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# THE MELODRAMATISTS

*Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray turned film noir into psychological drama*

My love must be a kind of blind love: Rock Hudson's wish that Jane Wyman's eyesight be restored is the key romantic conceit in Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession*.



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**I**N THE MID-1950S, FILM NOIR died and went to heaven. But a group of angels found the newcomer had been sent prematurely: There were still signs of life. They were about to return it to Earth but were distressed by its shabby monochrome appearance. Dark felt hat, cigarette dangling from the mouth, suit striped by window-blind shadows ... too dowdy for the affluent postwar years. A special color wardrobe was arranged, and film noir returned as '50s melodrama.

Handling this transmuted genre, directors Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk made the weepies and crack-up movies of the Eisenhower era sing. Look today at *Rebel*

*Without a Cause* (1955) or *Written on the Wind* (1956), *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) or *Bigger Than Life* (1956), and you gasp at their pop-Aeschylean bravura. The doom of unraveling families, the pain of unrequited love, the curses of alcoholism, blindness or madness—these are smeared across wide screens in all the colors of the Hollywood rainbow. Glossy surfaces meet subversive/antisocial themes. Ray and Sirk, working in a cinema upping the visual ante so as to beat TV, seemed to say, Sure, we'll make films in the house style, but we'll be playing some pretty interesting games with the house content.

Both men began their directing careers in Hollywood in the '40s: Sirk in '42, Ray seven years later. Ray started as a noir specialist with sleekly neurotic crime movies like *They Live by Night* (1949) and *On Dangerous Ground* (1951). Sirk was a Danish-born stage and film director who emigrated to the U.S. after early work with UFA and in the German theater. In Hollywood, he began by bringing a whiff of Chekhov to small-town stories like *Summer Storm* (1944) and went on to deliver darker stuff with *Lured* (1947), *Sleep My Love* (1948) and *Shockproof* (1949).

When Hollywood began dressing more



and more in color in the early-to-mid-'50s, noir became an endangered species, and directors like Sirk and Ray had to do a chameleon change. Grimy dramas of crime or passion shot in black-and-white were becoming TV's beat. Cinema, instead, tried to relaunch with gigantist formats like CinemaScope, Cinerama and 3-D, and—not least—with the enhanced color values of new processes like Eastman Color. In 1947, only 12 percent of American feature films were made in color; by 1954, the figure had topped 50 percent.

By the mid-'50s, noir as a visual style was scarcely in sight. But many of its psychodramatic values lived on. Ray and Sirk acted as inspired moving men: They took the furniture of noir—the hangover anxieties of World War II that had resulted in all those movies about jilted men, emotional crises and labyrinthine crimes—and rehoused it in the new polychromatic pleasure-pictures.

Sirk's first two truly Sirkian movies, *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), both starring Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson, are a locus classicus for the new melodrama. They provide a lush visual arena for guerrilla games with themes of destiny and emotion. For most of each movie, Wyman and Hudson are kept apart by heavyweight tragic ironies: the peer pressure of bourgeois respectability in *Heaven*

(Hudson is Wyman's gardener), the guilt of a playboy past in *Obsession* (Hudson caused the accident that resulted in Wyman's blindness). When the two are united, Sirk has so loaded up the straight-faced drama with subtle surfeit—the deer and Christmas trees of *Heaven*, the godlike doctor peering from his gallery above the operating room in *Obsession*—that emotional catharsis goes hand-in-hand with something close to parody.

But parody is coarser than what Sirk does here or what Ray does in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) or *Rebel Without a Cause*. They're not undercutting their own stories, they're framing them in a style of such florid conviction that it tells us both everything about the characters and everything about the social-historical age that dreamed them up.

The '50s was a decade that smiled at the camera, saying, Look how healthy and wealthy I am! But under the smile lay the Korean war and the aftershocks of McCarthy, the rise of juvenile delinquency and teen culture, and the collapse of Hollywood's own studio patriarchy. It was also a time when psychoanalysis had fully entered the public consciousness and family values incubated Freudian question marks.

No wonder that Ray in *Bigger Than Life* had a family split apart by a "wonder drug," with papa James Mason getting



**Rebel Without a Cue:** the psychologically savvy Ray discussing motivation with the Method-ical James Dean.

high on cortisone; that in *Rebel*, he gave us James Dean hammering on the psyche of his uncomprehending father (Jim Backus); or that in *Johnny Guitar*, he lit the screen up with a weird Oedipal romance between Joan Crawford, 49 looking 50, and Sterling Hayden, 37 looking 30.

Ray uses color in these films as chromatic humors. He's unashamedly expressionist. The yellow taxis sprawled across the CinemaScope screen in *Bigger Than Life* are a bilious brainstorm; the reds in *Rebel* are blood and fire; even the greens in his late, not-so-great *Wind Across the Everglades* (1958) are a lush, painterly emanation of the romantic spirit.

Both Sirk and Ray honor noir by harnessing its opposite—the wild horses of chromatic hyperbole—and riding toward the critical truths of the human heart. Like Sirk, Ray can also stand apart: gauging and composing the mayhem as if in ironic long shot. *Rebel*, for all its youth-movie turmoil, recognizes the right pictorial framing devices, especially in the Griffith Park Observatory scenes, when the struggles of a small knot of crazy kids are made to seem as tiny and unsingular as the stars.

