personaggio trova un suo corrispondente, simile ed "altro" nello stesso tempo (appoggiandosi anche a fonti letterarie: *The Birthmark* di Nathaniel Hawthorne, ad esempio). La situazione potrà non essere nuovissima, nelle sue relazioni con il cinema, ma qui è ribadita con una radicalità e una sistematicità inconsuete e più profonde. Coinvolta non è solo una materia narrativa (ove si disegna un rapporto di affinità tra il destino di Hector Mann e quello del professore/narratore), coinvolto non è solo il piano esistenziale (e tutto romanzesco) dei due destini, ma un po' tutto ciò che ruota attorno al sistema "cinema", fino alle caratteristiche della voce off, principio utilizzato in tutti i film dell'"ultimo periodo" di Hector Mann, attentamente analizzata e messa in valore dal protagonista.

Il cinema è associato, inoltre, sempre, a una situazione di *perdita*. E qui non è solo in questione la sorte dei film del passato, emblematizzata nelle vicende di quelli del comico, del primo o dell'ultimo periodo. Il professore inizia ad occuparsi di cinema dopo la morte della moglie e dei figli; un altro personaggio scriverà una biografia dell'attore dopo la morte della madre; Hector Mann riprenderà a girare film (che non avrebbero mai dovuto avere un pubblico) dopo la morte del figlio... Emerge dalle pagine di Paul Auster un'idea di cinema connessa a funzioni di riparazione e compensazione. Il film è un fantasma: presente e visibile, ma conseguenza di una scomparsa *essenziale*. Ovvero: il cinema è potenziamento dell'esistenza, ma determinato da una situazione di crisi. E' Chateaubriand, ora, ad essere chiamato in causa: "Les moments de crise produisent un redoublement de vie chez les hommes" (p. 238). L'esergo del romanzo (ancora Chateaubriand) tuttavia recita: " L'homme n'a pas une seule et même vie; il en a plusieurs mises bout à bout, et c'est sa misère"...

Ma il dato forse più originale è che in questo romanzo viene "novellizzata" è una situazione frutto della ricerca più recente (quella cui *Cinema & Cie* ha dedicato il suo primo numero...), quella che ha portato alla rifondazione dell'oggetto "cinema muto", a partire dalle consapevolezze sulla conservazione di quel patrimonio, da esigenze di ordine filologico, da una nuova impostazione metodologica. Che un romanzo costruisca una storia su queste basi appare come la sanzione più forte, incontrovertibile dell'acquisizione, istituzionale, di tali trasformazioni. Con tutte le contraddizioni che esse ancora contengono. Pure nell'epoca del DVD e della digitalizzazione più estesa, sul lavoro dello storico continuano a pesare i paradossi segnalati dal narratore: "I spent three months watching old movies, and than I locked myself in a room and spent nine months writing about them. It's probably the strangest thing I've ever done. I was writing about things I couldn't see anymore, and I had to present them in purely visual terms. The whole experience was like a hallucination" (p. 64).

1 Ringrazio Werner Sudendorf per la segnalazione del libro.

2 Ecco l'inizio del saggio: "Before the body, there is the face, and before the face there is the thin black line between Hector's nose and upper lip. A twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, the mustache is a seismograph of Hector's inner states, and not only does it make you laugh, it tells you what Hector is thinking, actually allows you into the machinery of his thoughts. [...] None of this would be possible without the intervention of the camera. The intimacy of the talking mustache is a creation of the lens. At various moments in each of Hector's films, the angle suddenly changes, and a wide or medium shot is replaced by a close-up." (p. 29).

