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A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE: Sirk guiding Lilo Pulver

A Time to Love and a Time to Die

by Fred Camper

*This is the third of three articles by Fred Camper on Douglas Sirk. The first two *(The Films of Douglas Sirk* and *The Tarnished Angels)* appeared in *Screen*, Summer 1971. As this part *(A Time to Love and a Time to Die)* is appearing on its own, the first section has been edited to make it self-sufficient while maintaining the important comparison between the two films. However the author has not been able to approve it in the form printed here due to pressure of time (Ed.).

I

In some respects, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is the exact opposite of *The Tarnished Angels*. If *The Tarnished Angels* is a film of objects, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is made of surfaces, surfaces which have no explanation other than themselves. The film sets up no internalised relationships. With the exception of the last shot, it has no specific materialisations of its ideas. There are no elements in the frames that could in any way be causes for the way things are in the film.

In *The Tarnished Angels*, individual events or materialisations are often particularly explicit. Episodes such as that of the masked figure bursting in on Burke and LaVerne have a directness rare even for Sirk. All the objects, all the demons could be seen as elements in a cause and effect relationship which the film seems to be setting up. The characters cannot find happiness *because* of the intrusion of the world; everything is frozen into a surface *because* of objects, which, partly independent from that surface, force everything else back into it. One might take the demons in *The Tarnished Angels* as Sirk's explanation of its despair.

But on closer examination it becomes clear that the objects have no additional explanation behind them. The mask bursting in on Burke and Laverne is simply a fact of existence, a comment on the nature of the world. The elements which are presented as causes in fact explain nothing. Still, certain things, in a limited way, appear to thrust forward from the flatness of the frames and some visible elements in the film appear stronger than the general context of characters, objects and surfaces. In this sense, the despair in *The Tarnished Angels* has a kind of specificity, an exactness of expression, which is rare in the cinema.

In contrast, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* seems, on a superficial level, much simpler. The frames are not filled with many simultaneous objects and events which compete for our attention. The events that do occur have a curious flatness to them, as if they had been drained both of individual power and of the many multiple resonances that similar events would have in *The Tarnished Angels*. Someone unfamiliar with Sirk might react to *The Tarnished Angels* with respect or astonishment at its power and yet feel that *A Time to Love* was too stark, drab and relatively limpid.

DOUGLAS SIRK
EDITED BY LAURA MULVEY & JOHN HALLIDAY

But these are the very qualities of *A Time to Love* which make it a great film. On the deepest level of Sirk's expression, there are no causes—even in a film like *The Tarnished Angels*—because all objects are ultimately the same. This principle is made overpoweringly explicit in *a Time to Love and a Time to Die*, just as the principle of *specific* causes was made explicit by *The Tarnished Angels*. If I had to choose, I would call *A Time to Love* the greater film; the specific materialisations of the demons in *The Tarnished Angels* allow the viewer a certain distance from the film—despair is not a universal truth if it results from specific situations. In *A Time to Love* there is only the surface and nothing else. The viewer must accept it and its beauty as the beginning and end of everything in the world. Because of the lack of any specific explanations, the film has an infinitely more total and general despair. This is the only feeling in Sirk that the viewer does not perceive in terms of formal distance: more than any other of his films it has one level of expression only, one static unity which contains all the action, so that everything that happens is inseparable from the context of the whole.

