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Introduction

Not one of the books that later made Nikolai Nikolaevich famous was yet written. . . . He passionately sought an idea, inspired, graspable, which in its movement would clearly point the way toward change, an idea like a flash of lightning or a roll of thunder capable of speaking even to a child or an illiterate. He thirsted for something new.

—Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*¹

Sirk has said: you can't make films *about* things, you can only make films *with* things, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, in fact with all the fantastic things that make life worth living.—Rainer Werner Fassbinder²

Enter the world of Russian filmmaker Evgeny Bauer and you enter a world of *things*. Each of his popular turn-of-the-century melodramas is crammed with objects: clocks, telephones, gadgets, and statuettes clutter his desks; rooms overflow with sofas, chairs, and tables; long, deep-focus shots create corridors of fashionably dressed, swirling figures who occupy spaces that seem to stretch infinitely toward an interior horizon; and planes of empty space are broken up by so many artificially placed architectural columns that contemporary critics ridiculed him for it. Bauer's cult of the object, his romance with things, signified more than a Victorian cliché of accomplishment and acquisition. It was an antidote to the Russians' nineteenth-century cult of the *idea*, a string of



The protagonist's study crammed with objects in Evgeny Bauer's *Child of the Big City* (A. Khanzhonkov and Col., 1914).

garlic worn to ward off the diabolical Red Domino stalking the pages of Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg*.

As the incarnation of the sacred *idea*, the alluring Red Domino makes a remarkably effective trope in modern Russian history, where the intelligentsia mounted the most articulate opposition to the autocracy and designated themselves a political elite.³ In a country where intellectual exchange had to substitute for political action under an autocracy stubbornly opposed to popular expression and participation, Belyi's symbolism in *Petersburg* accentuates the dominant role that culture played in Russian politics, while warning of the danger implied in Pasternak's personification of the intelligentsia's faith in ideas. During the course of the nineteenth century, artists and intellectuals across the political spectrum refined their uses of the *idea*, the singular weapon they possessed in their struggle against autocracy and backwardness. By century's end, they had endowed thought itself with the power to resolve Russia's perennially "accursed questions," to integrate its warring classes into one harmonious society, to change the world, and ultimately to transform humankind.

In essence, the prerevolutionary intelligentsia believed that culture, as they understood it, could resolve social inequities by constructing a single shared national identity. Not surprisingly, the intelligentsia also believed that by virtue of their part in possessing and creating ideas, they

merited the leading role in society. Faith in the *idea* was not restricted to one or another political party but was shared by people as diverse as the ultraconservative Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the historian and liberal spokesman Paul Miliukov, and Bolshevik leaders Vladimir Lenin and Lev Trotsky. Historians and literary scholars, by and large, have accepted the intelligentsia's aspiration to power as the driving force in the narrative of the imperial period, and they have constructed the era as a teleology, leading fatalistically toward revolution as the only event capable of realizing the *idea*. In the end, their aims turned out to be as furtive as the Red Domino.⁴

Among the cultural elite, Belyi and his percipient Symbolist colleague, poet Alexander Blok, although they were great proponents of the transcendent powers of abstractions and ideas, understood the seductive power of material desire and earthy entertainment. Belyi and Blok acknowledged the temptations of the marketplace and recognized that the existence of those whose desire for *things* would challenge the utopianism rooted in the cult of ideas. Belyi and Blok watched the crowds that surrounded the Red Domino on the boulevards of St. Petersburg: the growing population of peasants, workers, and bourgeoisie whose own cultural traditions and thirst for innovation had equally deep roots in Russian cultural life, and whose consumption of commercial culture was already transforming public discourses, political as well as cultural. And these crowds did not disappear in 1917, or for that matter in 1991. Commercial culture in general and melodrama in particular remain a central, if underappreciated, force in Russian society. As an alternative to the old intelligentsia's valorization of reason, propriety, and public and political commitment, melodrama offered its audiences a world of feeling, sensation, and private moral dilemmas. But for all its emphasis on the interior landscape, melodrama was by no means detached from the real world of transformation and conflict. In every age, setting, and medium, melodrama explored the social issues that preoccupied its audiences and offered models of behavior for changing times. Both before and after 1917, as shifting lines between private and public were being drawn and the public invasion of the private was being justified on new ideological, economic, and political grounds, melodrama helped people negotiate new boundaries in social life.

The Russian cult of the *idea* and a privileging of political thought and revolutionary ideology have obscured the genuine diversity of Rus-

sian cultural production and consumption. Just as the boundaries separating classes had become more porous by the end of the nineteenth century and social identity had become more complex, artists of the period intentionally mixed genres that had previously been associated with specific classes. Painters, architects, and musicians, for example, incorporated folklore and commercial motifs into their work. At the same time, commercial artists often larded their entertainment with social and political commentary, a device monopolized previously by belles lettres.⁵ In social terms, the consumers of culture were themselves becoming highly heterogeneous.⁶ The survival of this culture into the soviet period, when political circumstances should have written its death sentence, testifies to its power and underscores the historical significance of commercial alternatives to the utopian cult of the *idea*. The popularity of commercial culture in the nineteenth century indicates at least one overlooked historical path that Russia might have taken.

