

Document Citation

Title	Sirk masterworks
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Source	<i>Soho Weekly News</i>
Date	1976 Aug 05
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Tarnished angels, Sirk, Douglas, 1957

Sirk Masterworks

Fred Camper

Written on the Wind
The Tarnished Angels
Carnegie Hall Cinema

On July 26, the Carnegie Hall Cinema programmed two films directed by Douglas Sirk, *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels*, both made in the late 1950s. These two are among Sirk's three or four greatest films; there could be no better introduction to this work.

Who is Douglas Sirk? A European, he directed German theater and then German films before coming to America in 1939. Throughout the 40s and 50s, he directed Hollywood films, many of them soap-operas, a genre still reviled by many so-called intellectuals. As a result, Sirk is occasionally the subject of derision, though it almost always turns out that these "critics" have seen few or none of his films.

Written on the Wind

In much of his work, he reveals an understanding of America far more subtle and profound than that of almost any other filmmaker. It is an understanding which makes no pretense to objectivity or completeness, but which is not reducible to a single bias either. One strong theme—though, like many of his themes, it is often presented obliquely—concerns the materialism of American life. *Written on the Wind* is an exploration of a labyrinthine set of possible relations between people and costumes, people and objects, people and decor. Sirk has seen, as few others have, the extent to which people allow their perceptions, and their self-conception, to be determined by inanimate things—by possessions, by the visual structures of their rooms. This is a social observation which is obviously well-suited to film, but has never been completely realized before Sirk. His characters often behave in reductive ways, letting their identities be determined by their contexts; conversely, objects are seen anthropomorphically, often endowed with strange and terrifying powers.

I don't mean to imply, though, that his films set up a simple dualism between character and object, replacing the role of one with the other. Rather, both are held in a series of separate balances, and the issue of character and object reappears in

multiple versions. Just as the inanimate can sometimes seem animate, so a person can take on the role of an inanimate object, almost of a sign, and in so doing, become horrifyingly powerful. One example of this in *Written on the Wind* occurs when Kyle Hadley emerges from a doctor's office, mistakenly assuming he has been told he is sterile, and is confronted with a small boy rocking up and down in an almost sexual motion on a toy horse.

The plot of *Written on the Wind* relates two generations of a wealthy oil family, the Hadleys, to each other and to several outside characters. The multi-character structure allows Sirk to explore, comparatively, various degrees of psychological imbalance, set against a relatively stable character, Mitch Wayne. The Hadleys' children's problems are clearly traced to their parents, so that we have the theme of one generation laying the grave of the next, but the children's problems are not the same as their father's. A structure of simple duplication is thus avoided, and traps are spun off into new traps, even broader and more ensnaring. Further, these relations are always developed visually as well as dramatically through brilliant cross-cutting, the juxtapositions of characters and photographs, the placement of one character in the room of another.

Similarly, decor in the film, while a major subject, is never turned into a term in a single thematic statement. Its reductive properties, its ability to destroy the uniqueness, even the *life*, of humans, is expressed in the most complex ways imaginable. Kyle flies Lucy, whom he is trying to seduce, to Florida, and she finds herself in a spectacular hotel suite, decorated in a blinding variety of colors, its closets filled with every type of dress imaginable. Our eye, like hers, is confronted with colors and shapes so varied, so optically different from each other, that the images became almost impossible to look at. Sirk here has seen far beyond the simply reductive "His" and "Hers" towels or swimsuits and the "clothes that make the man." His vision is of such materialisms continually generating new ones in an infinite regress which swamps any being with a series of separate and irreconcilable possibilities. At its most extreme moments, *Written on the Wind* creates images which an individual being cannot

live in, nor a viewer's eye readily inhabit.

The Tarnished Angels

The kinds of visual splits found in such images occur in many images in *The Tarnished Angels* as well. Made a year after *Written on the Wind*, it is in black and white; the disparities Sirk achieved with colors in the earlier film can be found realized here in camera angles, camera movements and in the overall narrative structure.

Like *Written on the Wind*, this is a multiple-character film; its subject is a group of air-show "gypsies" in the 1930s. The circular routes of the main character's plane become circular traps that generate systems of traps of every sort throughout the film. Yet what is extraordinary is that the work's overall structure is never systematic; the difference between different devices or motifs asks the viewer to consider many kinds of relations between them rather than only parallelisms.

Some of the same concerns of *Written on the Wind* are present; characters are reduced to objects (planes or costumes); their hopes and strivings are continually being confounded. When Matt Ord looks at LaVerne, whom he desires, he sees her walking amidst a field of planes whose grotesque shapes assert a powerful presence which seems to deny her body its natural sensuality. Throughout, Sirk uses Cinemascope to allow decor to multiply on itself throughout the spaces characters cannot fill.

Sirk uses black and white here as he never had before, supporting my belief that the use of black and white by a filmmaker who really understands the possibilities of color, is often more profound than the use of it by filmmakers who have worked in color rarely or not at all. Black and white becomes a *choice*, rather than a given; I think of Brakhage's later black and white films as opposed to his earlier ones. The images and things within them in *The Tarnished Angels* are not simply in black and white, they are, rather, *drained* of color, made less specific and more ominous as a result, becoming shapes rather than things, shapes which harbor dark possibilities and hidden terrors. Every object in the film presents itself to the eye as a possible door which may at any moment open up on some faceless and unnameable horror. ●



LaVerne (Dorothy Malone) as Matt sees her