INTRODUCTION: WHY MELODRAMA?

Of all the non-professional actors who appeared in post-war Italian cinema, one not usually considered as belonging to a neorealist impulse is Lidia Cirillo. Filmed sitting on a train at the beginning of Una donna ha ucciso [A Woman Has Killed] (Vittorio Cottafavi, 1952), she tells an apparently suicidal fellow female passenger her cautionary tale. This woman has killed, and the story is her own – that is, the story the film is based on is that of a real murder, carried out by Cirillo on her husband, an English soldier. In her study of women in post-war Italy, Garofalo noted that the public was in many ways approving in its reaction to the crime. In her defence Cirillo told the court: ‘I wanted to avenge, along with my honour, that of all the women of Italy’ (Garofalo 1956: 20). What connection does this comment reveal between the particular and the general? Is it revenge against an apparent liberator – a member of the Allied armies who had just freed the country from the Nazis, a redeemer of distressed damsels turned into a stranger within the home? Is this symbolic of Italian reconstruction, of the disappointment in life after the Liberation? In her claim to speak for ‘all the women of Italy’, does she testify to an explosive violence underlying the institution of marriage, or of the return of the repressed of war to the domestic sphere? Is it an overturning of gender relations, a sign of feminine hysteria, that prison is indistinguishable from an unhappy family? Or does it offer a moral tale of deplorable transgression, of the futility of the desire for fulfilment for women, or the language of resistance in the renewed conservatism prior to feminism? The film takes inspiration from a news event, one which seems itself inspired by a film. As a story, it is a point of intersection...
not only between the newspapers and courts, but with mainstream cinema and with the beginnings of what was to be called ‘women’s studies’, as its consideration by Garofalo attests; indicating the common interest in both film and in wider discourses in the conditions of life – be they ordinary, popular, everyday – in Italy.

This book concerns melodrama in post-war Italian cinema and, like the Cirillo case, it sees in its topic an opportunity to probe the stimulating connections between reality and imagination. The roots of Italian melodrama can be traced to traditions of public, visual and musical spectacle, an aesthetic flair, the perception of life as a vale of suffering and the importance for day-to-day interaction of performance and gesture, which give rise to a range of phenomena that further influence cinematic melodrama, from opera to the public display of mass politics and the rituals and sentiments of Vatican Catholicism. Melodrama can be seen as the Italian form par excellence, a fact of some historic despair: Bazin, a founder of Cahiers du Cinéma whose philosophy of film drew inspiration from Italian neorealism, lamented that Italians ‘admittedly […] like the Russians, are the most naturally theatrical of people’ (Bazin 2005: 55), being unable to exorcise ‘the demon of melodrama’ (ibid.: 31) (itself a more melodramatic than materialist description). Earlier again, Gramsci, a founder of the Italian Communist Party, identified the difficulty of spreading a mass critical analysis as a cultural habit when ‘the only literature [the popular classes] know are the libretti of nineteenth-century opera […] [and consequently] members of the popular classes behave “operatically”’ (Gramsci 1985: 204). This book aims, among other things, to offer some analysis that can distinguish between and re-entwine the melodramatic and the Italian.
And what then is melodrama? Melodrama delves into the private intimacy of emotion to offer a ‘spontaneous, uninhibited way of seeing things [. . .] It is drama in its elemental form; it is the quintessence of drama’ (Bentley 1965: 216). Melodrama deals in misery, a condition – always miserable, often immiserated – that found its glory days in post-war Italian cinema. As such, it gratifies a wider impulse described by David Hume in relation to tragedy, namely that audiences

are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, swoln with the tenderest sympathy and compassion [. . .] The view, or, at least, imagination of high passions, arising from great loss or gain, affects the spectator by sympathy, gives him [sic] some touches of the same passions, and serves him for a momentary entertainment. (Hume 1985: 217)

But melodrama is a specific realisation of misery whose elevation occurs within a distinct ordinariness. The realms of dramatic grandeur, of life-or-death passions, of a heavenly beyond or hellish depths, are suggested within the everyday (Brooks 1995); the protagonists are bounded by the limitations of their station (Goimard 1999), the drama thus suggesting fantasies of escape that the characters cannot achieve, redoubling pathos (Neale 1986). Scenarios of entrapment and disruption make personal emotions the source of shelter and isolation, while melodramatic style suggests, but cannot provide passage to, a higher realm. The world is then melodramatic, in that forceful emotion governs it, and emphasises the weakness of its carriers.

