



GERM 880
Form and Experience:
Film and the
Melodramatic
Spring 2016
Th 4:40pm – 7:10pm
Prof. Inga Pollmann

Melodrama is pure cinema. Films are marked by excess in both *mise-en-scène* and affect and by an intricate relationship between form and emotional content as well as between the personal and the social-political. Though often derided as low form, kitsch, “just” woman’s film or tearjerker, film scholars have long recognized that melodramas are stylistically highly complex and push the boundaries of cinematic form and spectatorship. We will approach melodrama as a *question* that concerns all of cinema. Rather than engage with melodrama as a genre, we will define the contours of a melodramatic style in the cinema—a style that, as some have argued, seems synonymous with narrative film itself, as the melodramatic is defined by pure visibility, external signs, and a focus on gesture. By looking at films from a variety of national contexts we will refine our understanding of the melodramatic as a mode that conveys concrete historical experience.

Our course is divided into four sections. We will begin with a survey of the main characteristics of film melodrama and its indebtedness to 19th century stage melodrama. We will then focus on two case studies, Douglas Sirk (Detlef Sierck) and Max Ophüls, who started their career in Germany and Austria and went into exile during the 1930s (Netherlands, Italy, USA, and France). Their films will not only allow us to probe the relationship between film form, affect and national and cultural environment, but will also highlight how elements of German cinema from the 1920s (New Objectivity, Expressionism) infiltrate American melodrama and how this film language cycles back to Germany and amalgamates with French cinema. Finally, we will look at diverse examples of contemporary films that recycle, and redefine, melodramatic elements. The class discussion will be in English and all readings will be provided in English (and the German original where applicable); German and other foreign films will be subtitled in English.