

FIL 1001, SPRING 2003 TERM
Introduction to Understanding Film
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Melodrama
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Topics for this response paper:

- 1) Describe how two or more elements of mise-en-scene (movement of actors, set design, costume, lighting, camerawork, etc.) in the film reflect the conventions of melodrama;
- 2) Describe how those elements can be “read” emotionally, thematically, or iconographically by viewers of the era.

In my search for the elements of mise-en-scene used to reflect the conventions of melodrama, I began by watching the movie “Intolerance”, but I found out that the silent melodrama with the actor’s exaggerated movements and gestures didn’t seem to capture my interest without any sound. It’s quite amazing that most of the time, while watching a movie, I don’t even realize that the music is playing in the background, and even the actors’ voices seem unimportant when I’m captured by the narrative. Well, I might not be aware that the sound is there, but I sure was when it wasn’t there. Therefore, I’ll move on by discussing scenes from “Gone with the Wind,” which is one of my favorite movies.

In *Gone with the Wind*, one of the first Scarlett’s melodramatic gestures that I remember is when—right after Ashley doesn’t respond to her advances and leaves the room—she breaks a vase. Scarlett’s anger is obvious in the movement of her eyes, like a boat in a stormy sea, captured beautifully by the camera through a medium close-up shot. The camera suddenly

focuses on a vase, which Scarlet grabs and then throws it against a wall. The music tone increases with Scarlett's uncontrollable anger and then both culminate right before she breaks the vase. This unconventional gesture reveals Scarlett's impulsive character and strong personality. The sudden movements of the camera, which tries to follow Scarlett's reaction and gestures, also reflect the conventions of this theatrical melodrama. It also allows Rhett to witness Scarlett's emotional outburst and to better understand her character. From now on, Scarlett will always be the "rebel" love of his life, even if she is too blind to recognize a good thing.

Scarlett's reactions reflect the convention of theatrical melodrama because these visual expressions and gestures allow the viewers to understand Scarlett's feelings and unexpressed thoughts. Her theatrical gestures appear forced and exaggerated, and this is exactly what the director had intended, masterly accomplished through the manipulation of mise-en-scene: She only cries "crocodile tears," and the real victim in this case is Ashley, the perfect gentleman.

As we can see, in *Gone with the Wind*, theatrical melodrama dominates, and the elements that comprise the mise-en-scene can be "read" emotionally, because they address the human feelings of people forced to live during cruel times. We laugh, cry, and fall in love with drama queens, perfect gentlemen, and kind ladies; we go to war and live or die with every day heroes; or we simply forget that we're watching a movie, and we are being transported through time and space into a world that no longer exists.