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12 Rethinking genre

Christine Gledhill

Genre, like the forms it produces, is a cyclical concept, once more spiralling to the forefront of debate for contemporary film studies (Neale, 1990; Collins, 1993; Maltby, 1995; Altman, 1998). It is particularly useful now for its potential to fill a gap left by the fragmenting of grand theory, which once promised to grasp films as part of a totalising 'social formation' or 'historical conjuncture'. Despite complex theories of ideology and subjectivity developed in the 1970s, the notion that mainstream films can be correlated with their social contexts still draws on more or less sophisticated models of textual 'reflection' – for example the repeated claim that the *noir* turn of Hollywood in the 1940s–mid-1950s is connected to post-war malaise following the return of men from the war and consequent drive to return women to the home. How, exactly does this happen? Steve Neale comments that the mental condition of a nation cannot be read from consumer choice at the box office (1990: 64). Equally improbable is the picture conjured of a huddle of producers, scriptwriters, and assorted film-makers planning how to make the next *film noir* direct its female audience back to their kitchen sinks. If, post grand theory, film studies is not to diminish into a conservative formalism or a conceptually unrooted empirical historicism, the question of how to understand the life of films in the social is paramount.

Genre provides the conceptual space where such questions can be pursued. In this space issues of texts and aesthetics – the traditional concerns of film theory – intersect with those of industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences – the central concerns of political economy, sociology, and cultural studies. To understand exactly how the social and films interact we need a concept of genre capable of exploring the wider contextual culture in relationship to, rather than as an originating source of, aesthetic mutations and textual complications. If early versions of genre theory focused on the problem of what made a western a western, Richard Maltby's question – why does the western disappear in the 1970s–1980s? – demands more than ideological readings which translate forms back into social factors (1995: 122–4).

Genre is first and foremost a boundary phenomenon. Like cartographers, early genre critics sought to define fictional territories and the borders which divided, for example, western from gangster film, thriller from horror film, romantic comedy from the musical (Maltby, 1995: 107; Altman, 1998: 23–4). Not surprisingly, the process of

establishing territories leads to border disputes. As a boundary concept genre is utilised by a range of different interest groups – from film studios to academic monograph writers, from review journalists to women's groups, from publishing houses to film schools – to stake out kinds of film production, and the fictional worlds and generic identities they found (Maltby, 1995: 107). The first generic boundaries, performing a class cultural function, served to demarcate literary forms as aesthetic discourse from the rest. A work belonging to a category such as tragedy, poetry, epic, or lyric could claim the identity of 'art' separate from forms of daily social usage and of low culture. Such aesthetic categories are key to the increasingly specialised and professionalised sphere inhabited by 'literature' and 'art' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But as a critical concept, genre is pulled to either side of the boundary it was initially required to stake out. In painting, for example, 'genre' is associated with a turn to subject matter of everyday life in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, while in the nineteenth century, British genre painting becomes a highly narrativised form of middle-brow picture-making. With the rise of cinema, this reversal is complete. Genre, defined by familiar materials of popular cultural life and now the key to commercial fictional production, is separated from a supposedly non-generic art practice (Neale, 1990: 63–4). Latterly, as all areas of cultural production meet in a mass-mediated market place, accessible to every type of audience, postmodern culture dissolves the boundaries between high and low, the literary and the vernacular, the artistic and the commercial, threatening for more conservative critics cultural confusion and the loss of art as social critique (Collins, 1993: 249–50).

Genre was introduced into film studies as an alternative to auteurism more appropriate to a mass entertainment industry. For film critics it offered a tool capable of putting art back into popular fiction in order to reclaim the commercial products of Hollywood for serious critical appraisal. However, the process of repetition involved in the production of genres provided material for cultural historians concerned with what mass fictions reveal about society, resulting in analyses of genre films in terms of myth and ritual, or as 'reflections' of mass consciousness (Warshow, 1970; Wright, 1975; Schatz, 1981). More recently, a new historicism has investigated genre from the perspective of the film industry itself, opening a division between trade and critics' categories (Neale, 1990; Klinger, 1994; Maltby, 1995; Altman, 1998). In the contemporary moment of reinvention – of film both as medium and as discipline – genre boundaries, once seemingly securely in place if sometimes disputed, are repeatedly crossed by film-maker, critic, historian, and socio-cultural analyst. Herein, I want to suggest, lies the productivity of genre as boundaries are defined, eroded, defended, and redrawn. Genre analysis tells us not just about kinds of films, but about the cultural work of producing and knowing them.

Crucial to the development of the modern genre system and to understanding the shifting borders between high and mass culture is the rise in the nineteenth century of melodrama. Most contemporary accounts of melodrama begin with its 'notoriously' amorphous lack of distinctive boundaries. This is exemplified in recent gender disputes, whereby melodrama, reclaimed in the 1970s–1980s by feminist critics as a women's form, is now subject to historicist revision as belonging to male action genres. To

understand such shifts and reversals I shall draw on the concept of modality as the sustaining medium in which the genre system operates. This chapter, then, attempts to rethink genre in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice, and arena of cultural–critical discursivity.

As aesthetic practice, genre was initially conceptualised as a mode of artistic 'supervision' (Ryall, 1978). Each genre represented a body of rules and expectations, shared by film-maker and audience, which governed its particular generic 'world' and by which any new entrant was constructed and operated. The task of the genre critic was to survey the terrain of this world, identify its dramatis personae, iconography, locations, and plot possibilities, and establish the rules of narrative engagement and permutation. This taxomonic approach, seeking to define genres as exclusive categories, the identity of which rested in specific fixed features, established the first boundary skirmishes as to whether particular films fell into a particular genre and whether deviant films were valid variations or decadent corruptions. As auteurism ran out of steam, genre criticism continued the process of reclaiming by remapping Hollywood as an expanding frontier for the critical imagination of film studies, for film season and television programming, and for a burgeoning book market of pictorial and academic film histories. The western and gangster film/thriller were soon relatively well documented, but gradually less reputable or more recondite genres were recovered: the musical, science fiction, the horror film, pornography. At the same time discussion began of categories with ambiguous credentials in that they appeared to have no, or little, industrial basis: *film noir*, family melodrama, the small-town movie, and, subject of current controversy, the woman's film. Today the whole process seems to spiral out of control as genres confidently declared 'done with' return, as postmodern practices treat the past as a superstore for picking and mixing, and as film-makers take inspiration from critical as well as studio categories. A tension has always been present in this process of mapping and definition between empirically given, historical genres, and abstract theoretical structures which are thought as supervising their construction. The genre critic faced the conundrum succinctly put by Andrew Tudor: to identify a film belonging to a particular genre, the critic had to know what the features of that genre were, but equally the critic only knew that by reference to films identified as constituting the genre (Tudor, 1974: 135). Tzvetzan Todorov offered a means of addressing this tension in his proposition that whereas the historical genre is amorphous and continually growing, splitting or shrinking, the theoretical genre is provisional and subject to adjustment with every new addition to the generic corpus (Todorov, 1976: 13–14).

