

Amy Ratelle

### Half-breed Dog, Half-breed Film

#### *Balto* as Animelodrama

Linda Williams (1998) defines melodrama as “a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (p. 42). This emphasis on moral and emotional truth, as opposed to cinematic realism or adherence to historical fact positions the figure of the “suffering innocent” (p. 43) as a dividing line between the oppositions of (cinematic) “good” and “evil.” *Balto* (1995) takes several liberties with history. The nature of these liberties is of great interest, especially as the film is promoted as a “true” story (on its movie poster), and more particularly if we are to understand the film is operating specifically as melodrama. This paper examines *Balto* in terms of its melodramatic structure, and how the liberties taken with actual history serve to enhance the visceral impact of the film.

Melodrama is most often (pejoratively) deemed a genre of excess. Nearly all the writings on melodrama focus on its excessive qualities as properties of the “woman’s film” (Williams, 1998; Gledhill 2000), and are framed in terms of issues of violations of good taste, in that they are overly, often uncomfortably, sentimental. Children’s cinema is also often framed in terms of violations of good taste – too loud, too bright, too nonsensical. The similarity in negative views of these “marginalized” genres has yet to be noted in writings on melodrama or children’s cinema. It seems only logical, then, to examine *Balto* in terms of its excessive pathos, sentimentality and action-packed third act, especially in that the film undermines historical fact in order to drive home a larger point on suffering and the rewards of virtue, and because it implicitly maintains a tie to history, inherent in the live-action opening and closing “brackets”. Though most, if not all, children’s animation is melodramatic, *Balto* in particular is deserving of special attention by virtue of the tensions of pathos/action in the animated narrative, and the implicit “real-life” history in the live-action, which requires an anchor to an actual lived experience, as provided by the live-action bookends. While other animated films may have this explicit division between live-action and animation, in the case of *Balto*, the shift in medium is more than simply indicative of a flashback. As the human grandmother is revealed as Rosie, the little girl in the animated “core text,” this lends greater historical credence to the emotional journey of *Balto* in the animated portion of the film.

This troubled relationship to history is heightened by the division of the film into two parts – a brief live-action opening sequence, the animated “core text,” and a return to the live-action space at the end. Christine Gledhill (2000) further observes that “melodrama’s heightened contrasts and polar oppositions aim to make the world morally legible” (2000, p. 234) – pure/impure, rural/urban, wild/domestic, and nostalgia/history. The division of the narrative into two separate parts highlights the grey areas between historical fact and emotional truth. The interdependence of these two modes of representation as separate, yet inseparable parts of the same narrative is crucial to understanding the film as melodrama.

In the animated portion of the film, *Balto* is an outcast wolf-husky cross breed, yearning at first to be included as part of a dogsled racing team, then, after he meets purebred husky Jenna, to be domesticated as a family pet, preferably within her family unit. *Balto*’s chance for greatness comes in the form of a diphtheria epidemic in his “hometown” of Nome, Alaska. Through his tentative

## Animation Studies – Vol.3, 2008

friendship with Jenna, whose human owner, Rosie, a little girl, is struck down with the illness, he is exposed to a cozy family intimacy he has never been part of. Jenna, who loves her little-girl owner, is worried for her. Balto becomes worried, on Jenna's behalf.

The first act of the film goes out of its way to create standard melodramatic oppositions of good/evil, pure/impure, domestic/savage, and civilization/wilderness, in order to position Balto as a suffering innocent, beset by the injustices and indignities of being a misunderstood social outcast. He is distrusted by the humans of the town for his (allegedly) savage, unpredictable, 'wolfy' nature; the canine residents mock him for the impurity of his bloodline. He is a loner of sorts – his only companion is Boris, a snow goose, who stubbornly refuses to fly south with his own kind. Steel, the only other purebred husky, is Balto's chief antagonist. He repeatedly bullies him, and takes pains to ensure that Balto continues to be misunderstood and distrusted by the humans of Nome. Steel and his gang, the other dogs on the winning sled team, call Balto names, threaten him, and beat him up. The length of screen-time and narrative focus on these incidents results in a pathos-heavy first act. Clearly, apart from Jenna, and by extension, Rosie, Balto is not wanted in the town. His mixed heritage makes him a liability, which tugs at our heartstrings.

