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Film Studies: Paper Two

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Melodramas through a Family Tradition

From their first days, movies were organized as genres according to subject matter: films about a famous person, panoramic views and so on. As movies became more sophisticated, genres grew more complex. The genre I would like to discuss is melodrama, which can be defined as, characters being defined by a certain situation, narratives that rely on coincidences, and reversals that build toward emotional climaxes and a visual style that emphasizes emotion or elemental struggle (Corrigan 348).

Melodrama is one of the harder genres to define because melodramatic characters and actions can be part of many other kinds of movies. The word itself indicates combinations.

The movie I feel best represents the melodramatic genre is *Soul Food*, which came out in 1997. This movie is about Matriarch Mama Joe has holding her family together for 40 years around a Sunday dinner of soul food. When diabetes hospitalizes her, the dinners stop and tensions among her three daughters start to break the family apart. The African-American family displays the long-believed stereotype that black families are the people who “created” soul food. This is an example of a physical melodrama, which focuses on the physical plight and material conditions that repress or control desires and emotions (Corrigan 349). “These physical restrictions may be related to the places and people that surround that person or may simply be a product of the

person's physical size and color" (Corrigan 349). In this case, Mama Joe is the person experiencing that physical restriction that places a burden on the family and it is triggered from the family tradition; soul food. While Mama Joe is hospitalized, melodramas rely on close-ups of her face to express the agony and emotional pain she is going through. Although in the movie, this isn't necessarily told to us, we as viewers can still recognize the generic focus on bodily or material strain.

Another category as melodrama is family melodramas, which elaborates the restrictions of the protagonist by looking at the psychological and gendered forces of the family. In *Soul Food*, the family becomes divided after the passing of Mama Joe. Also during the movie, the women (sisters and the daughters of Mama Joe) face problems within themselves and take them out on one another. Two of the sisters feud continuously: Teri is jealous of Maxine's marriage and is irritated that everyone assumes her corporate salary is open to the rest of the family's uses, such as the foreclosure of Mama Joe's house. Maxine resents Teri's bossiness and insensitivity to family tradition. Bird, the youngest, newly married to an ex-con, accepts a favor from an old lover that leads to her husband's arrest. In Bird's situation, she and her husband's gender roles were being redefined. The fact that her husband couldn't get a job after his recent release from jail bothered him, and it bothered him even more that she was working and he was not. This family struggle to find a common ground in this instance of family melodrama (Corrigan 349).

The last category of melodrama is social melodramas, which extend the melodramatic crisis of the family to include larger historical, community, and economic issues. In these films, the loss, sufferings and frustrations of the protagonist are visibly

affecting the family (Corrigan 350). After Mama Joe dies, so do the family dinners on Sundays. The three sisters begin falling apart and communication dies. Mama Joe's grandson Ahmad, Maxine's son notices that these problems begin after the death of Mama Joe. He begins cooking up a scheme to bring the family together, back to the table. During this part of the film, there are examples of negotiating family and social traditions through melodramas. When Ahmad successfully gets all the family at Mama Joe's house on a random Sunday, he cooks dinner and sets up the dinner table just as Mama Joe would. The conflicts between the sisters are put out on the table, figuratively, and a lot of issues are resolved. I feel that this movie is a perfect example of melodrama because it hits all three categories in some way; the physical melodrama deals with Mama Joe having a stroke and being hospitalized, family melodrama is seen through all the issues the sisters face after Mama Joe's death. Lastly, social melodrama is shown when Ahmad notices how the dinners affect the family's behavior and he gets the tradition back going strong once again.