After 30 or so more years of post-classical Hollywood, which have foregrounded the hybridity and cyclical nature of genre production, accompanied by a period of cine-psychoanalytic theory in which all identity is perceived as dependent on a play of similarity and difference, and the obsessions of taxomonic analysis with boundary maintenance appear all but discredited. Steve Neale's 1980 study, *Genre*, argued that genres are not discrete phenomena, contained within mutually exclusive boundaries,

but deal rather in a shared and changing pool of plot mechanisms, icons, and discourses. Their identity as genres depend on the particular relations they establish between a range of common elements rather than on exclusive possession of particular motifs: for example, the discourse of gunlaw in the context of the city/social alienation/mob/police precinct works differently in the gangster film from the way it works in the western, in the context of the frontier/community/outlaw/sherrif's posse. Similarly, marriage may work to integrate the warring parties in romantic comedy or produce the heterosexual conflicts of family melodrama. Thus genres hang together as an integrated system of intersecting fictional worlds. In this perspective, boundary crossings and disputes become productive sites of cultural activity: for example, the crossing of the search motif from western (*The Searchers*, 1956), into science fiction (*Star Wars*, 1978–99) and war films (*The Deer Hunter*, 1978; *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998); or the intense debate around *Stella Dallas* (1937) as a woman's film or maternal melodrama (see, *inter alia*, *Cinema Journal* 25:1, Fall 1985 and 25:4 Summer 1986).

Although many of these theorisations of genre, up to and including Steve Neale's 1980 mongraph, were concerned to acknowledge the industrial foundations of mainstream cinema, they still focused on textuality, albeit industrially produced, rather than on genre as industrial mechanism. The analytical concepts developed – convention, stereotype, iconography (Alloway, 1971; McArthur, 1972), inner and outer form (Buscombe, 1970), structuring antimonies (Kitzes, 1969), syntax and semantics (Altman, 1984) – were largely formal, designed to explore how generic films produced their aesthetic and ideological effects. But a new twist in the debate follows film studies' return to history, which against critical genres poses the categories used by the industry in production schedules and marketing. Thus a decade after his monograph Steve Neale argues that 'industrial and journalistic labels ... offer virtually the only available evidence for a historical study of the array of genres in circulation or of the way in which individual films have been generically perceived at any point in time' (1990: 52). Barbara Klinger takes up this contention in her challenge to the authorial place given to Douglas Sirk as producer of what Thomas Elsaesser (1972) identified as 'sophisticated family melodramas' which, ironised by baroque *mise en scène*, were feted by cineastes and film critics as undermining the conformist ideologies of Eisenhower's 1950s' America (Klinger, 1994). By examining the 'intertextual relay' of publicity, posters, pressbooks, and review journalism, Klinger establishes that films grouped together in the 1970s as family melodramas were, in the 1950s, marketed to their audiences as 'adult movies'.

According to this perspective, reduction of melodrama to the bourgeois family within the Sirkian corpus created a retrospective genre to parallel that of *film noir*. Crucially, it brought critical attention to bear on a body of films that focused on the personal arena of domestic and heterosexual relations, culturally defined as feminine, thus inviting attention from a growing body of feminist film theory interested in what the culture dubs 'women's forms'. The intervention of feminism brought systematic ideological critique to bear on genre production in contradistinction to the auteurism that, in recuperating Douglas Sirk as a Brechtian master of ironic *mise en scène*, inadvertantly drew attention to melodrama as a mode and Hollywood's production for the female audience. Given the domination of the majority of mainstream genres by the male hero

and masculine action, feminist attention was drawn to any production aimed at the female audience which placed the heroine at the centre of the narrative, thus articulating the woman's film as a cross-generic corpus of films linked by their address to a female audience to be examined alongside women's fiction, women's magazines, the 'woman's page', the BBC 'woman's hour' and so on. Inevitably, given the weak twentieth-century commonsense boundary between anything labelled 'woman's' and melodrama, the woman's film and melodrama are frequently (but not invariably) treated by critics – both journalistic and academic – as one.

There have been a number of differently articulated attempts to disentangle these categories. Women's culture is distinct from, though it may use, melodrama and is as likely to relate to a tradition of domestic realism (see Gledhill, 1987; 1992; 1993). However, the most recent interventions stem from the new historicity. Thus Steve Neale in 'Melo talk' (1993) records results from an intensive perusal of the US trade press which show its limitation of the term 'melodrama' to action–sensation-dominated subgenres, assumed to be addressing male audiences – except when, as Ben Singer shows, they support a 'serial queen' such as Pearl White in the teens (Singer, 1990; 1995). Films aiming at female audiences, on the other hand, are more likely to be categorised under the more prestigious 'A' feature label, 'drama'. Richard Maltby (1995) and Rick Altman (1998) take up Ben Singer's and Steve Neale's findings to emphasise the distance between the domestic construction of the retrospectively named family melodrama of the 1950s and the presumed 'original action-oriented meaning of the term melodrama' (Altman, 1998: 35).

In thus focusing on locatable origins and singular meanings – according to Neale, Maltby, and Altman more authentically found at the site of production – the renewed historicism threatens to undo much of the valuable work achieved in theorising generic textuality. First, the presupposition of an 'original' undercuts the much discussed hybridity of genre as not only an industrial but also a cultural process. For melodrama, a form founded on plagiarism, the notion of an original or singular meaning is particularly inappropriate. Second, history is conceived as a series of successive shifts, leaving the past as done with, thus blocking perception of generic continuities. This, in turn, assumes film history has a definitive beginning this side of the emergence of the industry. But to unravel the relation of film genres and melodrama requires a history pre-dating cinema. For example, Singer's study of early film serials finds not only victimised but empowered heroines, recalling as a by-product of nineteenth-century gender ideology both cross-dressed and transvalued gender roles, whereby woman as sign of virtue may be more resiliant and competent in outwitting villany than the frequently incapacitated hero. In its focus on locatable origins and singular meanings, the empirical bent of the new historicism fails to grasp the productivity of such boundary encounters and category mixing which, amongst other things, permits the exploration of one social gender in the body of another and widens audience appeal.

