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Body genres

Linda Williams excerpted from Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44/4 (Summer 1991), 2-13.

The repetitive formulas and spectacles of film genres are often defined by their differences from the classical realist style of narrative cinema. These classical films have been characterized as efficient action-centred, goal-oriented, linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of action, and leading to definitive closure. In their influential study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson call this the classical Hollywood style.

As Rick Altman has noted in a recent article, both genre study and the study of the somewhat more nebulous category of melodrama has long been hampered by

assumptions about the classical nature of the dominant narrative to which melodrama and some individual genres have been opposed. Altman argues that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, who locate the classical Hollywood style in the linear, progressive form of the Hollywood narrative, cannot accommodate 'melodramatic' attributes like spectacle, episodic presentation, or dependence on coincidence except as limited exceptions or 'play' within the dominant linear causality of the classical.

Altman writes: 'Unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the



Mildred Pierce (1945)—the fluidity of generic boundaries

Body genres continued

existence of a competing logic, a second voice'. Altman, whose own work on the movie musical has necessarily relied upon analyses of seemingly 'excessive' spectacles and parallel constructions, thus makes a strong case for the need to recognize the possibility that excess may itself be organized as a system. Yet analyses of systems of excess have been much slower to emerge in the genres whose non-linear spectacles have centred more directly upon the gross display of the human body. Pornography and horror films are two such systems of excess. Pornography is the lowest in cultural esteem, gross-out horror is next to lowest.

Melodrama, however, refers to a much broader category of films and a much larger system of excess. It would not be unreasonable, in fact, to consider all three of these genres under the extended rubric of melodrama, considered as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more 'dominant' modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative. In this extended sense melodrama can encompass a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile, emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive. Much of the interest of melodrama to film scholars over the last fifteen years originates in the sense that the form exceeds the normative system of much narrative cinema. I shall limit my focus here, however, to a more narrow sense of melodrama, leaving the broader category of the sensational to encompass the three genres I wish to consider. Thus, partly for purposes of contrast with pornography, the melodrama I will consider here will consist of the form that has most interested feminist critics—that of 'the woman's film' or 'weepie'. These are films addressed to women in their traditional status under patriarchy—as wives, mothers, abandoned lovers, or in their traditional status as bodily hysteria or excess, as in the frequent case of the woman 'afflicted' with a deadly or debilitating disease.

What are the pertinent features of bodily excess shared by these three 'gross' genres? First, there is the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. Carol Clover, speaking primarily of horror films and pornography, has called films which privilege the sensational 'body' genres. I am expanding Clover's notion of low body genres to include the sensation of overwhelming pathos in the 'weepie'. The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping. I propose that an investigation of the visual and narrative pleasures found in the portrayal of these three types of excess could be important to a new direction in genre criticism that would take as its point of departure—rather than as an unexamined assumption—questions of

gender construction, and gender address in relation to basic sexual fantasies.

Another pertinent feature shared by these body genres is the focus on what could probably best be called a form of ecstasy. While the classical meaning of the original Greek word is insanity and bewilderment, more contemporary meanings suggest components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture, a rapture which informs even the pathos of melodrama.

Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body 'beside itself' with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness. Aurally, excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama.

Looking at, and listening to, these bodily ecstasies, we can also notice something else that these genres seem to share: though quite differently gendered with respect to their targeted audiences, with pornography aimed, presumably, at active men and melodramatic weepies aimed, presumably, at passive women, and with contemporary gross-out horror aimed at adolescents careening wildly between the two masculine and feminine poles, in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain.

In other words, even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators, as is the case in most traditional heterosexual pornography, it is the female body in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight.

There are, of course, other film genres which both portray and affect the sensational body—e.g. thrillers, musicals, comedies. I suggest, however, that the film genres that have had especially low cultural status—which have seemed to exist as excesses to the system of even the popular genres—are not simply those which sensationally display bodies on the screen and register effects in the bodies of spectators. Rather, what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female. Physical clown comedy is another 'body' genre concerned with all manner of gross activities and body functions—eating shoes, slipping on banana skins. None the less, it has not been deemed gratuitously excessive,

Body genres continued

TABLE 1. AN ANATOMY OF FILM BODIES

	GENRE		
	Pornography	Horror	Melodrama
Bodily excess	Sex	Violence	Emotion
Ecstasy—shown by	Ecstatic sex Orgasm Ejaculation	Ecstatic violence Shudder Blood	Ecstatic woe Sob Tears
Presumed audience	Men (active)	Adolescent boys (active-passive)	Girls, women (passive)
Perversion	Sadism	Sadomasochism	Masochism
Originary fantasy	Seduction	Castration	Origin
Temporality of fantasy	On time!	Too early!	Too late!
GENRE CYCLES			
'Classic'	Stag films (1920s–1940s) <i>The Casting Couch</i>	'Classic' horror <i>Dracula</i> <i>Frankenstein</i> <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i> <i>King Kong</i>	'Classic' women's films Maternal melodrama <i>Stella Dallas</i> <i>Mildred Pierce</i> romance <i>Back Street</i> <i>Letter from an Unknown Woman</i>
Contemporary	Feature-length hard-core porn <i>Deep Throat</i> etc. <i>The Punishment of Anne</i> Femme Productions Bisexual Trisexual	Post-Psycho <i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> <i>Halloween</i> <i>Dressed to Kill</i> <i>Videodrome</i>	Male and female 'weepies' <i>Steel Magnolias</i> <i>Stella</i> <i>Dad</i>

probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown. Indeed, it is almost a rule that the audience's physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often dead-pain reactions of the clown.

In the body genres I am isolating here, however, it seems to be the case that the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen. Whether this mimicry is exact, e.g. whether the spectator at the porn film actually orgasms, whether the spectator at the horror film actually

shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears, the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response.

What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts—an impression that the very colloquialisms of 'tear-jerker' and 'fear-jerker' express—and to which we could add pornography's even cruder sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to 'jerk off'.