

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Douglas Sirk and the melodrama</b>
Author(s)	Warren Sonbert Rainer Werner Fassbinder Jean Luc Godard
Source	<i>Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	April 3, 1975 - June 12, 1975
Type	program note
Language	
Pagination	
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	Lang, Fritz (1890-1976), Vienna, Austria Ray, Nicholas (1911-1979), Galesville, WI, United States Sirk, Douglas (1897-1987), Hamburg, Germany Aldrich, Robert (1918-1983), Cranston, Rhode Island, United States Hudson, Rock (1925-1985), Winnetka, Illinois, United States
Film Subjects	A time to love and a time to die, Sirk, Douglas, 1958 La strada (The road), Fellini, Federico, 1954 Imitation of life, Sirk, Douglas, 1959 Le plaisir, Ophüls, Max, 1951

Captain Lightfoot, Sirk, Douglas, 1954

Tarnished angels, Sirk, Douglas, 1957

Attack, Aldrich, Robert, 1956

Le diable au corps (Devil in the flesh), Autant-Lara, Claude,  
1946

Written on the wind, Sirk, Douglas, 1956

PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE  
2625 Durant Avenue  
Berkeley, California 94720

DOUGLAS SIRK AND THE MELODRAMA

April 3 - June 12, 1975

Notes by Film-makers on Sirk

Although many American film viewers would find it hard to believe, The Films of Douglas Sirk, particularly his popular fifties' melodramas starring Rock Hudson, Dorothy Malone, Robert Stack, Barbara Rush and Jane Wyman, are taken seriously not only by "those crazy French critics" but by a great number and variety of important contemporary film-makers. Many of these film-makers have acknowledged their debt to Sirk in the form of written appreciations as well as by conscious references and even "quotations" in their films. We have collected some Notes by Film-makers on Sirk in this handout, including notes written especially for the Pacific Film Archive by independent film-maker Warren Sonbert (THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL, WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO, CARRIAGE TRADE, etc.)

For further reading on Sirk, we recommend SIRK ON SIRK by Jon Halliday (A Cinema One Paperback), and DOUGLAS SIRK: THE COMPLETE AMERICAN PERIOD (Published by the University of Connecticut Film Society), both available in the University Art Museum bookstore.

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION (1954) April 24, 7:30 pm

"There is a very short distance between high art and trash, and trash that contains the element of craziness is by this very quality nearer to art." --Sirk.

Sirk, the uprooted émigré, sees the world and the subjects he undertakes with an anguished objectivity; observing, absorbing and reflecting his material. Like Ozu, Sirk takes on the least facile task of presenting the present; what is accepted by custom, mores and standards taken for granted, caste rules and stratifications, and qualifies them by his treatment and eye-of-God attitudes. No other Hollywood director of the 50's - not even Hitchcock - so ruthlessly exposes and undermines the hollow cupidity and superficiality of middle class ideals of the Eisenhower years in America. These films are perfect time capsules. And yet the works are made universal by a sensibility encompassing an acceptance of the varied states of life, by benign contemplation and an awe of the poetry of existence, as well as being viscerally permeated by an Olympian grace (a camera that glides); a Constructivist cinema deploying architecture to comment on the characters' iconography and their emotive stances. Take nothing for granted in a Sirk film: composition, cutting, color, light, sets (the textural diversity) - the control will guide you.

Jane Wyman goes blind (indirectly caused by shiftless playboy Rock Hudson, who earlier on was also responsible for the death of Jane's beloved husband. At the end they find out they're right for each other). The theme of blindness (literal displacement), of infirmity, crystallizes our constant anxiety of groping for a place in the sun. But this coming to face with the realization is also the beginning of hope; most people are blind but don't know it. Laugh if you must. Sirk is laughing too. But he's also weeping.

--Warren Sonbert

ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (1955) May 1, 7:30 pm

"The title in a picture is like the prologue in a drama... Titles are like signs in front of movies, or they should be: a passing in-between thing, not the drama itself... It should tell the story, but in a certain way; not the whole story." --Sirk.

In a Sirk film the realization that what one thinks of oneself is more important than what others think of one marks the initiation of growth. Unlike Ford's work, the value of the community, of the family, of Church and State are seen as detrimental to the freedom of mind of the individual. People here are trapped by furnishings, possessions, status, country clubs (a devastating rondo of a scene - savor the

scathing portraiture), the petty demands and consensus of well-meaning friends. The tragedy is that the characters may never even know this about themselves while Sirk parades all the bitter details. Deprived of Rock Hudson (who probably isn't going to pan out for her anyway - look at the schisms of their lifestyles) by her whining monstrous children (always more conservative and tyrannical than their elders - the bleak proviso being that our mistakes will recur) Jane Wyman gets instead a TV set in which her dim reflection traces a life sentence of frustration. Not a very sunny fade-out. Just as the deus ex machina of Greek drama or the being put to rights endings of the Mozart-da Ponte operas does not diminish the pessimistic almost misanthropic implications of what went before (nothing is as serious as comedy), so beware of Sirk's "happy endings". They are ominous. Trust the evidence.

