

DEPTHS AND SHALLOWNNESS OF COMING-OF-AGE STORY “THE PIT”

Mg.art. **Daniela Zacmane**

Latvian Academy of Culture

Abstract

Over the course of last three decades, Latvian cinema has experienced significant changes. Since country's renewal of independence and return to Europe many socio-political transformations took place. Film industry also changed a lot. In the 21st century films mostly are made on the basis of digital technology; film directors can freely choose the subjects of the films. We may presume that the characters portrayed on the screen have undergone changes, for example, representation of mother, father and coming-of-age young people. However, have these changes truly occurred?

The essay will focus on coming-of-age story “The Pit”, made by Latvian film director Dace Puce (*Dace Pūce*) (2020). Melodrama elements or – the backbone of melodrama can be recognized in the aesthetics of the film. The analyses of film will be based on article by Linda Williams “Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the “Classical””, where the author points out four features of nowadays melodrama. Although melodrama resonates with many social problems which are articulated according to aesthetics of melodrama, multiple stereotypes can be identified in the film when analysing the plot, the image of the victim and the way the viewers sympathy is directed to.

Keywords: *melodrama, modality, coming-of-age, The Pit.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 23, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol23.381>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Daniela Zacmane

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



Several directors of Latvian cinema in this century: Janis Nords (“Amateur”, 2008), Juris Kursietis (“Modris”, 2014), Andris Gauja (“The Lesson”, 2014), Renars Vimba (“Mellow Mud”, 2016), Madara Dislere (“Paradise ‘89”, 2018) have made their first full-length feature films as coming-of-age stories. Also, in other places of the world, the coming-of-age story is often the director’s first or one of the first full-length feature films: Roy Andersson’s “A Swedish Love Story” (1970), Richard Linklater’s “Dazed and Confused” (1993). Director Francois Truffaut’s career also began with a coming-of-age film. The release of “The 400 Blows” (1959) not only liberated the coming-of-age genre but also transcended numerous cinematic clichés associated with classical cinema, paving the way for a new wave of innovation and artistic expression. The film also surprised film critics and audience with its open ending. The young man Antoine Doinel (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud) runs to the sea, then he turns around and looks directly at the camera; according to several critics, that is when the French New Wave began.

The essay will focus on coming-of-age story “The Pit”, made by Latvian film director Dace Puce in 2020; it is her first feature film. I argue that this coming-of-age film, which may be categorized as melodrama, regardless of being made in a free and democratic country by a woman film director (it was exceptional in Soviet time) falls into the trap of gender stereotypes.

The genre of melodrama is basically associated with the stories that have strong emotional effect on the viewer. This emotional intensity in films is achieved by various audiovisual means along the specific narrative scheme. The “melos” (from Greek μέλος – song, tune, melody) as Thomas Elsaesser writes “is given to drama by means of lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music” [Elsaesser 1991: 78].

Coming-of-age story focuses on the growth of a protagonist from childhood to adulthood and this genre, at least in Latvian cinema, has mostly been made in aesthetics of melodrama. It can be explained by the comparatively new paradigm in film theory – modality of melodrama. As Christine Gledhill writes: “The melodramatic specificity, then, lies in its operation as modality: as a mode of aesthetic articulation distilled and adaptable across a range of genres, and across national cultures” [Gledhill 2018: xiii].

The story of “The Pit” follows a ten-year-old boy Markuss (played by Damirs Onackis), who must start a new life in the Latvian countryside. He now lives with his grandmother since his mother has refused from her son, but the father has died. After Markuss has an “incident” with neighbour’s daughter, nobody is friendly with him, except Sailor with a mysterious past. As they both start working on stained-glass window a special bond between them develops. The plot, at least from the point of view of filmmakers (judging from publicity materials etc.), made by film distributors seems

logic. To a large extent the film's narrative and visual style corresponds to "classical cinema" (or what David Bordwell described as "Classical Hollywood Cinema") pattern: time mostly is linear (with exception of some flashbacks), the narrative is a chain of cause and effect, it is structured with clear beginning, middle and end, aspects of space and time are subordinated to the narrative element. Also, the characters have steady traits, their action is psychologically and goal oriented etc., but is it so?

