In his seminal 1972 article ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, Thomas Elsaesser proposed that the Hollywood melodrama of the 1940s and 50s represented ‘perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of cinematic signification that the American cinema has ever produced’. And by the late 1970s this once-disparaged genre had indeed become one of the most fruitful areas of investigation for the emerging discipline of film theory, allowing scholars to explore political questions about gender and sexuality, social class, and the nuclear family alongside—and through—analyses of film style and aesthetics. Intended for both those new to film and film scholars alike, this course zeroes in on the classical Hollywood melodrama and the central role it has played within film scholarship. In particular, we will focus on the relationship between melodrama and ‘mise en scène’—a crucial cinematic concept that, by providing a name to the arrangement of things before the camera (and thus to the art of film directing), has become one of the great inventions of film criticism.

Why did the particular settings, plots, and themes of the Hollywood melodrama make it arguably the key site for theorizing mise en scène more broadly? And why did mise en scène criticism, with its linking of style and affect and its call for stylistic analysis beyond the individual shot, come to play such a crucial role in thinking through the politics of melodrama and ‘the woman’s film’? A vital part of the module will thus be our re-examination of the critical debates about mise en scène and, in particular, our attempt to assess the legacy of the foundational film and feminist theories of the 1970s and 80s. But in addition to these theoretical questions about style and meaning and gender and sexuality, we will also attend carefully to the details of these films themselves, learning to discuss problems of film form and style in a critical, sophisticated way.
SEMINAR SCHEDULE

1: What is Melodrama? ‘The Woman’s Film’ and Melodrama as Mode/Genre/Style

**Film:** Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937)

**Required Readings:**

**Additional Recommendations:**
Martha Vicinus, “‘Helpless and Unfriended’: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama” (1981)
Tania Modleski, ‘Time and Desire in the Woman’s Film’ (1984)
2: What is *Mise en Scène*? Noir, Classical Hollywood, and Early *Mise en Scène* Criticism

**Films:** *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945)  
*[Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)

**Required Readings:**
Barrett Hodsdon, ‘The mystique of *mise en scene* revisited’, *Continuum* 5.2 (1992), pp. 68-86

**Additional Recommendations:**
André Bazin, ‘William Wyler, or the Jansenist Art of *Mise en Scène*’ (1948)  
Michel Mourlet, ‘Sur un art ignoré [On a Misunderstood Art]’ (1959)  
E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (1978)  
Kristin Thompson, ‘Closure within a Dream? Point of View in *Laura*’ (1988)  
Catherine Jurca, ‘*Mildred Pierce*, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family’ (2002)
3: The Family Melodrama: Widescreen Cinema and the Politics of *Mise en Scène*

**Films:** *Bigger than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956)  
*Home from the Hill* (Vincente Minnelli, 1960)

**Required Readings:**  
Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’  
*Monogram* 4 (1972), pp. 2-15  

**Additional Recommendations:**  
Charles Barr, ‘Cinemascope: Before and After’ (1963)  
Ariel Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies* (2013)  
Chad Newsom, ‘Feels like Home: *Since You Went Away* and the 1940s Family Melodrama’ (2017)
4: Max Ophuls, Camera Movement, and ‘The Woman’s Film’ as Reflexive Form

Films: Letter from an Unknown Woman (Max Ophuls, 1948)  
Caught (Max Ophuls, 1949)

Required Readings:
Mary Ann Doane, ‘Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence’, Enclitic 5.2/6.1 (1981-2), pp. 75-89

Additional Recommendations:
Brian Henderson, ‘The Long Take’ (1971)
Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s (1987)
Gaylyn Studlar, ‘Masochistic Performance and Female Subjectivity in Letter from an Unknown Woman’ (1994)
Susan M. White, The Cinema of Max Ophuls: Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman (1995)
Steve Neale, ‘Narration, point of view and patterns in the soundtrack of Letter from an Unknown Woman (Max Ophuls, 1948)’ (2005)
5: Adapting Melodrama, Part I: *Imitation of Life*, Race, and Social *Mise en Scène*