--Warren Sonbert

THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW (1955) May 8, 8:30 pm

"I guess I'm too objective to fully empathize with the desires and motives of any one character or side". --Sirk.

As the titles get brighter, the works become more despairing. In Sirk there is a conspicuous absence of readily identifiable heroes and villains; everyone has his reasons. Like Mozart, whose music is always "beautiful" and utilizes the accepted forms and structures of his age and yet - for those with ears to hear it - has the bitter resignation and fatality that was to be smeared to abuse in later times, Sirk never hammers home points, forces rigid attitudes or forms condescending judgments about his characters and their situations. A dispassionate technique might sometimes yield compassionate results. People are eternally at cross-purposes, but that doesn't negate the validity of any of their terms.

And so here the curtains part to reveal the blissful household of Fred MacMurray with perfect wife Joan Bennett (one of the most devastating characters in all cinema: so wretchedly unknowing in her smothering of her husband, so cheerfully oblivious of all the pain around her, the only personage to escape even a tinge of anguish, existing in a dream world of smug politeness; when her husband has to flee to the piazza for a moment of brooding sanity, she calls him back to the bedroom with the admonition "You might catch a cold" with the solicitude of pure strangulation) a charming Father Knows Best trio of offspring (who vow to revere their father but promptly walk all over him again) (watch their faces at the dinner table and try not to quake), and a lucrative toy-manufacturing concession. Enter Barbara Stanwyck. The man who plays with toys grows up but it's too late. At the end Stanwyck leaves alone on a plane to start anew (like Malone in TARNISHED ANGELS). And in both films the unknown is better than the reality we've just witnessed. In no other movie does the claustrophobia of domestic rigidity become so shattering as in this Greek drama of a complacent, insulated man becoming aware. After you see it you'll be glad you're not straight.

--Warren Sonbert

WRITTEN ON THE WIND (1956) May 22, 7:00, 10:40 pm

"The place of language in pictures has to be taken by the camera - and by cutting. You have to write with the camera". --Sirk

The fetid taste of intrinsic imperfection, of behavioral mistakes endlessly repeated from generation to generation, find expression in the staggeringly demonic visual motifs recurring throughout Sirk's films of the merry-go-round, the amusement park ride, the circular treadmill, the vehicle that really goes nowhere, insulated hopeless activity, the Western frame of mind, people struggling to get outside cages of their own building yet encased by their own unique palpable qualities. Mirrors and surfaces as distancing agents (revealing yet qualifying and placing). A flight of stairs - stages of grace? No image or icon has a simplistic easily solvable frame of reference. An immediate appreciative laugh shouldn't obscure the double puns and triple meanings to be found in Sirk's "outrageous" moments. A lot of them happen in WRITTEN ON THE WIND, probably Sirk's richest work. One will suffice. Bob Stack after being told by his doctor he's impotent immediately comes upon a young boy jiggling furiously atop a stationary (natch) penny machine rocking horse (like Berg's "Wozzeck"). He's straddled around an enormous horse's head with a gleeful climactic smile (this in 1956 remember) totally oblivious to

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Stack's woes. How many ironic meanings can you count? Here's the son Stack will never have, performing a function Stack isn't up to, on a machine that isn't going anywhere anyway, but enjoying himself nevertheless.

--Warren Sonbert

IMITATION OF LIFE (1959) June 12, 7:00, 9:45 pm

"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..." --Sirk.

Melos - music, melodrama - music & drama. Filling the frame - from the titles of clear close-up diamonds floating down a black velvet background as the 4 Aces wail on the track to the violet-plumed horse drawn hearse for the funeral finale, Sirk bestows upon his images bleak innuendoes with witty asides. Here's intersecting moving bodies all busy talking to each other yet nobody listening; the pain doesn't mutually register. Highlight; the Schoolroom in the Rain (little girl passing for white to teacher and classmates gets a surprise visit from her mother - you don't want to miss one shifted glance). Everyone always cries at the end, at the funeral (at funerals people aren't really wrenching tears for the departed so much as for themselves, for their own fates). IMITATION OF LIFE was Sirk's last film and his most successful venture at Universal. He quit at the top, art ripe, at the end of a decade whose iconography he delineated with a robust succinctness unequaled by his peers.

--Warren Sonbert

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.