The film opens with the protagonist Markuss running; as it turns out later, he has lured and left the girl Emily in the pit. "Help me out Markuss!" shouts the girl from the dark depths of the pit in the forest. "It won't be that simple," says Markuss looking down. After a moment he leaves Emily alone there and runs home. Film scholar Linda Williams in her article "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the "Classical"" draws attention that competition with TV series has in this century caused new dynamization of the vertical space of the screen. Today's popular big-screen films are structured vertically (and basically spatially), while in series horizontally and putting in front category of time (first of all, the serial itself is stretched in time, that is, in several series).

In her article Linda Williams isolates four features of melodrama, which will be used analysing "The Pit" in this essay. These features are:

- 1) suspense which is described as "prolonged anxiety produced by awaiting the outcome of a dangerous situation";
- 2) the drive to achieve moral legibility in the eventual resolution of the suspense. The key question here is: "Who deserves to live, who to die?";
- 3) the need to locate the goodness that deserves to live in a home "space of innocence";
- 4) excess [Williams 2012: 524–526].

In melodrama, characters and situations are often portrayed in stark, exaggerated contrasts – good versus evil, love versus hatred, pure innocence versus wickedness, and so on. Film scholar Peter Brooks (whom Williams also quotes in her essay) has precisely described melodrama as "logic of the excluded middle" [Brooks 1992: 62]. The lack of the middle can manifest itself in a direct and tangible sense through physical actions. Climbing, flying, falling down, tumbling etc., all presuppose uncertainty, tension, climax and some resolution. Williams mentions several films (for example, "Titanic", "Vertical Limit", "Cliffhanger"), the titles of which refer to verticality. Numerous film scholars, it must be emphasized, highlight a fundamental paradox wherein the perception of melodrama as a genre primarily for females stems from a particular perspective. Historically, the rhetoric of melodrama has been linked with action films.

In "The Pit", not to mention the title of the film, vertical movement happens constantly, both literally and figuratively. Along the pit there is also another

“underground” place – cellar. Tragic events will take place there. The body of prematurely born child of a young woman Smaida (she is frequently beaten by her husband) will be discovered there. Valuable stained-glass window at Sailor’s shed, which once was made by Markuss father and will be finished by his son, stands for upward verticality. This is also a very powerful metaphor – the window high above lets the light in making it shine in different colours.

However, despite impeccable visuality, this verticality arises some deeper questions along – will somebody get out of it and when? – especially the pit. Many film scholars have noted that melodrama can be a powerful genre to articulate through individual characters social tension. Thomas Elsaesser in his profound article about family melodrama explores Hollywood films made in 1940–1963 proving that this form of melodrama so manifestly reflected and helped to articulate cultural and psychological context of the time. So does “The Pit”. The film deals with many social problems like abandoned child, alcoholism, violence against woman and gender prejudice. Melodrama can be self-conscious social force that resonates with reality. There must always be someone the spectator sympathizes with in melodrama. One of the characteristic features of melodramas in general “is that they concentrate on the point of view of the victim,” Elsaesser writes [Elsaesser 1991: 86]. Suffering of a protagonist may cause strong emotions of a viewer and that is what we expect from melodrama. Emotionless melodrama is either an oxymoron or a failure.

Markuss, and this is an obvious choice by the filmmakers, is presented as the key victim. The boy’s father has died (from drug overdose), his mother (we see in one short episode) doesn’t want to take care of her son, he has no friends, he lives at home with his grandmother; Markuss’ only salvation is drawing – he has a talent for it, just like his father once had. The whole narrative is structured in a way which leaves no space for doubt that Markuss is the one we should sympathize with. The news that Markuss has left Emily in the pit spreads in the neighbourhood. Some people afterwards look at the boy with suspicion, Emily’s mother shouts at him as he approaches the girl again, Emily’s brother and his friends attack him in the street. The cause of these effects can be traced back in some of flashbacks. In one scene Markuss remembers hearing conversation between his mother Sveta and his granny. “He needs mother! Child is a gift,” reminds granny. “I didn’t need this damned gift,” Sveta answers, adding that the father of Markuss didn’t grow up even after the birth of a child; the only thing he was interested in, was painting. There is a cause to the effects now. Behaviour of Markuss has explanation or even a kind of justification. There is also another aspect – a distinctive verticality in valuation becomes apparent within the narrative. Father of Markuss was a talented artist and this is something that makes him “more valuable” in comparison with mother who just is neglecting her son (the mother’s vocation remains undisclosed).