Ultimately, reliance on industrial and marketing categories threatens to return us to the taxomonic trap. The process of naming is a generative process, as is demonstrated by Rick Altman's ingenious model of generic proliferation which shows how a more widely applicable adjectival attribute shifts to a singular genre-nominating noun – from

musical romance and musical comedy to generic independence as *the* musical (Altman, 1998: 16–23). But names are attributed by particular organisations or groups under specific circumstances for specific purposes. Studio assignment of films for women to 'A' feature production tells us only about their placement in a production and marketing strategy, not about their cultural value, as Harry Warner made clear to Bette Davis when he told her he hated her films which nevertheless the box office dictated he make (Davis, 1962: 158). As suggested by Rick Altman's geological metaphor of the fold that exposes older rock formations, two different systems of generic naming and evaluation are at work at the same time (Altman, 1998: 22). So while there is no doubt that melodrama is a category deeply caught up in the gendering of western popular culture – in its classing and racialising as well – there is no simple identification to be made between gender, whether male or female, and melodrama at any point in its history.

What, then, do marketing labels represent? Tino Balio (1993), Klinger, Altman, and Maltby all suggest in different ways that the film industry does not work directly with genres at all. Rather, to guide production the studios look for series based on a clearly successful film or exploiting a particular asset in which they have exclusive ownership such as a star, reusable set, or particularly distinctive formula, often derived from a new mix of elements from different genres. Thus, to capture the process of industrial inception, Alloway, Maltby, and Altman favour the concept 'cycle' over genre, Tino Balio speaks of 'production trends', and Barbara Klinger of the 'local genre'. As a marketing tool genres are not only shared with rival studios, but threaten to divide audiences. Hybrid advertising identities are favoured to ensure interest for a maximal audience range (Altman, 1998: 9), while trade reviewers and video outlets work with broader categories more akin to the traditional literary types recast in popular terms – drama, adventure, comedy, thriller – under which a wide variety of films can be shelved.

Genres, nevertheless, are what journalists, critics, film scholars, and publishing houses are interested in. Altman, indeed, suggests a tension between industrially nominated cycles, which contract categories, and generic elaborations, which expand them (1998: 18). Thus there is an *inevitable* mismatch between industrial and critical histories. Richard Maltby points out, for example, that as an industrial category, the gangster film cycle lasted all of three years, while its cultural life extends to the present day (1995: 111). Genres, it would appear, represent categories whose identities are elaborated *post hoc* at a different level and elsewhere. Questions of cultural and aesthetic *value* require even more circumspection as between film-makers, trade and fan press, scholarship, and counter-cultural movements. If Rick Altman's meticulous evolutionary diagrams have all the appearance of a scientific law, the feminists mess things up by sneaking 'women's miseries' into the generic process in 'cobbling' together the woman's film, while simultaneously appropriating melodrama as a form for women (1998: 32). In a concluding coda Altman somewhat ruefully concedes that a feminist must do what a feminist must do (1998: 36), but this is precisely the wrong point to give in if we want to grasp the full productivity of genre, for boundary disputes involve contested identities.

If the return to historicist empiricism tends to conflate origins with explanations, the problem is not only, as Rick Altman argues, that the synchronic generic map does not fix things for all time. Neither do the artefacts themselves remain locked in the past. In this

respect television and video stores confront the film analyst with what are givens of literary critical life – the evolving existence not only of film genres but of past exemplars of any form. 'Old' films circulate amongst us still, enabling film and critical production to hook back into the past and dust off apparently worn-out formulae for present uses and possible renaming. So the western did not die in the 1970s and, in an age dominated by postmodern *tech-noir* and action movies, romantic comedy is suddenly back. A strand of 1950s' adult movies is regrouped as family melodrama, *film noir* emerges as both critical concept and new production category, and films not initially promoted as woman's films are reconceived under this banner. The life of a genre is cyclical, coming round again in corkskrew fashion, never quite in the same place. Thus the cultural historian lacks any fixed point from which to survey the generic panorama. This is not, however, to reject the precise and close attention to specific practices and operations demanded by Neale, Klinger, Altman, and Maltby. Revealing patterns or usages lost to view – such as *Variety*'s continued use of the term 'melodrama' in only one of its varied nineteenth-century generic manifestations well into the twentieth – enables us to sharpen the questions we ask of mass popular cultural production, and alerts us to new questions not asked before. It enables us to trace the movements of cultural history, carried forward or intruding into the present, revealing hidden continuities and transformations working under new or disguising names. If male-orientated action movies are persistently termed 'melodrama' in the trade, long after the term is more widely disgraced, this should alert us to something from the past that is alive in the present and circulating around the masculine.

Melodrama is not nor ever was a singular genre. However, we may retrospectively conceive its historical effectivity in two interdependent ways: first, as an early cultural machine for the mass production of popular genres capable of summoning up and putting into place different kinds of audience; second, as a modality, understood as a culturally conditioned mode of perception and aesthetic articulation. As a genre-producing machine, melodrama is forged from the convergence of two broad-based cultural traditions: one, excluded from official culture, which contained a mix of folk and new urban entertainment forms, and another, more formally coherent, deriving from an increasingly influential middle-class fiction and theatre of sentimental drama and comedy (Figure 12.1). This forging comes about in England and France from the commercial potential of new entertainment needs and the requirement of an industrialising, democratising society for a redefined and enlarged public sphere. For the melodramatic machine, news events, popular paintings or songs, romantic poetry, successful high dramas, or circus acts generate material for theatrical enactments in which titles and posters frequently precede the manufacture of acting scripts by contracted writers; visual effects and sensations are generated before and supersede the word; and actors serve the mechanical wonders and pictorial effects of *mise en scène* and moving scenery (Booth, 1981). The subgenres which melodrama produces cohere around any one, or combination, of these mechanical features and aesthetic effects: in England, water-tanks at Sadler's Wells give rise to acquatic and nautical melodrama, the circus ring at Astley's to equestrian and military melodrama (Figure 12.2), Drury Lane's status as a legitimate theatre favours domestic, romantic, and society melodrama, while
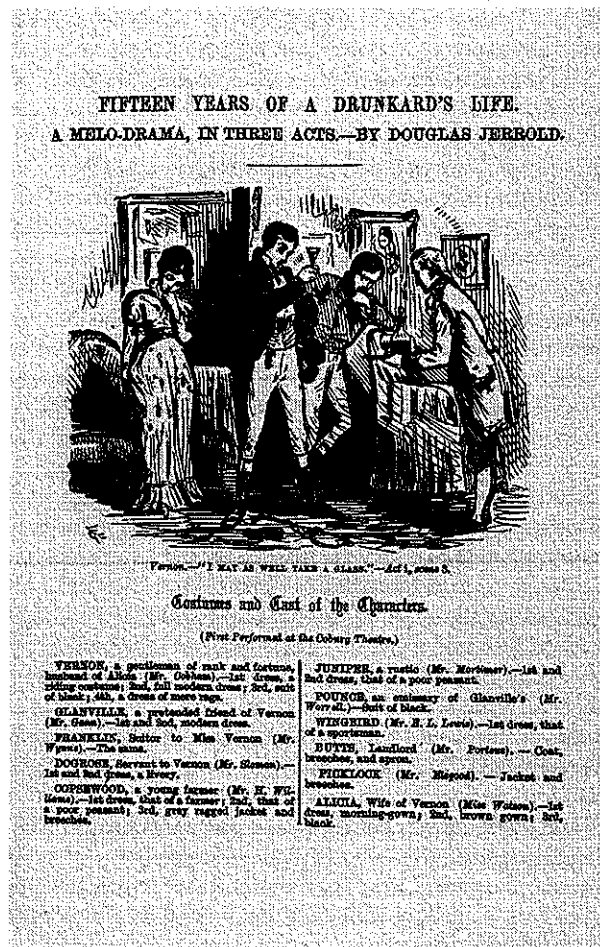
Figure 12.1 Frontispiece to J. Dicks's Standard Plays edition of *Fifteen years of a drunkard's life* (1828).