The collection of essays in this volume examine one of those alternatives by looking at Russian and soviet melodrama, a genre perennially popular with consumers of commercial entertainment but long held in contempt by those distrustful of popular tastes. The essays presented here address the questions raised by the seeming paradox of a bourgeois cultural form in an ostensibly hostile environment. The marginalization of commercial culture, both before and after the revolution, the idealization of abstract thought over materialism and consumption, and the widespread suspicion of bourgeois, western individualism, would suggest at the very least a peculiar reception for melodrama in Russia. On the other hand, the characteristics of excess, sensation, spectacle, and affect, so closely associated with melodrama, are also deeply ingrained in Russian cultural history, suggesting conversely fertile ground for the reception of melodrama there. The essays in this volume explore the uses of melodrama by Russian writers, artists, filmmakers, and playwrights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to ask, in part, whether there was a uniquely Russian melodrama.

The modern history of melodrama in Russia stretches back to the genre's earliest days following the French Revolution. From its origins in France in the 1790s as a specific form of staged drama, melodrama has been adapted to every artistic genre and has entered everyday life as a distinct mode of behavior. Despite its resulting diversity of forms and uses, common formulaic properties continue to give it recogniz-

able integrity. As Peter Brooks argued in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, the classical study of the 1970s that rescued the genre from two centuries of intellectual condescension, melodrama is best understood as “a mode of conception and expression, [and] as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience.”⁷ The particular features of this “fictional system” consist of an aesthetic of excess and a Manichaean narrative structure, which pits good against evil in what seems today to be almost satirical extremes. Brooks understood that “melodrama has the distinct value of being about recognition and clarification,” a capacity that allowed it critical perspective on the issues of its age, from national politics to gender, class, and consumption.⁸ Simply stated, melodrama exaggerates the circumstances of time and place in which it is produced, and as a result it offers a uniquely accessible mode of analysis for audiences to perceive the interaction among politics, art, and everyday life. Because melodrama is self-consciously about its own present, it offers scholars a new perspective on the dominant ideologies—political, cultural, social—in which each story is set. But because the cultural elites routinely denigrated melodrama, its doubtful status made it a guilty pleasure for those who indulged in its production and consumption. In order to place Russian melodrama in a historical and international context, it is important to review the history of melodrama alongside its contemporaneous critique. Both contexts were extensively shaped by the cultural politics of their times, and shaped in turn the evolution of melodrama and of its reception.

The genre’s association with the disreputable crowd dates from its reception in France following the revolutionary upheavals that began in 1789; its perseverance derived from its continued ability to make the contemporary world, especially in times of transformation, comprehensible to audiences who lacked the ability to articulate many of the ambiguities and contradictions that social change brought into their lives. Although philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the term *melodrame* to underline the musical element he added to his theatrical dramas, it was his fellow countryman René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, from a significantly different intellectual background, who produced the first corpus of plays to be recognized as representative of this new theatrical genre.

A writer with little taste for revolution but with great sensitivity to the profound changes he observed in the 1790s, Pixérécourt referred to his

works as “spectacular prose dramas” written “for those who do not know how to read.”⁹ Because the official censorship forbade spoken dialogue on the nonofficial stage, Pixérécourt pioneered a new type of production that drew on traditional popular culture and the drama unfolding in the streets of France.¹⁰ He introduced special sight and sound effects to engage his audiences on a fundamental sensory level, which complemented the intense emotionalism of the situations that entangled his characters. This primal sensationalism led to the accusations of escapism that have always tarnished melodrama’s successes, by those who would reduce it to its simplest elements. From the French stage the genre spread briskly across Europe and to the United States, and it spread into new media as well, especially with the advent of cinema at the end of the century.¹¹

Melodrama raced into new territory in the wake of dissemination of ideas of the Enlightenment. One of the underlying tensions that had prompted revolution in France produced what would become a central motif in melodrama: the conflict between identities in the private and public spheres. The *private* individual, conceived during the Enlightenment as an autonomous agent, struggled to find appropriate *public* identities in the emergent spheres created by new social, political, and economic institutions. The narratives of melodrama aimed to resolve these conflicts through emotion and happenstance rather than logic. Providence and coincidence replaced reason and social institutions as the narrative motor in these stories, which were served up in an aesthetic of excess: inflated emotion, stylized sets and acting, and wildly unbelievable plots. In political terms, however, excess did not generate subversion. However wild the plot, the existing order was restored at the end. This apparent stability gained western melodrama a reputation as a fundamentally conservative genre. Melodrama resolved conflicts by reaffirming rather than challenging contemporary hierarchies and was presumed, therefore, to leave its audiences satisfied with the status quo.¹²

Assumptions about the composition of the audience further supported a conservative reading of melodrama. Contemporary critics and retrospective scholars believed that its fans came from the political periphery: women and workers who had not yet developed a secure political identity derived from either gender or class. Presumptions about the political naïveté of the audience impelled these critics to im-

plicate melodrama in a cultural debate that had explicitly political ramifications about the relationship between high culture and low, and the relative social value accorded to each. For social critics, the image of the disenfranchised spending their meager earnings and their few leisure hours reincorporating themselves vicariously into the system that denied them access to power suggested an ignorance that bordered on complicity. The aesthetics of emotion, sensation, and excess appeared to render melodrama an irrational, escapist entertainment, prompting critics to charge the genre with undermining the rational justifications for an enlightened legal and political order.

Melodrama's reliance on coincidence to move the action toward climax also encouraged charges of political conservatism. Stories structured by forces over which the protagonists exercised no control, it was thought, could not encourage audiences to take charge of their own lives. Enlightened intellectuals' faith in agency in the early nineteenth century, central to both representative and revolutionary politics, was drowned out by the sensationalist spectacle on the stage.

