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Marcia Landy. *Cinematic Uses of the Past.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. ix + 301 pp. $60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2825-4; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2824-7.

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Operatic Melodramas

Many critics have commented on the recent rise and valorization of period films and have theorized about why their popularity is increasing. Approaching the millennium, are we becoming stuck in nostalgia or moving toward an end to history as we have known it? In Cinematic Uses of the Past, Professor Marcia Landy examines this interest in historical films for directors and audiences–not just during the "fin" but throughout the century. Landy examines the "past" and "history" in the broadest sense, seeing films set in the present or future as likewise evoking and reshaping the past, adding to the culture's popular understanding of its history.

Landy, following her previous book, *Film, Politics, and Gramsci*, solidly positions her critical approach to history and memory in the work of Gramsci, Nietzsche, Jameson, and Deleuze, intersecting their discussions to ground her view of historical films as operatic melodramas that attempt to shape the folklore of a culture's self-perceptions. The past seems especially valuable in exploring identity constructions based on nation, gender, sexuality, and race. She is generally less interested in comparing the official historical record with its filmic representations, focusing instead on illuminating how melodrama (featuring star "divas" and operatic effects) reflects and redefines a period's "folklore" of the past, the "common sensical" and "shared" memory of the past that "explains" the shared present.

In each chapter Landy examines several films–that share a common period, national cinema, and/or historic focus–for the particular way that they shape the past's folkloric images, Deleuze's "crystals of time." Using examples from Senegalese, Italian, American, British, and German cinema, she consistently portrays melodrama as the common denominator: "Melodrama and history feed on familiarity, ritualization, repetition and overvaluation of the past to produce a dj vu sense of 'Yes, that is the way it was and is.' " Melodrama therefore builds the consensus necessary for the representation of history–whether in official records or film–to pass into the culture's folklore.

"Operatic" becomes another key element for Landy, not referring to opera per se, rather to cinematic representations that stress opulent music, visuals, and gestures–as excessive as Jameson's "excesses of history"–

over the spoken word and narrative content. In Chapter Three, "The Operatic as History: Two Risorgimento Narratives," she does not discuss adaptations, but how the Italian movies, Blassetti's 1860 and Viscounti's The Leopard, use operatic effects and techniques to heighten the melodrama of nationalism and reveal the patterned rituals that move unfailingly toward the preordained end.

Star personas–like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Diana Dors–become for Landy the ultimate melodramatic divas, as their excessive screen personas and personal histories enhance their films' melodrama, while complicating the historic narratives. Divas augment the sense of the always present and always past that Landy finds in cinematic appropriation of history.

Chapter Five, " 'You Remember Diana Dors, Don't You?': History, Femininity, and the Law in 1950's and 1980's British Cinema," presents an interesting integration of a star persona, Diana Dors, into folklore. This important chapter provides the closest reading of a specific historical event–the life of Ruth Ellis, the last woman in Britain to be hanged.

Diana Dors' *Yield to the Night* (1956) was received by reviewers and audiences as a retelling of Ruth Ellis' 1955 execution, but the film had actually been written two years earlier, specifically for Diana Dors. Landy explores the parallels between Dors' and Ellis' lives, and how their personal situations were shared by many British women of the 1950's. In the popular consciousness, the stories of Ellis, Dors, and her character in Yield to the Night merge. Miranda Richardson's portrayal of Ruth Ellis in Dance with a Stranger (1985) Landy suggests is based as much on Dors as Ellis. This retelling of Ellis' story during the Thatcher era reflects the lack of change for many British women from the 1950's to 1980's, still facing the constrictions of gender and class–even if Margaret Thatcher moved into the male position of "executioner." Though Landy's definition of "history" may be at its most tenuous in this chapter, it does provide a fascinating discussion of women's issues and how social problem films that also employ melodrama attempt to address this concern.

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