



Studia
Filmoznawcze
29
Wrocław 2008

Petre Petrov

Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Pittsburgh

THE SCARS OF HISTORY AND THE BALMS OF MELODRAMA IN SOVIET THAW CINEMA

The goal of the present paper is to address analytically, but by no means exhaustively, a significant cultural encounter: that between Soviet film and melodrama. An unavoidable preface to my main argument would be to justify my use of “encounter” in the singular. Since this choice is largely determined by a specific point of view on the thing called “melodrama”, a terminological clarification is in order.

“Melodrama”, as I see it, refers to at least three distinct phenomena. Two of them are conveniently within reach, should we decide to reach for the dictionary. In the first of its meanings, the word takes us to a concrete dramatic form with its concrete historical existence (late 18th–19th centuries), more or less stable generic conventions, staging techniques, etc. The comfort of specificity this designation affords, however, turns into restraint the moment we decide to seek melodrama in other times or cultural fields. At this point, a second meaning offers to guide us, one in which what has hitherto been a stable presence (a set of dramatic texts and their performances) sheds its firmness, leaving us in the possession of an elusive generic contour: “The species of dramatic composition or representation constituted by melodramas; the mode of dramatic treatment characteristic of a melodrama... A series of incidents, or a story true or fictitious, resembling what is represented in a melodrama; also, in generalized sense, melodramatic behaviour, occurrences, etc.” (“Melodrama”, def. 1b, 2). We are no longer dealing with a genre proper but, rather, with a representational mode capable of crossing generic boundaries and lodging itself in various forms of textuality and even in the very flesh of human experience (it is the consciousness of the melodramatic’s penetrative prowess that forced

Ralph Aldo Emerson into an extra-terrestrial last-ditch defense against it: “My idea of heaven is that there is no melodrama in it at all”). Whatever the specific coordinates of this mode – representational conventions, strategies of effect/response, typified motifs and narratemes – they do not prevent it from being seen as a universal, a ubiquitous attendant to man’s work of telling stories, always at hand, ready to be “plugged in”: “Melodrama is material available to everyone, its devices, characters and situations instantly known, implanted by the culture in the psyche of each of its members. This material may easily be aroused, activated, used” (Kirby xiv).

Such an understanding of melodrama would make the notion of encounter between it and Soviet culture seem unjustified. How can melodrama be “encountered” if it is, indeed, a fellow traveler of every culture, if it is an item in every society’s story-telling baggage? By way of deflecting such an objection, I would like to interpose a third meaning of melodrama, one of which an attentive reading of Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* makes us aware. While taking into account the psychologized, universal, and ahistorical definition cited above, Brooks infuses the concept of melodrama with a new doze of historicity:

One might be tempted to consider melodrama as a constant of the imagination and a constant among literary modes: it could be (as some critics have proposed for the terms *baroque* and *romanticism*) one typological pole, detectable at all epochs... Such a conception of the term is no doubt valid; one could reasonably, for instance, talk of the melodramatic in Euripides in distinction to the tragic in Sophocles. But melodrama as we need the term – as it demonstrates its usefulness – appears to be a peculiarly modern form, and there is a specific relevance in the genre labeled melodrama as it comes into being in a historical context. The origins of the melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society. (14–15; emphasis in the original)

Brooks is doing more than advocating a return to the first meaning of the word “melodrama”. His approach is not narrowly historicist, but genealogical (in the Foucauldian sense of the term). As the title of his book suggests, he sees melodrama as referring to much more than a temporally circumscribed body of literary texts. To return to the terms of the preceding discussion, melodrama is for Brooks less a “genre” than a “mode”. This mode, however, is not freely floating over the expanses of time and culture (as the second meaning of melodrama would have it). Instead, it is anchored in a highly specific ideological and epistemological moment in which it finds its necessity.

The value of Brooks's reading is that it allows us to see melodrama with a peculiar kind of double vision: closer to the surface, there is the melodramatic – with its familiar inventory of dramatic strategies, characters, situations, emotional effects – as a corollary of meaning production (such is, for example, its role in the novels of Dostoevsky); on a deeper level, there is the melodramatic as an independent articulator of meaning, as a mouthpiece for a certain apprehension of modernity. Accordingly, one can conceive of two distinct “lives” melodrama leads through history: as a vagrant, homeless form, and as a *keirotic* frame for knowing and narrating experience. This second life of melodrama – melodrama in the fullness of its time – coincides, in Brooks's argument, with the advent of the Modern Age in Europe and is conditioned by the crisis in traditional systems of value and knowledge.

