New Media Studies

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Declaration of Ownership: I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged: ☑

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How did Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) subvert misogynistic attitudes in Post War American society?

America in the 1950s was a country undergoing significant change in terms of traditional gender roles. Post war American society was overtly anxious to reinstate these roles, as to reinstate the patriarchal 'norm'. Women were now working in what were previously defined as 'masculine' jobs, as they had been throughout the second World War. Though the image of the obedient housewife and mother dominated American media, emphasising the need for women to stay at home in suburbia and raise their children.

The melodramatic films of 1950s Hollywood acknowledged these societal changes and sought to challenge what were considered the conservative gender norms of the time. The melodramatic films of Douglas Sirk in particular, asked questions in regards to gender, class and race in 1950s America.

Douglas Sirk, also known as Detlef Sierck, left his home of Germany in 1937, after having completed an 'apprenticeship in cinema at the prestigious German film studio UFA'. [1] He emigrated to Hollywood, where he would go on to direct over 20 films between the years of 1942-1959.[2]

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[1] Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.xi.

[2] Tom Ryan, *Douglas Sirk*, Issue 30, (Melbourne: Senses of Cinema, 2004), pp. 9-10 < Douglas Sirk (csus.edu) > [accessed 8 March 2022].

Though one of the main reasons that Sirk left for Hollywood was due to the fact that Sirk's first wife Lydia Brinken had publicly denounced his relationship with 'Jewish stage actress Hilde Jary' [3] and so Sirk left Germany to join Hilde in Rome. Tom Ryan explains how Sirk felt the need to emigrate, stating that 'while there were admirers of his work in high places in Hitler's Nazi government – Goebbels foremost among them –he had become increasingly disillusioned with what was happening in Germany.' [4] This quotation provides some context into Sirk's personal life and how his filmography was regarded in Germany during the 1930s.

His filmography at this time includes short films such as *Der Eingebildete Krante* (*The Imaginary Invalid*) (1934) and *Dreimal Ehe* (*Three Times Love*) (1934). As well as longer films such as *Stutzen der Gesellschaft* (*Pillars of Society*) (1935).[5]

As gender roles in American society were being challenged, films such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) reflected this rapidly changing societal landscape through the representation of women on screen. Although many male film critics dismissed melodramas as 'weepy women' [6] [7] films, white women in middle class American suburbia

[3] Ryan, p. 5.

[4] Ryan, p. 5.

[5] Ryan, pp. 8-9.

[6] Angela Morrison, *All That Hollywood Allows: Douglas Sirk's Brilliant Melodramas*, (2017) < All That Hollywood Allows: Douglas Sirk's Brilliant Melodramas (filmschoolrejects.com) > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[7] Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), Ebook edition, p. 83.

saw their experiences in life and love being reflected back to them on screen.[8] They even saw their fantasies play out on screen through elaborate storylines and soaring film scores. [9]

By analysing the films of Douglas Sirk, we can reflect on whether he did subvert misogynistic attitudes in post war American society, by not portraying women on screen as voiceless, submissive, and domesticated. To pose the question that perhaps Sirk's films simply maintained and reenforced misogynistic attitudes in 1950s America.

It would take until the 1970s for Douglas Sirk's filmography to come to the attention of British feminist film critics and wider audiences alike. [10] To rediscover Sirk's work and to deconstruct it through feminist theory, as well as film theory.[11]

1970s Feminist Film Critics

As Jackie Byars states, 'feminist film critics of the early 1970s, working in a manner similar to that of literary critics and feminist historians of the period, focused on revealing Hollywood films as oppressive and women as their victims.' [12] She explains how feminist film critics

[8] Tag Gallagher, 'White Melodrama: Douglas Sirk', *Film Comment*, 34.6, (New York, 1998), p.16 < White Melodrama: Douglas Sirk - ProQuest > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[9] Andrew Emerson, *The Beginners Guide: Hollywood Melodramas*, (2019) < The Beginner's Guide: Hollywood Melodramas - Film Inquiry > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[10] Eric Rentschler, 'Douglas Sirk Revisited: The Limits and Possibilities of Artistic Agency', *New German Critique*, 95 (2005), 149-161, p. 151, < https://www.jstor.org/stable/30040971 > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[11] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 10.

[12] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 4.

initially considered Hollywood films to be patriarchal but soon began to study these films in more depth and began to recognise the complexities of female representation on screen.