II

The story of *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* concerns a young German soldier, Ernst Graeber (John Gavin), who is fighting on the Russian Front during World War II. After an opening section at the Front, he returns to his home town in Germany on a furlough. He tries to find his parents; meets an old friend who is now a party official; meets a girl (Liselotte Pulver) who he falls in love with and marries, and then has to return to the Front. The plot, like the style, appears far simpler, less diverse and multipoled, than that of *The Tarnished Angels*. Although this sparseness is spread through the entire film, there are still some specific events and objects which appear to have a mocking or reducing effect similar to many things in *The Tarnished Angels*. At first it appears that Graeber's return to his home town from the 'unreality' of the Front will be a fulfilment for him of the kind sought for but never obtained by Father Fulton in *The First Legion*, with his desire to return to the 'real world out there,' the world of his childhood. When Graeber first enters the town, he comes across a stuffed horse in a store window which has been there since his childhood, and remarks to a woman on the street that nothing seems to have changed. Up until now we have only seen a small part of the city; the street, though bare, appears healthy or at least well preserved. As Graeber now turns, we see a large section of the city for the first time, but rather than a natural or apparently 'real' sight, like the images of the quiet town at the beginning of the flash-back in *Summer Storm*, Graeber is confronted with the bizarre and twisted shapes of a vast smoking ruin. This vast, bombed-out rubble, present as a grotesque background for much of the action, has the effect of reducing the reality he had hoped to discover to nothing more than its own contorted forms. When asking about his parents, he is referred to a tiny, immensely cluttered bulletin board, filled with scraps of paper; any sight or word he might get of his parents would be of the form of a few scrawled words on such a scrap. There is also the box he collects from the Gestapo—the ashes of his wife Elizabeth's father—another reduction of a hoped-for reality (that he might be alive) to an inanimate object.

One can continue to draw resemblances to *The Tarnished Angels*. There are a few moments in *A Time to Love* that seem to hold a similar terror. When Graeber finds his old house, he discovers it, too, is a ruin, and has no idea what became of his parents. He hears a strange deep eerie sound amidst the rubble, only to discover it is just a cord scraping against exposed piano keys. Then he hears a crying, and suddenly thinks it's human—perhaps one of his parents—only to discover, just as he had begun to hope, that it is a cat. There are also elements which, while not threats in the most direct sense, have some of the complex reverberations of *The Tarnished Angels*. The walls of a bomb shelter are covered with children's drawings of airplanes. A funeral procession, otherwise unexplained, appears in the centre of the frame. There is the 'crocodile' woman in Elizabeth's building, the prostitute who tries to pick up Ernst after a quarrel with Elizabeth (he seeks a real relationship, the film offers him a prostitute), or simply a man out of focus in the barracks in the city, who comes into

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE: John Gavin on the corner of ruined Hakenstrasse, Berlin ▶

focus later in the same shot as the conversation suddenly shifts to him, a mysterious materialisation which gives his presence in the frame no more logic than it had before. There are also, as always, the mirror shots, occurring in typical profusion throughout the film.

But in this most characteristic element, the mirror shots, can be seen the deep differences between *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* and Sirk's other films. There is no sense of powerful terror in each individual reflection: they seem completely integrated into the film's style, to the point where it makes no dramatic or emotional difference at all whether or not Sirk is shooting an object directly or its mirror reflection. In a sense this is a comment on the degree to which Sirk's ideas are integrated completely into the style of the film: now everything, every frame, every object, every action, is only a reflection. The realisation of this fact in earlier Sirk films was a great shock, as a reflection shot appeared suddenly to reduce something that we had half-believed was real: to force it into a static unity whose nature we had not clearly perceived before the reflection appeared. If reflections in earlier films were active agents, in *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* they exist *only* as a part of the static unity. The revelation that everything is a reflection, rather than occurring with special intensity at a few specific moments, is now integrated into the film's entire form. One might say that this compression of space is something that occurred everywhere in the film's space before it even began; it is not so much a perceptual shock as simply the only possible world.

This also affects the nature of the specific events and objects referred to earlier, in comparing *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* with other Sirk films. Nothing is allowed to have a causal or pivotal power. It is as if the mechanics of cause, producing surface, are never allowed to appear separated from their result—the final surface, those mechanics finding their deepest expression within its workings. Events do have a certain strange force, but this is of a more limited sort than the power of the demons in *The Tarnished Angels*. The message board, for instance, is seen only in medium shot, never in a close-up which might have the force of the shot of the open dance-card which ends *Summer Storm*. In *The Tarnished Angels*, a medium shot of a message board would be taken as an opportunity for filling the rest of the frame with equally bizarre objects; in *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* the rest of the frame is filled with the endless, never-changing ruins; or, in the scenes at the front, with barren brown earth or endless snow. Perhaps the film's scariest incident, the scraping piano strings, is primarily an auditory rather than a visual event.