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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

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE (1957) June 5, 7:30 pm

I love ostriches. They are realists. They only believe what they see. When everything is going wrong, and the world is getting altogether too ugly, they only have to shut their eyes very tightly for the outside world to just melt away, like the prince overwhelmed by the tenderness of the little laundress in a song by Renoir. In short, ostriches are completely odiotic creatures, and completely charming ones. And if I like LE DIABLE AU CORPS it's because it tells the story of two ostriches. And if I also like A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE it is obviously because it's not like Autant-Lara's dreary movie, but the book by that strange man Radiguet. And anyway, why do I like Raymond Radiguet so much? Simply and solely because he did not know he was myopic, and thought everyone saw as dimly as he did, until Cocteau lent him a pair of spectacles.

It must be obvious that I am going to review the latest Douglas Sirk in wildly enthusiastic terms, just because I was thrilled by it. I shall refer back all the time to the ideas and feelings invoked by Radiguet's novel, and to Griffith's TRUE-HEART SUSIE because I think every article on the cinema ought to talk about Griffith; everyone thinks so, and everyone forgets him all the same; Griffith, then, and Andre Bazin, for the same reasons; and now that that's done I'll go back to the comparisons I was making a propos of A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE, just stopping for a moment to say that after LE PLAISIR, it is the most beautiful title in the whole history of the cinema, silent and sound, and also to say that I should like to congratulate Universal-International very loudly for having changed the title of Erich Maria Remarque's book A TIME TO LIVE AND A TIME TO DIE: those dear old universal, international bandits launched Douglas on to a battle circus that Boris Barnet would have loved to film, because it was ten times more infernal and more beautiful than the one Brooks made, or, to put it another way, they gave their director a wonderful starting-point for a script by replacing 'live' with 'love', implicitly asking 'Ought you to live in order to love, or love in order to live?' - so now before I finally get to the end of my sentence and my comparison, once more: a time to live and a time to die, no, I'll never get tired of writing those nine, non-divisible, non subtractable, ever-new words. A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE, everyone must know by now that I am going to talk about this film like one by Old Fritz or Nicholas Ray, like YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE or THEY LIVE BY NIGHT, in short as though John Gavin and Liselotte Pulver were Aucassin and Nicolette created anew in 1959.

Which is what I find magical about Douglas Sirk: this delirious mixture of the middle ages and modernity, of sentimentality and subtlety, of boring compositions and reckless Cinemascope. Anyone can see that you have to talk about this kind of thing like Aragon talked about Elsa's eyes: deliriously, you can be quietly, or passionately delirious, but delirious you have to be, for the logic of delirium is the only logic that Douglas Sirk has ever bothered about. To return to our ostriches. I remember last year seeing a very remarkable little film, set by the sea shore. There was a really quite attractive girl who was playing hide and seek with a chap in and out of the pine trees. He caught up with her at last, and kissed her. It was just what she wanted, but all the same she did not look completely satisfied or happy. 'Why?' the chap asked. The girl stretched out on the warm sand, shutting

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her eyes. 'Because,' she said, 'I should like to be able to shut my eyes tightly, so tightly that everything would go completely black; really black, completely, but I never manage it.'

That blackness is the subject treated by Douglas Sirk in *A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE*. I find this film beautiful because it gives me the impression that the two leading characters, Ernest and his Lisbeth, with their gentle Preminger-like faces, manage, by shutting their eyes with a kind of passionate innocence to the bombs falling around them in Berlin to get deeper into themselves than any other characters in a film before them. As Rossellini said, in this issue of the magazine, it is through the war that they rediscover love. They rediscover each other, thanks to Hitler, man and woman whom God created. It is because one must love in order to live, that one must live in order to love, Ernest seems to be saying to us as he kills a Russian woman partisan. Elizabeth, sipping her champagne, seems to be saying the same thing. Love must be leisurely, says Sirk with them, in every frame, paying homage to Baudelaire: love then, and die. And his film is beautiful because we think of war as the images of love pass before our eyes, and vice-versa.

People will argue that this is a simplistic idea. Perhaps, because after all it is a producer's idea. But it needed a director to make something of it, and rediscover the truth (pleasure) behind the convention (tears). Milestone could not do it long ago, Philip Dunne has just failed dismally to do it now. But unlike that pedestrian pedagogue at Fox, Douglas Sirk is an honest director, in the classic sense of the term. His straightforward ingenuousness is his strength. Technically speaking, it is in this sense that I find his film beautiful. Because I have the impression that the images last twice as long as those of ordinary films, a twenty-fourth of a second instead of a forty-eighth, as if he was remembering his days as an editor at UFA, and as if, out of respect for his characters, he was trying to make use of even the time when the shutter was closed. Of course Sirk was not so explicit about it as I have been. But he gives the impression of having had the idea. Perhaps it is an ingenuous idea for a film-maker to want to assimilate the definition of the cinema to his definition of his characters, but it is a beautiful idea. When we talk about 'getting inside a character's skin,' basically we mean just that. Taken all in all, it is as beautiful and ingenuous as Gance throwing his camera in the air when the boy Napoleon is throwing snowballs in the yard at Brienne.

