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The Marriages of Laurel Dallas: Or, The Maternal Melodrama of the Unknown Feminist Film Spectator

By Catherine Grant

I have formulated the field of feminine communication effected by the film screen, as allegorized by the lit window at the end of *Stella Dallas*, as a search for the mother's gaze.

STANLEY CAVELL¹

This double vision seems typical of the experience of most female spectators at the movies.

LINDA WILLIAMS²

The film's mysterious and ambiguous ending leaves us not knowing what the heroine has become and not knowing what to feel in the face of her happiness.

WILLIAM ROTHMAN³

I made "The Marriages of Laurel Dallas," my comparative study ([above](#)) of the cinematic build up to two tear-jerking moments—one long enshrined, and much argued over, in maternal melodrama studies—shortly after I saw the silent version of *Stella Dallas* for the first time. I had always assumed that the two earliest film adaptations of Olive Higgins Prouty's 1922 novel, from which the sequences in my video are drawn, would be quite different from one another in their *mise-en-scène*; I knew, at least, that they were made on either side of the divide between silent and sound cinema. I was also familiar with the view of film historian Christian Viviani, expressed in a footnote to his chapter "Who is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-39" (in Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart Is*): "King Vidor's [1937] film follows quite faithfully the plot of Henry King's [1925] version. Only their very different approaches help distinguish between the two films."⁴

It's hardly unexpected, of course, that the two *plots* should be similar. The films are relatively faithful adaptations of the same novel, not just key members of the same cinematic genre, the 1925 film, in Viviani's assessment, "an initial milestone" that played a "precursor role" in the "maternal melo;"⁵ the heroine of the second film "an archetype"⁶ of maternal decisiveness and energy, as well as suffering, as played by Barbara Stanwyck. Like Viviani, in her rich and fascinating 2011 comparison of the novel with King and Vidor's films, Diane Stevenson⁷ also particularly flags up the differences in approach between these three versions of the *Stella Dallas* story. So, when I finally saw the silent adaptation recently, I don't think I was prepared for what I then experienced as uncanny similarities between the endings of the two films. It was this *affective experience* of the analogous narrative and aesthetic choices of the two endings that was especially compelling to me, hence my video about (at one and the same time) it and them.

It is the silent era adaptation that first departs from the source novel in its climactic organisation around Laurel Dallas's wedding (the novel concludes, instead, with Laurel's formal presentation to New York society, even though this *is* witnessed through a window by her

mother standing outside on the street before she is moved on by a policeman). The final scenes of the 1937 film not only emulate many of the staging and framing choices of the earlier film; in a number of important details they potentially prompt our active recall of them, and in so doing (as the later film also does elsewhere in its diegesis) they bespeak the pre-existence of the 1925 film in eloquent and intriguing ways. Perhaps most fascinatingly the second adaptation swerves away from the novel and King's film in its portrayal, in an early scene, of Stella at the cinema, entranced while watching a romantic silent film, which, one might fancy, could even be (although isn't) a scene from the first film. In all these ways, the 1937 film may be considered to be more aware about its cinematic precursor than much discussion of *Stella Dallas* in Cinema Studies has been, for it is true that these films are not equally prominent in, or even equally remembered by our discipline. Vidor and Stanwyck's *Stella Dallas* went on to become an almost transcendent exemplar in theories of melodramatic pathos, in large part, because of its final scenes, as in Thomas Elsaesser's renowned study:

Pathos results from non-communication or, silence made eloquent—[...] a mother watching her daughter's wedding from afar (Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas*) [...]—where highly emotional situations are underplayed to present an ironic discontinuity of feeling or a qualitative difference in intensity, usually visualised in terms of spatial distance and separation.⁸

The 1937 adaptation and its ending were also taken up as a touchstone in feminist critical debates about the cinematic forms of maternal melodrama as well as about the complex identificatory possibilities of the female film spectator.⁹ And the *dénouement* of the later film further became one of the markers of meta-cinematic consciousness in reflections on 1930s Hollywood: for example, as Viviani notes, "The framing of [Vidor's final] scene, its lighting, even the form of the bay window where the wedding ceremony is enacted, evoke in a troubling way, the cinematic spectacle."¹⁰

My surprising (and very pleasurable) experience of watching the silent film version (it is very beautiful) also shook my own deep investment in the specialness of King Vidor's film and its final sequences. The 1937 movie, which I had loved when I saw it on television a number of times as a teenager, was one of the first films I chose to teach in a mid 1990s Masters class on feminist film theory, very early on in my academic career. I had my own VHS copy of it, while the King film was not so easily available, if at all. I was also fortunate to have been born into the generation below that of the truly great and pioneering feminist film scholars who produced so much understanding about this movie, its ending and its centrality to the genres of the "Woman's film" and the maternal melodrama. Their published theorising was, as a result, easily available to me. So the ending became one of the two main sequences I could focus on in seminars, relying on their work as generative set reading. In short, the silent film version of *Stella Dallas* just didn't stand a chance, for me, in the attentional or canonical economies of Film Studies at that point, either in terms of its salience or its accessibility.

