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The Magnificent Melodrama: Films of D.W. Griffith and Douglas Sirk

This film series was inspired by Greuze's *The Father's Curse: The Ungrateful Son*, a work which contains the decidedly melodramatic theme of familial morals and discontent. D.W. Griffith, who began his directorial career in 1908, developed a precise language for silent film melodrama. This language was constructed by Griffith's radical editing techniques, camera movement, lighting and use of close-ups, and the particular talent of actress Lillian Gish. Griffith's aesthetic, combined with his social concerns (particularly the restitution of the family unit), set the standard for film melodrama.

Douglas Sirk began his film career in Germany in 1934, emigrated in 1937 and began making films in Hollywood in 1943. Sirk is best known for his exquisite film style and his domestic melodramas of the 1950s. Blending the atmosphere of post-WWII disillusionment, Cold War paranoia and America's fascination with Sigmund Freud, Sirk created entertainment that slyly questioned the mass ideology of the Eisenhower years, centering on the complacent status quo of the suburban family. Griffith and Sirk are the supreme stylists of film melodrama, and their work engages the audience on a multitude of levels, at once celebrating and severely questioning basic American values.

Special thanks to: Caroline Yeager—George Eastman House; Jerry Pam.

Live musical accompaniment for the silent films will be provided by Michael Mortilla.

This series accompanies the exhibition *Greuze the Draftsman* at the Getty Museum.
Venue: All films in this series will be presented in the **Harold M. Williams Auditorium, The Getty Center**, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles.
Admission: Free, but seating reservations are required; call 310.440.7300.
For more information about the film series and the exhibition, visit <www.getty.edu>.



Written on the Wind



Broken Blossoms

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11

7:30 p.m.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS

(1919) Directed by D.W. Griffith
BROKEN BLOSSOMS is a far cry from the Griffith epics that preceded it, in particular the oft-maligned and controversial BIRTH OF A NATION. This film is instead an intimate "art" film, infused with both beauty—Lillian Gish's face, Hendrick Sartov's visual effects—and a sincere (albeit now seriously dated) pro-tolerance message. Lillian Gish stars as a poor and brutalized young woman who seeks solace from a gentle Chinese shopkeeper (Richard Barthelmess in yellow-face), with inevitably tragic results. Griffith's mastery of melodrama's concerns—familial disintegration, the plight of womankind, the battle between good and evil—is on full display, but with more restraint and sophistication than before. Producer: D.W. Griffith. Based on the short story *The Chink and the Child* by Thomas Burker. Cinematography: G.W. Bitzer. Special Effects: Hendrick Sartov. With: Lillian Gish, Donald Crisp, Richard Barthelmess, Edward Peil. 35mm, silent, 95 min. (21 fps)

PRECEDED BY

THE MOTHERING HEART

(1913) Directed by D.W. Griffith
Lillian Gish's masterful performance as a betrayed young mother is aided by Griffith's groundbreaking use of close-ups to convey her character's emotional state. Scenario: D.W. Griffith. Cinematography: G.W. Bitzer. With: Lillian Gish, Robert Harron, Mae Marsh. 16mm, silent, 30 min. (18 fps)

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12

7:30 p.m.

WAY DOWN EAST

(1920) Directed by D.W. Griffith
Griffith's vision of a pastoral America found its purest expression in WAY DOWN EAST, which became one of his most costly efforts as well as his greatest financial success. Famous for its breathtakingly dramatic climax on the ice, rendered in the director's trademark cross-cutting technique, the film also boasts stunning cinematography from longtime collaborator G.W. "Billy" Bitzer, as well as an indelible turn from Lillian Gish as the country girl seduced and abandoned by a callous city slicker. In classic Griffith fashion, the desperate and despairing Gish seeks shelter in a bucolic community and is ultimately redeemed. Producer: D.W. Griffith. Scenario: Anthony Paul Kelly. Based on the play by Lottie Blair Parker. Cinematography: G.W. Bitzer, Hendrick Sartov, Paul H. Allen. With: Lillian Gish, Lowell Sherman, Richard Barthelmess, Burr McIntosh. 35mm, silent, 120 min. (22 fps)

PRECEDED BY

THE MUSKETEERS OF PIG ALLEY

(1912) Directed by D.W. Griffith
One of the best-known Griffith Biograph shorts is a beautifully shot social-problem film portraying crime amid slum life on the Lower East Side. Scenario: D.W. Griffith. Cinematography: G.W. Bitzer. With: Lillian Gish, Elmer Booth, Alfred Paget, Walter Miller. 16mm, silent, 15 min. (18 fps)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

7:30 p.m.