on the Surreyside the 'Bloody Vic' specialises in murders. Other subgenres abound, including gothic, society, cloak-and-dagger, cape-and-sword, sensation melodrama and, in the USA, frontier, backwoods, civil war, temperance melodrama, and so on. These melodramatic subgenres, specialising in particular materials, effects, and spectator address, compete for the loyalty of differentiated audiences, while each production site, through mixed programming, and, in the absence of copyright laws, through adpatation, plagiarism, and piracy, seeks to maximise them.

Out of this institutional context, aesthetic, cultural, and ideological features coalesce into a modality which organises the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and
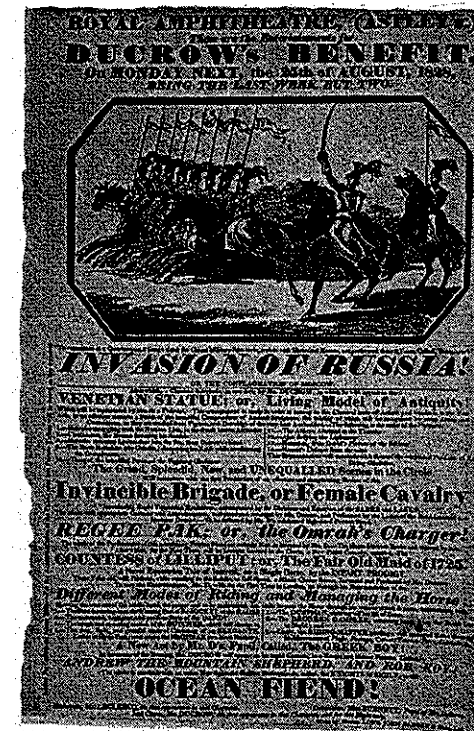
Figure 12.2 Equestrian and military melodrama at Astley's.
Reproduced courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

contradictions of a newly emerging secular and atomising society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms (see below, p. 234). The notion of modality, like register in socio-linguistics, defines a specific mode of aesthetic articulation adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures. It provides the genre system with a mechanism of 'double articulation', capable of generating specific and distinctively different generic formulae in particular historical conjunctures, while also providing a medium of interchange and overlap between genres. If comedy, tragedy, and romance are among the oldest and most widespread of modalities, tragedy has, in Peter Brooks's (1976) argument, largely been displaced by melodrama, while romance has radically shifted its purview from chivalric adventure to women's mass fiction (Radford, 1986). Because of its wider socio-cultural embrace, the melodramatic mode not only generates a wide diversity of genres but also draws other modes into its processes of articulation. Thus melodrama thrives on comic counterpoint, can site its fateful encounters in romance, and keeps pace with the most recent of modes, realism, which first worked in cooperation with melodrama and then disowned it. In such permeability

lies the flexibility of the system necessary to the forming of a mass-produced 'popular culture' for a broadening society, drawing into public view a diversity of audiences, sometimes dividing but working more generally to unite them, while at the same time facilitating international exchange. An exemplary figure here is the actor–manager–playwright, Dion Boucicault, of French–Irish descent, who refined the energies of Surreyside blood and thunder melodrama in tune with middle-class sensibilities, recasting the 'helpless and unfriended' (Vicinus, 1981) as the respectable poor and sometimes fallen middle classes who nevertheless encounter their share of sensation and spectacle enacted in attic suicides and tenement fires, rewritten in local colour many times over to appeal to the audiences of particular cities and nations. While Charles Reade was suing rivals who had pirated his adaptation of *Les Pauvres de Paris* (1856), Boucicault staged his own multiple versions as *The Poor of New York* and *The Streets of Philadelphia* (1857), *The Poor of Liverpool, The Poor of Leeds, The Poor of Manchester, The Streets of Dublin, The Streets of Islington* (when played at Sadler's Wells), *The Streets of London* (when played at the Princess's), all produced in 1864, revived regularly thereafter (Figure 12.3), and made into films in 1913 and 1922 (see Fawkes, 1979: 147–8; Gerould, 1983: 10–11). Thus melodrama constructs a version of the 'popular' capable of producing recognition for a range of audiences from different classes, localities, and national groupings.

As a genre machine, however, melodrama brought into play a major cultural boundary of modern society, between a mass culture of content and affect-defined genres and the formally defined artistic kinds of high cultural classification – drama, poetry, prose – which provided unity, coherence, and verismilitude to an aristocratic society of the eighteenth century and later to the cultural leadership of the intelligentsia at the turn of the nineteenth century. Where melodrama had been used to unite audiences, its name began to divide them. From its very inception the term held considerable ambivalence. Wedding two cultural traditions, and drawing together different audiences into a new public mass, melodrama is a double source of fascination and threat. Via one tradition, emerging out of and drawing on proscribed and marginalised folk and early urban entertainments, melodrama provokes, much as today, anxiety of the establishment as to the cultural degeneration and insubordination of the lower orders. Equally, however, providing an excitement and moral fervour lacking in sentimental drama and comedy, melodrama is drawn across the socially divided urban spaces to infiltrate the repertoire of established theatres in order to stem the flow of more adventurous middle-class audiences in the opposite direction. As a result the tactics of class-differentiated forms of entertainment combine. Thus action and sentiment, pathos and spectacle, presumed today to appeal to differently gendered audiences, are drawn into a composite aesthetic and dramatic modality, capable of different emphases and generic offshoots.