In my own argument, I would like to suggest that, should we wish, we could find in the history of Soviet cinema a moment when melodrama achieves just such a fullness of presence as a representational mode. This moment is the Thaw. Melodrama, in the relaxed sense of the word, had been present, even dominant, on the Soviet screen prior to the 1950. One thinks immediately of the post-revolutionary decade, when the loosened cultural politics of the NEP occasioned a brief blossoming of the genre. It can easily be observed, however, that the eminence of melodrama in those years was a straightforward corollary of popular taste (a taste that I would be tempted to qualify as universal) and, to that extent, could not be said to be in any kind of fundamental relation to Soviet history. By contrast, what is most characteristic of Thaw melodrama are precisely the symptomatics of history: the ways in which the genre is insistently called for by the exigencies of the historical.

As Aleksandr Prokhorov has shown, film melodrama enjoyed a second peak time during the war period, in a short-lived cultural “thaw” that was to be effectively squashed by Zhdanov's counteroffensive of 1946. This, of course, was not the 1920s still-“decadent”, “bourgeois” treatment of the genre, but a properly Soviet version, in which the melodramatic devices and situations were firmly embedded within a “correct” political perspective. Prokhorov notes that, despite its popularity during the war years, melodrama retained its “low” status in the generic hierarchy of Stalinist culture (29). Even more importantly, he perceptively observes that the melodramatic code in war-time films operates as auxiliary to a dominant and very much viable ideological code¹. As the main reason for melodrama's subaltern position within Stalinist culture Prokhorov cites the small-scale of representation – a characteristic very much at odds with the monumentally heroic style of the era (29). With the help of Brooks, this observation can be taken a step further. Far from

¹ Thus in his discussion of family melodrama in Soviet war-time film, Prokhorov notes that the integrity and survival of the nuclear family is a transparent pointer to the triumph of the Great Family, the Soviet Union (28).

being merely about scale, the monumentality of Stalinist culture is, really, a matter of *hierophany*². The monumental in Stalinist socialist realism is the representational space where materiality is asked to yield a qualitative surplus, become more than itself, and stand for something beyond itself: the presence of the Sacred. This is, of course, a different, secularized, Sacred, but a communal Sacred it is, and so much the worse for melodrama. For melodrama, in the strong sense that Brooks advances, thrives in a communal space in which the vistas to the transcendent have been lost or obscured. Melodrama's intervention then amounts to retracing these vistas, only this time their starting point is not the *socium* but the *individuum*³. Stalinist culture does not need such an intervention; within it, reality is always already conceived of as communally experienced hierophany; melodrama's function is, therefore, at best, attendant and auxiliary and, at worst, tautological and obsolete.

It is only with the end of Stalinism that the melodramatic, in the strong sense, comes into its own. For it is precisely then that the Soviet social Sacred enters a moment of crisis. Then melodrama is insistently called upon to institute its "moral occult" (Brooks) as a compensation and antidote for a severely discredited communal faith. It was no longer a question – as it had been during the war years – of "tapping" into private sentiment and mobilizing it for the holy common cause. It was, rather, that the very holiness of *cosa nostra* had been put in doubt, and had to be reinstituted, conceptualized anew, starting from the individual and the private.

In order to fully comprehend the dramatic epistemological shift brought about with the end of the Stalinist period, I would need to stress the fundamental work historical time does in instituting the secularized Sacred of Soviet culture. The progressive vector of history not only links past to present, so that the latter can recognize its origin in the former, but also assures every present that it is both the best of times and an opening onto the best of times. The present is, thus, obliged to see within itself the embryo of the definite future, a future that is, no more and no less, the triumphant second Babel on earth: the exodus of secular community into a Beyond of its own making. The radiance of the projected future cannot but be transmitted down the chain of historical causation to the here-and-now of Soviet society, thereby marking this here-and-now as a provenance of the Sacred (the distinction past-present-future is, in a sense, a "technical" one: there is really only one, sacred, time, unfolding toward its fullness – a terminal point of stasis where history and its coordinates – past, present, and future – are suspended).