Most of the Latvian coming-of-age films made in recent decades represent existing "modern" models of families and related conflicts. Teenage stories usually deal with conflicts with parents. Often – with one of them, because the other one (usually the father) is missing – he does not participate in a young person's life. The contrast between the narrative of societal acceptance of divorce and single-parenting in reality and its representation in films indicates a prevalent societal dichotomy. In "the real world", there has been a growing acceptance of divorce and the choice to raise children as a single parent, reflecting evolving societal attitudes and changing family structures. Meanwhile a one-parent family in many cases is represented in films as a crucial deviation and this kind of model usually serves as a cause of serious effects. Since the "missing" person mostly is father, the mother who doesn't cope with her life and who has problems with their sons is a typical character. It can be observed in many Latvian coming-of-age stories such as "Mother, I love you" (Janis Nords, 2013), "Modris" or "Amateur". Such cinematic representations can be viewed as a reflection of societal anxieties, traditional norms, or rather, a desire to amplify melodrama for narrative purposes.

Verticality and hierarchy functions on two levels: between Markuss' parents also between Markuss and Emily. The missing mother's role for Markuss can apparently be partly filled by his grandmother, illustrating a certain degree of substitutability. However, the role of the father remains notably irreplaceable, showcasing a hierarchy in parental roles. Markuss and Emily find themselves situated within a clear hierarchical position, both symbolically and directly. Most of the flashbacks consist of episodes when Emily is in the bottom of the pit while Markuss is standing up there looking down cruelly at the girl. "Help me out, Markuss!" she cries jumping up and waving desperately with her arms. "It won't be that simple," says Markuss, letting counting-out game (this is the way not to take his own responsibility to decide the unlucky fate of Emily) he leaves her there and runs home. Markuss hides at home under the blanket. Occasionally, echoes of Emily's distress reverberate through his consciousness, evoked by recollections of "the episode". He resolutely refrains from engaging in discourse concerning these tormenting memories. Markuss counts dead flies on the windowsill and draws gloomy and scary pictures. The boy suffers. But what about little girl Emily and her mother?

Emily's mother (played by Inese Kucinska-Lauksteine) will desperately search for her missing daughter. When somebody fortunately finds and rescues the girl, mother breaks into Markuss' house. Melodrama clearly here manifests itself, quoting Thomas Elsaesser, as "a special form of *mise-en-scène*" [Elsaesser 1991: 75]. The *mise-en-scène* can be described as spectacular. It is dark outside and it is raining. Emily's mother cries, her tears fuse with raindrops on her face as she reveals to the granny the terrible truth about what Markuss has done. This is a very emotional episode.

“I venture to argue that the primary work of melodrama (..) had fundamentally been that of seeking a better justice,” writes Linda Williams [Williams 2018: 214]. However, the *mise-en-scène* reveals the opposite. Emily’s mother Sandra, here and in some other episodes looks hysterical, she is full of suspicion, even mean. For example, in one scene Emily’s mother brings some sweets to the social worker begging she arranges the boy’s mental health is checked on the basis of his horrifying drawings. In summary, the portrayal of the maternal character is constructed in a manner that fails and apparently has not been intended to evoke sympathy or compassionate understanding from the audience. The hierarchy of victims can be identified here. Hyperbolized version of it will read as follows – Emily is expected to make sacrifices for the benefit of Markuss, underlining a perspective where one person’s (girl’s) welfare is considered more significant than another’s (boy’s).

It is essential to reveal the further plot. Sandra (again it is raining heavily) later gets into a car accident. In a high speed her car crashes into the bridge railings and falls down into the water (verticality again, this time under the water). She is punished and since melodrama usually contains moral lesson, the question “why?” might appear.

Sandra’s conduct aligns with the aesthetic principles of “excess”, embodying an exaggerated and amplified approach to expression and action. In the book “Lovely Mothers” Jana Kukaine reflects on relationship between mothers and daughters – the issue is essential part of feminism theory. The author analyses also Freudian concepts, coming to a conclusion that “Getting lost in the labyrinth of these interpretations, one can notice that in all versions the same motive appears: the mother-daughter relationship is full of contradictions and tension, it is always pathological, varying from passionate affection to icy indifference and hatred” [Kukaine 2016: 170]. Mother Sandra behaves hysterically, which tends to be presented as “too big affection” to her daughter. However, “the excluded middle” approach has excluded one important aspect and it is – the motivation. Mother of Emily behaves and reacts in a certain way because she has ground for it – her daughter has been lured and kept in the pit; she has been in great danger. Emily’s physical location down in the pit causes escalation of her mother’s emotions. The film conspicuously contains a clash between melodramatic representation and psychological authenticity.