She goes on to state that ‘by the mid-1970s, feminist film scholars began to turn toward the formal analysis of films and the “spectating subject” the films were said to create (or “center”), a turn away from the “recuperative” approach taken by feminist historians and literary critics, who had begun searching for signs of female resistance in cultural texts.’ [13] The ‘recuperative approach’ refers to feminists uncovering the hidden feminist voices of women within historical sources and literature.[14]

In terms of female resistance, feminist film scholars focused on the protagonist and their characteristics. The 1970s illustrated an emergence of a diverse and conflicting range of perspectives when analysing texts. The recuperative approach was a feminist way of reclaiming the ‘lost’ stories of women and was an optimistic viewpoint of framing the representation of women in any space revolutionary.[15] Though as literary critic Judith Lowder Newton did stress [16], you must not ignore the presence of patriarchy when reflecting on an historical time period.

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[13] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 4.

[14] Jill Liddington, ‘History, Feminism And Gender Studies’ in *Working Paper 1 Feminist Scholarship: within/across/between/beyond the disciplines*, (2001) < [Jill Liddington - History, Feminism and Gender Studies (jliddington.org.uk)] > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[15] Liddington, ‘History, Feminism And Gender Studies’.

[16] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 4.

It is vital to recognise the nuances and complexities of female representation in mainstream texts. Byars states that ‘equally naive is the assumption common in feminist film criticism today: all that is “feminine”—and, therefore, all that is woman—is created and circumscribed by patriarchy, with mainstream texts like Hollywood films serving solely to reinforce patriarchal patterns.’ [17] By acknowledging the nuances and taking a critical approach, you begin to disagree that every Hollywood film is inherently patriarchal.

Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)

The films of Douglas Sirk placed female characters in the centre of the story, portraying complex, multifaceted women. In *All That Heaven Allows*, the character of Cary is a lonely mother of two who has been widowed and longs to find excitement in life again. She refuses to play the part of the forever grieving widow. She enjoys dressing up and attending social events within the local, tight knit community with the respectable Harvey.

What is fascinating about the character of Cary is her refusal to stay at home and sit in front of the television set all day long. The television set is represented as the dreaded confirmation of a woman settling into stifling domesticity. Cary could easily settle for Harvey to appease her children as well as the local community, but instead she learns to value her own happiness and stays by the young gardener, Ron Kirby’s side.

[17] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 4.

As Tom Ryan acknowledges [18], *All That Heaven Allows* is based on a story written by Edna Lee in 1951, that featured in *Woman's Home Companion*, which from there was adapted into a novel. He describes how the novel locked 'the reader inside the feelings of its widowed protagonist as she struggles to escape the constraints of her comfortable middle-class existence'. [19]

Cary's world is suffocating and incredibly tense. She must keep up her appearances or else she will be ostracised from the community, providing great material for the town gossip Mona Plash to thrive off. Cary is terrified of being ostracised and so she strives to make her family, friends, and the wider community comfortable, at the expense of her own comfort.

Focusing specifically on the ostracisation that both Cary and Ron face, Ryan also states that although he could not locate any material from Douglas Sirk on the film, he came across an opinion from a commentator that there was an 'especially personal side to [the film], seeing in his 'drama of a couple oppressed by a society that persecutes difference… an allegory for Sirk's own experience in Nazi Germany." [20]

Every female character within Sirk's films such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) must overcome some form of oppression. The oppression is

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[18] Tom Ryan, *The Films of Douglas Sirk: Exquisite Ironies and Magnificent Obsessions*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), chapter 1, Ebook edition < The Films of Douglas Sirk: Exquisite Ironies and Magnificent Obsessions - Tom Ryan - Google Books > [accessed 6 April 2022].

[19] Ryan, chapter 1, Ebook edition.

[20] Ryan, chapter 1, Ebook edition.

often from within as well as external, through societal oppression. The character of Cary chooses to be with a man who loves her, as she does him, and they both reject the restrictive societal expectations that have been forced upon them.

It is important to acknowledge class when analysing *All That Heaven Allows*, as 'Ron Kirby proves socially unacceptable as a suitor for Cary Scott not only because he is younger but also because he is of a lower social status.' [21] The character of Sara represents the blatant classism within Cary's social cycle. 'Sara (Cary's best friend) cloaks her criticism with "concern" for Cary's happiness, but basically she cannot see how Cary could be happy outside the upper-middle-class socioeconomic environment.' [22]

Byars focuses on class and age as the film revolves around a white middle class woman who is peer pressured to stay within her own 'more respectable' social class. Kirby's age is also seen as taboo, as Cary is older than Ron, which leads to her children and community whispering about what are Ron's true intensions with Cary, and that Cary should be with an older, middle class man such as Harvey.

