

Melodrama as a Shortcut to Stress Tranquilizing

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MALE and female preferences as regards to the films they choose to watch bears great similarities to their choice of magazines and literature. Overall women choose to watch films of a more romantic nature, while men are generally drawn more towards action and pornography (Fischhoff, et al., 1998). Social and cultural models are often used to explain why the sexes have different genre preferences. However, it could be argued that there are various biological elements in these genres that illuminate essential aspects of the sexes' psychology. My position is to reflect upon a new line of argumentation. Namely, that of combining functionality with neurology, biology and evolutionary psychology in order to advocate what might make up the main building materials before the cultural and social pressures set in.

I shall give a few examples of how such a functional model might work, and concentrate on the gratifications that might derive from engaging with the reproductive suffering in the maternal melodrama, *Terms of Endearment* (Brooks, 1983).

Reproductive psychology

The purpose of my account is not to invalidate a feminist critique of the majority of film genres. Issues of social roles remain crucial to contest. Rather, my objective can be summed up as an attempt to broaden some of the perspectives that feminist film theory has avoided dealing with. My goal is not to advocate conservative family values. It is more of an attempt to stress that in order to change and to understand cinematic representations, we have to include the framework of human sexuality. It is important to note that despite the fact that film theory often requires speculations about the design and functions of the spectator's mind, it does not tell us anything about human biology. Nor does it try to explain the implications of the mind's evolved reproductive functions for the structure of film narratives. I'm not arguing that all aspects of film theory will be amenable to the adaptationist framework. Nor that everything in the melodrama plot can be boiled down to questions regarding reproductive strategies and solutions. My position is simply to scrutinize how we might utilize the adaptationist framework to enlighten the gendered paradox of fiction. After all, it is better to know than not to know.

Different desires

In mainstream feminist film theory the term "desire" is often referred to as a repressed sexual motivation to watch. This line of argument is put forward, despite the fact that the term evidently involves a whole range of aspects and tasks of mate assessment, partner selection strategies, and child rearing tactics. Mating psychology and reproduction are dismissed as too troublesome to include in female subjectivity due to ideological reasons. Since

issues of mating behaviour and child rearing have always been part of the human evolutionary environment - and because these mating tasks affect individual fitness - we might, nevertheless, expect the spectator's mind to contain adaptations designed to address specifically the psychological and social obstacles that accompany procreation.

Evolutionary psychology tackles sexual differences in a functional manner. In the neurobiology of the sexes - the view of emotions describe sexuality, love, and sex-specific behaviour as matters of biological functions. Here, the biological entity of sex is inevitably linked to the special genetic interests. The theoretical point here is that despite the cognitive component results in irrational behaviour – such as a female spectator aspiring to stereotypical versions of womanhood in the Hollywood romance - the viewing can easily be rational in its functional form. The reason is that the melodrama plot taps into what we might refer to as “the reproductive motivation system” in the brain. This system was developed during our hunter-gatherer phase of human evolution, in order to optimize and specialize procreative fitness. Darwinian selection (including sexual selection) is the only known source for the functional complexity of living things. Biologists have no reason to believe there are no others (Dawkins, 1986).

My hypothesis is that films emphasizing the quest of finding an exclusive romantic partner or how to evaluate the most optimal child-care strategies have a particularly strong effect on the average female spectator's cognitive and emotional make-up. Especially the melodrama genre fits the bill perfectly when it comes to elaboration on these issues. The reason is that the melodrama relies on, illuminates and exploits relevant issues of mate choices and reproductive care that were relevant even to our ancestral grandmothers. Since the nature of sexual reproduction poses radically different problems for the two sexes – these problems have challenged both male and female flexibility in functional brain wear and cognitive and emotional mind-sets. Mating preferences can be predicted to differ along several dimensions in aesthetics. In those reproductive areas we might expect the relevance of a film to depend on the sex of the spectator – and to what extent the protagonist, the theme and the style of the film might gratify and afford the spectator reproductively speaking (Kramer, 2004).

