

that an understanding of melodrama as a style necessitates a familiarity with Sirk's filmic techniques. There is, however, a problem here that is sometimes overlooked that needs to be indicated at this early stage. Film Studies academics have tended to imply that the very self-conscious techniques, often regarded as excessive, used by Sirk, are typical of melodramatic style. As Gledhill notes:

The work of directors, whose exploitation of colour, widescreen, camera movement, had previously been valued for humanist-realist thematics, were now seen as overwrought examples of the bourgeois family melodrama. Stylistic excess had no longer to be defended or justified as the correlative of a coherent vision. It became a positive value, passing from an authorial to a generic trademark and under this rubric the films of Minnelli, Ray, Ophüls, Cukor and Kazan came to stand alongside Sirk to mark the parameters of a new critical field. (ibid.)

However, it is important to remember that although some of the stylistic techniques that Sirk deployed can indeed be seen more widely used in the work of other directors of 1950s Hollywood cinema, Sirk's specific use of these techniques and the intentions that underpinned them are rather specific. Films such as Joshua Logan's *Picnic* (1956) for example have been regarded as revealing conflicts and tensions in 1950s American society though it is also usually acknowledged that the ironic subtext of such films is more inadvertent than intentional. By contrast, Sirk self-consciously, through his own admission, used an elaborate filmic style to undermine the inherent conservatism of the scripts that he was given to work with during his years at Universal. Sirk's intentions therefore were subversive and in many ways his films are atypical of the period rather than the epitome of the Hollywood melodrama. Thomas Schatz, for example, uses the term 'Hollywood Baroque' to describe Sirk's peculiarly elaborate and extravagant style:

Sirk's interests as a film director, as the premier narrator of female 'weepies' in the 1950s, were based on a style and attitude fundamentally at odds with many, if not most, of the other melodramatists. It certainly takes no more than a few pages of Fanny Hurst's tawdry 1933 bestseller (*Imitation of Life*) to realise that in the novel, the narrator actually took the subject matter seriously,

2 STYLE

In chapter one we observed the debates and problems posed by the identification of melodrama as a distinct cinematic genre. The group of films that we now categorise as melodrama have over time been identified variously as dramas, romantic dramas and perhaps most problematically as 'women's films'. We have seen that no fixed definition of what melodrama means has emerged within Film Studies. The term is perhaps best understood as a critical category rather than a fixed definition of cinematic genre. As we have noted, this critical category emerged in the 1970s out of a specific set of academic interests: most notably the study of ideology, the intervention of feminism and the emergence of representational theory. Furthermore as Barbara Klinger (1994) has noted this critical interest in melodrama (and the techniques deployed in the domestic melodramas of post-war Hollywood cinema in particular) are epitomised in the interest in the work of Douglas Sirk and more specifically the five key films Sirk produced whilst working as a director for Universal Studios between 1954 and 1961. The films in question are *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *The Tarnished Angels* (1956), *Written on the Wind* (1957) and *Imitation of Life* (1961). These five films have become touchstones for academics concerned with the stylistic characteristics of melodrama: they have effectively defined what melodrama is understood to be in Film Studies. As Christine Gledhill observes in her comprehensive overview of melodrama as an area of academic enquiry, 'through discovery of Sirk, a genre came into view' (1987: 7); a genre with a particular filmic style, epitomised in Sirk's films, and Sirk and his films remains firmly positioned at the heart of debate around melodrama in cinema. This means

celebrating the American success ethic, romantic love and the nuclear family. Sirk conceived of his subject quite differently than had Hurst – not as a celebration of the American Dream, but as an articulation and ultimately a criticism of it. (1981: 246)

It is perhaps more meaningful to understand Sirk's family melodramas as emblematic of both the style and narrative concerns of 1950s Hollywood melodrama. This is not the same as arguing that his films are typical of the period, which is an important point to emphasise. Sirk's films are in many respects atypical but rather become emblematic through a particular use of an ironic *mise-en-scène*, which suggests a critique of bourgeois ideology that reveals wider conflicts and tensions that manifest themselves through the dominant cinema of the period.

Douglas Sirk

Born Dietlef Sierck, Douglas Sirk's early history is widely misrepresented. He was not, as some accounts suggest, Danish and was in fact born in Hamburg.¹ Sierck studied law, philosophy and finally the history of art under the tutelage of the renowned art historian Erwin Panofsky at Hamburg University. Whilst at university he became involved in theatre and in 1922 directed his first play, Bossdorff's *Stationmaster Death*. A left-wing intellectual, well versed in the history of European philosophy and art Sierck was to become a leading figure in progressive German theatre during the coming years. Sierck directed productions by Bertolt Brecht and came under severe criticism by the Nazis in 1933 due to his production of the social critique *The Silver Lake* by Kaiser and Weill. In 1934 he became a director at the German state-run film producers UFA, working alongside a host of directors who would later make careers in Hollywood including Hitchcock, Wilder and Curt Siodmak. During the period between 1934 and 1937 he was to make a succession of films that achieved both popular and critical success that also found favour with the ruling Nazi regime, including *Zu Neuen Ufern* (1937), *Schlussakord* (1936) and his final German film, *La Habanera* (1937). Fleeing Germany at the end of the 1930s, Douglas Sirk, as he was to become known, eventually made his way to Hollywood and worked initially as a director for Columbia from 1942 and from 1946 with Universal.

