

Fall 2011 En 190 Senior Seminar Tth 955-1140 am  
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223 St. Jos. Hall, 551-7088  
Hours: TTh 855-955am & by appt.

## **Melodrama: White Hat, Black Hat, from the French Revolution to Harry Potter**

Melodrama is the dominant art form of modern, industrialized democracies. In any given year since cinema was invented, most of the top-grossing films are melodramas, continuing themes and expectations established on the 19th-century stage, especially static characters identified with binary moral struggle (good vs evil, innocence vs corruption, dignity vs exploitation). Other characteristics of melodrama include set-piece spectacle (explosions and train wrecks), thrilling narrative (chase sequences), and heroes who are both victimized and misunderstood (Rambo, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Spiderman). The conclusion of melodrama usually involves both stopping the villain and clarifying the victim-hero's status—he was really right, or she was really virtuous, all along!

Melodrama significantly influences nearly all forms of contemporary 21st-century public discourse, including both journalism and political speech. Originating as an iconography of democratic revolution (black opera hats signifying the aristocratic enemy of revolutionists wearing white peasant caps), melodrama has been adapted to the propaganda of left, right, and middle. We'll look at classic examples of melodrama on stage and screen, consider the use and abuse of melodramatic rhetoric, and examine the way melodrama operates pervasively throughout contemporary global culture as an organizing mode of thought.

Requirements: One presentation and final project. The presentation: Present a non-literary cultural object (news story, sermon, textbook, documentary, trial transcript, etc etc), to the class, analyzing its melodramatic content and themes. Strictly limited to 15 minutes. The final project: includes project proposal, annotated bibliography and lit review, 15-page final paper or creative equivalent, such as producing a short film or graphic history making original use of melodramatic elements. Normally I will not approve screenwriting alone for the final project.

Texts to purchase specified below. All other texts will be provided, usually in pdf form.

1. Ken Knabb, Situationist International Anthology
2. Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, eds. *Wobblies!: A Graphic History*
3. Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*.
4. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle: The Uncensored Original Edition*.
5. Chris Bachelder, *US!*
6. Dan Gerould, *American Melodrama*

### **Schedule**

Tu Sept 20 Welcome & discussion: melodrama vs realism, naturalism, modernism, and sentiment

Th Sept 22 Bousquet, "Harry Potter, the 'War on Terror,' and Public Culture"

Tu Sept 27 Adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or Life Among the Lowly* (1855) by George Aiken (1858) and Walt Disney ("Mickey's Mellerdrummer," 1933)

Th Sept 29 Ben Singer, "Melodrama and the Consequences of Capitalism," Dion Boucicault, "The Poor of New York"

Tu Oct 04 Birth of a Nation (screening)

Th Oct 06 Linda Williams "Anti-Tom and Birth of a Nation" and Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, victims

and heroes : Melodrama, media, and September 11”

Tu Oct 11 Chris Bachelder, US!

Th Oct 13 Chris Bachelder, US!

Tu Oct 18 Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

Th Oct 20 Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (class cancelled, but reading assigned)

Tu Oct 25 Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

Th Oct 27 Sergei Eisenstein, *The Battleship Potemkin* (screening)

Tu Nov 1 *V for Vendetta*, film (discussion w/Eisenstein, screen yourself) (Presentation 1)

Th Nov 3 Situationist International (excerpts) (Presentation 2)

Tu Nov 8 Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, eds. *Wobblies!* (Presentation 3)

Th Nov 10 Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, eds. *Wobblies!* (Presentation 4)

Tu Nov 15 MacPhee and Reuland, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Presentation 5)

Th Nov 17 MacPhee and Reuland, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Presentation 6)

Thanksgiving Break

Tu November 29 discuss Sergio Leone, *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, 1966 and Frederic Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”

Th December 1 discuss Ridley Scott, *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

Class policies: discussed in first session.