For twentieth-century film theorists the cultural processes of history pose the questions when and where did cinema begin and when and where did the nineteeth century end? There is now underway a vigorous debate between theatre and film scholars around the 'baton' model of stage-screen relations whereby it is supposed the practices of the popular nineteenth-century theatre are passed over to cinema, cleansed of their melodramatic trappings and made fit for the twentieth century, thus installing

Figure 12.3 Poster for revival of *The Streets of London*.
Reproduced courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

another boundary between 'old-fashioned' structures of moral feeling and contemporary demands for realist perception (see Mayer, 1997; Sokalski, 1997). Not only does this model misconceive the relation of melodrama and realism (to which I return below), but also it produces a paradoxical conception of film narrative. In recent years film studies, seeking to establish the historical development and formal structures of mainstream cinema, has turned predominantly to the principles of the novel or short story, as enshrined in the scenario or screenplay, for the 'classic' values of narrative causality and psychologically motivated character which are thought to displace the melodramatic. According to Steve Neale's 1980 monograph it is classic narrative which supervises the functioning of genres. And yet Richard Maltby, analysing submissions to the Production Code Administration in the mid-1940s, finds that a quarter to one-third of categories are counted as some form of melodrama (1995: 111), while Linda Williams

draws on categories deployed by the American Film Institute Catalogues for 1921–30 and 1961–70 to show a 'remarkable proliferation of categories of melodrama' that 'have persisted ... in the eyes of archivists and catalogists' (1998: 51). How, then, are we to understand this persistence of melodrama, despite its widespread rejection as 'old-fashioned' and the shifting evolution of its genres into the modern age?

The presumption that cinema constitutes a modernist break with past traditions has led to neglect of melodrama's earlier history. This is reinforced by suspicion of terms denoting continuity such as Zeitgeist, world-view, social malaise, imagination, which reify generic forms in a resistance to change (see Altman, 1998: 24–5). Nevertheless, the refusal to acknowledge continuities leads, as Gill Branston points out (Chapter 2), to a fetishisation of breaks as romantically perverse as that of universals beyond culture and history. Naming contributes to a process of redrawing boundaries and redefining relationships. But such processes are neither originary nor innocent. While names are chosen to serve certain functions, they also, as Bakhtin tells us, bring with them their past histories and enter into dialogue and contest with other names (Bakhtin, 1981: 276). Behind every name are all the other uses to which it has been put. Embedded within it are all the potential new relationships it might enter into. From around 1870 through to the 1930s the terms 'melodrama' and 'realism' circulated in a fluid interchange with gender and class values as, with the rise of mass-media entertainment, the map of cultural relations reshaped itself. The 1923 advertisement for Rex Beach's *Fair Lady* in the British trade journal, *The Bioscope* (Figure 12.4), shows just such terminological vacillation, as a pitch to female audiences recalls melodrama from a different arena of cultural circulation from that associated with adventure serials.

If melodrama does indeed cross the centuries this is partly, as Thomas Elsaesser (1972), Peter Brooks (1976), and, more recently, Ben Singer (1995) suggest, because of its capacity to respond to the questions of modernity. Rather than an essentialising 'personal continuity' (Altman, 1998: 25), the term ' imagination', linked by Peter Brooks to melodrama, can be reconceived in terms of an 'imaginary', as used by several contributors to this volume. If divested of its Lacanian connotations of illusoriness, the imaginary, as James Donald and Stephanie Donald explain (Chapter 7), can be conceptualised as a public space of social imaginings within a culturally conditioned aesthetic framework. Thus a 'mode of imagination' is both culturally and historically definable. The modality of melodrama has certain priorities: the endowment of a secular world, driven by the energies of capitalist accumulation, with a significance arising out of the clash of moral imperatives. Thomas Elsaesser suggests that the rhetorical devices of melodrama – the hidden identities, misrecognitions, delayed or chance meetings, sudden reversals and climactic *coups de théâtre* – resonate in relation to and provide a means of aesthetically organising the experiences of the city and life under capitalism, which in its geographic and temporal contiguities provides stark juxtapositions between wealth and poverty, upper and working classes, social rise and fall. Ben Singer demonstrates the correlation between the growing dangers of urban and technological existence and the increasing emphasis in proletarian melodrama and yellow journalism on sensational events, which are taken into the film serials of the early teens. Such phenomenal experiences provide the dynamic rhythms, and visual textures of aesthetic

FEBRUARY 8, 1923.   Bioscope   5

REX BEACH'S "Fair Lady"

SELLING MELODRAMA TO WOMEN

Wherever women go. the men go. That is certain. The preponderance of women at all performances of the popular stage hits in London and other big cities disproves the old belief that screen or stage melodrama furnishes genuine entertainment only for men audiences.

"Fair Lady" is a romantic photoplay melodrama of and for women; a melodrama of love, romance, gorgeous costumes and mystery; with thrills and action; tearful pathos and relieving comedy, and appealing directly to women of all types, classes and years.

Play up the title, "Fair Lady." It gives a direct exhibitor tie-up with every merchant, for the reason that every merchant in your city deals with women. He buys his stock, displays his goods—in fact, runs his entire business to please and cater to Fair Lady. You help him, and he'll help you!

Tie up with every first-class business man in your city. Give him neatly printed placards announcing the things he has to sell to Fair Lady. There are gowns for "Fair Lady"; hats for "Fair. Lady"; shoes, hosiery, lingerie. gloves, perfumes, cosmetics, hair-goods, hair-dressing, coats, wraps, negligee. sports costumes, motoring costumes, vanity bags, travelling bags, toilet articles, confectionery,–in short, almost anything and everything that any merchant sells.

Sell "Fair Lady" to the women of your city! They'll bring the men!

No business man ever tries to sell a stock of goods without telling his patrons what he's got, and why they should buy. Selling amusement more and more is getting to be an out-and-out straight business proposition.

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Figure 12.4 'Selling melodrama to women': advertisement for Rex Beach's *Fair Lady*, from *The Bioscope*, 8 February 1923.

