. I consider each film as both exemplary and ground-breaking in the context of the war film as genre. The analysis below will show how each also employs the defining features of melodrama.

## **The Space of Innocence**

The first point that Williams discusses is that of a “space of innocence.” She proposes that melodrama “begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence.”<sup>15</sup> This idyll is often the home or the “maternal place of origin,” which, according to Williams, is the “fundamental reason for melodrama’s profound conservatism,” namely that it wants to *return* to a lost Eden.<sup>16</sup> I would qualify Williams’ argument by pointing out that the so-called “space of innocence” is not necessarily innocent in any conventional sense of the word; it is rather Edenic or even utopian. The important point is that there is a place or situation where the protagonist-hero can be happy. In *Charlotte Temple*, it is Charlotte’s family home, while in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it is the neat and cheerful cabin where Tom lives with his family. In *Birth of a Nation*, it is the antebellum family home (in both the North and the South). The protagonist naturally wishes to return to this comfortable place. However, a longing for lost happiness does not necessarily make the story or the genre conservative. It simply establishes an emotional and moral compass against which the protagonist measures his or her loss, and melodrama depends on loss for its specific emotional pitch. Nevertheless, many melodramas point to the possibility of new and alternative Edenic spaces, such as the happy home of Charlotte’s American neighbor, Mrs. Beauchamp, or the friendly and efficient little Quaker settlement where runaway slaves are cared for and protected in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Similarly, in *Birth of a Nation*, the marital felicity of the two main couples is represented at the end of the film as an adequate substitute for the lost past. In the last scenes, the film even gestures toward a future “golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more,” further reinforcing the point that an Eden may lie in the future rather than the past.<sup>17</sup> Yet the political meanings of these works vary dramatically, from progressive (feminist and abolitionist in the case of *Charlotte Temple* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, respectively) to reactionary (*Birth of a Nation*), independent of their nostalgia. The defining point is the specific content of the situation that is missed, not the missing itself. Nothing requires the Edenic space to be defined as heterosexual, middle-class, white or romantic. It is simply the place where the hero/heroine is most happy and emotionally complete (which is why it is generally characterized by the presence of loving relationships).

However, the war film’s important variation on the conventional “space of innocence” is that it hardly ever associates this space with the maternal home.<sup>18</sup> While their family homes may initially appear to be the place where soldiers want to return, the fact is that most war films begin already at the military training camp or battlefield and the actual home of the characters is rarely shown at all. Moreover, the real home of the soldiers is generally represented as either too innocent, too problematic (a place they have escaped from), or too remote to count as the idyll that the war film wants to return to. Instead, the war film invariably represents the space of innocence more as a moment than a space: the moment when the “motley group” (as Basinger calls it) bonds into a “band of brothers.”<sup>19</sup>

This moment occurs when the mixed group of individuals begins to be united by their common identity as soldiers and their shared experience of training and/or combat and start to forge intense bonds of fraternity and loyalty among each other. If this moment can be associated with any particular location, it is the spaces of leisure and recreation between combat. What defines these spaces more than anything else is the presence of music, play, humor, and shared intimacies, such as in the form of confessions and personal anecdotes. These moments are “innocent” insofar as they are contrasted with the corruption of the rest of the world (and the cruelty of war), and their utopian dimension is represented by the importance of playfulness as well as the breaking down of hierarchies, racial differences, and social barriers of all kinds. In *Bataan*, this “space of innocence” is represented as a moment of listening to jazz on the radio, where the character played by Desi Arnaz explains the music to the other soldiers.

In *Platoon*, the visually striking scene in the “pothead” tent represents the utopian space where white soldiers smoke and dance with black soldiers to the sound of Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit” and William Robinson’s “Tracks of My Tears” (a poignantly melodramatic Motown title). On the DVD commentary, Stone describes these moments of interracial partying as keeping him and his comrades sane and “human” during the war, in contrast to the trigger-happy alcohol-drinkers who listen to country music and display a Confederate flag in their tent.<sup>20</sup> The film suggests that their inability to “loosen up” and play in the more intimate way of the marijuana smokers is related to their disconnection from their own (and the Vietnamese peasants’) humanity and their readiness to resort to violence as a release. In *Flags of Our Fathers*, the most poignant moment of “innocence taking pleasure in itself”<sup>21</sup> comes not at the beginning but at the end, when a group of soldiers strips and runs into the Pacific Ocean to play. In this chronologically complex film, which constantly shifts back and forth between several different temporalities, Clint Eastwood wistfully allows the narrative to end with a space of innocence even if it is clear to the audience that this apparent “happy ending” is artificial and ephemeral (with many of the swimming soldiers dying in subsequent days).

*Sands of Iwo Jima*, because it was made just after the war and wished to thematize a transition to post-war values, offers two spaces of innocence: the fraternal group of soldiers playing together on leave specific to the war film as well as the traditional domestic space of romance and family (represented by one of the main soldier’s falling in love, marrying, and becoming a father during the course of the film). The film also dramatizes the transition from wartime values to peacetime values by showing how the war has disrupted home life for characters such as Stryker (John Wayne) and the prostitute he meets in Hawaii. This woman has a baby but needs to hustle servicemen because the father is “gone”—a situation that changes Stryker’s bitterness about his own divorce into an understanding of the

harm done by absent husbands and fathers and prompts him to write a letter to his son apologizing for his military life. He has not finished it when he is killed, but his men read the letter aloud after his death and vow to finish it for him. Suspending its combat-driven action for several long minutes of pure pathos, this moment is the emotional climax of the film and segues directly into the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima.

Letters are especially important in the few war films that gesture to the absent home as an Edenic space. For example, in *Saving Private Ryan*, the letter of the first soldier to die becomes a sacred object passed around the group as each resolves to copy it and send it but is prevented from doing so by his own death. Naturally, letters are also the focus of Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima* since this film idealizes the domestic space more than any other. We not only see poignant scenes from the home life of the main character Saigo but also hear the letters written by the other main character, General Kuribayashi, to his son. Most importantly, the dramatic climax of the film is again the reading aloud of a letter, this time the letter of an American mother to her young son captured by the Japanese. Though the Japanese initially want to execute their injured American captive, his mother's letter (which they read after he succumbs to his wounds), makes the Japanese soldiers realize how similar they are to the Americans since any one of them could have received the same kind of letter from his own mother. This moment of recognition of a common humanity is articulated through the notion of a universality of mothers' relationships to their sons and encapsulates the entire point of the two movies: that soldiers and families on both sides feel and suffer exactly the same way. In this way, Clintwood effectively brings the war film back to the original project of American melodrama that we saw in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: a progressive universalism, according to which a common humanity trumps racial and political differences.

### **Recognition of the Virtue of a Victim-Hero**

The second key feature of melodrama identified by Linda Williams is the recognition of the virtue of a victim-hero. In fact, "virtue" and "victimization" are directly linked because it is suffering itself that serves as evidence of virtue.<sup>22</sup> This is a clear residue of the sentimental origins of American melodrama, which defined moral value in terms of emotional responsiveness: the more a character could feel (especially pity and empathetic pain), the better they were. The conflation of victimization and virtue also accounts for the importance in melodrama of *visible* signs of suffering. In the nineteenth century, the easiest and favorite sign of suffering was the tear, staged in elaborate scenes of weeping. And tears remain melodrama's favored manifestation of suffering, including the war film's, where a



soldier will occasionally break down and weep for a lost comrade. This is particularly dramatic when the soldier-hero is otherwise shown to be remarkably self-controlled and unemotional, such as Mike Kirby (John Wayne) in *The Green Berets* or Saigo in *Letters of Iwo Jima*.

However, the war film also has other means of rendering suffering physically visible and easily recognizable: sweat, pallor, and trembling on the light side of the spectrum and gory wounds on the heavy side. For example, Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*, who otherwise appears totally unflappable, has an uncontrollable twitching in his hand which reveals the fear and stress he feels but does not express. In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, Stryker's feelings are suggested in two ways: through long close-ups on his sweating and stricken face at key moments in the film, and through his excessive drinking, which functions as the only external sign of his anguish over the loss of his family. Both of those markers of suffering cast Stryker as the melodramatic victim-hero of the film, something that is often overlooked in assessments of its impact on post-war culture. The fact that Wayne's character is so sympathetic for his vulnerability (and not for his heroism) is an important complication to understanding Wayne's complex and enduring appeal in the decades that followed.<sup>23</sup>

The important thing about the war film's use of melodrama in general is that it makes soldiers automatically into victim-heroes as soon as the first shot is fired at them or even before, when they first suffer from danger or fear. Since the soldier's role is inherently dangerous and distressing, the soldier character is always inevitably a victim. The more the soldier suffers, the more virtuous he appears unless he does something dramatically cruel or unjust. This is another fairly constant theme of the American war film, i.e. that the victims of war are its soldiers, and it is especially true for last-stand films such as *Bataan* and *Letters of Iwo Jima*. It is interesting to link the war film to the earlier American melodrama's efforts to rehabilitate a social marginal. In *Birth of a Nation*, this social marginal became the white South rather than a person. If this rehabilitative function is still present in the war film, the question arises, who or what could be seen as being rehabilitated. In my view, it is the soldier that represents the "other" to ordinary civic society. One of the greatest cultural challenges facing a society like America, which finds itself at war quite often, is how to feel about the warrior, whose conduct in combat is so different from social norms under peaceful circumstances. The war melodrama tries to resolve these moral ambiguities by depicting the soldier as a victim as well as a hero.

## **Realism**

Realism is the third main feature of melodrama. This may seem paradoxical at first since we associate melodrama with wildly improbable plots and excessively staged emotions. However, this is to overlook the fact that melodrama evolves and adapts to current standards of realism, and so we cannot judge it by nineteenth century conventions. Contemporary melodrama is much less obvious to us as melodrama because its devices become invisible when they “work” as they should. They only seem glaringly obvious and artificial when they fail to engage our emotions and when we feel alienated from the film’s strategies. Moreover, the realism of melodrama does not pertain to plot or causality (which are often contrived) but to questions of verisimilitude on the level of representation. Realism in melodrama serves the melodramatic agenda of heightened emotion by striving to bring the viewer “inside” the action. In nineteenth-century stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, productions often included real horses and bloodhounds during the chase after Eliza as well as real water to represent the Ohio River.

The war film also strives to appear as realistic as possible in order to render combat scenes emotionally effective. Griffith had military advisors help him recreate the scenes of Civil War combat, as did all of the war films discussed here. Each one was heralded at its time as setting a new standard for realism and authenticity in its representation of war and combat. This realism generally has come to mean making the spectator feel as close to the soldier’s experience as possible through the use of sound and hand-held cameras, the depiction of sand, water, and blood spraying the camera lens, as well as the portrayal of general confusion along with graphic displays of combat wounds. *Saving Private Ryan* remains notable in this regard for its heavy-handed display of combat gore in the early scene of the landing on Omaha Beach, which includes images of soldiers’ legs and heads shot off, a soldier picking up his severed arm, and a disemboweled soldier calling for his mother. This wrenching demonstration of graphic realism serves to establish the film’s credibility (its war film credentials, as it were), and there are no other scenes like this in the film because they are no longer necessary. In fact, the second main sequence, in the letter-writing office, is strikingly implausible in every way: a woman who happens to have written two letters to Ryan’s mother happens to know that another woman has written yet another one. She tells her superior, who immediately tells his superior, and the chain of concerned reactions continues unbroken all the way to the general who will immediately authorize the humane mission to save the fourth Ryan brother. The absurdity of this romanticized scenario of the army’s concern for maternal feelings is lost in the aftermath of that traumatic first scene of carnage, which has the effect of a *blitzkrieg* on a viewer’s critical distance and judgment.

## The Dialectic of Pathos and Action

The fourth defining feature of melodrama for Williams is its dialectic of pathos (defined as suffering) and action. This is an important point in retheorizing the gender of melodrama. One of the long-standing assumptions about the genre was that it staged and invited feelings of helplessness in the spectators. Williams argues instead that there is another logic at work in the genre that entails a dialectical relationship between the scenes of suffering and the subsequent scenes of action.<sup>24</sup> The feelings mobilized by the scenes of pathos are generally channeled into some sort of action or reaction on the part of the other characters.<sup>25</sup> In practical terms, the deaths of the victim-heroes have a galvanizing effect on the survivors. The precise form of this action depends on the main subject matter and other generic features of the film or text. In some cases, the effect is to convert another character to the cause represented by the dying victim. This is the case of Little Eva's and Uncle Tom's deaths in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which inspire several characters to become either Christians or abolitionists. In other cases, the pathos-generating deaths lead the other characters to rededicate themselves to a cause they already shared. In *Birth of a Nation*, the death of Flora prompts her brother to rededicate the Ku Klux Klan to the cause of saving the white South from African Americans (represented by a ceremony involving the dipping of a Klan flag in her "sacred" blood).

The fact that the hero or heroine of melodrama often dies, transforming the survivors in their wake, complicates the question of their centrality to the narrative. In fact, the real protagonist of many works of melodrama is not necessarily the victim-hero, but the survivor, the one who is changed by the victim's death. For example, in *Birth of a Nation*, Flora is the bearer of the values of the South, and her victimization makes her even more clearly into a sign for the South, but it is her brother who is the main hero of the film. In *Platoon*, Chris Taylor is the protagonist, but the melodramatic victim-hero and bearer of the values the film wishes to endorse is Elias (Willem Dafoe), the "good father" who is betrayed and killed in one of the most elaborately drawn-out slow-motion combat death scenes ever filmed (he is sprayed by what seems like hundreds of bullets as he runs out of the jungle and falls on his knees in a melodramatic tableau of pure combat agony, an image recalling the crucifixion, which is also featured on the film poster).

In most war films, the death of a cherished soldier-comrade will lead to a renewed dedication to the war effort. Thus, Stryker's death in *Sands of Iwo Jima* reinforces the "conversion" of Conway (John Agar), who has been a reluctant soldier and Stryker's antagonist. The pathos created by the long letter-reading scene completes Conway's conversion to Stryker's values and the war effort in general, shown by his volunteering to finish Stryker's letter and adopting Stryker's signature phrase ("lock and load"). In *Platoon*, the first moment of pathos occurs when the soldiers find the body of an African-American platoon member mutilated

and strung up to a pole. A series of reaction shots reveals his comrades' grief and shock, which lead directly to the "My Lai"-type incident of the next scene, where the pathos of grief translates into the "action" of violence against the villagers.

The mechanism of pathos and action also structures a potential interface between the melodrama and its audience. Moving the viewer emotionally, preferably to tears, is the most obvious and paradigmatic objective of the melodrama as affect-generating mode. However, melodrama's translation of pathos into action can also invite the audience to transform *their* strong feelings of grief into concrete action of some kind. Here we might even take Abraham Lincoln at his word, that it was Stowe's melodramatic novel that prompted the Civil War. Lincoln is reported to have said upon meeting her, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."<sup>26</sup> We can also recall that *Birth of a Nation* not only led to the resurrection of the long-defunct KKK, but it caused anti-black riots in some cities, leading to the NAACP boycott of the film and the demand that its screening permit not be renewed. These kinds of real-world effects are no less dramatic in the case of war films, several of which have had a significant impact on enlistment. *Sands of Iwo Jima*, for example, which is not a pro-war film *per se*, is nevertheless a pro-Marines film and was used as such by recruitment officers well into the 1970s. It had a particularly important influence on the generation who fought the Vietnam War, and many film scholars have noted the extraordinary frequency with which this specific film was cited by soldiers as the reason they enlisted. Wayne's *The Green Berets* also stimulated enlistment when it was released in 1968.<sup>27</sup> What film critics have not understood until now, however, is the extent to which the power of these films to move young men to enlist is due to their use of melodrama rather than spectacles of heroism. The commonly held argument that films incite audiences to imitate what they see is no longer current among film and media critics, but no alternative theory has been proposed to explain why boys would be incited to enlist after watching a film like *Sands of Iwo Jima*. Situating the war film in the tradition of melodrama offers a new perspective on the history of works that have had dramatic social effects (such as *Birth of a Nation* and *Sands of Iwo Jima*) and suggests new ways of understanding the emotional impact of this genre.

### **Primary Psychic Roles Organized and Manichean Conflicts**

The final feature that Williams discusses is the tendency of melodrama to rely on the moral stereotyping of characters and on Manichean conceptions of good and evil. The portrayal of stereotypical characters is particularly common in the war film, where we often find the coward, the innocent under-age boy, the ethnic other (often Italian, Polish, Irish, or Greek), the wise African American, the brave and selfless leader (or "noble sacrifice," as Basinger calls him)<sup>28</sup>, and others. Williams

also specifies that melodrama involves characters assuming “primary psychic roles” such as father, mother, sister or child (“Melodrama Revised” 77). This too is true in the war film, except that the roles tend to be symbolic rather than literal and limited to the male roles of brother, father, and son. The dynamics between a sergeant and his men are often cast as a symbolic father-son relationship, especially in WWII films.

The issue of a Manichean conflict between good and evil is actually more complex than it might appear. Of course, on the one hand, war films lend themselves naturally to a simplistic conceptualization of “us” (our soldiers) as good and “them” (the enemy) as evil. On the other hand, as I argued earlier, melodrama tends to need a situation of some initial ambiguity or moral confusion in order to function. The war situation happens to lend itself well to this task, and war literature and films are replete with double-binds and dilemmas as the competing claims of safety, loyalty, and justness cannot always be clearly arbitrated or aligned. The war film compulsively restages these painful situations of moral ambiguity and uses the techniques of melodrama to resolve them into moral clarity. For example, a common feature of the war film is the weighing of the life of one soldier against the potential loss of several others. This kind of cruel calculus is one of the most challenging ethical problems rehearsed by the war film as a genre and offers a striking illustration of how melodrama is deployed to resolve it. For example, in *Saving Private Ryan* the relative value of one life versus several others is not only a constant topic of discussion but the whole point of the film’s premise: risking the lives of several men to save one (and, in fact, all the main characters in the film die except Ryan). The final scene at the military cemetery, where a tearful Ryan is reassured by his wife that he has been a “good man,” offers a melodramatic answer to an otherwise irresolvable moral question: has Ryan’s life been worth all the others? The main victim-hero, the virtuous Captain Miller, tells Ryan with his dying words to “earn this.” The film asks us to accept that Ryan does earn his life even though it does not even attempt to evaluate Ryan’s life in any other terms than the purely sentimental. We do not know if he cured a disease or did anything remarkable; instead, the film signals that Ryan is good by showing him weeping at Miller’s grave (in a direct link to the sentimental roots of melodrama, according to which sincere tears are always a sign of virtue). The film then heavy-handedly reinforces the sentimental effects of this final scene with swelling orchestral music and the fade-out on the American flag. In this way, the film seeks to assure audiences that Ryan’s life was indeed worth the half dozen lives that were lost on his behalf. Yet, the ending needs to be so excessively clear and deploy all the stock devices of melodrama (music, tears, iconic symbolism) *because* the problem posed by the premise that Ryan’s life is worth the several that were lost finding him is so ethically murky.<sup>29</sup> The lingering ambiguity about the actual value of losing so many men for one (and especially losing the film’s hero,

Captain Miller) makes it necessary for the film to insist so much that it was indeed worth it.

### **The Redeemed and Redemptive Death**

This brings me to the last point, one which has received scant critical attention but which should be considered a defining feature of melodrama: the redeemed and redemptive death. In fact, deaths are generally “redeemed” by *being redemptive* for others; they are given a meaning and justification by becoming the occasion of another character’s salvation or realization of something crucial. This is where we see the workings of what Brooks calls the “moral occult”: melodrama’s desire to imagine that there is a sphere of moral meaning and justice beyond surface appearances and which is a direct reaction to the secularization entrained by modernity.<sup>30</sup> This aspect of melodrama makes it comparable to Romanticism, insofar as this too was a specifically *aesthetic* attempt to recuperate the idea of a transcendental or supernatural sphere of existence.

Just as religion has traditionally served the purpose of embedding death within reassuring narratives of spiritual meaning and afterlife, so melodrama devotes its greatest energy to embedding death in narratives of moral meaning and ethical agency. As a result, there is no such thing as a meaningless or vain death in melodrama. On the contrary, death becomes the single greatest occasion to prove that there are forces impinging on human existence that transcend the merely physical. In its crudest form, eighteenth and nineteenth-century melodrama features victim-heroes having visions of heaven (joy, serenity, or peace) at the moment of passing. Melodrama also offered another, more humanistic and secular form of redemption by which death becomes the catalyst that converts the survivors to the values of the victim-hero. For example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, both Little Eva and Tom have mystical visions at the instant of their death, but what really saves their deaths from the void of meaninglessness is the fact that each death converts several other characters to Christianity and/or a more assertive abolitionism (e.g. St. Claire, Topsy, Cassy, Sambo, and George Shelby). Similarly, Flora’s death in *Birth of a Nation* steels Ben’s resolve to organize the Ku Klux Klan, while Charlotte’s death in *Charlotte Temple* thoroughly reforms her seducer Montraville.

The war film lends itself well to melodrama because it needs to make sense of death for film audiences who, like nineteenth-century audiences, want to be moved and yet reassured and entertained. The potential problem and fear hanging over all war films is that combat death might be meaningless, or, as a Japanese soldier in *Letters from Iwo Jima* puts it, “for nothing.” The anguish of this possibility is heightened in some war films by the recognition that the “too late” finality of death often happens to characters for whom it is “too soon” (and the extreme youth of

soldiers is invariably stressed in anti-war combat films like *Letters from Iwo Jima* and played down in pro-war films like *The Green Berets*).

War films typically have three main strategies to “redeem” or give meaning to soldiers’ deaths. The first is to represent them as justified by abstract ideals, the military ethos, or the justness of the war. This is the least common (especially since Vietnam) and in some respects, the most conservative method since it reinforces an uncritical acceptance of war and vague political pieties. By this standard, *The Green Berets* is the most conservative film of my sample group because it justifies the series of deaths it stages in terms of simplistic Cold War arguments about communism and the inhuman cruelty of the enemy.

Another way of redeeming combat deaths is to link them to the familial space back home. This is particularly common for films that represent the home as a space of innocence and domestic happiness, such as *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Part of the poignancy of this film lies in the fact that the characters will die for a cause (Japanese nationalism) most viewers consider misguided, which is why the film relies so heavily on the domestic sphere to make the characters appealing and understandable. The two main protagonists in particular (Saigo and Kuribayashi) are represented as motivated by an admirable combination of stoicism in the face of danger and a deep attachment to their families. By far the most “melodramatic” scene in the film is when the film stops its action while General Kuribayashi listens to the radio program of children from his home town singing about his heroism on Iwo Jima. Abandoning itself entirely to music and emotion, this scene comes just before Kuribayashi’s death and helps spectators understand how Kuribayashi understands and accepts his martyrdom. The children’s song reveals that his sacrifice has been publically acknowledged by Japanese authorities and that the Japanese people, including his son (to whom he writes letters in voice-off throughout the film) will recognize his heroic service to Japan. Kuribayashi is both moved and reassured by the song and this in turn reassures spectators that he feels that his death will not have been in vain. Paradoxically, while idealization of the domestic is generally considered a conservative gesture, in the war film it typically represents an anti-war tendency because it represents relationships and attachments that interfere with the soldier’s ability to die (and to kill) without hesitation.

The third and most common strategy of retrieving combat death from senselessness is to contextualize it in terms of the fraternity between soldiers. As *Flags of Our Fathers* repeatedly insists, soldiers do not fight for a cause but “for each other.” The war film often shows that the only thing that can give a soldier’s death any meaning is that his comrades honor it, remember it, and transform it into a determination to fight better or live better as a result. This strategy is particularly important in the Vietnam War film, which is generally as skeptical about the “innocence” of the home front as it is about the value of official explanations of the war. The Vietnam film compensates for its cynicism about most social institutions,

including government, family, and the military itself, by an almost fanatical investment in the idea of the individual soldier and his relationship to his buddies. For example, in *Platoon*, Chris' greatest drama in Vietnam is the death of his friend Elias, which is saved from meaninglessness by being the catalyst for Chris' final loss of innocence (figured in the film as a positive development, one that allows him to mature and regain his voice and narrative control over the story in one final voice-off at the end). Politically, this kind of film represents an attempt to avoid taking an ideological stand and to seek refuge in pure subjective and personal experience. While not endorsing warfare or militarism or any particular military conflict, it also avoids taking a clear stand against it. Instead, it represents war and combat as a unique site of intense male friendship and solidarity, and therefore offers an intensely ambivalent portrait of war as both a moment of powerful bonding with other men and a moment of devastating loss when those bonds are severed by death.