During a career that lasted over 40 years and includes some 43 films Sirk's output both at UFA and later in Hollywood was to be especially

diverse. His first Hollywood production was the war film, *Hitler's Madman* in 1943 and he was to direct several other films within the genre including *Battle Hymn* (1957) and *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958). Sirk also directed thrillers such as *Sleep, My Love* (1948), *Lured* (1947) and *Thunder on the Hill* (1951), the western, *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), historical dramas such as *A Scandal in Paris* (1946), *Captain Lightfoot* (1955) and *Sign of the Pagan* (1954) and even comedies and musicals such as *Has Anyone Seen My Gal?* (1952), *Take Me to Town* (1953) and *Meet Me at the Fair* (1953).

What is now regarded as the distinctive Sirkian style was to be fully realised during his years at Universal, working on a succession of projects, characterised, in Paul Willemen and Jon Halliday's words, by 'the grossness and vulgarity of the cliché-ridden plots' (cited in Gledhill 1987: 7). In a series of films that were both huge commercial successes and surreptitious social critiques, Sirk was to bring to bear his experience in avant-garde German theatre, his philosophical interests, concerns as a left-wing intellectual and his aesthetic sensibilities as an art historian.²

Through the use of complex and symbolic *mise-en-scène*, irony and pathos and alienation devices borrowed from Brecht, Sirk is now widely regarded as using the conventions of Hollywood cinema to produce critiques of post-war American society.

Sirk and Film Studies

Sirk's critical reception has changed considerably over the years and has resulted in the radical re-evaluation of a relatively obscure contract director, elevating his position to one of the most influential and subversive Hollywood filmmakers of the post-war years. The twists and turns in Sirk's status within the academy are discussed in detail in Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning* (1994) and demonstrate very vividly the developments and concerns of Film Studies as an academic discipline during the period of Sirk's 'rediscovery' by the academy. It is inaccurate to suggest that Sirk was completely overlooked prior to his critical re-evaluation by the film theorists of the early 1970s, however. The *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, especially Francois Truffaut, had argued for Sirk's status as an auteur during the late 1950s and several articles during this period point to his singular cinematic style. In 1968 Andrew Sarris identified Sirk as belonging to the second line of auteurs. Though lacking, in Sarris' opinion, a consistently unified stylistic vision, Sirk was nonetheless sufficiently important to

be included in his pantheon of Hollywood directors listed in *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. A year or so later Jon Halliday tracked down the then retired Sirk and conducted a lengthy interview that was to form the basis of the book *Sirk on Sirk* in 1971. The early, auteurist interest in Sirk had revealed distinctive stylistic techniques in several of his films, duly assisted by his own clear conversancy with film theory and ability to discuss his work in theoretical and reflective terms. Fred Camper's essay 'The Films of Douglas Sirk', published in 1971 in a special edition of *Screen* devoted to Sirk is a good example here. Camper himself notes that, 'no critic has been as perceptive as Sirk himself in articulating some of these themes' (1971: 44). Camper's essay focuses on the aesthetic and narrative patterns in a wide range of films directed by Sirk during his period in Hollywood including *All I Desire*, *Has Anyone Seen My Gal?* and *A Time to Love and a Time to Die*, as well as the family melodramas *Written on the Wind* and *All That Heaven Allows* that he was to become best known for. However, Klinger notes that as film theory developed during the 1970s and shifted from auteur theory to the study of genre, questions of ideology and representation (and the ideological function of cinema) became ever more important. At this point a sense of a director notable for a diverse range of films diminishes as interest was to be focused on a very specific group of films that Sirk made for Universal, often in collaboration with the producer Ross Hunter in the period between 1954 and 1959. The films in question are primarily domestic family dramas, set in contemporary 1950s America often, though not always, featuring female protagonists.

1950s post-war American society was rather more complicated and contradictory than standard accounts would suggest. Paul Willemen, for example, suggests that Sirk's films reveal a smug and self-satisfied bourgeois worldview which Sirk, the social critic, intends to undermine. In fact, as we noted in chapter one, many films from this period open themselves up to a symptomatic reading and reveal unease and neurosis hidden beneath the surface of respectable society. The end of the Second World War saw a period of rapid economic and industrial development in the US and an increased urban population in the growing suburbs of major cities. The relative independence enjoyed by women in the war years needed to be balanced against the employment needs of men returning home and women were encouraged to return to their more traditional roles as wives and mothers. Women (and teenagers) were consumer groups considered essential to the economic growth of American society during this period and Hollywood cinema tended to reflect this, selling consumerist dreams

of luxury and glamour to audiences. This was also a period of political uncertainty with the emergence of the Eastern Bloc and the corresponding American fear of communist totalitarianism. Additionally, the influence of the *Kinsey Report on Human Sexuality* and a growing popular familiarity with Freudianism, resulted in a culture which, paradoxically, celebrated the values of respectable family life and clean living at the same time as a growing awareness of the limitations of these ideals became more accessible to many. The film industry itself was far from immune to the rapid pace of change in post-war America and found itself in the position of competing for audience share with the increasingly popular medium of television. The industries' response to this was firstly to utilise new technological developments such as widescreen and colour more extensively as well as exploiting gimmicks such as 3D and secondly to target production at key demographic groupings such as women and teenagers who were identified as key consumers.³ During the 1950s the production code continued to be enforced even though it was becoming increasingly anachronistic. