



Imitation of Life

On the Films of Douglas Sirk

"Film is a battleground," said Samuel Fuller—who once wrote a screenplay for Douglas Sirk—in a film by Jean-Luc Godard, who, shortly before he shot *Breathless*, wrote a hymn in praise of Douglas Sirk's *A Time to Love and a Time to Die*. Whether it be Godard or Fuller, someone else or me—none of us can hold a candle to him. Sirk has said that film is blood, tears, violence, hate, death, and love. And Sirk has made films, films with blood, with tears, with violence, hate, films with death and films with life. Sirk has said you can't make films about something, you can only make films with something, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, with all these crazy things that make it worthwhile. Sirk has also said that lighting and camera angles constitute the philosophy of the director. And Sirk has made the most tender ones I know, films by a man who loves human beings and doesn't despise them as we do. Darryl F. Zanuck told Sirk one time, "The film has to fly in Kansas City and in Singapore." That's crazy, isn't it—America!

Douglas Sirk had a grandmother who wrote poetry and had black hair. Douglas was still called Detlef then, and lived in Denmark. And it happened that around 1910 the Scandinavian countries had their own film industry, which produced primarily big human dramas. And so little Detlef and his poetry-writing grandmother went to the tiny Danish moviehouse, and both of them wept again and again at the tragic death of Asta Nielsen and many other wonderfully beautiful girls with white-powdered faces. They had to do this in secret, because Douglas Sirk was supposed to become a cultivated man in the great German tradition, humanistically educated, and so one day he gave up his love for Asta Nielsen so that he could love Clytemnestra. In Germany he did theater, in Bremen, in Chemnitz, Hamburg, and Leipzig; he became educated and cultivated. He counted Max Brod among his friends, met

Kafka, etc. A career began to take shape that might have ended with him as general manager of the Munich Residenztheater. But no, in 1937, after he had already made a few films in Germany for UFA, Detlef Sierck emigrated to America, became Douglas Sirk, and made films that people in Germany with his level of education would have smirked at.

All That Heaven Allows

That's how it happens that in Lugano, Switzerland, you can run into a man who is more alert, brighter than anyone else I've met, and who can say with a very small, happy smile, "I must say, sometimes I've really loved the things I've done." What he loved was, for instance, *All That Heaven Allows* (1956). Jane Wyman is a rich widow, and Rock Hudson is pruning her trees. In Jane's garden is a "love tree," which only blooms where love is present, and so Jane's and Rock's chance encounter becomes a great love. But Rock is fifteen years younger than Jane, and Jane is completely integrated into the social life of an American small town. Rock is a primitive type, and Jane has a lot to lose—her girlfriends, the good reputation she owes to her deceased husband, her children. In the beginning Rock loves nature, and Jane at first doesn't love anything, because she has everything.

That's a pretty shitty starting point for a great love. Her, him, and the world around them. But basically that's how it looks. She has the motherly touch; she gives the impression she could completely melt at the right moment. You can understand why Rock is wild about her. He's the tree trunk. He's perfectly right when he wants to be with this woman. The world around them is evil. The women all have large mouths. There aren't any other men in the film besides Rock; the easy chairs are more important, or the drinking glasses. To judge by this film, an American small town is the last place I'd want to go. Finally Jane tells Rock she's leaving him, because of the idiotic children and so on. Rock doesn't put up much of a fight—he has nature, after all. And Jane sits there on Christmas Eve; the children are going to leave her, and have given her a television set. At that point everyone in the moviehouse breaks down. They suddenly understand something about the world and what it does to people. Then later Jane goes back to Rock, because she keeps having headaches, which happens to all of us if we don't fuck often enough. But when she's back, it isn't a happy ending, even though they're together, the two of them. A person who creates so many problems in love won't be able to be happy later on.



A still from All That Heaven Allows (courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York, Film Stills Archive)

That's what he makes films about, Douglas Sirk. Human beings can't be alone, but they can't be together either. They're full of despair, these films. *All That Heaven Allows* begins with a long shot of the small town, over which the credits appear. It looks dreary. Then the crane shot swings down toward Jane's house, where a girlfriend is just arriving, returning some dishes she borrowed. You can't get much more dreary! A traveling shot past the two of them, and in the background



Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman in All That Heaven Allows (courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York, Film Stills Archive)

stands Rock Hudson, as an extra would stand there in a Hollywood film. And because the friend can't stay for a cup of coffee with Jane, Jane has coffee with the extra. Even now all the close-ups are of Jane. Rock still doesn't have any real significance. When he does, there are also close-ups of him. That's so simple and beautiful. And everybody gets the point.

Douglas Sirk's films are descriptive films. Very few close-ups. Even in shot/countershot sequences, the partner is always partly visible in the frame. The moviegoer's intense emotion doesn't come from identification but from the montage and the music. That's why you leave these films feeling somehow dissatisfied. You've glimpsed something of other people. And you can voluntarily recognize or have fun grasping what's important for you in the film. Jane's children are nuts. An old guy turns up, to whom they are superior in every respect—youth, knowledge, and so on—and they think he would be just the right partner for their mother. Then Rock comes along, who's not much older than they are, more handsome, and not even all that dumb, either. And they react with scare tactics. That's wild. Jane's son fixes a

cocktail for each of them, Rock and the old guy. Both of them praise the cocktail. Both times the same shot. With the old guy, the children are totally at ease. With Rock the atmosphere in the room is on the verge of an explosion. Both times the same shot.

Sirk knows how to deal with actors—it's staggering. If you look at the last films of Fritz Lang, made around the same time, where the worst sort of incompetence manifests itself, you know what you have when you have Douglas Sirk in your head, right? In Douglas Sirk's movies the women think. I haven't noticed that with any other director. With any. Usually the women just react, do the things women do, and here they actually think. That's something you've got to see. It's wonderful to see a woman thinking. That gives you hope. Honest.

And then the people in Sirk's films are all situated in settings that are shaped to an extreme degree by their social situation. The sets are extraordinarily accurate. In Jane's house you can only move a certain way. Only certain sentences occur to you when you want to say something, and certain gestures when you want to express something. If Jane entered another house, Rock's, for instance, would she be able to adjust? That would be something to hope for. Or has she been so molded and messed up that in Rock's house she would miss the style that's hers, after all. That's more likely. That's why the happy ending isn't a real one. Jane fits into her own house better than into Rock's.

Written on the Wind

Written on the Wind (1957) is the story of a super-rich family. Robert Stack is the son, who was always worse in everything than his friend Rock Hudson. Robert Stack really knows how to spend money—he flies planes, boozes, picks up girls, and Rock Hudson is always right there with him. But they aren't happy. What's missing is love. Then they meet Lauren Bacall. She's different from all the other women, of course. She's a simple woman, who works for a living, and she's gentle and understanding. And yet she chooses Robert, the bad guy, though Rock, the good guy, would suit her much better. He also has to work in order to live, and has a big heart like her. She picks the one things simply can't work out with in the long run. When Lauren Bacall meets Robert's father for the first time, she asks him to please give Robert the benefit of the doubt. It's so disgusting when this good-hearted woman sucks up to the good guy so he'll smooth things out for the bad guy. Oh, yes, of course everything has to go wrong. Or let's hope

it does. The sister, Dorothy Malone, is the only one who loves the right person, namely Rock Hudson, and she stands by her love, which is ridiculous, of course. It has to be ridiculous when, among all these people who take their compensatory actions for the real thing, it becomes absolutely clear that she does what she does because she can't have the real thing. Lauren Bacall is a substitute for Robert Stack, because he must realize that he won't ever be able to love her, and vice versa. And because Lauren picks Robert, Rock loves her all the more, because he won't ever be able to have her. And the father has a model oil-drilling rig in his hand that looks like a penis substitute. And at the end, when Dorothy Malone, as the last remnant of the family, has this penis in her hand, that's at least as mean as the television set Jane Wyman was given for Christmas. That was just as much a substitute for the fucking her children didn't want to let her have as the oil empire that Dorothy now heads is her substitute for Rock Hudson. I hope she doesn't make it, and goes crazy, like Marianne Koch in *Interlude*. Insanity represents a form of hope in Douglas Sirk's work, I think.

Rock Hudson in *Written on the Wind* is the most stubborn pig in the world. He must sense some of the longing Dorothy Malone is feeling. She throws herself at him, she carries on in public with guys who resemble him somehow, to make him get the message. All he can say is, "I would never be able to satisfy you." But he would, God knows. While Dorothy is dancing in her room, the dance of a dead woman—that may be the beginning of madness—her father dies. He dies because he's guilty. He always reminded his children that the other one, Rock, was the better man, until he really was. Because Rock's father, who hasn't earned any money and can go hunting when he feels like it, was always the better man in the eyes of the father, who could never do the things he wanted to. The children are the poor wretches. Probably he realizes his guilt and drops dead of it. In any case the moviegoer realizes it. His death isn't horrible.

Because Robert doesn't love Lauren, he wants a child by her. Or because Robert doesn't have any prospects of accomplishing anything, he wants to beget a child, at least. Courage detects a weakness. Robert begins to drink again. Now it becomes clear that Lauren Bacall doesn't have anything to offer her husband. Instead of going out drinking with him and showing some understanding for his pain, she just becomes more and more noble and pure, more and more nauseating, and you see more and more clearly how well she would suit Rock Hudson, who's also nauseating and noble. These people who were raised for a specific purpose and have their heads full of manipulated dreams are



Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone in Written on the Wind (courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York, Film Stills Archive)

totally screwed up. If Lauren Bacall had lived with Robert Stack instead of living next to, off of, and for him, he would have been able to believe that the child she bears was really his. He wouldn't have had to groan. But this way his child is really more Rock Hudson's, even though Rock never did it with Lauren.

Dorothy does something evil—she makes her brother suspicious of Lauren and Rock. Yet even so, I love her as I've seldom loved a person in a movie. As a viewer I'm with Douglas Sirk on the trail of human despair. In *Written on the Wind* everything good and "normal" and "beautiful" is always very disgusting, and everything evil, weak, and confused makes you feel sympathy. Even for those who manipulate the good people.

And then the house where all this takes place. Dominated, people say, by the grand staircase. And mirrors. And always flowers. And gold. And coldness. The sort of house you build for a lot of money. A house with all the fancy doodads you get when you have money, and among which you don't feel comfortable. It's like at the Oktoberfest, where everything is animated and colorful, and you're lonely like them. In this house, which Douglas Sirk had built for the Hedleys, feelings must

put forth the weirdest blossoms. The light in Sirk's films is always as unnaturalistic as possible. Shadows where there shouldn't be any help to render plausible emotions that you would prefer to keep at arm's length. The same with the camera angles in *Written on the Wind*—mostly oblique, mostly from below: chosen so that the strangeness of the story doesn't manifest itself in the mind of the viewer but on the screen. Douglas Sirk's films liberate the mind.

Interlude

Interlude (1957) is a film that's hard to get into. At first everything seems false. The film takes place in Munich, and it isn't the city as we know it. The Munich in *Interlude* consists of grand buildings. Königsplatz, Nymphenburg Palace, the Hercules Hall. Then later you realize that this is Munich as an American might see it. June Allyson comes to Munich to experience Europe. What she experiences is a great love, the love of her life. It's Rossano Brazzi, who plays a conductor of the Herbert von Karajan type. June Allyson stands out somewhat among Douglas Sirk's characters. She strikes me as too natural, too healthy. Too fresh, although she does become very ill, in the end. Rossano Brazzi is a conductor through and through, even in the tenderest whisperings of love. The way he moves, eternally posturing, putting on a show for others, even when he means what he says completely seriously; it's a masterpiece of directing. The way Brazzi plays that is the way Wedekind's *Music* would have to be performed.

Brazzi has a wife, Marianne Koch. And this is the character who is perhaps the most important for an understanding of Douglas Sirk's view of the world. Marianne Koch loves Rossano Brazzi. He married her, and she was always happy with him, and her love was her undoing. She went insane. All of Sirk's characters are pursuing some kind of longing. The only one who has experienced fulfillment is done in by it. Can one interpret this to mean that in our society a person is only okay in the eyes of society if he goes panting after something, like a dog with his tongue hanging out? As long as he does, he'll adhere to the norms that allow him to remain useful. In Douglas Sirk's films, love seems to be the best, most sneaky and effective instrument of social oppression. June Allyson goes back to the United States with a minor love she's met. They won't be happy together. She'll always dream of her conductor, and the man will sense his wife's discontent. They'll concentrate all the more on their work, which will then be exploited by others. Okay.

The Tarnished Angels

The Tarnished Angels (1958) is the only black-and-white film of Douglas Sirk's that I've had a chance to see. It is the film in which he had the most freedom. An exceptionally pessimistic film. It's based on a story by Faulkner, which I don't know, unfortunately. It seems Sirk desecrated it, which was good for it.

This film, like *La Strada*, shows a dying profession, but not in such a gruesomely highbrow way. Robert Stack was a pilot in World War I. He never wanted to do anything but fly, so now he flies around pylons at air shows. His wife is Dorothy Malone, who does parachute demonstrations. They can barely live on what they make. Robert is brave, but he doesn't understand a thing about the plane. Then there's the other member of the threesome, Jiggs, who's a mechanic and loves Dorothy. Robert and Dorothy have a son, who, when Rock Hudson first meets him, is being teased by other soldiers: "So which one's your father? Jiggs or . . ." Rock Hudson is a journalist who wants to write something fantastic about these gypsies, who instead of blood have motor oil in their veins. At the moment the Shumans have nowhere to stay, and Rock Hudson invites them to his place. During the night Dorothy and Rock get to know each other. You can sense that the two might have a lot to say to each other. Rock loses his job, a pilot crashes during a race, and Dorothy is supposed to sell herself to get a plane, because Robert's is on the fritz. Rock and Dorothy don't have so much to say to each other after all. Jiggs fixes the broken-down plane, Robert takes off and dies. Dorothy leaves. Rock gets his job back.

Nothing but defeats. This film is nothing but a collection of defeats. Dorothy loves Robert. Robert loves flying. Jiggs also loves Robert, or maybe Dorothy and Robert? Rock doesn't love Dorothy, and Dorothy doesn't love Rock. At most it's a lie, even if the film sometimes makes the whole thing believable, just as the two of them think for a few seconds that maybe . . . Just before the end Robert tells Dorothy he's going to give up flying after this flight. And then of course he dies doing it. It would be inconceivable for Robert to pay real attention to Dorothy instead of flirting with death.

In this film the camera is constantly in motion, acting like the people the film's about, as if something were actually going on. In reality, in the end they could all lie down and let themselves be buried. And the traveling shots in the film, the crane shots, the pans! Douglas Sirk shows these dead souls with such tenderness and with such a light that you say to yourself that they're all in such a shitty situation and yet so lovable that something must be to blame for it. What is to blame