It must be pointed out that mostly the main protagonists of Latvian coming-of-age films are of male gender and the affection (or just the opposite) is usually between son and mothers; only recently several film directors have changed that. The most vivid example is film “Lame-os” by Marta Elina Martinsons (2021). The film director puts in the centre of the film three girls – ninth graders Sarmite, Sveta and Katrina in 1999, just on the eve of Millennium celebration, besides there is modality

of comedy instead of modality of melodrama in the aesthetics of the film. Martinsone approaches to Latvian coming-of-age film with a fresh and unique touch.

The second feature of melodrama described by Linda Williams – the drive to achieve moral legibility in the eventual resolution of the suspense and the question who deserves to live, who to die? manifests itself in episodes with Emily in the pit and even more in the car crash scene. We don't know whether the little girl will get out of the place. Several hypotheses may arise regarding further events and this in a way equalizes as, the viewers, with Sandra, Emily's mother – her shock comes from presumptions "what could have happened...". We don't know whether Sandra will escape from the car either. Underwater world, where Sandra falls into seems like another reality. Coincidences, chance, time pressure (too late or too early) are typical elements of melodrama. Markuss, who happens to be near the accident, helps Sandra. Emerging from the river, both figures stand in a state of purification, having shed the residues of insults, suspicions, and animosity. The profoundly evocative musical accompaniment to this scene conveys a sense of drama intertwined with optimism. The place where the horizontal and vertical lines cross, the sacred appears.

The shed of Sailor (played by Indra Burkovska) with stained-glass window can be interpreted as what Linda Williams describes as another feature of melodrama – that is the "space of innocence", the space where goodness is located. The visuality presented in the concluding scenes achieves a nearly tactile quality (cinematographer Gatis Grinbergs). The interplay of light and texture becomes prominent as Markuss completes the intricately designed glass-stained window. Illuminated by sunlight, particles of dust dance in the air, accompanying the burgeoning luminosity that permeates the expansive room through the art piece. This intensification reaches a zenith wherein the delineation between vertical and horizontal orientations becomes indiscernible.

The character of Sailor deserves exploration – it is so complicated and unique. If "The Pit" has its depths, then this is there. Sailor does not consider himself to be a victim (although he had grounds for it) but accepts his way of life as a conscious choice. There is no bitterness in this character. All he says is direct and wise. The melodrama is focused on "excess"; however, a notable juncture occurs wherein a seemingly static interlude prevails, suggesting a cognitive departure from anticipated heightened events. Markuss has discovered a secret about Sailor – he by chance sees that Sailor has woman's body. An inward process takes place – he thinks, he doubts. And in this case, instead of falling down into his own pit of disappointment, anger or self-pity, he chooses not to. Invisible vertical and internal movement proves to be the strongest one.

To conclude, the coming-of-age film "The Pit" uses features of melodrama described by L. Williams: excess, suspense, the drive to achieve moral legibility and the

“space of innocence” for the goodness. The suspense has primarily been constructed through the utilization of vertical movement, employing opposing downward and upward spaces. While the visual elements serve their intended purpose, it is evident that a stereotypical and shallow victim-oriented hierarchy underlies them, casting doubt upon the achievement of moral legibility and after all – also emotional power.

Sources

- Brooks, P. (1992). The Melodramatic Imagination. In: M. Landy (ed.). *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, pp. 50–67.
- Elsaesser, T. (1991). *Tales of sound and fury*. In: M. Landy (ed.). *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, pp. 68–91.
- Gledhill, C. (2018). Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama. In: C. Gledhill, L. Williams (eds.). *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures*. Columbia University Press.
- Kukaine, J. (2016). *Daiļās mātes: sievietē, ķermenī, subjektivitātē*. Rīga: Neputns.
- Williams, L. (2018). “Tales of Sound and Fury...” or, The Elephant of Melodrama. In: C. Gledhill, L. Williams (eds.). *Melodrama Unbound. Across History, Media and National Cultures*. Columbia University Press.