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The dictionary defines melodrama as a 'sensational dramatic piece with crude appeals to the emotions'. Or is there more to it than that? Douglas Sirk's torrid melodramas seemed to have been designed to reflect and probe the unspoken hopes and anxieties of the film audiences of middle America in the Fifties.

It might be asked why Douglas Sirk, whose career as a director effectively ended in 1959, suddenly became a major focus of attention in Anglo-American film culture in the early Seventies. After years of critical neglect, there appeared an interview book (Sirk on Sirk) and a special issue on him in a film-theory magazine (Seven, Summer 1971), as well as a retrospective at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1972 with a book of critical essays on his work to accompany it. His 'rediscovery' resulted primarily from a change in the kinds of films and film directors celebrated in Anglo-American film criticism after the Fifties and the extent to which oppositional critical positions – more favourable to Sirk's kind of cinema – were finding a voice in the study of films in the Sixties and Seventies.

Douglas Sirk was born Hans Ditlev Sierck in Germany in 1900. He studied law, philosophy, and the history of art, and worked briefly as a journalist before entering the theatre as a playreader in 1920. In the next two decades he had a distinguished career as a producer of classical and modern drama and also as a director in the cinema. Fleeing from Nazism, he went to Hollywood in 1939. After a range of low-budget films for various companies – including Hitler's Madman (1942) for MGM, Miss Love for United Artists and Shockproof (both 1948) for Columbia – he settled down in 1950 to almost a decade of productive work with Universal-International. And it was there, with Ross Hunter or Albert S. Zuckmihl as his producer, that he made the melodramas – Magnificent Obsession (1954), All That Heaven Allows (1955), Written on the Wind (1956), The Tarnished Angels (1957) and Imitation of Life (1959) – on which his critical reputation is founded.

The critical factor
In the twenty years or so following World War II, the dominant critical position in British and American cinema had two main features: the undervaluing of 'commercial' Hollywood movies in favour of the 'artistic' films of the non-English speaking world; and
Douglas Sirk's magnificent obsessions


Far left: Sirk relaxes during the making of Lured (1947) with his star Lucille Ball. Left: the film is a noir thriller about a dancer (Ball) who helps police catch a killer. Above and above right: Sign of the Pagan (1954) and Captain Lightfoot (1955) were low-budget potboilers for both Sirk and Universal.

Sirk’s particular weakness of the dominant critical position of that time was its blindness to mise-en-scene (roughly, the arrangement of cinematic effects used to tell a story) and its undervaluing of melodrama as a legitimate artistic form.

The quality of Sirk’s Hollywood films was first perceived by French critics, who celebrated rather than disparaged Hollywood and who were much more interested in issues of cinematic style than subject matter. Those concerns were imported into Anglo-American film culture in the Sixties, most notably in the writings of the American critic Andrew Sarris and the British journal Movie, although Sirk’s movies did not figure very prominently at first.

The interest in him finally surfaced in the Seventies through the work of a group of critics, many of whom were associated with another British journal, Screen. Though highly responsive to the formal elements of cinema, these writers deployed a Marxist frame of reference, an important aspect of which was to pose relationships between aesthetic systems and the social systems within which they operate (ie, what films mean and how they circulate within particular societies). Sirk, therefore, was a highly congenial figure to this group on several fronts: his left-wing credentials in pre-war Germany; his stress on the artist rather than the realism of cinema; and the way his films offered a critique of bourgeois America. Moreover, through his specialization in the family melodrama in the Fifties, he prophetically explored the stresses in family life and the repression of women—issues that were to become central in radical (especially feminist) politics in the Seventies.

The measure of melodrama

In his films, Sirk seems to have consciously intended both to deliver all the most satisfying elements of the ‘weepie’—glossy bourgeois settings, handsome heroes, suffering heroines—and to operate a critique of that ethos (and thus of bourgeois America itself) by dismantling the form from within. Sirk observed that melodramatic forms, far from being trite or superficial, have been the best indices of the social stress-points within particular societies. He was not unique in charting American social disintegration through melodrama. Nicholas Ray and Vincente Minnelli, for instance, did so with equal intensity if with less self-awareness, feeling rather than thinking the process.

Sirk’s ‘dismantling’ of the form of the melodrama from within—rooted in his refusal to align himself as director, with the sentimental responses that the story-lines of his films demand—is achieved in a variety of ways. Among the most important of these is his relentless insistence on the fabricated quality of the films. Thus, the emotional intensity of the ‘normal’ melodrama is in many of Sirk’s films, pushed to a point of delirious excess which evokes the highly stylized forms of the German Expressionist cinema.