**Films:** *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1932)  
*Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959)

**Required Readings:**
Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, ‘*Imitation(s) of Life*: The Black Woman’s Double Determination as Troubling “Other”’, *Literature and Psychology* 35.4 (1988), pp. 44-57  

**Additional Recommendations:**
Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (1933)  
Judith Butler, ‘Lana’s “Imitation”: Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative’ (1990)  
Conn Holohan, ‘All That is Solid: Producing the Home-Space in John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life*’ (2018)  
6: Adapting Melodrama, Part II: The ‘Sirkian System’ and Mise en Scène Today

Films: All That Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
          Far From Heaven (Todd Haynes, 2002)

Required Readings:

Additional Recommendations:
Jon Halliday, Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday (1972)
Rainer Werner Fassbinder, ‘Six Films by Douglas Sirk’ (1975)
Laura Mulvey, ‘Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home’ in Visual and Other Pleasures (1989)
Dana Luciano, ‘Coming Around Again: The Queer Momentum of Far From Heaven’ (2007)
Donna Campbell, ‘Walden in the Suburbs: Thoreau, Rock Hudson, and Natural Style in Douglas Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows’ (2008)
Glyn Davis, Far From Heaven (2010)
Victoria Evans, Douglas Sirk, Aesthetic Modernism, and the Culture of Modernity (2017)
Robert Pippin, ‘Love and Class in Douglas Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows’ (2019)
Additional Recommended Films

*Back Street* (John Stahl, 1932)
*Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932)
*La Signora di Tutti* (Max Ophuls, 1934)
*Magnificent Obsession* (John Stahl, 1935)
*Camille* (George Cukor, 1936)
*History is Made at Night* (Frank Borzage, 1937)
*The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940)
*The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941)
*Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942)
*Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)
*Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944)
*Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944)
*Leave Her to Heaven* (John Stahl, 1945)
*Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)
*Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947)
*Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947)
*Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947)
*The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophuls, 1949)
*Whirlpool* (Otto Preminger, 1949)
*Under Capricorn* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1949)
*The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952)
*Ruby Gentry* (King Vidor, 1952)
*All I Desire* (Douglas Sirk, 1953)
*Angel Face* (Otto Preminger, 1953)
*Magnificent Obsession* (Douglas Sirk, 1954)
*Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954)
*Senso* (Luchino Visconti, 1954)

*There’s Always Tomorrow* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
*Lola Montès* (Max Ophuls, 1955)
*Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)
*East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955)
*Hilda Crane* (Phillip Dunne, 1956)
*Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956)
*The Cobweb* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956)
*Giant* (George Stevens, 1956)
*Peyton Place* (Mark Robson, 1957)
*Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)
*Bonjour Tristesse* (Otto Preminger, 1958)
*Some Came Running* (Vincente Minnelli, 1958)
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Richard Brooks, 1958)
*Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959)
*The Best of Everything* (Jean Negulesco, 1959)
*Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961)
*Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962)
*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (Jacques Demy, 1964)
*Madame X* (David Lowell Rich, 1966)
*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974)
*Lola* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1981)
*Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995)
*Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015)

Additional Readings: Literary and Cultural Backgrounds

- Olive Higgins Prouty, *Stella Dallas* (1923)
- Edna and Harry Lee, *All That Heaven Allows* (1952)
- Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (1964)

**Additional Readings: Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style, and *Mise en Scène***

• Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* (1968)
• V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972)
• David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (1997)
• Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000)
• V.F. Perkins, ‘Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction’ (2005)
• Andrew Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (2011)
• Zoe Wallin, ‘“Pictures Seem to Run in Cycles”’: Industry Discourse and the Economics of Film Cycles in Classical Hollywood’ (2019)

**Additional Readings: Melodrama and ‘The Woman’s Film’**

• D.N. Rodowick, ‘Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s’ (1982)
- Pansy Duncan, ‘Tears, melodrama and “heterosensibility”’ in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (2011)
- Alison L. McKee, *The Woman’s Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and History* (2014)