But in this Sirk seems to be acknowledging, with rare explicitness, the ultimate nature of similar events in all his films. The sound-track of a Sirk film traditionally contains the dialogue, and information about the characters; it is the simplest or most schematic and least deeply expressive level on which the meaning is conveyed. Events in the stories are like simple comments on the deeper actions: very general thematic ideas to which Sirk gives greater meaning only through his whole style. But here he confines the use of object-terror, which might have appeared to a superficial viewer of his earlier films to be the deepest level, to the very same sound-track. Single incidents in Sirk are merely illustrations; like his own statements about his films, they place the entire action in a certain context. One could almost say that they are the film's deepest meanings as title-cards are to the story of a silent film: they make apparent and visible what we should have been seeing all along. So Sirk's insistent limiting of object power in *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is not an about-face so much as a move towards even greater explicitness. *The Tarnished Angels* is a crystallization of all the different forms of terror and their ultimate inseparability, while *A Time to Love* goes further and makes completely inseparable what was already inseparable at the deepest level of *The Tarnished Angels*: the relationship between cause and effect. The only truly meaningful level of *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is that at which the flatness of its perspective, the unity of all things in that flatness, is perceived. This gives the viewer less to 'hang on to', since there are no ready crystallizations of the apparent meaning. But it goes much further in the sense that the meaning it does reveal is the most general and total one possible in all of Sirk.

III

At this point the word 'surface' may appear to be something of a catch-all. Of course there are many

different kinds of surfaces, and simply to use it to describe a film is not enough. Much of the expression in *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* is contained in the specific way objects and textures are used as parts of the whole.

Sirk does not see his whole as a huge, amorphous mass into which everything, including our consciousness, should be encouraged to drift; as always, romantic identification and unity are precluded by his use of distance. His whole remains rooted in very specific conceptions, certain modes of perception, always making us see not a single shape or encompassing surface but a whole in terms of its component parts. The images of *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* do not give an impression of a single impenetrable surface as much as they give one the feeling of watching the *process* by which all things are fused into this whole. Strictly speaking we were incorrect in saying that this fusion was effected before the film began, because the fusion is always viewed as a continuing process: what the film takes as given is this process itself. At the beginning of *A Time to Love* exterior shots of the Russian Front are often very stark, clearly emphasising surfaces rather than objects: the entire frame is dominated by a huge mass of white snow and the vast empty sky. But these elements do not fuse or harmonize together; rather, they seem to be struggling with one another. The line on the horizon where they meet, appears not so much as a natural boundary or a blending of the two as the point at which each cuts off the rest of the other from the field of view. The areas never appear in complete full-bloodedness, as a result we are continually looking for their 'missing part,' those sections that will make them whole again. In this context, any line between areas appears to be cutting from our view something which our natural tendency toward completion of shape would like to see. Instead the image forces us to see the distortion of shape into forms which appear frozen into a unity. The areas still remain separate from each other; each appears to be twisted, contorted, fragmented, into a shape determined not by its natural identity, but by the filmic perception which the frame forces upon us. The sky is not a real sky, but a flat area of blue on the screen.

It is apparently a fact about perception that we learn to see only because of differences in colours and light intensities. If a baby saw only a continuous visual field of a single colour, it would never learn to 'see' even in the sense that we see colour. In fact, if one gazes for a very long time at a coloured paper which fills the eye's field, it will slowly appear to lose its colour. The eye works by comparison between different areas, a comparison which obviously must occur at the border between objects. It might be said that borders between single areas of light and colour (single surfaces) are the only parts of a scene which convey information to the eye.

Thus Sirk's style is not only an abstraction of his own conception, but is strongly rooted in our entire method of perception. By concentrating the force of his images in the borders between areas (the snow and sky in *A Time to Love*), he forces us to perceive in a new way, and at the same time to be consciously aware of our re-formed perception. In the same way, he uses our natural sense of perspective to convey the nature of his own perspective, making use of the very elements—contrast between areas—on which our natural sense depends. It is not the individual objects or areas which have power and meaning, but only their relationships to the surrounding visual field. He is thus using the very materials of seeing to convey his ideas. This is another way in which distance is achieved: one is made aware of the film as process rather than as a finally achieved truth.