SELECTED BY: LAUREN RABINOVITZ

Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle*

Tom to O.J. Simpson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

Well-known for her scholarship on feminist film theory and melodrama as well as for her groundbreaking study of pornography (*Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*), author Linda Williams takes on American film melodrama as the primary narrative mode for dealing with the national struggle over race relations. She first carefully defines melodrama not so much as a *genre* but as a *mode* that has been highly suitable (and stable) for expressing an evolving national preoccupation. In this way, Williams moves her project out of film genre studies – where so many previous discussions regarding melodrama have taken place – into an expanded arena of cultural studies. Her goal is to explain the narratives and tropes that have anchored "the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans" (p. 44). Williams, therefore, aims at broad political concerns but ones that are less about cinema's general relationship to ideology and culture than about a deeply-felt concern for defining American-ness, of "just who we mean when we say 'we' are a nation" (p. 44).

But if her subject addresses content specific to an American national identity, her historical trajectory of movie melodramas as a vehicle for representing racial identity and strife proceeds from three major arguments that have broad implications for film genre studies in general. 1) Williams asserts that melodrama as a category encompasses more than the group of women's pictures that first gave rise to putative definitions of melodrama as "feminine excess" and then to feminist recuperations of melodrama. Following the line of reasoning of melodrama critics from Peter Brooks to Christine Gledhill, Williams submits a corpus that includes a wide range of social problem films about everyday life.[1] There is good reason that this expanded corpus has been subject historically to criticism of "feminine excesses." First, these films are unlike westerns or gangster films that have been perceived within film studies as preoccupied with masculine cultural values. Second, this corpus engages action and realism *in the service of* sensation, sentiment, and feel-good moralism: they achieve the merger of "morality and feeling into emphatically imagined communities forged in the pain and suffering of innocent victims, and in the actions of those who seek to rescue them" (p. 21).

2) Williams contends that melodrama cannot be understood fully within the confines of classical cinema. In this regard, she rejects the overarching definition of classical Hollywood cinema as a container for "genres" in general, for looking at how groups of American films adhere to or depart from a "classical" norm. It is because of the normative category of classical Hollywood cinema, she argues, that melodrama is seen in the first place as "excessive." Rather, she opts for what is now fashionably known as an "inter-medial" definition of melodrama, one that takes into account melodrama as a form of representation and storytelling in literature, in the theater, and ultimately in the tabloid press. An inter-medial definition opens up her corpus even further: melodramas prior to classical Hollywood cinema and even prior to cinema may be compared and become important for long-range historical continuities and the origins for today's racial narratives.

3) She therefore rejects outright the idea that melodrama is a genre at all. Her claim offers a bold feminist thesis regarding film theory and history:

> *Narrative cinema as a whole has been theorized as a realist, inherently masculine medium whose 'classical' features were supposedly anathema to its melodramatic infancy and childhood [...] Melodrama has been viewed either as that which the 'classical' cinema has grown up out of, or that to which it sometimes regresses* (p. 17).

Instead of a genre, melodrama is a "modality of narrative with a high quotient of pathos and action" (p. 17). Williams' key texts for analysis here are the multiple manifestations (novel, play, and/or film) of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Show Boat* (1936), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Roots* (1977), the "texts" surrounding the Rodney King police beating case (1991-92) and O. J. Simpson's televised trial for murder and its subsidiary texts (ca. 1995) (the dates for fictional texts above are for film and television versions rather than original novels and plays).

Two racial narratives bind this interconnected chain of melodramatic texts: one she labels the "Tom" narrative and the other is the reversal of it called the "anti-Tom" narrative. The former features the beating, suffering, and victimization of a "good" black man, which lends virtue and humanity to slaves and former slaves. The latter inverts the history of racial abuse against African Americans and casts the African American male as an arrogant villain who poses a threat of rape and endangerment to suffering white women. The cycle of these two narratives for more than a century and continuing up through two recent nationally-televised trials demonstrates the wide extent to which victimization as a melodramatic form of moral power has played a prominent role at different times, for different individuals, and in different ways in defining American racial politics.

Williams' analyses of individual examples are smart, richly rewarding interpretations that read the texts within and against existing criticism. To each case study, she brings to bear a synthesis of the best scholarship already accomplished on that example. The single limitation of her approach is one of cultural studies in general: there is little sensitivity to the reality outside the texts that gave them power at specific historical moments for specific historical reasons.