However, he is just as uncomfortable with wolves. Early in the film, after being set-upon by Steel, Balto slinks away, and encounters a wolf pack on his way home. High on a ridge, they call to him, howling out mournfully. He looks a lot more like them than he resembles even the other (non-Siberian) huskies in town, and they seem willing to have him as a part of their pack, but Balto yearns for Jenna, and 'civilization.' He slinks home, filled with shame over his impure bloodline. As this is (ostensibly) Balto's story, the viewer is concretely aligned with Balto, suffering every indignity right along with him. We want him to win Jenna; we need him to overcome the stigma of his mixed blood origins. He is as much a victim of circumstance as he is of Steel's bullying. As Williams (1998) puts it, "in melodrama, there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice... as the powerless yet virtuous seek to return to the 'innocence' of their origins" (p. 48). In Balto's case, this is a little complicated, as he is half-wolf, and thus already sullied at birth. As spectators, we need there to be a way for Balto to overcome the stigma, to win Jenna, and a place within her family unit.

Balto's affection for Jenna and his need to both impress her and save Rosie is his impetus to rescue the sled team, which has become lost in the blizzard conditions. Balto is determined to get the antitoxin serum from Nenana to Nome, even though the town has made it abundantly clear that they have no use for him. Cut-aways to the lost team reveal, however, that it is not the weather that has undone them, but Steel's megalomania. At the beginning of the film, Steel is portrayed as merely high on himself. By the time the antitoxins have begun their Nome-ward journey, Steel is very obviously insane. He has lost the trail, causing the sled to tip and the driver to pitch forward, rendering him unconscious, thus losing any human decision-making authority. Steel forbids the other dogs from attempting to regain the trail without him.

It is at this point that Balto (the film) becomes far less interested in pathos than it does in action. Balto (the dog) braves every conceivable winter-related obstacle on his quest to save the sled team and the antitoxins. Setting out with Boris, he soon runs into trouble in the form of an enormous black bear, roused from winter hibernation. The bear is depicted as pure grizzly evil. Balto must fight the bear, but it is a losing battle until the bear is distracted by Jenna, who has followed Balto, thinking to aid him on his journey. With her assistance he defeats the bear, but Jenna has been injured, and Boris must escort her back into town for medical attention. Boris offers Balto some parting advice: "A dog cannot make this journey alone. But, maybe, a wolf can."

## Animation Studies – Vol.3, 2008

Thus Balto's quest becomes not so much about helping Nome, but about finding his inner wolf and reconciling it with his outer dog.

Balto sniffs out the team on the winter wind. Setting off to find them, Balto marks his trail back to Nome. He finds the lost team quickly enough, but must contend with Steel's madness. Each time Balto goes near the crate of medication, Steel runs him off. Balto demonstrates his "quality" through passive-resistance. Each time he is thrown by Steel, he gets back up, and tells him, "I don't want to fight you." Unfortunately, Steel feels otherwise, and they do fight, ending with (predictably) Steel falling off a cliff. In the meantime, Balto's character has so impressed the other dogs, that they offer him Steel's place as lead in the harness. In the spirit of non-stop action, Balto's trials are hardly over. Steel survives his fall, and obliterates Balto's trail by marking every tree. Balto is left with no alternative but to guess the way home, and fails miserably. He nearly takes the team off (yet another) cliff. He saves the team from falling, but both he and the precious antitoxin go over instead. He has an encounter with a wolf unlike any he, and by extension, we, have ever seen before.

This sequence is essentially the pivot on which the film turns. It is a quiet, spiritual moment in what is, up to that point, and for the rest of the third act, a dialogue- and action-heavy film. Balto and the wolf howl together against a backdrop of blizzard and mountains. This mountainous winter landscape takes on great symbolic importance, as does the whiteness of the spirit wolf, in this specific moment and the film as a whole. Richard Dyer (1997) notes, about the stark, white mountain landscape that

such places had a number of virtues: the clarity and cleanness of the air, the vigor demanded by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate, the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of the mountain vistas, even the greater nearness to God above and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow. (p. 21).

Or, at the very least, the snow is the second-whitest presence in the scene. The spirit-wolf (perhaps even the god of wolves) is the whitest thing set in a landscape of white things. Balto, searching for origin, finds that it is as lily-white, if not more so, as Jenna's or Steel's. His is a noble origin, far outreaching the mangy grey wolves he declined to join at the beginning of the film. Animation beautifully renders both the unusual appearance of the spirit-wolf – tall, slender, with a lovely, tapering snout, and yellow eyes with concentric pupils – as well as controls the blizzard background of delicate blue and green shades, warmed up by the presence of the wolf, emitting a very faint pink and yellow-tinged glow. The staggering revelation of Balto's purity and inherent worth is accomplished with little movement and no dialogue at all – the calm of centre of literal blizzard conditions, and the storm in Balto's heart. As Williams (1998) points out, "[t]he revelation occurs as a spectacular, moving sensation – that is, it is felt as sensation, and not simply registered as ratiocination in the cause-effect logic of narrative – because it shifts to a different register of signification, often bypassing language altogether" (p. 52). In a third act crammed with action and spectacle, the quiet beauty of this communion stands as a moment out of the "time" of the narrative.