What changes in the period 1953–1956⁴ is not only the course of Soviet social and political life, i.e. history as exterior to text, but also the way in which *homo*

² A term Mircea Eliade uses to denote a manifestation of the sacred.

³ "Melodrama represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms" (Brooks 16).

⁴ This is the transitional period between late Stalinism and the Thaw, circumscribed by Stalin's death in March of 1953 and the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in

Sovieticus relates to history; this changed relationship is the principal interior condition for making sense of the world in the texts of Thaw culture. The revelation of the crimes committed by Stalin and his administration at the twentieth Party congress in February of 1956 does not simply create a traumatic past in the memory of Soviet society. Neither is it simply a matter of atoning for sins, locating guilt, etc. The consequences reach much deeper. They amount to a temporary discrediting of progressive historical time as a maker of meaning. What is put into question is not the status of this or that valorized past (the Revolution and the Great Patriotic War – the most salient examples – retain their sacred and evangelical aura), or the „bright future” ahead; it is the connection of these moments to one another and to the present that is problematized. Historical necessity and dialectical determination, which have, hitherto, secured the continuum are no longer reliable categories (if they are to be trusted, the more recent, „chthonic”, past must also be seen as predetermined and necessary). All this is to say that the secular Sacred is jeopardized, since its presence in the here-and-now of Soviet society rested precisely on the secure continuity between past, present, and future. To eschew this predicament, the Thaw needs a new epistemological arrangement, a new way of conceiving man and history.

The simplest, if somewhat aphoristic, way of formulating this new epistemological position is to say that while, earlier, man passed through history, the Thaw would image history as passing through man; while before man was asked to be in stride with history, now history would be asked to be in stride with man. What I mean by „man” is, of course, not the quotidian „every man”, but, rather, a certain normative concept of humanity, an ideal vision of *homo Sovieticus*. Every moment in time now would be seen not so much horizontally – in its relation to preceding and subsequent moments – but vertically, as it measures against this normative yardstick. The pasts of Soviet society are now stacked alongside a moral sacrament and valorized accordingly: some are conceived as „high”, others as „low”, times.

Thaw’s preference for vertical spatiality over the previous code of linear temporality affects also the concept of the present. The present is imaged as „mundane”, unilateral space oblivious to its connection with a „higher” plateau of human being (what I referred to as the moral sacrament): the world is trapped in its flatness. Many texts of the Soviet Thaw can, thus, be read as so many variations on a dominant theme: delivering the (Soviet) present from its (seeming) flatness and connecting it to a redeeming elevated dimension.

By its very nature, melodrama is destined to play an instrumental role in accomplishing just this cultural mission. In fact, the mission itself is fully resonant with the function of melodrama as seen by Brooks. Referring to the melodramatic in Balzac, Brooks observes:

February of 1956, which witnessed the historical speech by Nikita Khrushchev disclosing some of the „aberrations” of the previous regime.

We might say that the center of interest and the scene of underlying drama reside within what we could call the “moral occult”, the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated and masked by the surface of reality... [It is] a realm which in quotidian existence may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value. The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult.

What I am trying to suggest is that the very nature of the melodramatic mode “clicks” with the cultural moment of the Thaw.

Thaw melodrama, of course, has a specificity of its own dictated by the specificity of the epistemological and cultural moment in which it must operate. If the pathos of traditional melodrama derives from the dramatic struggle of polarized moral forces underlying the quotidian, Thaw melodrama dramatizes the very access to the moral sacrament beneath the quotidian; it musters empathy for that moment in which the dull ontological film covering and flattening the present is pierced to open the dimension of normative morality. Thaw melodrama is not Manichean. Its libidinal charge resides not in the suspenseful reversals of fortune between good and evil, purity and moral destitution, etc.; instead, it is released through what I would call the “appeal of moral debt”. Through his actions, which take him to various forms of victimhood, the central hero of Thaw melodrama opens within the present the unbearable gap of ethical demand. The site of the hero’s victimization becomes an emotional centrifuge that “sucks in”, absorbs – through pity, remorse, guilt, etc. – the *socium* within the film and the *socium* in front of the screen, thus forcing them to partake of the moral sacrament.

