What do Jane Austen and Quentin Tarantino have in common? Since the Industrial Revolution (and other cultural transformations of the 18th Century), popular story forms have changed in tandem with shifts in the organization of work and leisure. Melodrama and realism, the major genres/styles of this period, have often been seen as antagonistic toward each other. In this class, however, we’ll follow up on recent suggestions that both modes always co-exist even though melodramatic and realistic texts often differ clearly in ostensible purpose, effect, and audience. Melodrama, for example, promotes conventionality but subversively celebrates the felt over the known and thereby speaks an otherwise unspeakable truth. Realism, in contrast, was developed to criticize a world that can be known and articulated, and yet the form tends to isolate the individual while failing to promote collectivity. Class texts will enable us to consider melodrama and realism as responses to or consequences of the key changes said to characterize Western modernity: the loss of common belief in the universal and metaphysical; the newfound role of the machine in relation to art; shifts in the political meaning of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and the philosophical arguments that emerged from the tension between the “Age of Enlightenment” and “Discovery of the Unconscious.”

Whether defined as a genre or a mode, melodrama allows for several approaches that shed light on cultural history, aesthetics, audiences, and the politics of everyday life. A fuller study of melodrama would encompass more music—its role in the stage melodramas that dominated popular culture in the 19th century and especially within the ultimate combination of music and drama, grand opera. While we discuss the role of music we will also be attentive to the way in which meanings are conveyed and feelings are provoked in films, plays, and written literature through other non-verbal means such as silence, gesture, and imagery.

Over the course of this semester the students will work towards their own definition of melodrama, largely through examining a number of texts that have either been labeled melodrama or that speak to arguments about it, including Peter Brooks’s claims about its importance in post-theological modernity and Linda Williams’s claim that all American (popular) narratives are melodrama.
A recurring point of discussion will be the power of melodrama to voice sentiments on behalf of those in socially marginalized positions. Plots that highlight conflicts of race, gender, class, and sexuality are very much on our seminar table, and we will pay particular attention to the ongoing association of melodrama with female audiences and characters.

**COURSE GOALS:**

In addition to gaining a deeper knowledge of the works and authors on the required reading lists, students will leave this class with clearer notions of terms such as “genre” and “style” and a fuller knowledge of the dramatic and conceptual structures associated with the terms “melodrama” and “realism.” By the end of the semester the student should be able to speak knowledgeably about the similarities and differences between theatrical, novelistic, and cinematic narrative forms of melodrama and able to place these forms in relation to the periods familiarly called “Realism” and “Modernism.”

**REQUIRED READINGS AND VIEWINGS:**

Fannie Hurst’s novel *Imitation of Life* is on order at the NYU Bookstore. Other readings (marked with an “*”) will be posted on the NYU Classes site. All of these films are readily available online or at the Avery-Fisher Library at Bobst or can be purchased (often quite inexpensively) in DVD format.

**FILMS:**

- D. W. Griffith: *Way Down East* (1920)
- Clarence Brown: *Possessed* (1931)
- King Vidor: *Stella Dallas* (1937)
- Yasujirō Ozu, *What Did the Lady Forget?* (1937)
- Wong Kar Wai: *In the Mood for Love* (2000)
- Quentin Tarantino: *Django Unchained* (2012)
ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

In-class presentations: two per semester on dates to be assigned later and individually. After your presentation, please submit a 1 – 2 page version by the next class meeting. 

Percentage of final grade: 25%

Midterm Paper: 5 – 6 pages, prompts will be distributed, due October 16

Percentage of final grade: 25%

Final Paper: 10 – 12 pages in two parts: part A developing an argument on the text of your choice and related to our concentration, part B in response to prompts that will be distributed on December 9

Percentage of final grade: 35%

Class Participation

Percentage of final grade: 15%

Attendance is vital. Please email me in advance if you miss a class.

Notes on the in-class presentations:

Your presentation should include at least three of the following:
- researched information about the author, director, or any other interesting topic that will help us place the work in historical context
- a general overview of the plot and major themes of the work
- the analysis of a particular scene (or some other aspect or feature of the work that captures your curiosity)
- possible questions for the day’s group discussion

Academic integrity: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website.

http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html
**SYLLABUS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, September 2</td>
<td>Introductions – What is melodrama and why do we care? Genre or mode? Style and narrative. Melodrama and modernity. The Problem of taste.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, September 14 –</td>
<td>Watch: Douglas Sirk: <em>Written on the Wind</em></td>
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<td>Wednesday, September 16</td>
<td>Read:</td>
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<td>*Eric Bentley, “Melodrama” (from <em>The Life of the Drama</em>)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*Rohan McWilliam, “Melodrama” (from the <em>Companion to Sensation Fiction</em>)</td>
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<td>Monday, September 21 -</td>
<td>Sources of Melodrama: The Gothic and Realism</td>
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<td>Wednesday September 23</td>
<td>*Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher”</td>
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<td>*Gustave Flaubert, “A Simple Heart”</td>
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<td>* Peter Brooks, from <em>The Melodramatic Imagination</em></td>
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<td>Monday, September 28</td>
<td>*Dion Boucicault, <em>The Octoroon</em></td>
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<td>Wednesday, September 30</td>
<td>*Henrik Ibsen, <em>Hedda Gabler</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, October 5</td>
<td>Watch: D. W. Griffith, <em>Way Down East</em></td>
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<td>Wednesday, October 7 –</td>
<td>Read:</td>
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<td>Tuesday, October 13 –</td>
<td>*Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, October 14</td>
<td>*Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today”</td>
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<tr>
<td>n.b. no classes on Monday,</td>
<td>*Ben Singer, from <em>Melodrama and Modernity</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>October 12—instead, Monday classes meet instead on Tuesday, October 13 (legislative day)</td>
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**MIDTERM PAPER DUE BY FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16**

*Case Study: The 1930’s Hollywood Melodrama (mothers, shopgirls, man trouble)*

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, October 19 –</td>
<td>Watch: <em>Possessed</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, October 21</td>
<td>Read: *Fannie Hurst, <em>Imitation of Life</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday, October 26 –</td>
<td>Watch: <em>Stella Dallas</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, October 28</td>
<td>Read: <em>Linda Williams, “Something Else Besides a Mother</em>: <em>Stella Dallas</em> and the Maternal Melodrama*</td>
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</table>
*E. Ann Kaplan, “Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film 1910-40”

Monday, November 2 – Wednesday, November 11
Watch: *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Imitation of Life* (1959)
Read:
*John Mercer and Martin Shingler, “Style” (from *Melodrama, Style, Sensibility*)
*Lauren Berlant, “National Brands, National Body,” Chapter Three of *The Female Complaint*

Monday, November 16
Watch: Douglas Sirk, *All that Heaven Allows*

Wednesday, November 18
Watch: Rainer Maria Fassbinder, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*

Monday, November 23
Watch: Todd Haynes, *Far from Heaven*

Wednesday, November 25
*Thanksgiving Break*

*How “Western” is Melodrama?*

Monday, November 30
Watch: *What Did the Lady Forget?*

Wednesday, December 2
Watch: *In the Mood for Love*

Monday, December 7 – Monday, December 14
Watch: *Django Unchained*
Student presentations on final paper topics

Wednesday, December 16
*FINAL PAPERS DUE*