## Conclusion

I have ended with death because it is around this issue that the ideological, emotional, and cultural effects of melodrama are most densely clustered and therefore visible. By "cultural" I mean the quasi-religious or anthropological function of embedding mortality in a reassuring narrative of meaning and closure. This is a dimension of Peter Brooks' theory of the cultural work of melodrama that has received relatively little attention, probably because it seems to lie outside the purview of literary and film scholarship. However, given the insistence with which melodrama stages elaborate death-scenes, and given how axiomatic the emotional experience of "too late" and irretrievable loss are to the genre, it makes sense to conceptualize melodrama as a cultural practice for thinking about and coping with death.

Death is also a site of major ideological work in American culture, especially combat death, which is so patently the result of political policy. In discussing the ideological tendency of the films I examined, however, I did not follow the terms of ideological analysis that emerged around melodrama in the 1970s and have remained influential. At that time, film scholars assumed that non-realistic forms of representation, such as melodrama were potentially progressive because they undercut the illusion of realism and transparency that was held to reinforce the ideology of the status quo. By displaying their artificiality, their "constructedness" as artifacts, and their fictionality, such films were considered to invite spectators to question rather than accept existing social reality. There are at least two important objections to this influential model of the relationship between ideology and aesthetics, especially as applied to melodrama. One is that realism is not



necessarily inherently conservative (one thinks, for example, of Ken Loach), nor are non-realistic films necessarily politically progressive in any meaningful sense of the word (David Lynch, for example, is both unrealistic and rather reactionary).

The other objection to this line of reasoning to understanding the ideological effects of melodrama is that it tends to assume that melodrama is always unrealistic and excessive, whereas melodrama is actually quite adept at evolving with current standards of realism. This is why I have preferred to examine each film individually in order to assess the specific values and political sympathies it solicits in viewers through a variety of strategies (including identification, point of view, screen time, narrative, and especially, emotional impact). In this way, the ideological register of each film can be assessed as the effect of a set of strategies, though the most telling moments are precisely the most “melodramatic” ones, i.e., the deaths of the soldier-victims.

Finally, thinking about the combat film as a form of melodrama helps to understand its appeal beyond the obvious spectacle of heroism and violence. We can begin to recognize the fact that part of its enduring popularity may lie in the way it offers men a strong emotional experience, during which feelings of loss are staged and tears are permitted without being feminizing (since the characters, situations and other viewers are mostly or entirely male). In an essay about the experience of weeping in the cinema (in this volume), Julian Hanich suggests that one of the pleasures of melodrama is the experience of embodiment in the context of a culture that tends to suppress and forget the “lived-body.” Thinking this issue through in gendered terms, it is worthwhile to consider that war melodrama is one of the very few cultural occasions which offer this kind of corporeal experience to men. There is no shame in weeping during *Platoon* because it is a male director’s film about men. Recognizing that it is also a melodrama can help us look beyond the sometimes misleading division of films into male and female genres and to understand the deeper cultural issues at stake.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rick Altman describes how melodrama came to be associated with women’s issues and films in “Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process.” In *Reconfiguring America Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. These earlier studies include Thomas Elsaesser’s “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama.” *Monogram* 4 (1975): 2-15 and Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and The Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. Later film-oriented works include: Christine Gledhill. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*. London: British Film Institute, 1987; Mary Ann Doane. *The Desire to*

*Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; and Marcia Landy. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. An important contribution to the clarification of melodrama's complex gender history is Ben Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Singer's meticulous historical research demonstrates that the earliest usage of the term "melodrama" in film was not to the "weepie" or family film, but what we would consider "action" genres.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Altman, "Reusable Packaging;" Janet Staiger. "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History." In *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: Texas University Press, 2003; Barry Langford. *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005; and John Frow. *Genre: The New Critical Idiom*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and The Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Williams. "Melodrama Revised." In *Reconfiguring America Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 42. Williams develops her argument across a wider range of literary and theatrical material in *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy N. Davidson. "Introduction." In Susanna Haswell Rowson. *Charlotte Temple*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, xi-xix.