Making special in the maternal melodrama

Evolutionary psychologists insist that whenever an intense pleasure is found in human life, such as the pleasure of melodrama, there is likely to be some reproductive or survival angle connected to it. Ellen Dissanayake (2000: 134) has proposed art to be valued on the same level as play and rituals as human behaviours that "make special". She claims that the arts evolved as an intrinsic need to make socially important activities memorable and pleasurable.

From the perspective of “making special”, the maternal melodrama, to make an example, manifests itself as a narrative with a made special characteristic of certain themes and goals. The maternal melodrama differs from the romantic melodrama and soaps that often elicit young fertile women who

utilize certain strategies to pick a partner such as in the popular HBO TV series *Sex and the City* (1998-2003) and the prototypical Hollywood romance. The maternal melodrama often has a romantic angle to it but it generally evolves around a mother's reproductive tactics. Often it describes a woman, who is facing a dilemma that consists of a social narrative that meets certain helpers and barriers framed by the cultural environment and challenged by biology. Biological dispositions thus quickly become a social and cultural narrative. To what degree the biological and the environmental conditions will influence the individual is, of course, in constant dialogue.

The classical tear jerking scene of the maternal melodrama portrays a suffering woman, who is deprived of her closest relatives while facing a loss or a near loss that derives from such a reproductive predicament. In *Terms of Endearment*, the protagonist Emma – played by Debra Winger - is dying of cancer. She has decided to give her three children away out of reproductive despair. We meet her alone in her hospital room. She is preparing herself to see the children for the last time. She is going to split them up: giving her sons to her mother. The oldest of the sons is emotionally fragile presumably because of the many fights he has experienced between his parents. Emma's closest friend, Patsy, will adopt the third and youngest child: a little girl. This is the optimal choice for Emma, since her husband – the feeble literature professor Flap - is too immature to be a full time father. The tragedy of the scene where Emma disguises her weakness is not only the fact that she is dying young. Foremost, the scene gives salience to the mixed emotions of the romantic love that will never be. The tragedy might also be regarded from a reproductive perspective. Emma's sickness is the culmination of the relatively poor choices she has made. Emma is dying knowing that it is her own flaws that have given her the most pain. Even though women's cognitive and emotional components for mind reading are on average better than men's, Emma has been a bad mind reader. She was not perceptive enough to predict how Flap might develop as a father or that he would be unfaithful to her. In retrospect, she is reproductively irresponsible. Due to this flaw, she has put her children in a weaker position than she would otherwise have done. Moreover, she dies knowing that it is too late to remedy.

What could Emma have done to avoid this? She could have married another more suitable man. She could have been less eager to escape her dominating mother and run off with the first man that came along. She could have focused on her own self-realization instead of becoming a young mother of three. When Emma has to say goodbye to her children she is therefore forced to cover for Flap's misdeeds and her own mistakes, while she is embracing death. The scene from the hospital is the culmination of the relatively poor choices she has made in her life. Her pain is framed in a series of close ups in connection with reaction shots of her children and the surrounding family that come to see her for the last time.

Functional training

The scene does not necessarily have to place Emma as a weak mother or absorb the spectator into masochism or a masquerade as often portrayed by

feminist critics (Mulvey, 1975, 1989, Doane, 1987, 1982). The sincerity of the scene as emphasized through communicative close-ups can function as an abstract learning scenario. Given those special cognitive and emotional capacities that women have evolved - as for instance their more refined sense of emphatic mind reading that the natural sciences report women to possess - the tragedy of the scene can be seen as consisting of a worst case scenario that women might have special dispositions to receive. The melodramatic scene might thus be regarded as a scenario for reproductive learning, providing the spectator with an image of functional training involved in a biologically meaningful life concern. Simulation - as it runs off-line in the cinema - entails a given behaviour being carried out under circumstances that emphasize real life cognitive processes, such as mate choices and reproductive strategies. This indicates that the purpose of the mechanisms sub-serving imagination and pretence is to test-run possible courses of action (Steen and Owens, 2001).