Any doubt that Sirk commands the frame as well as the painting is dispelled by a look at his two late masterpieces,



**Sirk (left) blocking three of his four** *Written on the Wind* stars—(left to right) Rock Hudson, Lauren Bacall, Robert Stack.



*Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* (1957). Sirk is detached, almost cheeky, in the way he uses elemental textures in his main actors: the simple beefcake honesty of Hudson, the intensity and deep-sea voice of Robert Stack, the telegraphic carnality of Dorothy Malone. In both films, high style transcends simple story components. The proto-*Dallas* oil family smashed by its own character flaws in *Wind*, the team of stunt-fliers with a collective death wish in the Faulkner-based *Angels*.

When Hollywood, at the advent of the '60s, decided that joining TV was shrewder than trying to beat it—the success of Hitchcock's low-budget, black-and-white, TV-crewed *Psycho* (1960) was a watershed—the wilder '50s excesses of CinemaScope and color gave way to the '60s rise of underground filmmakers (John Cassavetes) or graduates from TV (Sidney Lumet, John Frankenheimer, Sydney Pollack). Noir was over, as was its crazy, resplendent, all-color 1950s child.

It's a disgrace that the following films represent nearly all of the Sirk canon available on video. Ray has been better served, but such key films as *The Lusty Men* and *The Savage Innocents* are regrettably missing in action.

### **Flying Leathernecks 1951**

Routine war script vitalized by visual grace notes. John Wayne, gung-ho Marine Corps air commander in the Pacific, can't see eye-to-eye with namby-pamby second-in-command Robert Ryan, who cares too much about the boys' safety. But never mind the plot: Aim your sights on the emotional subtext Ray builds into the images, like the doomy diagonal shots of fliers in their cockpits, or the way the soldiers' name-painted coffee mugs, sentimental lifelines to peace and personal identity, bear a red-gold design that rhymes with the gramophone Duke gets as a birthday present from his daughter. *Turner Home Entertainment*, \$19.98

### **Johnny Guitar 1954**

Joan Crawford squares bionic cheekbones as Ray's Girl of the Golden West. The dotty plot about railroads, gambling dens and violent locals pales into insignificance beside Ray's heaping of colors, chromatic and dramatic, onto his Manierist palette. Camp before its time, the film deconstructs sexuality (Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge are more

**He wore a khaki helmet: John Wayne earning his wings in Ray's sentimental fly-boy story *Flying Leathernecks*.**



mannish than handsome, soft-spoken Sterling Hayden), paints its saloon-casino in riotously moody colors and creates a frontier as enclosed and expressionist as a late O'Neill play. *Republic Pictures Home Video*, \$14.98

### **Magnificent Obsession 1954**

Will playboy Rock Hudson ever become a responsible citizen? Only if he accidentally causes pretty Jane Wyman's blindness and then follows her all over Europe secretly, self-redeemingly arranging her ocular comeback. As a plot, it's piffle. As a Sirk movie, though, it's sumptuous and sophisticated. Relish the echoes of Euripides' *Alcestis*, the visual compositions and the moments of transfiguring craziness. As Sirk himself said, "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." *MCA/Universal Home Video*, \$59.95

### **Rebel Without a Cause 1955**

But there is a cause: the overthrow of discredited (parental) authority and middle-class complacency. James Dean sulks, smolders, has crying fits and does everything a man's gotta not do. He invented the new age 30 years before the New Age. Ray surrounds him with warring colors, vibrant actors (Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo) and a CinemaScope screen made for everything from family rows in low-ceilinged suburbia to lean and terrifying automobile chicken runs on a cliff top to

trysts in the ruins of mansions. *Warner Home Video*, \$19.98; *laser disc*, \$24.98

### **Written on the Wind 1956**

More craziness from Sirk, but also more control. Oil heir Robert Stack marries Lauren Bacall while his man-hungry sister Dorothy Malone fastens on Bacall-besotted Rock Hudson. Very complicated, so Sirk, going for the simple option, plays it like grand opera. The Stack mansion makes the Southfork look like an outhouse. And the roles are divided as much for vocal texture (tenor Hudson, bass Stack, mezzo Malone, contralto Bacall) as for varied physical appeal. The film's about the collapse of materialism as a creed, but the collapse has the materialist magnificence of a *götterdämmerung*. *MCA/Universal*, \$29.95

### **Imitation of Life 1959**

Sirk's last, and, as Fassbinder called it, a "great, crazy movie about life, death and America." Remaking the 1934 weepie about a white actress' friendship with a black maid and the maid's wild daughter, Sirk guides Lana Turner through knockout visuals. She looks shell-shocked. But statuesque aphasia is what he wants from his star, posed in close-ups as if the camera were the narcissistic heroine's looking-glass, heaven compared to the hell of the dives where the daughter sins and sings. Sobs, choirs and Mahalia Jackson by the end. Keep 10 Kleenexes with you, one for polishing the TV screen to a reverent gleam. *MCA/Universal*, \$59.95 □