<sup>6</sup> The novel contains several key elements that will become important in American melodrama: 1.) it implicitly challenges patriarchal law; 2.) it privileges maternal compassion over paternal discipline; 3.) it invites readers to sympathize with a socially compromised person, here a "fallen woman;" 4.) it privileges moral recognition over retribution (the seducer is punished only by a lifetime of melancholic contrition); and 5.) it redeems the victim-heroine's death from tragedy or meaninglessness by making it redemptive for others (notably, the seducer, and tacitly, the audience).

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 101-135.

<sup>8</sup> See film script of *Birth of a Nation* in Robert Lang (ed.). *The Birth of a Nation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> In a reply to the *New York Globe*, D.W. Griffith wrote that the film is "based upon truth in every detail," and that school principles have asked permission to bring their pupils to view the film "for its historic truths." See Lang, *Birth of a Nation*, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Earl Shain. *An Analysis of Motion Pictures about the War Released by the American Film Industry, 1939-1970*. New York: Arno, 1976, 31.

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas Schatz. "World War II and the 'War Film.'" In *Reconfiguring America Film Genres: Theory and History*. Nick Browne, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 91 and Jeanine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003 (1986).

<sup>13</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 57. Curiously, James Agee, in a July 1943 review of *Bataan* in *The Nation*, calls it a "war melodrama" to describe its power in spite of the lack of realism (qtd. in Schatz, "World War II And the 'War Film,'" 123).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Birth of a Nation*. Edited by Robert Lang. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 155.

<sup>18</sup> In the war film, the space of innocence is particularly important because the theme of the loss of innocence is a staple of war films in general and is related to the way the American war film needs to cast the soldier as victim (which I will discuss below). It is also central to another cultural function of the war film, which is to offer a spectacle of one of North American culture's very few widely respected rites of passage to masculinity. Thus, loss of innocence is a major theme of the combat film because it marks the soldier's attainment of some sort of shared standard of manhood. The fact that this rite of passage is more of a myth than a reality does not make it less compelling material for the war film. If anything, it makes it more compulsively reinterrogated and restaged the more questionable it seems. For example, many Vietnam films are informed by the insights of the women's movement as well as the hindsight of U.S. military failure and are therefore quite critical of the way the military markets itself as the maker of men. Thus, Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) is about the cruel irony of Ron Kovic's enlisting in Vietnam in order to prove his manhood after failing at sports at home and returning literally unmanned by paralysis from the war. Yet, most war films present military service and combat as an effective, if traumatic, means for boys to become men (if they survive). Thus, the poster of Stone's first Vietnam film, *Platoon*, engages with the theme of innocence in a typically conventional way by asserting that "the first casualty of war is innocence."

<sup>19</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver Stone's commentary on the film is available on the DVD released by MGM in 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 67.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Wills offers a fascinating analysis of Wayne's complex appeal as both alternative and "excuse" for the absent father in post-war culture in his biography *John Wayne's America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, 156-7.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 69.

<sup>25</sup> "Pathos" is one of the three classical modes of rhetorical appeal (along with ethos and logos) and describes the rhetorical strategy of appealing to an audience's emotions. Linda Williams gives this term a prominent role in her discussion of melodrama's effects (whereas Brooks uses it sparingly), and I follow her usage because I find it useful to keep in mind the original meaning of pathos as a form of persuasion. In the context of melodrama, "pathos" refers specifically to the emotions associated with suffering and loss.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in John R. Adams. *Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989, 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> For the influence of *Sands of Iwo Jima* on Marine recruitment, see Lawrence Suid's *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image on Film*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002, 123. For the impact of *The Green Berets*, see Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America*, 49-150.

<sup>28</sup> Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 50.

<sup>29</sup> Another ambiguous ethical dilemma posed by the film, concerning the German prisoner that the men want to kill and that the innocent young translator wants to protect, is resolved equally clearly but in a darker way. This German initially seems worthy of pity as he desperately quotes phrases from popular American culture in order to plead for his life, but he later fails to keep his promise to turn himself in to the Allies. Instead, he rejoins the German army and reappears in the film to kill two of the main characters, thus becoming clearly legible as “evil” for the audience and for the young translator (who then personally executes him in a scene that echoes Chris’ execution of Barnes in *Platoon*).

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 20.