Focusing on the criticism directed at Sirk for *All That Heaven Allows*, the *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther described the film as depicting the 'doleful situations so dear to daytime radio serials.' [23] Though there was praise from auteur and ideological critics of the 1970s. Paul Willemen wrote in *Screen* in 1971 that 'by stylizing his treatment of a given

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[21] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 108.

[22] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 108.

[23] Walter C. Metz, 'POMP(OUS) SIRK-UMSTANCE: INTERTEXTUALITY, ADAPTATION, AND ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS', *Journal of Film and Video*, 45.4 (1993), 3-21, p. 4 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688015 > [accessed 8 March 2022].

narrative, [Sirk] succeeded in introducing in a quite unique manner, a distance between the film and its narrative pretext.' [24]

Though he also addresses the filmgoing audience stating that 'there appears to be a discrepancy between the audience Sirk is aiming at and the audience which he knows will come to see his films'. [25] He believes that 'marketing, genre, and other institutional appeals' [26] means that the industry defines the audience as female. His criticism presents a patriarchal ideology by discarding the quality of Sirk's melodramas due to their female audience.

His comments disregard the intelligence of the female audience that engage with Sirk's films as though they have been tricked to identify with the female characters on screen, without analysing the film critically. To suggest that the women who engaged with Sirk's films were not aware of the social and political commentary conveyed in his melodramatic films and were merely passive viewers simply reenforces misogynistic attitudes and is a blatant disregard of the valuable emotional connection women found within his films.

[24] Metz, p. 4.

[25] Metz, p. 4.

[26] Metz, p. 4.

All That Heaven Allows, dir. by Douglas Sirk (Universal International Pictures, 1955)

In the scene that is depicted in the image above, Cary decorates her Christmas tree alone, as both her children Kay and Ned prioritise their own lives over spending time with their mother. Cary briefly stops decorating her tree to look out her front window, as a group of young children pass by her house on horses and in a carriage. She pauses and begins to cry, realising how lonely and heartbroken she is without Ron.

Sirk uses ice blue lighting to depict Cary's melancholy. The close-up of Cary's face, with her tears blending into the falling snow on the other side of the window illustrates Sirk's ability through his camerawork to capture moments of grief and isolation.

To bring in a feminist perspective, Laura Mulvey states in her 1978 essay titled 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', 'the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction… The few Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind evoke contradictions rather than reconciliation, with the alternative to mute surrender to society's overt pressures lying in defeat by its unconscious laws.' [27]

She highlights how Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* is made up of mixed messages and reenforces patriarchal passivity. [28] She understands the film to be a missed opportunity in terms of positive female representation on screen and that the film did not go far enough as to interrogate the misogyny that surrounds Cary. To allow her character more power in subverting the patriarchal environment she is trapped in. Though the film is a product of its time (1955) and projecting a 1970s feminist film theorist reading onto this film diminishes how subversive this film was within this specific time period.

Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959)

Another of Sirk's most critiqued 1950s melodramatic films that has been deconstructed and analysed is his 1959 film titled *Imitation of Life*. The film tells the story of Lora Meredith, a white single mother who longs for stardom, struggling to balance both the role of being a mother for her young daughter Susie and her dreams of acting on stage and screen. When Lora meets Annie Johnson, an African American woman, and her biracial daughter Sarah Jane, both women uplift and support one another over the course of a decade.

The character of Lora Meredith wishes to represent a dreamlike reality where a single mother can be both a successful actress and mother. As Anne Morey states, 'Sirk's

[27] Metz, p. 5.

[28] Metz, p. 5.

protagonist cannot trade suffering for glamour because she is not sufficiently real to suffer.' [29] Lora Meredith isn't capable of suffering because she is a fantasy.

The film examines the concept of motherhood and ponders whether a mother can work and raise a family at the same time. '*Imitation of Life* explores the possibilities of female rebellion and escape… but it accomplishes this task [of evoking an emotional reaction from the audience] in a way that criticises female aspirations and audience gullibility.' [30] Morey argues that the female audience is being manipulated by Sirk's films emotionally [31], though the film simply explores the misogynistic critiques aimed at female ambition.