The important thing, as Douglas Sirk proves, is to believe in what you are doing by making the audience believe in it. *A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE* goes even farther in this direction than *TARNISHED ANGELS*, *WRITTEN ON THE WIND* and *CAPTAIN LIGHTFOOT*. They are not great films but it doesn't matter, because they are beautiful. And why are they beautiful? Firstly, as we have seen, because the script is beautiful. Secondly, because the actors are not ugly, to say the least. Thirdly, because the direction isn't, either. *A TIME TO DIE* proves it once again.

Before talking about the form of the film, let's talk briefly about Liselotte Pulver's. Nobody seems to like it but me. You say she's skinny. But it was war time! and the subject is not: Lise, take off your sweater. And for my part, I never believed so much that I was watching a real German girl at the time of the collapse of the Third Reich as I did watching Liselotte Pulver (and yet she's from Zurich), jumping nervously at every new shot. Let's go further. I never believed so much that I was in Germany in war time as I did watching *A TIME TO DIE* though it is an American film made in peace time. Sirk can make us see things so closely that we can touch them, breathe them. Aldrich did it in *ATTACK*, but Sirk does it better. The frozen face of a dead man on the Russian Front, the bottles of wine, a brand new flat in a ruined town, we believe in them as though they had been filmed by a reporter's Cameflex, not a great Cinemascope camera manipulated by what must be called the hand of a master.

It is fashionable today to sneer at the wide screen. Not with me. I should like to take this opportunity of telling René Unclear-Clair and all others of the same persuasion, very politely, that they are talking through their hats. It suffices to have seen the two latest Douglas Sirks to be convinced that Cinemascope is as much an improvement on normal format as it is an enlargement on it. It has to be admitted that our old film director has recovered his youthful powers, and is beating all the young directors on their own ground, panorama-ing anywhere and everywhere,

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moving in and out on the action with equally reckless abandon. And the astonishingly beautiful thing about these camera movements, which gather steam like an engine, and are so swiftly executed that you can't see the blur\*, is that they give the impression of having been done by hand, when in fact they were done with a crane, rather as if the swooping, swirling lines of someone like Fragonard had been done by complicated machinery. Conclusion: those who did not see or like Liselotte Pulver running on the bank of - was it the Rhine or the Danube? it doesn't really matter which it was or how it was - ducking under a gate and straightening up on the other side all in one agile movement, and did not see at the same time Douglas's big Mitchell camera also duck and straighten with exactly the same supple-jointed down-and-up, either didn't see anything, or do not know what is beautiful.

\*When the camera pans the landscape automatically looks blurred. Sirk intelligently masks the blurred effect by having people running all round the ones he is following, suppressing the disadvantages of speed by going even faster.

--Jean-Luc Godard

### SIRK AND THE MELODRAMA

Thursday, April 3 7:30 pm	George Sanders and Linda Darnell in SUMMER STORM (1944, 106 mins)
Thursday, April 10 7:30	George Sanders, Signe Hasso, Carol Landis and Akim Tamiroff in A SCANDAL IN PARIS (1945, 100 mins)
Thursday, April 17 7:00, 10:30	Barbara Stanwyck and Richard Carlson in ALL I DESIRE (1953, 79 mins, 35mm)
Thursday, April 24 7:30	Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson, Barbara Rush and Agnes Moorehead in MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION (1953, 108 mins, color)
Thursday, May 1 7:30	Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson, and Agnes Moorehead in ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (1955, 89 mins, color, 35mm)
Thursday, May 8 8:30	Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, and Joan Bennett in THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW (1955, 84 mins)
Thursday, May 15 7:30	Rock Hudson, Anna Kashfi, and Dan Duryea in BATTLE HYMN (1956, 108 mins, color, 35 mm)
Thursday, May 22 7:00, 10:40	Rock Hudson, Lauren Bacall, Robert Stack, and Dorothy Malone in WRITTEN ON THE WIND (1956, 92 mins, color)
Thursday, May 29 7:00, 10:40	Rock Hudson, Robert Stack, Dorothy Malone and Jack Carson in THE TARNISHED ANGELS (1957, 91 mins, 35mm)
Thursday, June 5 7:30	John Gavin, Lilo Pulver and Jock Mahony in A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE (1957, 133 mins, color, 35mm)
Thursday, June 12 7:00, 9:45	Lana Turner, John Gavin and Sandra Dee in IMITATION OF LIFE (1958, 125 mins, color, 35mm)

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END