Melodrama studies in general makes only the most negligible of references to Italian examples.1 As a discipline, Italian studies is beginning to pay more attention to melodrama, in most extended form through the work of Maggie Günsberg (2005), who devotes a third of her book on gender in Italian cinema to post-war melodrama. English-language works concentrate in particular on the films of Matarazzo,2 or on films known from other contexts, on neorealist films3 or on auteurs (especially Visconti).4 Italian-language scholarship, on the other hand, widens the field of reference with various surveys: of selections taken from the scholarship that has accrued over the years in Appassionatamente (Caldiron and Della Casa 1999) and Forme del melodramma (Pezzotta 1992a), or of the films that make up melodrama, as seen in the two monographs currently available.

Morreale’s Così piangevano (2011) is the first full-length monograph in any language to offer an account of the range of melodramatic and romantic dramas of Italian cinema and popular culture in the 1950s. Morreale lays out the opening premises for the study of post-war melodrama well:
Never has there been so much crying in Italian cinema as in the fifties. And never have so many female protagonists been seen. The theatre stalls of our country were conquered by melodramas [. . .] a confluence of the inheritance of Neapolitan sceneggiata and the literary feuilleton, the neorealist background and the innovations of the fotoromanzo [. . .] Crying or fallen women, emigrant or veteran men, the figures in this cinema speak to the last public of a peasant Italy. And yet cinematic melodrama is the incubator for the styles and themes that will nourish modern cinema. (2011: 3)

More recent still is Cardone’s 2012 Il melodramma, a series of case studies of particular films from Assunta Spina (1915) to Respiro (Emanuele Crialese, 2002). Cardone links her chosen films with ideas such as the operatic, excess and music, the conflict of good and evil, passion. With regard to Matarazzo’s Catene/Chains (1949), her chosen film for the post-war period, she explains:

The melodramatic imagination was subject in this period to a very great diffusion, generating a kind of shadowy and sinful loveworld marked by passion and sacrifice, that invades the cinema and the popular press and involves millions of spectators. (2012: 89)

Interestingly in historical terms, after Matarazzo she then moves into the arthouse cinema of Zurlini, Bertolucci, the Tavianis, Antonioni, suggesting perhaps a historical change after the bright flame of popular melodramatics burns itself out by the mid-1950s.

This monograph seeks to offer a more sustained investigation into popular culture and aesthetics than a survey or case studies format allows. It seeks through extended film analysis to convey the artistry that marks melodrama. Although it is in the experience of the thing itself that its essence is to be found, such descriptions have been necessary for the purposes of analytical incision, and in the circumstance of intellectual inquiry, as they say, a tooth is more to be prized than a diamond.

In the first section of this book I consider the five-year heyday of domestic melodrama from 1949 to 1954, the enormous success of which confirmed the re-establishment of the post-war film industry. This is the period both of mamismo, the much satirised mummy’s boy, an ‘image of dependency’ emerging after the destruction wrought by war (Patriarca 2010: 220), and of its reverse side, of a flourishing Marian cult found in sightings, acts of devotion, and in the mothers – suffering, martyred and sacrificed – of the domestic melodrama. I ask what kinds of experiences these pessimistic tales make available and what values make them meaningful, discussing how ‘meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between compet-
ing frames of reference, motivation and experience’ (Gledhill 2006: 114). Their prevailing sense that life is unfair allows a poignant complex of acceptance and protest (Moretti 2005: 180), while as fictions they provide a conventionalisation of the expression of suffering that helps define an emphatic uncertainty.

The shared interest in the authenticity and elemental emotions of a situation, of presenting them with vividness and working through an ethical attitude to them, makes the similar historical time frames of post-war melodrama and neorealism more than coincidental. This has meaning for Italian film history, and not only for the reconsideration required if one accepts Pedro Almodóvar’s assertion that ‘when melodrama focuses on unemployment, they call it neo-realism’ (cited in Fofi 2007: 188). It also aids an understanding of melodrama as an artistic realisation of questions of crisis, faith and representation, one which emerges in post-war cinema in a lively relationship with both realism and modernism.

The dividing line between high and popular art is set by a process of critical negotiation, a negotiation that in the post-war period in Italy broke out in extended and angry argument. The second section of this book thus widens the analysis to an application of melodrama to questions of realist and arthouse cinema, seeking to account for its place within the post-war rearticulation of the relationship between cinema, art, representation and reality. It considers these factors also for their appearance in neorealismo popolare, crime and romance melodramas with neorealist innovations. Evidence of how dissatisfaction and hope, defeat and impotence, romance and passion, are ambivalent socially, just as they are stimulating artistically, is realised in neorealismo popolare less through the shelter of the family home and individualised romance than of collectivity and public solidarity.