This can be illustrated by sequences from two of Sirk’s most accomplished films, Written on the Wind and The Tarnished Angels. In each, the impression of emotional excess beyond the strict requirements of the story is created by intercutting two separate strands of the narrative until they collide in a crescendo of feeling. Characteristically in Sirk’s films, the sexual longings of particular characters are directed at characters whose own sexual longings are directed elsewhere. Thus, in Written on the Wind, the wayward daughter (Dorothy Malone) of a rich oil family desires her brother’s friend Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson), who in turn looks to the brother’s wife (Lauren Bacall). The daughter, having taken a young pet pump attendant to a motel, is brought home to the family mansion by the police. Her father (Robert Keith) confesses to Mitch his disappointment with both his children and then, broken in spirit, moves on up the staircase that dominates the family home. His ascent is intercut with a scene in which the daughter in her room puts on a record and

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Hudson and Wyman were teamed in All That Heaven Allows (above) following the success of Magnificent Obsession: Hudson, tall and handsome, and Wyman, soulful and romantic, were ideal performers for Sirk’s melodramas — as were square-jawed Robert Stack and the flamboyant Dorothy Malone who starred in Written on the Wind (above right) and The Tarnished Angels (right).

performs what is effectively a striptease in front of a picture of Mitch. As the tempo of the music mounts and her dance becomes an almost abstract pattern of diaphanous red chiffon, the pace of the intercutting with the father’s climb up the stairs increases until, at the top, he suffers a heart attack and plunges (dead) to the bottom of the stairs.

In The Tarnished Angels, the obsessive interest of the reporter (Rock Hudson) in a troupe of aerobic performers is guided by his sexual longing for the woman in the troupe (Dorothy Malone), who constantly looks toward her own neglectful husband (Robert Stack). There is a brief moment when, for the ‘wrong’ reasons — vulnerability and despair — the reporter and the woman come together. This scene is intercut with the scene of a New Orleans Mardi Gras party; just at the moment when the couple are about to engage in their self-deluding kiss, the two scenes come explosively together as the revelers, led by a figure in a skeleton suit, burst into the room, destroying — in an ‘overkill’ of cinematic effects — the couple’s illusory moment.

These sequences indicate the emotional register and the consciously fabricated quality of Sirk’s films. Music and objects are made to carry an unusual emotional weight. In another film, All That Heaven Allows, the shattering of a piece of pottery, for example, carries resonances far beyond its strictly narrative importance.

Sirk and social insecurity

As the brief description from Written on the Wind indicates, the social milieu of Sirk’s films is quite often that of the rich bourgeois, inevitably emotionally crippled within the parameters of home, family and country club.

This class-analytical element in Sirk’s films is perhaps best exemplified in All That Heaven Allows, in which Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), a comfortably-off widow, embarks on an affair with her social inferior, gardener Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), thereby scandalizing her grown-up children and her friends — who attempt to mummify her in the role of bourgeois widowhood. The film also shows that Sirk’s work is most fruitfully understood by regarding the mise-en-scene rather than by straightforward thematic analysis. The kinds of thematic oppositions set up in All That Heaven Allows between the ‘natural’ world of Ron and the crippled world of Cary country versus city, casual clothes versus formal clothes, working with nature versus working with money, a gathering at a friend’s house versus a gathering at a country club, wine versus cocktails, and so on — constitute ideological oppositions to be found across a whole range of American films. But what is distinctive about Sirk is the extent to which the social decay and atrophy of a particular class is carried beyond the simple theatics of his films so that the form of them poses questions about the kind of art being consumed in Fifties America and what the stance of a thoughtful director should be to that art. And it is this fact that makes Sirk’s films as relevant today as they were made. —Colin McArthur