Reproduced courtesy of British Film Institute.

form rendered in theatrical or pictorial terms, while at the same time bringing to the arbitrariness of an accident and coincidence-prone daily experience some kind of sense. Thus Peter Brooks suggests that sensation and aesthetic control work together to make significant the apparent randomness and atomisation of life in a capitalist world: 'making large but insubstantiable claims on meaning', the sensational effects of melodrama assert significance both in the sense of making things matter and making them mean (Brooks, 1976: 199). Melodrama's use of heightened contrasts and polar oppositions aim to make the world morally legible (1976: 42). At the threshhold of the new millennium none of these conditions, material, existential, or aesthetic, have changed. The questions how to live, who is justified, who are the innocent, where is villainy at work now, and what drives it are, as Linda Williams (1998) has forcefully argued, those which the modality of melodrama organises in the material at its disposal. The many genres of melodrama provide a range of fictional worlds in which these questions can be embodied, personified, and enacted in different social and gendered arenas and historical periods.

Melodramatic modality can do this because of its founding heterogenity and the particular aesthetic mechanisms it deploys. Despite melodrama's cultural divisiveness, the practices it separates are constantly engaged in border raids. So, for example, nineteenth-century melodramas circulate Schiller and Shakespeare, while Peter Brooks has recourse to melodrama to explain the workings of Balzac and Henry James. In writing about the genres of literature, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) suggests that the novel's distinction lies in its capacity to reproduce all other modes of speech and writing. It is a genre of active heteroglossia, capable of drawing into itself all languages and cultural forms, high and low, literary and vernacular, past and present, setting them into dialogic exchange with each other and returning them in the process to the public sphere as literature. Melodrama might be thought as doing the same in reverse direction, drawing social, popular, and high-art cultures and discourses into its orbit, packaging them in different combinations through its cluster of genres for consumption by a newly emerging mass audience, whose social and cultural differentiations can be appealed to and exploited within a broad generic system.

Cinematic technology also delivers a medium that can reproduce all others. And like melodrama it evolves from the merging of two sets of class- and gender-differentiated traditions: fairground with parlour entertainment, the cinema of 'attractions' with a cinema of narrative fiction. If its technology and the conditions of mass production and reception usher in a qualitatively new phase of modernity, cinema's reproductive capacity makes it a site of coalescence between these and the modernising forces gathering in the previous century in melodrama's system for generic production. When studios begin to look for means of lengthening film fictions and fleshing out their generic affiliations, cinema draws on surrounding popular forms not simply from the past but still active in the music halls, vaudeville theatres, and much of the wider theatrical culture itself, as well, of course, in other sites of mass popular production: illustrated fiction, magazines, the press, public galleries, and cheap prints. Melodrama delivers a generic system as a method of production and marketing, together with a set of visual, gestural, and musical strategies which combine bodily eloquence and spectacle,

already organised to address different audiences. The ascription, 'classic', to film narrative paradoxically ties cinema to a novelistic past in defiance, as Miriam Hansen suggests (Chapter 18), of its modernity. But if the novel is a form that presents all others, it too cannot partake in the purity of the 'classic'. The attempt to define mainstream film as classic neglects not only cinema's melodramatic legacy via the genre system it finds at hand but also flies in the face of the beginnings of modernity both in the melodrama machine and in the Bakhtinian novel.

Paradoxically, then, film *studies* (as opposed to the film *industry*) looks for the 'classic' while relegating melodrama as outmoded. Both moves have been facilitated by the complex history of melodrama's transition into the twentieth century and the critical vicissitudes of its name under pressures of modernisation in which class and gender played their part. A key feature in this history is the presumed superiority of cinema in delivering realism, metioned above (Vardac, 1949; Pearson, 1992). However, as David Mayer (1997) and Thomas Postlewait (1996) insist, the opposition implied between melodrama and realism simplifies the complexity of their relationship. If, as Ben Singer and Steve Neale suggest, the film industry narrows its name generically to sensational action and emotional thrills, nevertheless melodramatic modality continues to dominate mainstream cinema under the new names of Hollywood genres to the present day (Williams, 1998). To unravel this paradox requires a dialectical concept of melodrama–realism relations and of their role in modern culture's changing values, which leads practitioner-critics to disavow melodrama's name while continuing to write within its modality (Postlewait, 1996: 45).

In 'Questions of genre' (1990) Steve Neale substitutes for 'realism' the concept of cultural verisimilitude, constituted by those conventions which represent what society takes as reality, what it finds acceptable. Generic verisimilitude, on the other hand, defines what is expected of a particular kind of *fictional* world. As Neale points out, genres call on cultural verisimilitude according to their relationship to a social world – for example, the historical West in the case of the western or the contemporary urban metropolis in the case of the gangster film. However, while serving the model of bourgeois ideology which dominated 1970s' high theory, the abandonment of realism as an operative concept impoverishes the resulting model of genre culture. The conventions of verisimilitude are not static but shift under the polemic of realism, which can now be more precisely understood as that modality which makes a claim on the real, in a bid to redefine what counts as reality under pressure from struggles between established and emerging or resisting groups (Donald and Mercer, 1981). In the nineteenth century a hegemonic gender ideology of separate spheres provided ideal embodiment for the moral confrontations of a melodramatic modality. For a society governed by white, patriarchal, capitalist inequalities, yet officially committed to Christian morality, 'woman' constituted a signifier of virtue, enduring, combatative, and triumphant, or, if forswearing this role, corrupted and fatal. Functioning symbolically inside genres, such embodied representations circulate back to form social expectations and practices. However, as the socio-political formations and psychic identities of class and gender – on which Victorian melodrama depended – break free from the ideologies and representations that sustained them, the codes of verisimilitude are challenged.

With successive working-class, feminist, and civil rights movements, a reflexive self-consciousness invades an increasingly media-mediated culture: struggles to redefine cultural verisimilitude under the banner of realism follow. So if melodramatic modality aims to render everyday life morally legible and its democratic morality is locked into an aesthetic of justice, it must, in order to command recognition, acknowledge the contested and changing signs of cultural verisimilitude, bringing radical as well as conservative voices into play.

In this context, gender and class constitute key values in a contest for hegomonic control of the diversity and fluidity of a new mass culture and the mass public it brings into being. The drive to preserve cultural space and leadership for a middle-class intellectual elite polarises melodrama and realism as critical values. This had profoundly ambivalent effects for those endeavouring to claim respectability for the industry they depended on, whether studio heads or a critical intelligentsia seeking to promote cinema as an art form. In this context the 'feminine' is recruited to both sides of the struggle. On the one hand, realism, in its association with restraint, underplaying, and the reasoning mind, is valued as masculine, relegating emotion and pathos as feminising. On the other hand, analysis of feeling and dialogue are nurtured in women's fiction, which becomes a staple source for scenario writers of genres labelled 'drama' or given the prefix 'psychological' and aimed at female audiences, who were crucial to raising the cultural respectability of cinema (Neale, 1993).