Small wonder that early opponents of melodrama despaired of a genre that appeared to bolster dominant power structures and the complacency of the subordinate multitudes.¹³ In large measure, however, the political complexion of the audience was read backward from critics' stereotypes about popular tastes. Melodrama's subtle but pointed challenge to gender and class hierarchies and its engagement with public issues of morality and power eluded early critics. Indeed, over the decades changing conditions had transformed the composition of melodrama's public as well—ticket prices, literacy skills, and the media themselves all complicated the audiences for melodrama. Nor, for that matter, were the plots as predictably uniform as critics charged. Despite formulaic aesthetics and excesses, melodrama's makers often used the genre's formulas in innovative ways to explore social identities and social change.

Early critics misunderstood melodrama because they saw it as a de-based form of the theatrical genres that they knew: tragedy and realism. However, as Peter Brooks has persuasively argued, melodrama originated as a response to the limited capacities of these two forms to address the conflicts ordinary individuals faced in post-Enlightenment society, where moral certitude, shaken by industrial and cultural revolution, was defending itself against the heavy artillery of secularization.

Brooks pointed out that the distinction between melodrama and the familiar forms of tragedy and realism was paramount at first, when melodrama offered audiences a fundamentally modern theatrical mode for experiencing the changes connected with industrial and political revolution. Unlike tragedy, which for dramatic tension relied on forces that individuals could not control and, therefore, ended in inescapable ruin, melodrama mired its characters in adverse situations, but provided resolutions that restored order to their worlds. Brooks noted that in contrast to realism, and despite melodrama's grounding in the secular and familiar, the genre fostered self-indulgent emotional expressionism over rational discourse. Generations before modernism received credit for shattering the surfaces of realism, Pixérécourt's innovations in sensory experiences soon led artists to use an *aesthetic* of emotional excess to explore the *content* of emotions lying repressed beneath the surface rationality of realism. Melodrama, popular with those unable to articulate their own needs clearly, came to depend on nonverbal means to convey what words were inadequate to communicate. Hence the performance techniques of a heightened style of acting, with its exaggerated gestures and mannered characterizations, became synonymous with the genre.

In creating a new mode for perceiving modernity, melodrama borrowed heavily from Romanticism, the initial reaction against the Enlightenment. Appealing to the visceral rather than the cerebral, melodrama drew from romantic obsessions with feelings and the occult, and from gothic novels with their dark secrets and mistaken identities. Elucidating what Brooks termed "the 'moral occult,' — the domain of operative spiritual values, which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality," — melodrama helped its audiences sort out the ethics of a secular world.¹⁴ The characters' inability to express themselves in words remains central, as they negotiate their conflicts through repression and sublimation. Because their private anxieties are rooted in public policies, the melodramatic expression of their anguish reflects something about the larger edifices that structure their lives. As Brooks noted, melodrama anticipated the two philosophical strains that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century to address the effects of both social structure and the unconscious: first Marxism and then Freudianism.¹⁵ Like psychoanalysis, melodrama became increasingly preoccupied with the return of the repressed; significantly, it did so in forms that linked it directly with social and political life.

One of melodrama's essential properties lies in its engagement with contemporaneous social issues.¹⁶ In Patrice Petro's words, the genre offers "a heightened and expressive representation of the implications of everyday life."¹⁷ Originally, the limited scope of such presentism contributed to its cultural marginalization because, as critics argued, melodrama located social stress within specific sets of circumstances instead of advancing universal truths about the human condition. What was intended as a reproach, however, reflected characteristics of melodrama's audience and its cultural function, which historical perspective casts in a more positive light. Melodrama proved to be a medium for cultivating cultural self-awareness and self-expression for the social groups emerging from the upheavals associated with the industrial revolution.¹⁸ As Thomas Elsaesser noted, the genre was integral to the development of bourgeois identity because it provided these new classes with a "particular and socially conditioned *mode of experience*."¹⁹

This presentism, however, also constitutes an obstacle to analyzing melodrama; the typical plot's reliance on specific moral contexts has not served individual texts well. Individual melodramas aged quickly when situations that appeared life-altering to one generation came to seem ridiculous to the next, after past conflicts had been resolved or became irrelevant. In the late twentieth century, historical melodrama becomes most readily accessible through the camp sensibility that has reconstituted one era's moral occult in terms of its own.²⁰ Paradoxically, however, presentism has proven to be melodrama's most enduring advantage for cultural and social historians by providing documentary evidence of the social traumas of the past. As the wrenching changes of the French and industrial revolutions gave way to technological and political revolutions in the twentieth century, melodrama continued to offer emotionally cathartic probing beneath the surfaces of new ideologies, and it provided dramas of identity formation to audiences eager to consume them. In so doing, these aesthetically remote texts bring the burning social and cultural issues of the past within the reach of scholars in the present.