In the post-war years, cinema occupied a central place in popular life, years in which the reach of cinema is achieved across the breadth of Italian society. In its contemplation of the experience of crisis and uncertainty within the personal sphere, the melodramatic urge of the post-war era seems to dramatise Garofalo’s opinion that war ‘is also reflected in human relationships and in love, and as well as bridges and houses, the myth of masculine infallibility had collapsed’ (1956: 4). As well as considering how doubt and pain are inscribed into changing versions of manliness and womanhood, the study considers post-war Italy as ‘a foundry of tales’ (Bravo 2003: 67), a comment reminiscent of novelist Italo Calvino’s recollection that after the events of war, resistance and occupation, Italians found themselves ‘bursting with stories to tell’ (Calvino 2000:8).

This is realised in a common impulse both for realist description and the pleasure of retelling itself. In the third section of this book I consider the relationship of cinematic melodrama to other forms. Melodrama builds upon the potential of cinema to incorporate a broad heritage – of opera, literature,
theatre, song, popular presses, iconography – that also determines its fundamental character, thereby not only relaying these other entertainments but becoming itself operatic, theatrical, musical, iconographic. Popular culture, differently from folklore, is marked by such contamination of forms, but in melodrama this hybridity creates a particular kind of longing. When at the beginning of Appassionatamente (Giacomo Gentilomo, 1954) Andrea first gazes at the portrait of his future wife Elena, a piece of music begins to play, a leitmotif for his desire. The music is taken from a 1920s waltz (Dyer 2010: 86) itself called ‘Appassionatamente’ and connects music to romantic emotion, but also brings attention to nostalgia, to recognition, and reminds the spectator of the world outside of the film at the same time as it underlines the feelings that it aims to convey.

A distinctive trait of Italian melodrama, and of its mass culture, is the importance of opera. The development from opera into cinema in Italy occurred because:

‘As entertainment, social phenomenon, and – we can even say – public service, cinema fulfills a function analogous to that carried out by opera during the nineteenth century, particularly in Italy’ [Brunetta 2003, citing Giacomo Debenedetti [1935]: 151]

This can be seen in cineopera, films in which opera is included within cinematic narratives, often rendering a melodramatic relationship between the opera stage and the lives of those who perform on them.

An operatic attitude is in cineopera applied to romance, to national identity, and to the melodramatic artwork itself, and the relationship it posits between opera and prose life. As well as this, an operatic aesthetic is developed in Italian cinema more generally. Operatic theatricality can be seen in character behaviour, with climax marked principally by bodily and vocal expressivity and by tableaux and stasis. The operatic can also be seen in dramatic situations in which moments of highest drama are marked by confrontations and the expansion of emotion beyond the physical restrictions which proliferate at points of climax.

I argue that this operatic aesthetic is discernible across Italian cinema, contrasting manifestations of which can be found in the films of Raffaello Matarazzo and Luchino Visconti. They are the two directors responsible for some of the most commercially successful films of the genre, and their dominance only increases when it comes to scholarship on Italian melodrama. For these reasons I have left them to a final comparison at the book’s end, evaluating them as points of summation of many of the main themes informing the rest of the book. Although Visconti is the high art and Matarazzo the main
popular point of reference for Italian melodrama, they are united by common but unique interests in romance, the popular, neorealism, resulting (if in very differing ways) in cinematic formalisations of popular culture itself, from *foto-romanzi* to religious icons.

This book argues for the centrality of melodrama to post-war Italian cinema and culture. It seeks to add to knowledge of the form within the Italian context and to develop conceptualisations of melodrama more generally. It positions melodrama within popular culture, and elaborates its reference to the problems of everyday life and the search for an elemental vividness. During its writing, I have had in my mind Visconti’s (1958) profession to love melodrama because it is located at the borders of life and theatre [. . .] Theatre and opera, the world of the baroque: these are the motives which tie me to melodrama [. . .] In the mythologies of our time the diva is the incarnation of the rare, the extravagant and the exceptional. (cited in Bacon 1998: 62)

It alludes on the one hand to Italian melodrama in its reference both to reality and to the opera stage. Yet it also describes a border, a point of confinement, suggesting the tensions that I describe as central to melodrama. Melodrama does not exist beyond any of the confines that it sets up within itself; it is the border itself, the line at which excess pulls with restriction, formal expressivity with representation, and art with reality.

**Notes**

5. Dramatic plays or films devised from Neapolitan songs (discussed in Chapter 3).
6. Popular publications made up of dramatic and romantic photostories.