Imitation of Life is not 'an implied critique of women's labor outside the home', but rather the issue is that '[Lora Meredith's] work outside the home subsumes her work [inside of the home].' [32] Meredith's relationship with her daughter Susie is fractured due to the fact that she is never at home, and so Annie raises Susie as though she is her own daughter.

The dominant theme in *Imitation of Life* is that of race and motherhood, as both Lora and Annie have fractured relationships with their own daughters, Susie and Sarah Jane. To give some historical context to how the 1950s would have been in terms of a work life balance for single mothers, Lucy Fischer explains how 'this decade [1948-1958] witnessed shifts in female employment and its relation to domestic responsibilities.' [33] She goes on to say that

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[29] Anne Morey, 'A Star Has Died: Affect and Stardom in a Domestic Melodrama', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 21.2 (2004), p. 95 < https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200490273071 >.

[30] Morey, p. 95.

[31] Morey, p. 95.

[32] Morey, p. 95.

[33] Douglas Sirk, *Imitation of Life*, ed. by Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 7.

'William Chafe charts how the war years saw female employment grow by over 50 percent – the largest gains coming for older married women.' [34]

So although times were changing in regards to female employment, working single mothers had to deal with 'inadequate child-care' and 'wages [that] trailed men's.' [35] The character of Lora embodied this conflict between choosing your family or your career in *Imitation of Life*. One scene that addresses this conflict is when Susie reveals to her mother how neglected she has felt while her mother has been physically absent from her life. Susie tells Lora that Annie has been more of a mother to her and that all she has ever wanted was for her mother to be by her side and to listen to her.

Imitation of Life, dir. by Douglas Sirk (Universal International Pictures, 1959)

To provide more context to the struggles faced by working women and housewives, Fischer quotes Robert Coughlan in a 1956 *Life* magazine's double-issue about 'The American

[34] Sirk, p. 7.

[35] Sirk, p. 7.

Woman: Her Achievements and Troubles' [36]. In the magazine Coughlan 'chastized the housewife who succumbed to the "suburban syndrome" – becoming "morbidly depressed" [37], and 'he was suspicious of the "New York Career Woman": "a bright, well-educated, ambitious" wife in her mid-thirties who abandoned feminine tasks to pursue outside work.' [38]

Coughlan's comments convey the misogynistic attitudes of the 1950s, as an impossible situation for women. As well as the dismissal of mental health issues. While progress was being made, there was also plenty of pushback and anxiety towards women seeking greater financial control and independence. To focus specifically on the character of Annie, 'World War II saw a shortage of household help as women of color found jobs in shipyards, aircraft plants, arsenals, and foundries.' [39] This emphasises the move away from domestic work to industrial work for women of colour like Annie during this time period.

Between 1953 to 1958, which 'overlap the time-line of *Imitation of Life*' [40], significant gains were made as part of the civil rights movement, from bus boycotts to the desegregation of schools. During the time in which Annie was running the house and looking after both Sarah Jane and Susie, 'the sense of housework as a disgrace was exacerbated, however, in the

[36] Sirk, p. 8.

[37] Sirk, p. 8.

[38] Sirk, p. 8.

[39] Sirk, p. 10.

[40] Sirk, p. 11.

forties and fifties by the false promise of the war years and the hopes of the burgeoning civil rights movement.'[41]

Focusing specifically on domestic work, it is worth acknowledging that Black women's 'rejection of domestic service might also have been spurred on by the feminist movement, which reconfigured homemaking as drudgery.' [42] Fischer then ponders, 'we wonder how [Annie] remains so content with her imitation of life.' [43] There is a valid argument to be made here about the representation of Annie in what appears to be domestic bliss, yet is far removed from the racial and political context of the time period in which *Imitation of Life* is set in.

To compare both the characters of Lora and Annie to one another, 'the more Lora scales the ladder of success, the more she displaces her traditional role of homemaker/mother, the more a chasm opens within her domestic space.' [44] Annie's role as such, is to fill that domestic space. [45] Annie doesn't have the option of dismissing employment as she needs financial support due to her socio-economic background and race. For Lora, she has the privilege to exist outside the role of the 'homemaker/mother' [46] while Annie does not.

The character of Annie Johnson fits into the mammy trope. Della Cyrus, in a 1947 article, asks the question, 'could it be that the 'dumb' nursemaid had her points after all, when she

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[41] Sirk, p. 11.

[42] Sirk, p. 12.

[43] Sirk, p. 12.

[44] Sirk, p. 16.

[45] Sirk, p. 16.