By the end of the nineteenth century, melodrama had left behind its origins on the bourgeois stage to enter many other forms of popular culture, especially literature. Literary melodrama borrowed from both the supernatural of the gothic novel and the "glistening tear" inspired by sentimental fiction. It also increased the audience base for the genre,

attracting more educated women and creating a unique space for them, a psychological “room of their own.”²¹ On the stage, the music of the “melo” lost its importance once the censorship relaxed controls over spoken dialogue, but the use of theatrical spectacle to intensify the action remained. Music would return as an integral element at the very end of the century with the emergence of the silent cinema, a medium particularly well suited to melodrama because of its own capacity to dramatize emotion and its immediate popularity among women and the urban poor. As the movie industry advanced technologically in developing sound and color, film melodrama remained popular by utilizing its uniquely sensational visual elements to amplify the emotional impact of its images. By the end of the nineteenth century, melodrama had already proven its durability as a prism of contemporary culture by adapting both form and content to suit changing times.²²

From the very beginning, melodrama’s orchestrated appeal to the broadest public guaranteed rejection by intellectuals. In the 1960s, though, when academics began to revise their understanding of popular culture and recognize the powerful role it could play in mediating political and social conflict, melodrama won recognition as an important source of cultural commentary. Douglas Sirk, a refugee Weimar intellectual who found his way to Hollywood and directed the most extravagant of the 1950s movie melodramas, played the determining role in the elevation of melodrama to a critically acceptable art form. One of technicolor’s first masters, and one of the first to bring Berthold Brecht’s influence to film, Sirk consciously turned some of Hollywood’s biggest stars into Freudian simulacra for the angst of repressed sexuality and irrational passions underlying the surface complacency of the 1950s. Sirk’s cinematic portrayals of glamorous middle-class women trapped in the false security of the domestic economy demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to serve both the priests and the rabble. He became the darling of both crowds and critics with films that offered moralistic examinations of postwar conformity through characters who inevitably violated the norms of middle-class morality in lurid, melodramatic excess.²³

Sirk’s movies about women frustrated with bourgeois life made natural texts for the nascent field of feminist studies in the 1970s, when feminism joined forces with film criticism to redress the inferior status of melodrama.²⁴ Together they reimagined the female viewer, formerly construed as passive and marginal, by endowing her with critical agency.

The opulent sets characteristic of melodramatic *mise-en-scène* were no longer disdained for cultivating bourgeois values but rather were appreciated for their use of contrast and extravagance to expose social inequalities and tensions among genders, classes, and cultures.²⁵ The new scholarship acknowledged the complexity of the audience, and it replaced assumptions about melodrama's Manichaean morality with a sophisticated appreciation for its capacity to render dichotomies ambiguous. In a key revisionist point, Laura Mulvey recognized the ambiguity in melodrama's conventional restoration of the status quo. In most melodrama, the same problems that had generated conflict in the opening scene still simmered below the surface calm as the curtain fell or the last page was turned.²⁶ Once it was understood that melodramas could problematize hierarchies as much as they reinforced them, the genre could offer a significant new category of cultural analysis.²⁷

This critical reappraisal, initiated by Sirk's reinvention of an ambiguous melodrama and the feminist discovery of its capacity for a submerged challenge to underlying cultural, sexual, and class conflicts, has expanded possibilities for revealing readings of melodramas in other times and contexts.²⁸ In Russia, audiences for melodrama experienced the industrial revolution under significantly different social and political circumstances from those that spawned the genre in the West. Yet melodrama was as popular in Russia as in the West, from its inception at the turn of the nineteenth century through the collapse of communism. Was there, then, a uniquely Russian melodrama? Yes and no. Sharp differences are readily apparent between Russian and western melodramatic texts, but their cultural functions are remarkably similar. In short, what made Russian melodrama unique was Russia, not melodrama. Throughout this volume, individual authors show repeatedly that melodrama as a genre followed the same historical trajectory as its counterparts in western Europe and the United States. Peter Brooks's conceptualization of the genre's prescriptive functions applies to Russian melodramas of every type and period. Literary authors, playwrights, and filmmakers used melodrama to address issues of social identity in times of transition, to explore the shifting boundaries between public and private, and to both challenge and reaffirm existing hierarchies, but they did so to explore specifically Russian or soviet versions of those issues.

As the studies in this collection will show, melodrama in Russia was

a malleable form, as useful for the radical intelligentsia as it was for the middlebrow. Melodrama offered a counternarrative to challenge the intelligentsia's view of itself as the country's sole conscience and primary cultural authority. The private pleasures and passions on the domestic palette of commercial melodrama encompassed a social world as large and varied as any represented in the radical cultural narrative, or even in the works of renowned novelists. By dramatizing class tensions, urban-rural transformations, marriage politics, struggles over national memory, the nature of heroism, and the conflict between the worship of ideas and the accumulation of things, melodrama had the capacity to explore the most important cultural conflicts at the heart of the construction of both national and individual identity.

In Russia, melodrama was useful even for some of its harshest critics among the intelligentsia. The Freudian notion of the repression of sexuality found a Russian political analog in the repression of the Russian people. Even more significant, radical narratives, both political and literary, plotted revolution in melodramatic terms: good battled evil; ravished innocence and virtue were restored by moral action; and radical male heroes defended the honor of the (female) motherland. From the intelligentsia's point of view, Russian society before the revolution was a Manichaean world where an evil government defiled an innocent people and where educated heroes—and heroines—intervened on their behalf. Despite the communalism of nineteenth-century socialist theory, the intelligentsia's view of itself as the “conscience” of the nation revealed at least one strain in radical thought to be an individual affair, preoccupied with choices about individual values—honor, sacrifice, commitment, morality.