Thus the name of melodrama is preserved by the film industry for genres which emphasise action and spectacle while minimising (though rarely abandoning) sentiment and pathos in a more direct appeal to urban, proletarian audiences, imagined in the masculine. But how the industry tries to position its product and how film-makers or critics, each with their own stakes in mass culture, respond are very different things. Bette Davis had to fight to retain the dialogue of Olive Higgins Prouty's Now, Voyager (1942), while camerawork, lighting, and Max Steiner's score melodramatise the more attenuated domestic realism of women's fiction (Allen, 1984). Critical literature and review press are scattered with giveaway phrases which attempt to distanciate the effects of the presumed feminising aspects of emotion while finding protective classic names to remasculinise and dignify genres to be rescued for serious critical attention. Thus the first generic mapping of Hollywood reclaims the western as epic, the gangster as tragic hero, and melodrama, inescapable in Douglas Sirk's Hollywood œuvre, is at last acknowledged only through the ancient Greek terms, aporia and peripeteia, as ironising devices deployed to undercut what are described as the hollow sentimentalities derived from a feminised consumerist culture (Gledhill, 1987: 10–11). But all the ancient Greek terminology in the world cannot disguise the melodrama that exploits a realism associated not only with the rich repertoire of sexualised images derived from popular Freudism, but with the intensifying expressive violence of the western, thriller, action movie, and horror film. The taciturnity of masculine realism is the seedbed of melodramatic emotion (Figure 12.5), while the talk that characterises women's cultural forms threatens to dissipate melodrama in analytic discourse.

Application of 'classic' labels, however, is not simply a bid to claim elite cultural values. When André Bazin talked of the 'classical' maturity of Hollywood in the 1930s

Figure 12.5 The taciturnity of masculine realism as seedbed of melodramatic emotion: Clint Eastwood in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976).

and 1940s, he was looking to identify 'the genius of the system' (Bazin, 1968: 154) – a phrase taken up since by David Bordwell et al. (1985) and Thomas Schatz (1988) to connote the smooth working of a well-oiled aesthetic machine. In popular usage 'classic' suggests the realisation of a distinctive fictional world, working within familiar rules (Maltby, 1995: 112–14; Ryall, 1998: 336). This world is both like and not like ours, its boundaries permitting safe encounter with what lies the other side. But submitted to the model of classic narrative, genre's fictional worlds are conceived as formal and ideological systems which programme audience reading or secure compliant subjects. From this perspective, cine-psychoanalysis, with its uncompromising relegation of narrative to 'secondary elaboration' of a primary, underlying psychic substrate, deconstructes the boundary as some kind of regressive security blanket. However, boundaries serve not only to separate and contain but also constitute meeting points, instituting contact between spheres the dominant culture seeks to divide. Definition through differentiation brings new terrain into view. Desire is generated at the boundaries, stimulating border crossings as well as provoking cultural anxieties. This is particularly the case where social identities – gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality – are shifting.

Melodramatic modality is peculiarly attuned to the frisson of the boundary in its search for polarising juxtapositions founded in referential recognition. Symptomatic of

such border activity is the cry of outrage heard from British critics when the Italians used the Eastwood persona to inject into the western a newly sexualised, proletarianised male violence, making a new claim on realism and cutting across the genre's 'classic' codes of honour. In this respect melodrama's protagonists hover between symbolic functions for the genre and the renewal of performance gestures that will command cultural recognition. Importantly, Steve Neale's (1990) account of generic and cultural verisimilitude allows a crossover effect as media fictions circulate in society, supplying generic signs as cultural signposts, and, conversely, reabsorbing cultural codes into generic worlds as markers of authenticity or contemporaneity. An exchange takes place between generic symbol and signifier of the real. Protagonists classed, gendered, or ethnically marked for our cultural recognition take up symbolic positions in a moral and affective drama. Melodramatic modality articulates social, as aesthetic questions, and vice versa. It asks of the protagonists and actors available: who can personify – body forth in their physical presence, in the particularities of personality in their social representativeness – the cause of innocence, justice, hope? Who embodies the oppression and allure of demand run rampant which dares break taboos, releasing desires we disown as threatening destruction? Bodies, gestures, looks, the grain of the voice perform affective scenarios in which aesthetic involves moral and social drama.

Melodrama, as an organising modality of the genre system, works at western culture's most sensitive cultural and aesthetic boundaries, embodying class, gender, and ethnicity in a process of imaginary identification, differentiation, contact, and opposition. But, as we have seen, bodies belong not only to generic worlds. They circulate as representations of ourselves within cultural verisimilitude and are subject to challenge. In a media-saturated society, now aware of sexism, racism, and homophobia, contest over ownership of the image is intensified. In the early stages of genre analysis a common metaphor used of genre was that of a society *talking to itself* (McArthur, 1972) – a metaphor that prefigures Miriam Hansen's development of the concept of cinema as an 'alternative public sphere'. It is now possible to conceptualise the intuitive reach of this metaphor in the tripartite meeting between Bakhtinian dialogism, melodramatic modality, and the boundary encounters of the generic system. In this activity operate the processes by which society enters genre production. Genres construct fictional worlds out of textual encounters between cultural languages, discourses, representations, images, and documents according to the conventions of a given genre's fictional world, while social and cultural conflicts supply material for renewed generic enactments. Heteroglossia and dialogism are built into the genre product's need both to repeat, bringing from the past acculturated generic motifs, and to maintain credibility with changing audiences by connecting with the signifiers of contemporary verisimilitude, including signs of struggles to shift its terms in the name of the real, of justice, of utopian hope. In each addition to a genre, 'thousands of living dialogic threads ... [are] woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance ... it cannot fail to become a participant in social dialogue' (Bakhtin, 1981: 276). Melodrama capitalises on this Babel-like condition, courting the excitement and novelty of sometimes violent, sometimes startling, encounters at the boundaries – giving us, for example, the serial queen, or the 'true woman', as today's action heroine – and

orchestrating proceedings in an eruption of moral and emotional consequences staged in terminal conflicts and clarifying resolutions.