ORPHANS OF THE STORM

(1921) Directed by D.W. Griffith
The last in Griffith's series of silent blockbuster epics, ORPHANS OF THE STORM was also the culmination of his long and fruitful creative relationship with the Gish sisters whom he had been directing since 1912. Lillian and Dorothy here star as orphaned sisters separated by turbulent events in 18th-century France. Occasionally punctuated by Griffith's anti-revolutionary political views—he was staunchly opposed to Bolshevism—ORPHANS is ultimately more about people than politics. A classic period melodrama, the film shows Griffith at the height of his powers, a true master of the genre whose conventions he did so much to define. Producer: D.W. Griffith. Scenario: Marquis de Trolignac. Based on the play *The Two Orphans* by Adolphe d'Ennery and Eugène Cormon. Cinematography: Hendrick Sartov, Paul Allen, G.W. Bitzer. With: Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Joseph Schildkraut, Frank Losee, Katherine Emmett. 35mm, silent, 125 min. (22 fps)

PRECEDED BY

AN UNSEEN ENEMY

(1912) Directed by D.W. Griffith
Lillian and Dorothy Gish make their screen debuts as sisters in trouble in this nail-bitingly suspenseful rescue melodrama. Scenario: Edward Acker. Cinematography: G.W. Bitzer. With: Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Elmer Booth, Robert Harron, Harry Carey. 16mm, silent, 15 min. (16 fps)

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19

7:30 p.m.

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

(1954) Directed by Douglas Sirk
Based on a 1929 novel by Lloyd C. Douglas, MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION was the first of Sirk's breakthrough '50s melodramas and effectively propelled leading man Rock Hudson to stardom. Hudson plays Bob Merrick, a selfish millionaire who inadvertently causes the death of his town's most esteemed doctor. When he meets the doctor's blind widow (a radiant Jane Wyman), he falls obsessively in love and vows to cure her. By turns moving and credulity-straining, the film shows Sirk in the first stages of refining his direct yet sophisticated approach to the "woman's picture." Universal. Producer: Ross Hunter. Screenplay: Robert Bleess. Based on the novel by Lloyd C. Douglas. Cinematography: Russell Metty. Editor: Milton Carruth. With: Rock Hudson, Jane Wyman, Agnes Moorehead, Otto Kruger. 35mm, 108 min.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25

7:30 p.m.

WRITTEN ON THE WIND

(1956) Directed by Douglas Sirk
A florid, hyperbolic critique of postwar affluence and the bourgeois American family, this saga about a Texas oil dynasty melodramatically undone by dysfunction is Douglas Sirk's most overwrought and stunningly stylized film. Rock Hudson and Lauren Bacall are outsiders drawn into the excesses and neuroses of siblings Robert Stack and Dorothy Malone. WRITTEN ON THE WIND would seem to prefigure television soap operas like DALLAS and DYNASTY—the characters are all bigger than life, their problems and passions accordingly outsized—except that Sirk counterpoints the sensationalistic scenario with knowing visual wit and a deliciously subversive sense of irony. Universal. Producer: Albert Zugsmith. Screenplay: George Zuckerman. Based on the novel by Robert Wilder. Cinematography: Russell Metty. Editor: Russell F. Schoengarth. With: Rock Hudson, Lauren Bacall, Robert Stack, Dorothy Malone. 35mm, 99 min.

In person: Robert Stack

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26

7:30 p.m.

IMITATION OF LIFE

(1959) Directed by Douglas Sirk
Sirk's last American film stars Lana Turner as a young widow and mother determined at all costs to become a Broadway star; Sandra Dee plays the daughter she neglects in her drive for success. And in the film's emotionally charged parallel plot, light-skinned Susan Kohner chooses to pass as white in defiance of her African-American mother, Turner's friend-turned-maid (the incomparable Juanita Moore). The highest-grosser in Universal's history to that point, IMITATION OF LIFE is distinguished by Sirk's characteristically expressive mise-en-scène, not to mention a remarkably forthright handling of hot-button racial issues. Universal. Producer: Ross Hunter. Screenplay: Eleanor Griffin, Allan Scott. Based on the novel by Fannie Hurst. Cinematography: Russell Metty. Editor: Milton Carruth. With: Lana Turner, John Gavin, Sandra Dee, Juanita Moore, Susan Kohner. 35mm, 125 min.



Magnificent Obsession