is loneliness and fear. I've seldom felt loneliness and fear the way I do in this film. The moviegoer sits there in the cinema like the Shumans' son in the merry-go-round when his father crashes. You realize what's wrong, want to run and help too, but when you think about it, what can a little boy do against a crashing plane? They're all to blame for Robert's death. That's why Dorothy Malone is so hysterical afterward. Because she knew. And Rock Hudson, who wanted a sensational story. When he finally has one, he blames his colleagues. And Jiggs, who was wrong to repair the plane, sits there and asks himself, Where are you all? It's bad enough he never realized before that no one was there. These films tell about the illusions people can construct for themselves. And why people need to construct illusions. Dorothy saw a picture of Robert, a poster of him as a proud pilot, and fell in love with him. Robert wasn't anything like the picture, of course. What to do? Create an illusion. Be my guest. Nobody's forcing her, you say to yourself, and you want to tell her that her love for Robert wasn't real love. What good would that do her? With an illusion in your head you can stand the loneliness better. Be my guest. I think this film shows that that isn't true. Sirk made a film where there's constant action, in which something's always going on, where the camera moves frequently, and where you learn so much about loneliness and how it makes us lie. And how wrong it is that we lie, and how stupid.

A Time to Love and a Time to Die

A Time to Love and a Time to Die (1958). John Gavin comes home to Berlin on leave from the Eastern Front in 1945. His parents' house is destroyed. He runs into Liselotte Pulver, whom he knew when they were both small. And because they're so desperate and alone, they begin to love each other. The film is quite properly called "A Time to Love and a Time to Die." The time is the war. That's obvious: it is a time to die. And where you have death and bombs and cold and tears, love can flourish in Douglas Sirk's world. Liselotte Pulver has planted a little flower outside her window, the only speck of life amidst the ruins. John Gavin will die in the end, that's clear from the outset. And somehow all this doesn't have anything to do with the war after all. A film about the war would have to be different. It's actually about the situation. War as a situation and as nourishing soil for an emotion. The same types, Liselotte Pulver and John Gavin, if they met in 1971, you'd have a smile, a "how are you," "well, look at that," and that's it. In 1945 it can turn into a great love. This is quite right. Love doesn't have

any problems here. The problems are all going on outside. Inside two people can be tender to one another.

For the first time in a work by Douglas Sirk a small love, unprepossessing people. With big, incredulous eyes they stare at what's happening around them. It's all unfathomable to them, the bombs, the Gestapo, the madness. Under the circumstances love is the simplest thing, something you can hang onto. And so you cling to it. But I wouldn't like to be forced to imagine what would happen to the two of them if John survived the war. The war and its horrors are only the backdrop. You can't make a film about war. How wars come about—that would be important, and what effect they have on people or leave behind. This isn't a pacifist film, either, because you never for a minute say to yourself, Without this gruesome war everything would be so beautiful or whatever. Remarque's novel, *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, is pacifist. Remarque says that without war this would be an eternal love; Sirk says that without war there wouldn't be any love here.

Imitation of Life

Imitation of Life (1959) is Douglas Sirk's last film. A big, crazy film about life and death. And a film about America. The first great moment: Annie tells Lana Turner that Sarah Jane is her daughter. Annie is black and Sarah Jane almost white. Lana Turner hesitates, understands, still hesitates, and then quickly acts as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a black woman to have a white daughter. But nothing is natural. Never. Not throughout the entire film. And yet everyone tries compulsively to consider his thoughts or his wishes his own. Sarah Jane wants to be white, not because white is a prettier color than black but because you can live better as a white person. Lana Turner wants to be an actress, not because it's nice for her but because when you're successful you have a better position in the world. And Annie wants a grand funeral not because it will benefit her—she'll be dead, after all—but because she wants to display to the world an importance she was not allowed to have in life. Not one of the protagonists realizes that all these things—thoughts, wishes, dreams—grow directly out of their social reality or are manipulated by it. I don't know any other film that shows this phenomenon so clearly and so despairingly. Once, toward the end of the film, Annie tells Lana Turner that she has many friends. Lana is amazed. Annie has friends? The two women have been living together for ten years, and