For example, Williams studies *The Birth of a Nation* as a case of adaptation from both novel and play. She examines three different texts for a variation of narratives through which the Tom backlash narrative of black male sexual threat emerges. But she does little to explain that this backlash against the "suffering Tom" narrative occurred only when African Americans migrated in record numbers from rural southern counties to Southern and northern cities, found expanded job opportunities during the labor shortage of World War One, and asserted a working class African American culture within northern white cities. American cities were dominated by non-white and non-native born citizens, who brought religious, sexual, and cultural values that threatened those of white, nativist Americans. The "anti-Tom" narrative found voice amidst the onset of immigration restrictions and even mass scale deportations, nativist preaching, wide-scale segregation and discrimination laws, a national epidemic of lynchings, and major race riots in several American cities. In other words, Williams neglects the power and function of her narratives within larger spheres of cultural power. Hers is a textual study, an excellent one that compares the important relationships among texts not usually considered side-by-side in genre studies. But, as an explanation of cultural power, it treats literary narratives as though they operate in a somewhat self-contained, insular fashion. Such a criticism should not be leveled solely at Williams, who here dramatizes cultural studies at its best, but at the short-sightedness of American cultural studies as a historical method.

What Williams does accomplish is a masterful interweaving of film criticism and the complex historical depth to today's disturbing racial values. She makes a persuasive argument for how the past conditions the present – that we continue to be ready to feel sympathy only for the suffering and victimization of either white women or black men. Such a Manichean polarity and cycle of victims and villains are ultimately tales of race, gender,

and power. They both serve not only to erase the African American woman and justify her continued abuse but to serve up a disturbing narrative of national identity.

The extent to which Williams has hit upon a basic nerve of the American character and its history can best be illustrated here for an Italian audience by the 1997 curtain call of *The Birth of a Nation* at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone. When the conductor turned to an onscreen picture of director D.W. Griffith, the mostly Italian audience rose as one and gave a thundering ovation of applause and cheers. The Americans scattered throughout the audience sat dumbfounded, unable to applaud or react. The difference in cultural understanding was telling: in Italy, the film is a stunning achievement of film art; for Americans, as Williams so effectively shows, the film represents a landmark in a complicated racial history of shame and denial that is reenacted regularly in today's racial politics and injustices.

1 P. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, reprint 1976); Ch. Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in Ch. Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987).

SELECTED BY: COSETTA SABA

Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition. Catalogue, Kassel, June 8 – September 15, 2002 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002, English edition)

The catalogue of *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition* outlines a circuit of attention on the otherness of art, producing at the same time a short circuit of our attention on the same subject: a "behind the times" operation, which muddles modern Western societies, where the critical activity is deliberately atheoretical or programmatically post-theoretical. This volume deals with the otherness, expressed and documented not only by the works exhibited in the *Platform 5* – works which are oriented towards the crossing of thresholds and of frontiers between territories, bodies, minds, texts, societies, signs, etc. – but also by the expositive context itself.

Documenta 11, as maintained by its curator, Okwui Enwezor,

> *was conceived not as an exhibition but as a constellation of public spheres. The public sphere of the exhibition gesture, implicit in the historical formation of* Documenta*, in which art comes to stand for models of representation and narratives of autonomous subjectivity, is rearticulated here as a new understanding in the domain of the discursive rather than the museological.*[1]

Enwezor presents a new curatorial model, consisting of an experimentation of the "platform" concept as referring to world cultures and to their geography – traced out by historical and contemporary conflicts –, according to the following thematic paths: *Democracy Unrealized* (Platform 1, Vienna); *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (Platform 2, New Delhi); *Créolité and Creolization* (Platform 3, St. Lucia, West Indies); *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (Platform 4, Lagos).

The discourse of *Documenta 11*, planned by Enwezor together with his co-curators, highlights through works of art, the theme of the difference between Postmodernism and Postcoloniality, in a context of modernity. Enwezor asserts that

> *postcoloniality must at all times be distinguished from postmodernism. While postmodernism was preoccupied with relativiz-*