During the revolutionary era and into the postrevolutionary reconstruction, when Bolsheviks adopted melodrama's moral purity for the deceptively simplistic political narratives of socialist realism, the genre was less useful for exploring transformations and revealing the repressed than for establishing new categories of good and evil and opening up the private to the purgative glare of public, politically charged morality. The rich tapestry of prerevolutionary urban cultural life was badly burned by the Bolshevik revolution, but it was never entirely destroyed. The Bolsheviks' efforts to tame private passions and expose the hidden arenas of private life deprived the revolutionary-reconstruction melodrama of its century-long fascination with everyday complexities, thereby forcing

artists, filmmakers, and writers to seek new ways of stretching the limits and plumbing the depths of the permissible. As tensions increased between official discourse and everyday experience—between the public and private, the collective and individual, and the idea and the thing—artists found abundant material for melodramatic treatment.

In socialist realist works of the 1930s and 1940s—in the boy/girl/tractor/machine-gun melodramas—domestic passions were never far from the surface. After Stalin's death, the recovery of private life offered melodrama a new role as a self-reflexive, at times ironic, genre for exploring the legacy of revolutionary culture (well before the collapse in 1991, it should be noted). The revival of private life as a legitimate subject for the arts raised questions about the impact of public values on domestic ones. By exploring basic human relations, post-Stalinist melodrama offered insights into the survival of the individual after the assault of the collective. Despite their differences, the long history of affinities between melodramatic and revolutionary modes of thought, despite their differences, made melodrama an especially apt tool for exploring the individual *within* the collective, the private morality *underneath* the strictures on public performances, the tensions resulting from political manipulations of both public and private morality. Issues that lay at the heart of melodrama's staging of the conflict between public and private life were also central to Russian political culture throughout the modern era, when social responsibility turned into coerced conformity and demands for a right to privacy became an excuse for greed and hedonism.

Rightfully identified as a chorus from below, melodrama offers escape not from political reality but from a social and moral certainty imposed from above. The essays in this volume examine the uses of melodrama within Russian political culture to rethink several features of Russian and soviet historiography. They bring the middle classes back to a status long denied them, for example, because melodrama examines attitudes toward the status quo without assuming a direct connection between the bourgeoisie and electoral politics. Gender roles, a central preoccupation of melodrama, are examined for their ability to focus moral dilemmas and reveal hidden strengths as well as hidden weaknesses of identity. Both the power and the limitations of the pervasive soviet state become apparent in its blatant manipulation of the genre, and a subtext of resistance allows melodrama to provide its fans with

one means to circumvent the predations of that state. As an authentic reflection of popular sentiments, melodrama contains all the ambiguities, contradictions, and ironies implicit in such a mediative cultural idiom. Furthermore, the Russian example suggests possibilities for a deeper and broader understanding of melodrama as a genre across cultures. The study of Russian and soviet melodramas shows, for example, that the presumed audience for propaganda enjoyed an alternative source for simplified social and political discourse. Moreover, these studies provide evidence that the political elite considered the genre useful for state purposes as well.

In the first essay in this volume, Richard Stites identifies the Russian audience for early melodrama as socially diverse. In so doing, he expands Pierre Bourdieu's argument that culture provides a form of capital, by suggesting that cultural taste can also supply a marker of social identity distinctly different from that prescribed by class. Contrary to common assumptions about melodrama's middle-to-lower-class audience, Stites finds a significant element of the audience for melodrama in the more elevated populace at the Winter Palace, and he reveals an international constituency for plays performed in radically different political climates, from New York to St. Petersburg. The specific plays he discusses star one of melodrama's most celebrated characters, the vulnerable female whose return to patriarchy is ensured, but only after sufficient tears have been shed. Because these early plays established patriarchy as the site where social conflict could be reconciled, Russia's autocracy shows an often overlooked cultural affinity with bourgeois capitalism. Furthermore, Stites's concluding discussion of Alexander Herzen's revolutionary adaptation of one of the era's most popular melodramas demonstrates both the underlying affinities between revolutionary and melodramatic modes of constructing social reality and melodrama's inherent challenge to convention, which Sirk brought to the surface a century later.

The different cultural uses to which Russian and western writers put melodrama are explored by Julie Buckler, who looks at how "Russia" became at once a location and a character in several important western melodramas. Such writers as Victorien Sardou and Oscar Wilde utilized melodrama's Manichaean dualism to emphasize the political differences between Eastern and Western Europe, identifying eastern autocracy as the villain that made western liberalism look "good." From the western

viewpoint, the “evil” Other portrayed by Russia had two equally odious sides: autocratic oppression and revolutionary socialism. Western melodramatists resorted to a familiar trope, the power of female love, to redeem unsavory politics. The melodramatic “Russia” that appeared on western stages, however, enacted western rather than Russian anxieties. True love could redeem the western heroic versions of Russians, but tsarist audiences who lived in genuinely oppressive circumstances were less impressed by love’s redemptive potential.

Wilde and Sardou drew their Russian heroines straight from contemporary stereotypes of revolutionaries. Placing their women in a melodramatic conflict within a western, liberal context, those women had little choice but to take their own lives in order to demonstrate the primacy of true love over political action. At first glance this might evoke favorable comparison with the heroines created by Russian authors. But, as Beth Holmgren shows in her portentously subtitled essay, “Why She Died,” there were stark differences between western and Russian women’s motivations for suicide. These, together with differences between the meanings death imparted to conflict resolution, demonstrate the conflicting cultural uses of the generic conventions, just as Herzen had suggested earlier. The western heroines committed suicide in order to dramatize their marginalization in society. The women created by the authors in Holmgren’s study—one Polish and the other Russian, both female—make political statements with their deaths, but the stakes are reversed. The West’s idealized Russians, as described by Buckler, reaffirm patriarchy and the capitalist status quo; on the other hand, the authentic Slavs die questioning capitalism, not autocracy.

