

## Document Citation

Title	<b>The tarnished angels</b>
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Tarnished angels, Sirk, Douglas, 1957

[THE TARNISHED ANGELS (1958) May 29, 7:00, 10:40 pm

THE TARNISHED ANGELS is the only black and white Sirk I have been able to see. It is the film in which he had most freedom. An incredibly pessimistic film. It is based on a story by Faulkner which unfortunately I do not know. Apparently Sirk has profaned it which becomes it well.

The film, like LA STRADA, shows a dying profession, only not in such an awfully pretentious way. Robert Stack has been a pilot in the First World War. He had never wanted to do anything but fly, which is why he now takes part in air-shows circling round pylons. Dorothy Malone is his wife; she demonstrates parachute jumping. They can barely make a living. Robert is brave but he knows nothing about machines, so he has a mechanic, Jiggs, the third one of their team, who is in love with Dorothy. Robert and Dorothy have a son, who Rock Hudson meets when he is being teased by the other fliers: "Who's your old man today kid? Jiggs or..." Rock Hudson is a journalist who wants to write a fantastic piece about these gypsies of the air who have crankcase oil in their veins instead of blood. It happens that the Shumanns have nowhere to stay so Rock Hudson invites them to his place. During the night Dorothy and Rock get to know each other. We get the feeling that these two would have a lot to say to each other. Rock loses his job, one of the fliers crashes in the race, Dorothy is supposed to prostitute herself for a plane as Robert's has broken down. Rock and Dorothy haven't got that much to say to each other after all, Jiggs repairs a broken down plane, Robert goes up in it and is killed.

Nothing but defeats. This film is nothing but an accumulation of defeats. Dorothy is in love with Robert, Robert is in love with flying, Jiggs is in love with Robert too, or is it Dorothy and Rock? Rock is not in love with Dorothy and Dorothy is not in love with Rock. When the film makes one believe for a moment that they are, it's a lie at best, just as the two of them think for a couple of seconds, maybe...? Then towards the end Robert tells Dorothy that after this race he'll give up flying. Of course that's exactly when he is killed. It would be inconceivable that Robert could really be involved with Dorothy rather than with death.

The camera is always on the move in the film; just like the people it moves round, it pretends that something is actually happening. In fact everything is so completely finished that everyone might as well give up and get themselves buried. The tracking shots in the film, the crane shots, the pans! Douglas Sirk looks at these corpses with such tenderness and radiance that we start to think that something must be at fault if these people are so screwed up and, nevertheless, so nice. The fault lies with fear and loneliness. I have rarely felt fear and loneliness so much as in this film. The audience sits in the cinema like the Shumanns' son in the roundabout; we can see what's happening, we want to rush forward and help, but, thinking it over, what can a small boy do against a crashing aeroplane? They are all to blame for Robert's death. This is why Dorothy Malone is so hysterical afterwards. Because she knew. And Rock Hudson, who wanted a scoop. As soon as he gets it he starts shouting at his colleagues. And Jiggs, who shouldn't have repaired the plane, sits asking 'Where is everybody?' Too bad he never noticed before that there never really was anybody. What these movies are about is the way people kid themselves. And why you have to kid yourself. Dorothy first saw Robert in a picture, a poster of him as a daring pilot, and she fell in love with him. Of course Robert was nothing like his picture. What can you do? Kid yourself. There you are. We tell ourselves, and we want to tell her, that she's under no compulsion to carry on, that her love for Robert isn't really love. What would be the point? Loneliness is easier to bear if you keep your illusions.

There you are. I think the film shows that this isn't so. Sirk has made a film in which there is continuous action, in which something is always happening, and the camera is in motion all the time, and we understand a lot about loneliness and how it makes us lie. And how wrong it is that we should lie, and how dumb.

--R. W. Fassbinder