Most of the celebrated film premieres of the Thaw – *Pavel Korchagin* (1956), *The Communist* (1957), *Cranes are Flying* (1957), *The House I Live in* (1957), *Ballad of a Soldier* (1959), *The Fate of a Man* (1959), *Clear Skies* (1961), *Nine Days in One Year* (1962), *Colleagues* (1962) – may serve to illustrate this general scheme. Given the constraints of space, I would like to consider just one, less familiar, example: Vasilii Ordynskii’s 1964 film *The Great Ore* [*Bol’shaia ruda*]. It is a production arguably inferior to those just cited; I am choosing it because it articulates with iconic clarity the main movement of Thaw melodrama: the piercing of the surface reality hiding the dimension of the essential.

The film begins with the arrival of the hero, Viktor, at a mine in Ukraine in search for a job. The work at the mine has not moved much beyond its initial stage: the ore has not yet been reached, which is a source of considerable anxiety, even discouragement, among the mine’s engineers. Viktor is hired as a driver and given a truck that is so run down that needs to be, practically, constructed anew. In the following several scenes, we watch a love affair between a man and a truck, as Viktor, with his own, “golden”, hands puts together and adorns his *mazik*⁵. When he finally

⁵ Viktor refers to his truck with the diminutive of its maker name, MAZ.

begins work, Viktor must cart twenty-two loads of gravel, instead of the customary seventeen, since his truck is smaller than the other drivers'. He accepts this condition without remonstrations, and there begins a veritable race along the narrow roads of the mine, as Viktor tries to overtake his colleagues and their norms.

The narrative introduces a new measure of distance between the hero and the drivers' collective when a stretch of inclement weather begins. The rain makes the unpaved road to the excavation site dangerous, and the work comes to a halt. We see the drivers playing cards while waiting for the rain to stop. Viktor's conscience, however, does not allow him to remain idle. He decides to continue work at a risk for his and his truck's well-being. A jarring symphony for an overcharged engine and battering rain accompanies Viktor's superhuman efforts. Their first result is the hostility of the other drivers: they try to, first, convince and, then, bully Viktor into "loyalty", but he remains firm.

Needless to say, the "great ore" is reached at a time when it is only the hero's fanatic devotion that keeps the excavator running. In an act of inspired folly, Viktor decides to cart a double load of the newly discovered treasure. Predictably, the *ma-zik* slides off the muddy road and crashes. Viktor dies a couple of days later in the local hospital. Before he does, he is visited by his colleagues, who have trouble hiding their remorse behind clumsy words of encouragement. The doctor summoned from the big city enters the scene to announce the hero's imminent death and pronounce his epitaph: "He knew his work better than we do". In a contrapuntal concluding move, the film shifts from Viktor's bedside back to the mine, where the festivities celebrating the discovery of the ore are in full swing. The closing shot zooms in on the front page of the local newspaper, where a picture shows the day's celebrities: the mine's officials and engineers. Viktor is among them, in a way that is slightly disturbing and highly symbolic: his figure is cut out from an old photograph and pasted onto this one (he is in a soldier's uniform, his face anachronistically youthful).

The symbolical implications of the film's plot are more than transparent: the moral sacrament, whose carrier is Viktor, is refigured as a treasure buried in the bowels of the earth. As the terrestrial surface opens toward bountiful depths, the hero's character is revealed, opening new ethical plateaus. The access to the moral sacrament and the discovery of the ore coincide: the earth breaks away from its surface, while the moral universe breaks free from its flatness. Through Viktor's death, the excavation site becomes also a site of moral debt. The mining project is responsible for the former, the project of melodrama – for the latter.

If the moral sacrament is the vehicle of the metaphor the film unfolds, then this vehicle operates under a double tenor. On one hand, there is the geologic incursion; on the other, there is an excursion in the past – both individual and communal.

In a delirious dream preceding his death, Viktor relives the main moments of his life after the war. We see him, first, as a soldier, returning from the front to his beloved. He is on a boat, crossing a vast river shrouded in mist. From the ferryman

Viktor learns that his bride-to-be is engaged to another. He convinces himself of this during his short sojourn in the village. The dream scene of the two former lovers' reunion culminates in a close up of the woman's face as she laughs cynically at Viktor and his renewed marriage proposal.

