

## SELECTED BY: RICHARD ABEL

Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001)

Singer's book offers a challenging, alternative history of 1910s American cinema to those already available in such stellar works as David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (focused on film style and modes of production), Miriam Hansen's *Babel & Babylon* (focused on the public sphere and spectatorship), Staiger's *Bad Women* (focused on the regulation of sexuality), or Sumiko Higashi's *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture* (focused on the emergence of a "middle class" cinema).

His book, admittedly, has had a long gestation. Its subject originated in two "discoveries" that Singer made, as a doctoral student at New York University, doing research on the US trade press of the 1910s: 1) melodrama then meant something quite different from what it usually means today and 2) feature-length films, which commonly define that decade, actually were promoted no more heavily than other films that long have been overlooked: sensational serials. That subject mutated during the dissertation process and subsequent revisions, however, into a much broader exploration of melodrama's inextricable interrelation with modernity. Despite a decade of writing and rewriting, therefore, the book could hardly be more timely, for the way it yokes two concepts now crucial to theorizing the history of early cinema. As drawn from Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and other Weimar critics, *modernity* has shaped a more or less cohesive body of recent historical inquiry – notably by such scholars as Hansen, Tom Gunning, and Vanessa Schwartz – that conceptualizes early cinema both as a dynamic contributing factor to modernity and as its cultural consequence or product. Singer not only interrogates the so-called modernity thesis as a model of histori-

cal inquiry but also demonstrates its value by exploring its symbiotic relationship with the most popular form of *melodrama* in the USA at the time. This was a melodrama of thrilling action, violence, and spectacle quite unlike the family melodrama of "classical Hollywood" films – the principal subject of so much influential work in cinema studies in the 1970s and 1980s – a form of melodrama epitomized by sensational serials.

Any book with such a dual focus confronts the writer with an organizational dilemma, as the opening chapters attest in taking up, first, the "meanings of modernity" and, second, the "meanings of melodrama." This suggests that alternation will govern the book's structure, but one soon discovers that the trajectory of reading takes on a spiral movement in which modernity and melodrama, somewhat like orbiting double stars, are seen within a series of differing yet linked frames that involve an increasing degree of specificity. In one chapter, Singer addresses, point by point, the epistemological and aesthetic objections and questions raised by such scholars of the "Madison school" as Bordwell and Charlie Keil about the modernity thesis; in the next, he recasts the theories of melodrama derived from Peter Brooks more firmly within the context of modern capitalism, situating sensational melodrama at the center of a turn-of-the-last-century culture war about class conflict. Taken in conjunction, these theoretical considerations establish a gravitational center for the fascinating cultural history dominating the rest of the book. Accordingly, several chapters describe and analyze sensationalism, as a highly visible component of urban modernity, through a wide spectrum of prior cultural forms and practices – from newspapers (especially graphic illustrations), amusement park rides, daredevil stunts, vaudeville acts, and "blood-and-thunder" melodramas (incredibly popular with the "masses" between 1890 and 1910) to the sensational melodramas on film that rapidly replaced those on stage (this latter section is perhaps

less thorough than it could be). The penultimate chapter puts a further spin on this analysis by also situating sensational serials at the center of a culture war over gender roles, analyzing the “pleasures and dangers” of the serial queen (the prime example is Pearl White) as a figure of the American “New Woman,” and how that figure could have appealed to women (and men) of most classes. A further chapter then reverses the direction of the book’s intertextual investigation, exploring the “tie-in” marketing practices that sensational serials helped to promulgate, from fashion designs to early fan magazines.

Finally, Singer’s generosity encompasses much more than the nearly 100 illustrations that support the book’s analysis or the extensive twenty-five pages of bibliography. For one, he deals unusually even-handedly with his colleagues’ objections to the modernity thesis and accepts potential disagreement with certain of his arguments. For another, he concludes the book with a number of provocative questions intended to encourage further research, research that could not only extend or modify but even counter his own invaluable work.

## SELECTED BY: RICK ALTMAN

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(What follows is not a normal review. Knowing that Richard Abel was reviewing Ben Singer’s *Melodrama and Modernity*, I exceptionally requested permission to review the same book, primarily to draw attention to a single aspect of the book’s coverage. This review should thus be thought of not as an independent statement, but as a complement to Abel’s general review)

Ben Singer’s recent book on *Melodrama and Modernity* is in many ways a book to admire.

Both of the topics implied by the title are complex and controversial, yet the book handles them with extraordinary clarity and generosity. Few important topics have been as shamelessly neglected by scholars as stage melodrama and film serials; Singer rectifies that situation with easily the best chapter ever written on stage melodrama and two solid chapters on film serials. Furthermore, this book boasts the most interesting illustration program of any recent film publication (though it is surprising and disappointing not to discover more frame enlargements from a wider range of serials). From cover to cover, not only are the research and scholarship first-rate, but they are supported by writing that is both forceful and clear.

The overall quality of Singer’s book makes it all the more disappointing to note that this major work on melodrama devotes hardly a word to the *melos* that distinguishes melodrama from just plain drama. It is well known that stage melodrama and melodramatic film serials were both accompanied musically. Did this music not contribute to the experience and meaning of stage and film melodrama? It is a sad statement regarding the state of sound scholarship that such an otherwise good book should entirely ignore such concerns.

To be sure, there are easier problems to handle than music for stage or screen. It is important to recognize, however, that substantial resources are available in this area. On other topics, Singer makes very good use of Lewin A. Goff’s outstanding 1948 Western Reserve University dissertation, *The Popular Priced Melodrama in America 1890 to 1910 with Its Origins and Development to 1890*, but he draws little benefit from Goff’s substantial material on melodrama music. More recently, two scholars have produced a series of careful and well-documented articles, chapters, and books on music for stage melodrama. The following works by British theater scholar David Mayer will be found useful:

“Nineteenth Century Theatre Music,” *Theatre Notebook*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1976), pp. 115-122.