The suicidal Russian heroine in Holmgren’s essay, Mania Eltsova of *The Keys to Happiness*, found her fate recast by the prolific moralist Count Amori, the pen name used by “boulevard” author Ippolit Rapgof, who rewrote some of the most sensational novels of the fin de siècle. As Otto Boele points out in his essay, the way in which melodrama sets up the conflict between good and evil made it an appropriate medium for identifying some of the tensions that beset society as the old regime tottered toward its collapse. Amori included Mania in a cast of decadent fictional characters, but he erased the suggestive ambiguities that her creator, Anastasia Verbitskaia, had raised about her self-indulgent, self-fulfilling lifestyle. More to the point, by calling on readers to accept his own unequivocal righteousness, he was emulating the moral certi-

tude of the old intelligentsia and trying, unsuccessfully, to subvert the very power of the genre he employed.

Amori tried to redraw the moral world in black and white, an agenda he did not carry over into the scripts he wrote for the emergent black-and-white world of early cinema. Movies and melodrama were made for each other. From the acting styles that played on emotional rather than verbal expression to its ability to hide hollow morality beneath glamorous or virtuous surfaces to their socially heterogenous audiences, cinema was able to refract as well as reflect cultural mores. More than in any other mass medium, the vision of Russia that flickered across its silver screens showed a country that had lost its moral compass as a direct result of the disarray in the national domestic economy. The weakening of tsarist authority was represented metaphorically in Russian melodrama as a troubled and problematic head of the household. As Louise McReynolds argues in "Home Was Never Where the Heart Was," her essay on the enormously popular silent cinema, the familiar melodramatic trope of domesticity appeared repeatedly in Russia as a home without a patriarch. As figures more than simply incompetent in running their households, melodramatic fathers were prone to violate the vulnerable young ladies left in their care. In a significant departure from generic convention, these movies ended without closure or resolution. A rickety status quo remained in place but, unlike in western melodrama, it was hardly restored.

The last shot in a prerevolutionary movie melodrama, in which the possibilities for reconciliation lay dead literally as often as figuratively, contrasts sharply with post-1917 melodramas, equally popular and made manifestly political by the new regime. Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky recognized the power of melodrama to reach the unsophisticated audiences whose support was critical to the new regime. As Julie Cassiday argues in her study of the temperance drama, another conventional melodramatic scenario, the genre provided a familiar cultural site for identifying good and evil and negotiating an individual's banishment from and return to the community. An alcoholic who drinks away his family's chance for happiness wrenches our tears for those defenseless against his weakness, and in the early soviet temperance drama such a drunk could just as easily personify a public issue as a private grief. Unlike such classic western plays as *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, in which drinking marked specifically individual behavior,

the soviet temperance drama mobilized the audience into judging the drunk's behavior for its impact on the collective. For a government determined to heal the wounds left by civil war, the activist temperance drama depended on reconciliation and return in order to lay the foundations for what would become the new status quo. Most significant, it also set into motion the uniquely soviet melodramatic tendency to privilege public over private concerns.

Temperance dramas put citizens on trial for unethical behavior that tore the social fabric, and the juxtaposition of alcoholism with sobriety made an especially easy contrast of good and evil. Stalin, however, found the most radical political use for melodrama since Pixérécourt's initial questioning of the French Revolution. Lars Lih uncovers the melodramatic structure underlying the show trials of 1936 to 1938, where life imitated lowbrow art with devastating results. The trials deployed classic melodramatic tropes to illustrate political good and evil and to villainize political threats. The evildoers singled out for exposure and banishment in these real-life melodramas were the "waverer," an individual who still had doubts about the new community, and the *dvurushnik*, one who hid his hatred of the virtuous soviet community under a mask of surface loyalty. The emotion that these melodramas played on was fear, a categorically public fear that worked to transform the very nature of privacy into a threat to public order and thereby justify the exposure of all private life to the state's gaze.

Stalin's brilliant manipulation of melodramatic structures could not, however, sustain a status quo that derived so much of its authority from exhausting, debilitating fear, nor could soviet society maintain its excessive intrusion into the private sphere. The versatility of melodrama proved itself once again during the "thaw" that followed Stalin's death in 1953, when artists reclaimed private life as a legitimate, if contested, subject. Susan Costanzo's study brings us yet another public trial about private life, but this one staged in an experimental theater at Moscow University in 1957. Director Rolan Bykov used the innovative staging of a Czech melodrama to highlight the potential for ambiguity that had been in decline under Stalinism. Like his contemporary Douglas Sirk, Bykov had been influenced by Brechtian uses of form to evoke psychological moods. At the same time that Sirk was questioning the American ideals of consensus and conformity during the cold war, Bykov was raising comparable doubts about conformity under soviet socialism.

Although Bykov used the conventions of melodrama to challenge the moral certainty of Stalinist public values, Mikhail Kalatozov used similar conventions to rework the central trope of late Stalinist culture, the Second World War. One of the signal cultural events of the period, Kalatozov's film *The Cranes Are Flying*, undermined sacred icons of soviet wartime heroism. Comparing *The Cranes Are Flying* to a war-era movie melodrama *Wait for Me*, Alexander Prokhorov argues that in the late 1950s Kalatozov fulfilled people's need to reconcile the public memory of national victory with their devastating personal losses. As the action shifted from the external battlefield to the domestic and internal one, Russian men and women replaced the Nazis as the sole source of evil during the war. And again, like Sirk in the United States, Kalatozov used melodramatic conventions to raise questions about the private individual held captive by public ideology.