But it is not just inside the fictional worlds constructed by genres that society talks to itself. If taxomonic definition cannot be justified at a meta-discursive level, the zeal with which genre identities such as the western or woman's film are contested demonstrates that naming remains culturally and politically significant. Moreover, just as critics participate in audiences, audiences may also become critics. Thus the women's movement rejected the place Hollywood carved out for women, and reinterprets particular historical cycles and trends from the perspective of a specific social group in a later decade. The new historicity, however, looks for empirical authenticity in the film industry and questions such interventionist critical constructions as bids for cultural prestige or academic advancement – as if historians were not also on the academic payroll. An examination of publicity tells us about a certain 'horizon of expectations' within which films circulate and are positioned for audiences. But the film industry is neither an originating source of categories, nor are such categories the measure of audience response. Putting, as Tom Ryall (1978) recommends, industry, genre product, audiences, and critical institutions back into their shared cultural and social formation makes productive the tension between industry and genre histories. Where, for example, do the names called on by the film industry come from? Barbara Klinger (1994) shows how the term 'adult movie' wins at the box office because it cues into culturally resonant material and attitudes. In claiming maturity with the promise of censored material for adults only, it combines the prestige of the sexually more adventurous European movie with the sensationalism of the 'true confessions' magazine. But while the identification of the category 'adult movie' pinpoints a marketing niche, this does not of itself tell us about the aesthetic or ideological productivity of the films. Indeed, Klinger suggests that these conditions of production and circulation, rather than displacing the family melodrama as an analytical frame, explain why the form retrospectively so named served the adult movie well. The massness of films is so often treated as a direct conduit to social concerns, the historical and cultural analyst may forget what textual understanding of narrative and generic processes can reveal of cinematic experience as yet unarticulated. Audiences may be summoned and aesthetically moved by, and film-makers drawn to, fictional and filmic processes without the critical apparatus that accounts for why. Marketing names, aesthetic practices, and critical values are not coterminous and may conflict.

In producing trends, cycles, and local genres the film industry provides material for the wider process of genre-making, conceived as a process of cultural identity or social imaginary formation in which a range of different agents participate. Genres are central to this process, because they provide public imagery as the building material for the construction of alternative, fictional worlds, while their overlapping boundaries and pool of shared images and conventions mean that they are ripe for reconstruction and retrospective imagination. The job that critics do, then, whether journalistic, academic, or counter-cultural, is to make connections across generic boundaries, to bring into view previously unperceived configurations and patterns – for example: *film noir*, the small-town movie, the woman's film – that were present if unarticulated in a previously figured terrain of an earlier period, and which hold a different significance for us now.

Such configurations become available for new uses by film-makers, audiences, critics, and, if widespread enough, production publicists. In this sense the small-town movie, despite *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *Blue Velvet* (1984), has not yet made it, whereas *film noir* has not only returned but is generating its own subgenres, 'neo-*noir*' and 'tech-*noir*'. Thus the genre system's inevitable historicity, intensified by postmodernity, reinforces the revisiting and reworking of past practices and discourses (Collins, 1993: 246–8).

Recovering the concept of melodramatic modality – as distinct from melodrama's subgenres – forestalls reduction of the symbolic productivity of genre to a form of social or cultural reflection. Because melodramatic modality supervises many but is not identified with any one genre, it offers maximum flexibility, while the permeable boundaries between generic and cultural verisimilitude support two-way exchanges between melodramatic personifications and new signifiers of the 'real'. However, while melodrama as genre machine fosters heteroglossic encounters and dialogic exchanges that play on what Bakhtin (1981: 275) terms 'the elastic environment' of signs, as a polarising modality it drives generic signifiers towards binary oppositions, making signs declare themselves in identification with singular social, affective moral forces (Brooks, 1976). This aesthetic necessity creates conditions in which what cannot be said officially may appear dramatically. Thus melodramatic modality, personifying social forces as psychic energies and producing moral identities in the clash of opposites, is committed to binaries which bring the 'others' of official ideologies into visibility. The body images of liberation and struggle created by the women's movement, black power, and gay liberation – along with a repertoire of gestures, looks, dress codes, character traits, and so on – provide material to melodrama for enactments of heroic resistance against tyranny and of world-transforming hope to counter the terrible fascinations of power at work (Figure 12.6). If the ideological conditions and signs of cultural verisimilitude allow, any 'body' can occupy these positions. Significant are those increasingly numerous occasions when the mantle of victim–survivor–saviour is passing from the white to the black woman or man: 'I'm poor, black, I may even be ugly, but dear God, I'm here!' (*The Color Purple*, 1985). *The Siege* (1998), predictably perhaps, casts terrorism from the Middle East as source of fascinating villainy. But unlike *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which went to Vietnam to find the corruption at the heart of Middle America, *The Siege* (1998), shown in London when the USA and Britain were bombing Iraq and the Clinton impeachment was at its height, uses terrorism as a dramatic catalyst to trigger the aesthetic derangement of white militaristic masculinity in Bruce Willis's American general as the ultimate dystopic threat, against whom Denzel Washington's black crusading policeman fights to protect a vision of original multicultural innocence. Such films can neither be reduced to an ideological substrate nor simply be referred to the conventions which establish a genre as a discrete fictional world. Melodramatic modality is double. Ideologies provide material for symbolic actions and the aesthetic process hands back to the social affective experience and moral perceptions.

Thus genres provide fictional worlds as sites for symbolic actions, but the combination of generic and cultural verisimilitude ensures a fluidity not only between the boundaries that divide one genre from another but also between fictional and social imaginaries. In

Figure 12.6 The body images of liberation: *The Color Purple* (1985).

the process genre itself becomes a dialogised category and, as we have seen, occasion of contest. The historicity of the genre system complicates the uses of film history, for through genre production history is never done with; historical research does not provide a true identity we can find once for all in some past origin but is itself, as Steve Neale, Richard Maltby, and Rick Altman demonstrate, an object of appropriation, struggle, and, moreover, still in the making. Genres are fictional worlds, but they do not stay within fictional boundaries: their conventions cross into cultural and critical discourse, where we – as audiences, scholars, students, and critics – make and remake them. The metaphor of society talking to itself – the notion that film can provide an alternative public sphere – is seen in action as a growing secondary genre industry in film criticism, television shows, film seasons, and pictorial encyclopedias produce a widely diffused film culture increasingly conscious of its own history, calling a range of new stakeholders into implicit or explicit struggle for ownership. Dialogic discourses gather round each genre and we need to be sensitively attuned to what is being said in what arenas and for what purposes by the contradictory voices that mingle there.

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