Psychologists Ed S. Tan and Nico H. Frijda (1999) have argued that emotions occur when a situation is relevant for an individual's concerns. They consist of an assessment of the situation's significance and an action tendency. The emotional experience is thus the awareness of the situations particular meaning, in terms of a relevance of a concern and the felt-action tendency. Through empathetic engagement with Emma's dilemma, spectators are provided with both strategic and functional exercises - before they enter the mating game or motherhood for real. Of course, women make conscious choices and sacrifices to pick a partner and nurture their children. But it seems likely that nature has given women some biological and cognitive hints just in case they do not automatically deliver the care needed for their children to face maturity successfully.

What makes the melodrama relevant for functional training?

The melodrama is pragmatic and holistic. It strips down information for the spectator to get an overview of character development. Ideally, it is communicative in the sense that it helps us notice reproductively useful strategies that might be concealed or difficult to notice in real life. As a result of constant selection pressures in increasing perceptual sufficiency, our cognitive system has developed in a manner whereby our perceptual mechanisms seek automatically to identify potentially relevant stimuli such as the reproductive relevant information arising from Emma's reproductive difficulty (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Even if the perception system we utilize in the cinema doesn't initially help spectators to produce healthy babies or to select the most reproductively ideal partners when we leave the cinema, the melodramatic imagination might provide the spectator with certain cognitive and effective advantages. The ones who has been in love or has been trying to do strategic reproductive planning knows that the wounds you get in real life can be gruesome compared to the ones you might get from engaging with characters and prototypical reproductive scenarios in the cinema.

Emotional and social bonding

More precisely, the melodrama is a core “mating genre” in the sense that it reveals the softer emotions of life. Tenderness, sincerity, and empathy have evolved primarily to maintain reproductive functions that benefit future generations. Such considerations are fundamental aspects of the term “desire”. When those essential emotional and social reproductive bonds are threatened, substitutes in the shape of sisters, female friends and family members might take over, in order to provide that extra help that could be lost with the paternal investment. In the melodrama rhetoric of contemporary cinema, female characters look for comfort within their own ranks to solve problems. During the relationship with Flap, Emma consults her mother and her girlfriend for help. The female bonding system as a solution to stress situations is widely distributed as a key scene in women’s film and TV-series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2003), *Waiting to Exhale* (Whitaker, 1995), *Crush* (McKay, 2002), *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky, 1978), *The First Wives Club* (Wilson, 1996), etc. Female bonding offers a solution that might work alongside romantic love or in extension to it. It might be appropriate to regard these female alliances as something else than a bisexual possibility. From a prehistoric point of view such female ties were selected for reproductive reasons. Women and children have initially stayed alive over the centuries because women form friendships. This disposition might have begun as a counter strategy in those cases where mothers were abandoned by their spouses or in times where food supplies were short and physical dangers many. Beginning from early childhood girls develop more intimate friendships than boys and create larger social networks for themselves (Baron-Cohen, 2003). Such female primate networks can be amazingly strong social systems. In an ideal scenario, food got distributed, babies were cared for, future mothers were trained, while everyone else got groomed and tendered in the process.

When scientists have listened to men and women’s solutions to stress, there is substantial consistency. Women turn to their social group when they are overloaded by burdens. They speak with their friends or spouses. They comfort the ones they love. The difference between men and women’s inclinations to turn to the social group within times of stress are ranked with “giving birth” as among the most reliable sex differences (Taylor, 2002: 24).

Psychologists from UCLA have found that in times of trouble, especially women are biologically programmed to seek the comfort and support of social groups (Taylor, 2002). Male groups, on the other hand, are described more unemotionally. They are often related to either a personal bond between two people or as a camaraderie that is capable of coping with terror and pain in warfare. This might reflect the average male spectator’s preference for buddy-films, war and action films, such as it is depicted in film like *The Thin Red Line* (Malick, 1998) or *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998). Here brotherly alliances are formed to resist external threats and to perform well in order to fight injustice. From a functional perspective, film preferences might have a biological drive that works along cultural and social motivations deriving from the different challenges that the sexes face.