My "silent" video remix (above) came from the simple desire to experience the two film endings—a beloved one to be re-visited and a previously unknown one to be newly explored— together in a live synchronous comparison, now that both had become available to me in digitised versions. I had experimented with this kind of videographic comparison before, and indeed wrote about it in an earlier issue of *Mediascape*. Unlike those experiments, a simple split screen or sequential montage didn't seem to work with this material: those techniques kept everything too separated, too academic, too inert. I needed to play in a more complex way with proximity and distance videographically, on this occasion. So the comparative framework that I found myself adopting was one of a synchronous, slightly overlapping, side-by-side placement, with the silent film higher in the frame, and the sound film lower. The 1925 footage was made more translucent for its partial superimposition over the 1937 sequences. The later film was slightly slowed in motion and newly colorized to correspond with the presentation of the silent film.

As I wrote of the series of related experiments in my earlier *Mediascape* essay:

With their precise juxtapositions of film material, which unfold in [...] space and time, video essays, or assemblages, like the one above, can introduce us to the "unconscious optics" of particular instances of intertextuality. [...]

As well as an exposure to audiovisual argumentation (involving selection of evidence, montage and mise en scene, titling, sound editing and other creative effects), they offer an active viewing process, one of live co-research, or participant observation. Unlike written texts, they don't have to remove themselves from film-specific forms of meaning production to have their knowledge effects on us. And we can *feel*, as well as know about, the comparisons these videos enact.¹¹

This kind of work is not only comparative, of course, but also combinative, and thus creative, especially in this case, given the added music (credited below) that doesn't come from either version of *Stella Dallas*. Unlike a good deal of the existing critical work on the films, the video's aims are not directly hermeneutic but meditative, exploratory, experiential. It plays with and expands upon the kinds of generic and intertextual repetitions and differences that the films themselves perform, between each other and the source novel. The resulting video also acts out and multiplies the spectatorial analogies of the final scenes of both films, with characters from each "watching" scenes in the other and at least appearing to seek an even more complex and trans-generational exchange of looks than in either film on its own. In a similar way, the video proliferates external spectatorial positions, or entry points, and perhaps further multiplies identificatory possibilities, too. The latter is just one of the most obvious points of contact that it has with the theorising of those feminists and other scholars who helped to inspire, as much as the original films, the associative and affective work of memory and (re-)creation it performs.

Credits:

The video embedded above is a comparison of the final scenes of two cinematic 'Maternal Melodrama' adaptations of Olive Higgins Prouty's 1922 novel Stella Dallas: the 1925 version directed by Henry King, starring Belle Bennett as Stella Dallas, Lois Moran as Laurel Dallas, Alice Joyce as Helen Morrison and Ronald Colman as Stephen Dallas; and King Vidor's 1937 version starring Barbara Stanwyck as Stella (Martin) Dallas, John Boles as Stephen Dallas, Anne Shirley as Laurel Dallas and Barbara O'Neil as Helen Morrison.

The video was first screened at the Maternal Melodrama Symposium, University of Kent, UK, on June 3, 2014. Thanks to Pam Cook, Elizabeth Cowie, Tamar Jeffers McDonald and others in the audience for their valuable comments.

The music used in "The Marriages of Laurel Dallas" is adapted from the track 'Sweet Tender' by Jared C. Balogh, shared at the Free Music Archive under an Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 International License:

http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Balogh/Lunar_Elegance/SWEET_TENDER

NOTES

1. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.215.
2. Linda Williams, "'Something Else besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, Ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), p.316.
3. William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 2nd ed.), p.94.
4. Christian Viviani, "Who is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-39," trans. Dolores Burdick, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 99n12.
5. *Ibid.*, 90.
6. *Ibid.*, 91.
7. Stevenson, Diane. "Three Versions of Stella Dallas," *Film International*, Issue 54, Volume 9, Number 6, 2011: 30-40.
8. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 66
9. See Linda Williams, "'Something Else besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 299-325. See also the valuably reflexive accounts of *Stella Dallas* by Patrica White in *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Indiana University Press, 1999); and by Jodi Brooks, "'Missed Beats: Unseen Cinema and a Cinema of the Unseen (or Stella Dallas again)," *Screening the Past* 34, 2012. Online at: <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/08/missed-beats-unseen-cinema-and-a-cinema-of-the-unseen-or-stella-dallas-again/>
10. Viviani, 99n16.
11. Catherine Grant, "Déjà-Viewing? Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies," *Mediascape*, Winter 2013, http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html



Author bio:

Catherine Grant is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sussex. Author and editor of numerous film studies videos, as well as of written studies of intertextuality, film authorship and adaptation theories, she runs the Film Studies For Free, Filmanalytical and Audiovisualcy websites and, in 2012, guest edited the inaugural issue of online cinema journal *Frames* on digital forms of film studies. She is the founding editor of the REFRAME digital publishing platform, and is also founding co-editor (with Christian Keathley and Drew Morton) of *[in]TRANSITION*, a new videographic film and moving image studies journal. Her latest project is a new website on *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory in Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* which she hopes will further encourage discussion and practice of this form.



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