In the 1970s, director Nikita Mikhalkov took cinematic melodrama a step further into moral ambiguity and a subtle questioning of the late soviet status quo. Joan Neuberger's discussion of *Slave of Love*, Mikhalkov's complex melodrama within a melodrama, shows this film to be much more than the "retro-chic" costume drama that critics branded it. Setting his story in the final days of Russia's old regime, Mikhalkov used the world of bourgeois filmmaking to explore the affinities between revolutionary and melodramatic approaches to life's basic questions. By collapsing categories usually seen as mutually exclusive, Mikhalkov uncovers the moral interdependency of public and private life. In *Slave of Love*, Neuberger argues, Mikhalkov used the old-regime setting to challenge the revolution's repression of private life, while at the same time decry the seductive dangers of private self-absorption, a pointed reflection on the revived private sphere of his own time. Ultimately the film represents choices between good and evil as primarily individual affairs, but also as ambiguous and difficult in the renewed (and remembered) soviet private life as they had been in the heroic and conformist soviet public sphere.

Helena Goscilo brings this volume to a fitting end by connecting prerevolutionary to postsoviet society with her analysis of celebrity funerals. Structured like melodrama, these public rituals accentuate the presentism of the genre, as the urgencies of the present determine celebrity status. The first funeral she discusses, that of silent film star Vera Kholodnaia, recalls both the popularity of the silent movies themselves

and Mikhalkov's calculated use of a Kholodnaia-like heroine in *Slave of Love*. The funerals of Stalin and of the dissidents who spoke out against the soviet privileging of public over private remind us that Stalinism never entirely erased opposition, and they illustrate some of the particularly Russian forms that opposition took. Melodrama in the soviet period assumed a heightened political function precisely because so little was permitted to be said out loud. In a society where reason struggled against impossible conditions, emotions ran persistently high. The last funeral Goscilo discusses shows that melodrama will continue to play an important function in postsoviet culture, as the terms of good and evil and public and private again undergo redefinition: these funeral melodramas mark the death ritual of the monopoly of the *idea*.



Whether electrifying from beneath the proscenium arch of the legitimate stage, springing to life from the pages of a romance novel, flickering on the silver screen, or lying in funereal repose, the heroes and villains of Russian melodrama interpreted their audience's contemporary worlds, and they did so in terms that illuminate the writing of Russian history. The story of melodrama would be worth telling even if the essays here simply recreated images of the past. As fragments of a story heretofore deemed unworthy of analysis, the essays in this volume fill an important blank spot in the historical record. The now-established field of cultural studies, however, suggests ways that melodrama can isolate stress points in social and political structures that are not otherwise visible. These studies of melodrama in Russia restore a limited agency to groups long regarded as the passive pawns of oppressive political systems, autocratic and communist. They reveal a lively, ongoing negotiation over issues of morality, power, and identity. And they show how such subjects could be approached in ways that were both aesopic and quotidian in times when direct speech about the everyday was impossible. Most important, though, these studies of Russian and soviet melodrama reaffirm Belyi's Red Domino as an apocalyptic and tragic symbol of old-regime, Enlightenment culture in decay, and they offer a corrective to the dangers of the Russian cult of the *idea*.

Such postsoviet fare as Masha Gessen's *Dead Again* and Andrei Siniavsky's *The Russian Intelligentsia*, which hold the intelligentsia responsible for the successive failures of attempted democratic transforma-

tions, underscore the continuation of the belief that high culture plays a uniquely important role in Russian politics and history.²⁹ Although they reverse the intelligentsia's own judgment of itself as tragic heroes and *blame* the intelligentsia for the current crisis, Gessen and Siniavsky are still taking the view from the top and obscuring the rest of the Russian world. Observers who would look instead for the culture that was actually, and voraciously, consumed at the end of the soviet era would find melodrama in a prominent place. No television program before or since, and perhaps no cultural product, has matched the popularity of the imported, outdated Brazilian *telenovelo* *The Rich Also Cry*, which dominated the airwaves during the first year after the failed coup of 1991 elevated Boris Yeltsin to power. Horrified critics reverted to stereotype and denounced the soap opera as "escapism." Without giving serious thought to what else viewers might be gleaned from the long-running saga of Marianna, the beautiful heroine who raised her son in secrecy from the father who never knew of his birth, intelligentsia critics missed the essential appeal of the addictive serial.

Of all the melodramas imported by Russian television studios, including the American *Santa Barbara* (which enjoyed greater success in Europe than at home), *The Rich Also Cry* generated the most devoted following along with a cottage industry of spinoffs, including a Russian-language novelization. The original show contained the classic ingredients of melodrama: a self-sacrificing mother, the concealed identity of a son, the threat of incest when the boy meets his younger and unknown sister, and a father forced to negotiate the oedipal conflict with the son he never knew he had. Douglas Sirk would have appreciated the richly exaggerated aesthetics of its spike heels, big hair, tight skirts, and hot tempers. In the 1990s, as in revolutionary eras past, Russian audiences appreciated a narrative that reflected the everyday turmoil in their lives far more coherently than they did the reigning political figures and ideologies.³⁰ The Brazilian melodrama "worked" because it was grounded in the moral dilemmas of the everyday and it was structured to dramatize the complex issues its viewers understood implicitly but could not yet articulate. The millions of Russians who glued themselves to the television to follow Marianna's exploits tuned in for the show's most obvious value, entertainment. But if they watched obsessively, they did so with considerable irony and self-reflexivity—the funniest joke in Moscow at the time was that "the poor also cry." Marianna's