Lana doesn't know a thing about Annie. Lana Turner is surprised. And when her daughter reproaches her for always leaving her alone, Lana Turner is also surprised, and when Sarah Jane suddenly rebels against the white goddess, and when she has problems and wants to be taken seriously, there, too, Lana Turner can only be surprised. And she's surprised when Annie dies. You can't just go and die like that. That's not right, to be confronted with life so suddenly. Throughout the entire second part of the film all Lana can do is be surprised. The result is that in the future she'll play dramatic roles. Suffering, death, tears—you have to put them to some good use. The problem Lana faces becomes the problem of the filmmaker. Lana is an actress, possibly even a good one. That you never find out exactly. In the beginning Lana has to earn money for herself and her daughter. Or does she want to have a successful career? The death of her husband seems not to have affected her much. She knows he was a good director. I think Lana wants a successful career. Money comes second, after success. After that comes John Gavin. John loves Lana; for her sake, in order to support her, he has put aside his own artistic ambitions and taken a job as a photographer with an advertising firm. Lana simply can't understand that—his denying his ambitions out of love. Yes, I'm quite certain Lana doesn't want to make money; she wants a career. And John is stupid, too; he confronts Lana with the choice between marriage and a career. Lana finds that exciting and dramatic, and decides in favor of her career.

That's how it goes throughout the film. They're always making plans based on happiness, on tenderness, and then the telephone rings, a new offer, and Lana perks up. The woman is hopeless. And John Gavin, too. He really should have seen after a while that it wouldn't work out. And yet he hitches his life to this woman. Whenever things won't work, they pursue them doggedly, these people. Then Lana's daughter falls in love with John; she's the type John would like, but she's not Lana. That's understandable. Except that Sandra Dee doesn't understand it. Maybe a person who's in love understands less. Annie loves her daughter, too, and doesn't understand her at all. When Sarah Jane is still little, it rains one time, and Annie brings her an umbrella to school. Sarah Jane has been passing for white in her class. When her mother brings the umbrella, the lie comes out. Sarah Jane will never forget that. And when Annie is dying and wants to see Sarah Jane and goes to visit her in a bar in Las Vegas, Annie is still so full of love that she doesn't understand. To her it's a sin that Sarah Jane wants to pass for white. That's what makes this scene so terrible: the cruel one is Sarah Jane, and the poor, pitiable one is her mother. But, in fact, it's

exactly the opposite. The mother who wants to possess her child because she loves her is brutal. And Sarah Jane is defending herself against her mother's terrorism, the world's terrorism. That's cruel; you can understand both of them, and both of them are right, and no one will ever be able to help either of them. Unless, of course, we change the world. We all cried over the movie. Because it's so hard to change the world. Then at Annie's funeral everybody comes together again, and for a few moments they act as though everything was all right. And this occasional "acting as though" permits them to go on making the same mess of things, because they do sense what they're longing for, actually, and then they lose sight of it again.

Imitation of Life begins like a film about the character played by Lana Turner, and then imperceptibly it becomes a film about the Negro Annie. In the end the director set his own concern aside—the relevance of the theme to his own work—and looked for the deception of life in Annie, where he found a much crueler situation than he could have discovered in Lana Turner or himself. Even fewer opportunities. Even greater despair.

I've tried to write about six films by Douglas Sirk, and in the process I've discovered how hard it is to write about films that have something to do with life, that aren't literature. I've left out a lot of things that might be important. I've said too little about the lighting, how carefully it's handled, or how it helps Sirk transform the stories he had to tell. And that besides him only Josef von Sternberg uses light so well. And I've said too little about the sets that Douglas Sirk had built for the films. How incredibly accurate they are. I've not analyzed sufficiently the importance of flowers and mirrors, and what they mean to the stories Sirk tells us. I've not stressed sufficiently that Sirk is a director who gets the most out of his actors. That under Sirk's direction chatterboxes like Marianne Koch or Liselotte Pulver become human beings you can and want to believe in. And then I've seen far too few of his films. I'd like to see all thirty-nine of them. Then maybe I'd be farther along, with myself, with my life, with my friends. I've seen six films by Douglas Sirk. Among them were the most beautiful in the world.

February 1971