Balto then proceeds to climb back up the cliff, dragging the precious antitoxin with him, and leads the team back to Nome, foiling a broken bridge, treacherous ice caves, and other such clichéd winter dangers to become the hero of the day, and Jenna's chosen mate. He is accepted into the town with honours, reaping integrity's rewards - "the recognition of virtue by the less virtuous" (Williams, 1998, p. 52).

## Animation Studies – Vol.3, 2008

But the film doesn't end here - it ends as it begins, with a live-action grandmother and granddaughter paying tribute to the statue of Balto in Central Park, New York City. The complete film opens with the grandmother and granddaughter, dragging a purebred Siberian husky puppy around the park, as they search for a place the grandmother knows, but is unable to easily find.


*Granddaughter:* "Grandma, what are we looking for?"

*Grandmother:* "A statue..."

The grandmother launches into the story, which spawns a dissolve from a pan across brightly-coloured fall maples into the snowy forest-space of the animated "core text." By the end of the animated portion of the story, in the return to the closing bookend, they have found the statue of Balto, dedicated to the "indomitable spirit of the sled dog."

*Granddaughter:* "Did Balto really do all that?"

To the grandmother, the answer is yes, but history itself tells a different, shorter, and ultimately less exciting tale. The diphtheria epidemic was real, and so was Balto. The real Balto was a dog on racing great Leonard Seppala's second-string team, but Seppala didn't think he'd make a particularly effective lead dog. Seppala's assistant disagreed, and hitched Balto up as the lead for his team for the last leg of the serum relay. Balto performed admirably, saving the team from becoming lost on several occasions. Clearly, Balto (the film) ignores facts and embellishes others to serve a greater emotional truth. The inclusion of the indexical relationship of live actors to the camera indicates that more is at work than simply the embroidered recounting of one dog's tale. The live action sequences provide a symbolic anchor to history, lending greater weight and credibility to the melodramatic animated bulk of the film. Balto's achievement, in terms of the animated text, as illustrated by the statue in Central Park, is a most public, and, in terms of the live action, tangible, recognition of his inherent virtue, which transcends his shady background. The fictional Balto raises his social standing and reinforces the civilizing properties of the nuclear family, returning to an origin he has been denied; the real Balto saves some Inuit children from certain death. Both are memorialized in the single figure of the statue in Central Park, in all its inscribed glory. Because Balto is melodrama, its core tenet is that anyone, whose heart and intentions are pure enough, can overcome the taint of their origins, and achieve public (and sometimes bronze) recognition of virtue. The dialectic of pathos and action played out in the animated part of the film opens and closes in this quiet, "real world" corner of New York City. Because the melodramatic structure subverts actual history to provide a greater moral truth, the bookends serve not only as a means to access the past, but also the future. The live action closing sequence carries Balto's legacy of virtue into not only our "real," urban world, but, as embodied in Rosie's granddaughter and her puppy, into the (filmed) bodies of generations to come.

Though by no means a comprehensive study of melodrama or children's cinema, this paper does provide an inroad to further discourse in terms of how these two marginalized genres can be woven together on their own terms, as well as offering potential avenues for future studies in animation theory. 

**Amy Ratelle** is currently a PhD student in the Joint Program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University and York University. Her research focuses on animal issues and animality in children's film and television. She holds a BFA in Film Studies from Ryerson University and a MA in Film Studies from Carleton University.

## **Animation Studies – Vol.3, 2008**

### **References**

- Balto (1995). Directed by Simon Wells. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures and Amblin Entertainment, 2001 [Video: DVD].
- Dyer, Richard (1997). *White*. London, Routledge.
- Gledhill, Christine (2000). “Rethinking Genre”, in: Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.). *Reinventing Film Studies*. New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 221-243.
- Williams, Linda (1998). “Melodrama Revised.” *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Nick Browne, ed. Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 42-88.

© Amy Ratelle

Edited by Nichola Dobson