Although Viktor returns, presumably, to his native village, we never see him entering his own house (only that of his fiancée). We must understand that his true home was left there, in the misty beyond from which he has just emerged. The river of his dream is none other than the symbolic Styx of Thaw culture, separating the land of ideals from the profane space of "our" present. Now a prisoner of the latter, Viktor can acknowledge his lost motherland only by refusing to inhabit any identifiable "here". And, indeed, the rest of Viktor's (dream) past is dominated by images of trains that take him in an unknown direction. He becomes the resident of the road, unable to find a home anywhere but in the very imperative for movement.

When he stops to begin work at the mine, he does so because he finally senses the opportunity for escape from the horizontality that imprisons him. In this sense, the geologic penetration is analogous to a recovery of the lost motherland, to crossing, in the opposite direction, of the river separating the sacred past of the war from the mundane present of the post-war years. The Great Ore and the Great (Patriotic) War coincide in the symbolical topology of the cinematic text. This is made clear by one of the more memorable cuts in the film. It provides a transition between Viktor's last moments of consciousness and the final sequence of the narrative, featuring the mass festivities at the mine. As Viktor's dream narrative ends, the film shifts to a series of explosions on a snow-covered ground. Yet another cut takes us to a procession of trucks adorned with banners, carting the newly extracted ore. The intervening episode of the explosions remains ambiguous: it is motivated both as an epilogue to what precedes it and as a prologue to what follows it. It is clearly evocative of a war scene, and can, thus, be read as a visually announcing the death of Viktor (who, throughout the dream sequence, has been dressed as a soldier). But another possibility is also open: these may be, simply, geological detonations announcing the commencement of the mine's industrial exploitation. In fact, this is an ambiguity that need not be resolved. As I noted, we have here a coincidence of two tenors – the war and the ore – participating in one and the same metaphorical operation. They both connect to the same vehicle: an essential spiritual reality behind the veil of the quotidian.

It is difficult to find a better illustration than *The Great Ore* for the argument I made earlier concerning the new ways in which the Thaw images history. Valorized pasts do not foreshadow, herald, condition the present. They are part of the topology of the present, sites in its landscape. The peak times of Soviet history are "pasts" only formally; in fact, they are not subject to pastness. In relation to the present, they are not thought in categories of temporality. In its fabric, these "high times" exist as "high spheres", ethical landmarks. The Thaw's essential project is, thus, to re-

write social history as moral spatiality. For a “narrativized” world, it must substitute a “dramatized” one, meaning that what was previously thought of in terms of unfolding progression would now have to be conceived of a conflict between co-present forces or states of existence. Innocence and guilt, virtue and sin, ugliness and beauty – the typical values with which the melodramatic polarizes and dramatizes its universe – are reinvoked and reworked in the films of Thaw to symbolize, without explicitly naming it, the sin that was Stalinism and the historical guilt associated with it against the original purity and beauty of the socialist idea.

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BLIZNY HISTORII I BALSAMY MELODRAMATU W RADZIECKIM KINIE ODWILŻOWYM

Streszczenie

Autor pisze w swoim szkicu o wyidealizowanej rzeczywistości Związku Radzieckiego ukazywanej w melodramatach powstałych w okresie tzw. odwilży Chruszczowowskiej. Koncentruje się zwłaszcza na jednym filmie – *Bolszaja ruda* (1964 – polski tytuł *Ambicja*) Wasilija Ordynskiego. Melodramat w powojennej Rosji Radzieckiej nie był, jak ten z lat dwudziestych, z okresu NEP-u, „burżuazyjny”, „dekadencki”, lecz stanowił „ulepszoną”, radziecką wersję gatunkową – melodramatyczne sytuacje i środki ekspresji stosowane były dla ukonkretnienia na ekranie „poprawnej” politycznej perspektywy. Film Ordynskiego artykułuje z obrazową klarownością główne znamię odwilżowego melodramatu: przekłucie powierzchownej rzeczywistości przy jednoczesnym ukrywaniu wymiarów tego, co esencjonalne, ważne. W istocie w melodramacie *Ambicja* nie uczucia ludzkie są w centrum, lecz przeszłość, która jednakowoż postrzegana jest jako „wyższy czas”, „wysoka sfera zbiorowej egzystencji”, epoka „etycznych punktów orientacyjnych”. Zasadniczym projektem odwilży jest ponowne napisanie społecznej historii jako przestrzeni moralnej. Film Ordynskiego jest częścią tego projektu.

Przełożył Sławomir Bobowski