A more conventional (for Sirk) type of distance is created in the shots in the city with the ruins as a background. In many shots there seems to be a finite distance between the ruins and the characters, almost as if they were back-projections, i.e., images projected on a movie screen which Sirk then photographs for our own screen. As with his use of mirrors, this impression pervades every image on the screen, so that the entire film seems double-distanced.

IV

In a sense, the relationship between *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* and Sirk's other films is similar to the relationship between an object in a Sirk film and that film as a whole. *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* is best understood in the context of the earlier, often more explicit films; a feeling for these will make it seem deeper and more moving, rather than as bleak and barren, as the film finally shows the world to be.

But also Sirk's earlier films are greatly illuminated by *A Time to Love*, as it shows up specifically things that were occurring only in the most general way in the earlier works. The sparseness of its narrative; the presence of only two major characters; all are the result of a tendency toward greater purity and simplicity of expression. But this is not to say that the film is so 'general' that the events of the narrative have no relevance. On the contrary, they exist alongside the style until the last shot reveals their inextricable fusion with that style.

The film has two basic locations: the Front and the city. It begins on the Front, as Graeber prepares to leave; the section in the city constitutes the bulk of the film. He meets a number of minor characters, but the main focus is his relationship with Elizabeth, the girl he marries. The film shows him as a relatively ordinary person; a bit more human than most, but with normal desires and none of the inner psychological torment of Kyle Hadley (Robert Stack) in *Written on the Wind* or any of the main characters in *The Tarnished Angels*. Elizabeth is an intensely proud woman who has not permitted herself to be emasculated by the surrounding chaos, as so often happens to Sirk's characters. When the bombing raids come, she refuses to be 'stampeded,' remaining in her very individually decorated room, trying to save all that she can of her 'personal freedom.' In the course of the film she gives some of this quality to Ernst, who at first is inclined to follow the crowd to the shelter; but on their last night together, having come to understand her feelings, he refuses with her to go to the shelter at all.

Elizabeth lives and feels each moment with a rare intensity, thus giving their relationship great power. But there is also a remarkable absence of any severely limiting neurosis in either character. This is one of the few, arguably the only, relationships in Sirk in which, were it merely up to the characters themselves, they would be happy. More commonly, a character like Groves (Fred MacMurray) in *There's Always Tomorrow* becomes the victim of a love which is made impossible both by external forces and the nature of his own feelings. Ernst and Elizabeth, by contrast, are relatively well-balanced, and in their moments to-

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE: ▶
The German-Russian front

SLEEP, MY LOVE: patterns of light: George Coulouris and Hazel Brooks

gether, happy. They are free of inner neurotic torments. Just as the film is free of specific object terror.

This permits us to believe that, on some level, there are moments when 'real' emotion occurs between them. It also helps to explain the remarkable scene of Ernst's departure at the train station, another moment when an emotion seems to break through the flatness of the frames. Just as, after the apartments had been bombed, Sirk showed people and the clutter of their things out on the street, inevitably placing Ernst and Elizabeth in the same context, so he now intercuts shots of another family breaking up as Ernst departs: a mother and child crying, as they wave to their father departing on the same train. Ernst's and Elizabeth's love is materialized in this very real, heartbreaking longing. At the same time, we remember that this emotion breaks through at the very moment it is being lost; and the scene also contains a devastating shot of Elizabeth watching the train leave from behind a large glass window, reducing their life together to this passive, endistanced vision.

The apparent reality of Ernst and Elizabeth as characters, their lack of inner neuroses, the fact that left alone together they might be very happy (though one might well claim that their happiness was in fact a result of their knowledge that Ernst would have to leave)—for these reasons Sirk resorts to his most arbitrary fatalism in decreeing that they shall not be happy. He dissolves from the station back to the Front, surely one of the most devastating dissolves in cinema: it reveals in an instant the form of his film as A-B-A, i.e. front-interlude-front, showing that those

moments of happiness were precisely an interlude, hopelessly limited by the surrounding surfaces and despair. There is no question or hope of Ernst ever seeing Elizabeth again; the dissolve reveals that their relationship can be perceived only in the context of the empty sky, pale snow and brown earth of the Front which contains it.