Filmography

Films made in Germany as Delph Sieck unless specified: 1935 April, April (co-dir. only on Dutch-language version; ’t Was e’n April, 1935); Das Mädel von Moorhof; Stützen der Gesellschaft (GB: The Pillars of Society). 36 Schahanshah; (+co-sc.) (GB: Final Accord); Das Hofkomiet; (+co-sc.) (GB: The Court Concert) (dir. only on French-language version: La Chanson du Souvenir, 1936). ’37 Zu Neuen Ufern (+co-sc.). La Habanera. ’39 Boefje; (+co-sc.) (NETH). All remaining films in USA as Douglas Sirk: ’42 Hitler’s Madman; ’44 Summer Storm; (+co-sc.). ’45 A Scandal in Paris; ’47 Lured (GB: Personal Column). ’48 Sleep, My Love; Slightly French; Shockproof. ’50 The First Legion; (+co-prod.); Mystery Submarine. ’51 Thunder on the Hill (GB: Bonaventure); The Lady Pays Off; Weekend With Father. ’52 Has Anybody Seen My Gal?; No Room for the Groom; Meet Me at the Fair. ’53 Take Me to Town; All I Desire. ’54 Taza, Son of Cochise; Magnificent Obsession; Sign of the Pagan. ’55 Captain Lightfoot; All That Heaven Allows; There’s Always Tomorrow; Never Say Goodbye (co-dir, uncredited). ’56 Written on the Wind; Battle Hymn. ’57 Interlude; The Tarnished Angels. ’58 A Time to Love and a Time to Die; ’59 Imitation of Life. ’79 Bourbon Street Blues (sup. only).
Turner's 'scandalous' past was by this time too widely publicized for her to conform to a submissive female stereotype: indeed, during the making of Imitation of Life, the scandal of Turner's daughter Cheryl being tried for the murder of her mother's lover, Johnny Stompanato, proved once again how loudly her public persona resonated against her movie roles. This fortuitous, sub-conscious confusion of the Lana and Lora roles works powerfully to the film's advantage - both women are actresses and achievers. And they do not need men to attain success.

The social environment of Imitation of Life is one where men, if they appear at all, are pushed into the margins. Even the return of Steve at the end is a hollow gesture towards the obligatory happy ending. The film's ambiance is essentially female, an imitation perhaps of the life lived by the millions of women to whom the film is and its antecedents in the Hunter-Sirk melodrama cycle, are addressed. They are the middle-American matriarchy, and in a society grounded in Christianized concepts of family and home, their role is far from the passive, self-sacrificing attitude that the term 'women's weepies' assumes.

What Sirk presents in Imitation of Life is nothing less than a monstrous metaphor of an acquisitive, success-seeking, class-bound, racially prejudiced, intolerant society in which Anne Lora is as much a victim as Annie. As the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder himself an admirer and imitator of Sirk) observed: 'None of the protagonists comes to see that everything, thoughts, desires, dreams arise directly from social reality or are manipulated by it. I know of no other film in which this fact is formulated with such precision and with such desperation.'

The bleakness of Sirk's critique is explicit in the deeper and angrier progress of Sarah Jane from schoolroom to strip joint following not her own mother's example - Annie represents solid domestic values and that of her 'mistress-mother', in what Richard Dyer calls an 'imitation of white'. But the underlying disquiet of the movie - which renders its impact so pessimistic - is the collapse of matriarchy at the heart of the middle-American home. Both Anne and Lora fail their daughters: Annie from the moment she visits Sarah Jane at school to give her an umbrella, and Lora throughout the movie but especially in the scene where she makes a shallow promise to Susie to give her boyfriend Steve rather than to allow him to come between them.

If we were to consider Annie and Lora together as a composite mother figure, it would become apparent that she conforms to the sexism that requires women should first become mothers, even after should suffer patiently and sacrifice themselves for the good of the offspring. Neither child in this movie benefits from that act. But the supreme audacity of Sirk's Imitation of Life is to split this mother figure in two and to make one of them black, thus lumping not only the contemporary issue of racial prejudice but also questions of class and sexual oppression right on the doorstep of the white, middle-class American home.

MARTYN AUTE

Lora Meredith, a widowed actress down on her luck (1), hires Annie Johnson - a poor, black woman with a small daughter (2) - to be her housemaid. Lora is determined to pursue her career, even if it means neglecting her daughter Susie. She discusses her career plans with Steve Archer (3) but turns down a proposal of marriage from him (4).

Sarah Jane, Annie's daughter, grows up in the Meredith home but her initial friendship with Susie becomes troublesome as she begins to learn about life in a predominately white society. Born a half-caste, Sarah Jane tries to pass as white in school and with her boyfriend Frankie, but he beats her up when he learns that her mother is black (5). Sarah Jane returns home and takes out her anger on Susie (6). Sarah Jane also rows frequently with her mother and on one occasion, when Lora is entertaining a visiting movie director (7), serves them drinks in a parody of black servile behavior.

Lora is at last a success but her stardom has finally alienated Susie (8) who transfers her affections to Annie. Sarah Jane leaves the household and goes off to work in a nightclub and her mother follows her to find out where she works (9). The prolonged absence of her daughter breaks Annie's heart.

She becomes ill and on her death is treated to the symposium funeral - where Mahalia Jackson sings a valedictory hymn (10) - that she has saved for all her life.