[46] Sirk, p. 16.

was easygoing, relaxed, unambitious, foolishly contented, and childlike with her young charges?' [47] Cyrus argues that there is a 'maternal superiority of the lower-caste caretaker'. [48] This is illustrated by how Annie is portrayed as being more maternal, gentle and humble than Lora. She leads a simpler, domesticated life, though she is financially secure and surrounded by love and support from within the household and local community.

Towards the end of the film, Lora is confronted by the realisation that she hasn't been present in Susie's life, while for contrast, Annie has been, in Sarah Jane's eyes, overly present in her life, desperately trying to connect with her and love her. Sarah Jane rejects her, ashamed by the fact that she's biracial, though Annie is lovingly remembered as being a wonderful mother and friend. Lora is left to try to rebuild her relationship with Susie.

Final Thoughts

Douglas Sirk's 1950s Hollywood melodramas were known for being dismissed by male critics, who reduced his films to nothing more than 'weepy women' [49] pictures, soap operas, overdramatic nonsense. Bosley Crowther's critiques convey that dismissal quite harshly.

Though Eric Rentschler presents a different perspective towards Sirk's work. He quotes from Heinz-Gerd Rasner and Reinhard Wulf's 1973 interview with Sirk, that he is 'full of nuanced subtleties and fine distinctions. Nothing about him is like Hollywood, none of the perfunctory friendliness, shallow, well-known anecdotes… intellectual arrogance or cynical

[47] Sirk, p. 16.

[48] Sirk, p. 16.

[49] Byars, Ebook edition, p. 83.

misanthropy.' [50] His films were meant to be deconstructed and examined due to their complexities and originality. He offered an entirely new perspective from within the Hollywood film system.

The interview goes on to state that 'in his films one finds a blend of warm humanity and sharp analytical thought; his melodramas are full of hopes, and happy ends, but at the same time they contain an awareness that all bourgeoise self-satisfaction is ultimately spurious and ephemeral.' [51] This conveys his ability to embody contrasting themes and tones within his films.

Sirk's critical view on 1950s American bourgeoise life would go on to influence Rainer Werner Fassbinder with his film *Ali: Fear Eats The Soul* (1974) [52] and Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven* (2002). Both directors play homage to Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) through their films and address the experiences of outsiders in society.[53]

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[50] Rentschler, p. 154.

[51] Rentschler, pp. 154-155.

[52] Robert C. Reimer, 'Comparison of Douglas Sirk's All That Heaven Allows and R.W. Fassbinder's Ali: Fear Eats the Soul; Or, How Hollywood's New England Dropouts Became Germany's Marginalized Other', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 24.3 (1996), p.281 < Comparison of Douglas Sirk's All That Heaven Allows and R.W. Fassbinder's Ali: Fear Eats the Soul; Or, How Hollywood's New England Dropouts Became Germany's Marginalized Other - ProQuest > [accessed 8 March 2022].

[53] Ryan, chapter 1, Ebook edition.

This captures the many complexities of Sirk's work as well as his character. Sirk's melodramas finally found his audience, or more like his audience *found him* during the time period of the 1950s-1970s.[54]

Although his work divides opinions, his filmography, especially his melodramas, have left a mark on feminist film critics, cinemagoers, and film students alike since the 1950s onwards.

His work is well suited for critical analysis, film theory, deconstruction, and speculation. Which, as a result, allows his work to remain relevant and fascinating. Even in the 21st century we continue to discuss and examine his melodramas through a feminist lens, a cultural lens and a historical lens.

Sirk certainly offered something new and distinctive to Hollywood through his films. *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) may not have completely subverted misogynistic attitudes in post war American society but the women who visited the cinema to watch these films would believe so. As for film critics, they did not, as these films were not given the opportunity to do so. It would take another 20 years or so that Sirk's work would finally be met with an open minded approach and appreciation.

He sought to create interesting, multifaceted female characters through his melodramas and touched on topics such as motherhood, race, marriage, desire, and rejection. The women on screen were given thought-provoking and intriguing characters to embody. These characters had depth and arcs and were not just 'weepy women' as such. He deliberately wrote alluring female characters as he wished to express the contradictions in post war American society and taboos of the time.

[54] Rentschler, p. 151.

He set out to subvert misogynistic attitudes and challenge the status quo. Sirk was a director with aim and ambition. He was an outsider in Hollywood which allowed him to bring a new, refreshing outlook to his work. Hollywood as a film industry was and remains all the better for it.

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