One might reason that the transition to the Front, the limitations on their happiness, results in part from their personal pride, and are thus not wholly arbitrary. Sirk's films are certainly replete with retribution being taken on characters who believed that they could preserve something of themselves in an emasculating world. One could further argue that Ernst's death is a direct result of the humanity that Elizabeth gave him, his feeling that he need not accept his assigned place in the world: he refuses to shoot some hostages, sets them free, and one then shoots him. But the film's A-B-A form seems to be something given, something that the characters could not affect *whatever* they did, so that it is rather their knowledge of Ernst's impending return to the Front (the film's overall form) which *causes* them to be happy. As Sirk says, they 'realise that it is their duty to be happy since the world around them is falling apart'. So, just as some emotion more real than the surfaces appears to be 'manifested at certain moments', so the film's fatalism has an arbitrariness which is unexplained within the context of the film. One might almost feel the form as an imposed order, an overlay as arbitrary and yet meaningful as the slanted patterns of light on LaVerne's face as she looks out of the venetian blinds in *The Tarnished Angels*.

It is the ending more than the overall form which is the most powerful and arbitrary thing in the film. The shooting of Graeber occurs without warning or logic. Throughout the war he, like the other soldiers, has been forced to take orders which are immoral and for which they have no taste. Early in the film, a sensitive soldier kills himself rather than sacrifice his humanity. By the end, Graeber, too, refuses to give in. He tells the hostages he was ordered to shoot 'you're free,' as we see them in a close interior shot with a flat background to which they seem inextricably fused and hardly free. Nonetheless, they slowly and drunkenly emerge; turning away, Graeber begins to read a letter from his wife, and one of them shoots him in the back. As they slowly wandered out, one felt them as nameless, faceless nonentities, like the crowd swarming on the field in *The Tarnished Angels*, and like that crowd, they seem to have a power even beyond their visual presence in the frame. Unlike the deaths of Olga (Linda Darnell) in *Summer Storm* or Roger Shumann (Robert Stack) in *The Tarnished Angels*, the shooting of Graeber is an event whose force has no clear materialization in the objects of the frame. The hostages have none of the visual power of the objects in *The Tarnished Angels*. There appears to be no visual force or terror in the frames which could account for the awful retribution of Graeber's murder. While the crowd in *The Tarnished Angels* gains force from the whole systematic development of object-power in the film, these hostages are powerless nonentities in the true sense of the word. The only explanation which corresponds to the incredibly devastating power of Graeber's death is that the motive force comes from a world beyond the visible frames. Surely the flat surfaces of the film, which proceed from what is in effect the assumption that Graeber is already dead, contain no such forces. Nor do the actual shots of Graeber's death have any of the thrusting power of similar events in other films. We must conclude from this that Graeber's death is an event, for one of the few times in Sirk, which is *beyond* the visible, and has no visual materialization in the images of the film. Like the altar in *The First Legion*, its controlling power appears to extend beyond and outside of the apparent visual field; unlike the altar, it is itself invisible. This must be the most terrifying and retributive moment in Sirk, unless one chooses the last image of *A Time to Love*, where Graeber's reflection is visible in the river as his now-dead hand reaches out for his wife's letter which he has dropped there, a completely literal representation of Sirk's statement about finding happiness:

> Everything, even life, is eventually taken away from you. You cannot feel, cannot touch the impression, you can only reach its reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself, your fingers only meet a surface of glass, because happiness has no existence of its own, and probably exists only inside yourself . . . I certainly believe that happiness exists, if only by the simple fact that it can be destroyed.'

HITLER'S MADMAN: John Carradine as the dying Heydrich, frightened, grasping the jacket of Howard Freeman (Himmler)

Yet this last shot, unlike most of the rest of the film, is an image of extraordinary pivotal and even causal power; it seems to sum up and contain everything. Its force results not from its illustrative or summarizing aspect, but from the sense in which, like Graeber's death, it appears to materialize out of nothing, unexpectedly, startlingly, to control our entire perception of the film; and simultaneously reveal that it was really contained in the film's earlier images. For the power of this single image, its force, suddenly appears to be the terror behind the nameless flat surfaces of the film; it is the final surface, the death, which had been stalking every image of *A Time to Love and a Time to Die.*