fate was more than simple escape from political reality; the soap opera helped people to configure and comprehend the essential elements of the new national melodrama that began its run in 1991. As this book goes to press, the Russian government has just announced a rise in vodka and bread prices and the return of the second most popular soap, *Santa Barbara*. Canceled following the economic crisis of 1998, *Santa Barbara* returns to the broadcast schedule during a particularly desultory presidential campaign and, according to the *Moscow Times*, the program matters to Russian voters as much as the economic crisis or the war in Chechnya.³¹ Like earlier audiences who enjoyed Kotzube, Verbitskaia, Bykov, and Mikhalkov, or who sat anxiously through show trials and temperance dramas, Russians needed and still need the contemporary melodrama to make sense of their lives in times of change.

Notes

- 1 Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (1958; New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 7.
- 2 Quoted in David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1981), 613; Fassbinder refers here to the great director of post-war Hollywood melodrama, Douglas Sirk (born in Germany as Detlef Sierck), whose work is discussed below.
- 3 Among the many works that conflate the two, up to and including Richard Pipes's mammoth two-volume *A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1990) and *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Knopf, 1993), the textbook example remains Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1966).
- 4 As John Bayley points out: "An idea in Russia exists to be implemented by the means of power, even though it may have been conceived in abstraction, barren argument, apparent helplessness. . . . Russia has always presented itself as a perfect paradise for the historian of ideas" (Bayley, "What Follies and Paradoxes!," *New York Review of Books* 45, no. 18 [November 29, 1998], 37).
- 5 Among many other examples, see Anna Povelikhina and Evgenii Kovtun, *Russkaia zhiuopisnaia vyveska i khudozhniki avangarda* (Leningrad: Iskustvo, 1991); Joan Neuberger, "Hooliganism and Futurism," in *Cultures in Flux*, ed. Stephen Frank and Mark Steinberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and James von Gelden and Louise McReynolds,

- eds., *Entertaining Tsarist Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- 6 On changing audiences, see Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (London: Routledge, 1994); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
 - 7 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), xiii.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 206.
 - 9 Quoted in Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 181.
 - 10 *Ibid.*
 - 11 Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, eds., *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 1994). See also Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967).
 - 12 Julia Przybos, in *L'entreprise melodramatique* (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti, 1987), takes a similarly conservative stance on melodrama, but adds an interesting perspective based on the anthropological studies of Victor Turner, who believed that popular culture maintained social stability by offering sites for conflict resolution.
 - 13 On the historical critique of melodrama, see Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 5–39. On the conservatism of female-oriented popular culture, see also Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977). Andreas Huyssen discusses some of the fundamental politicized associations in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 188–208.
 - 14 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 5.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 201. See also Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," in *Tragedy: Vision and Forum*, ed. Robert Corrigan (New York: New York University Press, 1965).
 - 16 As Gledhill argues: "Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. . . . If melodrama can end only in the place where it began, not having a programmatic analysis

- for the future, its possibilities lie in this double acknowledgment of how things are in a given historical juncture, and of the primary desires and resistances contained within it" (Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," 39).
- 17 Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 34.
 - 18 David Grimsted has pointed out that "the ties between melodrama and the great democratic-bourgeois revolutions of the last quarter of the 18th century are self-evident truths" (Grimsted, "Vigilante Chronicle: The Politics of Melodrama Brought to Life," in Bratton et al., eds., *Melodrama*, 199).
 - 19 Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 49.
 - 20 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* (1961; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966), 275–92. Sontag notes that "pure examples of Camp are deadly serious" (282), as are melodramas.
 - 21 Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Chapter 3, "The Act of Reading the Romance: Escape and Instruction," discusses the significance of melodrama's seemingly fraternal twin, the Harlequin novel, to its female readers.
 - 22 For melodrama outside of popular culture, see Stuart Cunningham, "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6, no. 4 (1981): 347–64.
 - 23 The abundant literature on Sirk has been collected and analyzed by Barbara Klinger in *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Sirk's classic movies include *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *Written on the Wind* (1957), and the Lana Turner version of *Imitation of Life* (1959).
 - 24 Although Betty Friedan did not discuss Sirk in her pioneering analysis of the unfulfilled woman, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), both essentially address the same social problem and the same social character.
 - 25 Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 62. See also the epigraphs at the end of the collection (365).
 - 26 Laura Mulvey discusses the problems of melodramatic closure in "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 75–79. See also Bratton, Cook, and Gledhill, eds., *Melodrama*, 3.
 - 27 Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," 5–39, especially part 2, "Historicising Melodrama."
 - 28 In addition to the numerous works cited throughout this collection, see Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works

- in European History," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (December 1996), especially 1510–12.
- 29 Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia after Communism* (New York: Verso, 1997); and Andrei Siniavsky, *The Russian Intelligentsia*, trans. Lynn Visson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- 30 Fredo Arias-King, in "Is It Power or Principle? A Footnote on Clinton's Russia Policy," discusses the residual effects that the stars of this extraordinarily popular show might have had on the 1993 elections to the Duma, and potentially thereafter. This article appeared first on the Web, in Johnson's Russia List, no. 2475 (13 November 1998); it is scheduled for publication in the spring 1999 issue of *Demokratizatsiya*, which the author edits.
- 31 "The Voters Also Cry . . . for Help," *Moscow Times*, 22 February 2000.