Underlying biological drive

It is likely that there is a neurological explanation behind such observations. Hormones such as oxytocin and the peptides EOP (endogenous opioid peptides) for example prime women. When the hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress responses in a woman, it protects the so-called "fight or flight" response that men generally turn to under stress. Oxytocin in women encourages them to tend to their children or to cultivate conversations with friends instead. Estrogens – known as the female hormones - seem to enhance oxytocin. When a woman engages in this tending or befriending urge, more oxytocin is released, which further counters stress and produces a calming effect. This calming response does not occur in men. Testosterone - which men produce in high levels under stress - seems to lower the effects of oxytocin and thus counter the calming effect. It seems probable that the enjoyable experience of plain predictable romance or maternal entertainment - and the narrative solutions these films offer the spectator - might be felt as rewarding – partly because they highlight essential features that maintain procreation. Oxytocin appears to get some help in this process.

EOP peptides are those energy boosters that athletes have referred to as "runners high". They can cause the feeling of being in a pain free zone especially during peak performances where extra energy causes feelings of ecstasy. EOPs are also known as contributors for easing pain under labour and prompting milk production. They seem to play a role in social behaviour. Scientists believe they are one of the main hormones in maternal behaviour that make women - and perhaps not men - more social (Taylor, 2002).

Consider the classical mother and child constellation most evident in the Madonna with the Jesus child in her mourning arms. This is an icon that has been known throughout the arts since Michelangelo (1497-1500) and has been repeated in film history with Bergman's high angle pietà shot in *Cries and Whispers* (1972), where it is seen as one of the most exquisite evocations of care giving qualities. Here the good Anna tends the dead body of the maid Agnes lying in the crucifix position evoking religious symbolism. Anna and Agnes might have been lovers, but it could also be that such forceful depictions have become classical because of the functionality of their design. The demonstration of Anna's fertile and tending giving features and skills so crucial for procreation might provide us with the felt quality of pleasure, because such representations feed the eye with essential information to maintain human reproduction. It is striking in this regard that the earliest known forms of art are drawings of the famous Venus figures in various variations of the female fertility spectrum that we often meet in the melodrama embodied by female characters (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999: 18).

Romantic and maternal loves are often connected with beauty. They constitute emotional states that have provided forceful motivating factors for human action. Human brain imaging studies show that there are large overlapping areas of the brain that are implicated in romantic and maternal love, and which contain rich densities of the neuro-hormones vasopressin and oxytocin, especially known in women to maintain the mother-infant bond and

romantic love. Common sites in the reward system of the brain are also implicated during the experience of love and beauty. The intensity of activity in these sites is related to the reported subjective feeling of beauty. Research made by the neurologists Andreas Bartels and Semir Zeki (2004) shows that motivational systems in the brain forwarded hormonally and biologically were released when women looked at pictures of their spouses and their children.

It could be that scenes of melodrama might be felt gratifying, because they complete the function that has been vital, for instance to ensure the softer emotions of bonding through reward of the circuitry that motivates tender appraisal (1). To speak of mothering and romantic love as neurobiological spectacles might universalize the viewing habits of women who cannot help enjoying melodrama. The genre puzzle of the sexes might not be such a big mystery after all.

Note:

¹ A few days before this paper was presented at the CCSMI conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan, July 22-24 2004, psychologist Oliver C. Schultheiss and his colleagues at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor issued new results on hormones and film. What they found was that scenes from a romantic movie, *The Bridges of Madison County* (Eastwood, 1995), boost both men and women's levels of sex hormones linked to attentive feelings. On the other hand, violent scenes from *Godfather Part II* (Coppola, 1973) made testosterone levels surge in men with naturally high levels of the power-motivating hormone. This might not only explain why the sexes have distinct genre preferences, but also explain why certain types of persons like certain film genres. According to Schultheiss affiliation-motivated people might like to see romantic films, whereas power-motivated people prefer movies with more action and violence. His results will appear in the journal, *Hormones and Behavior*.

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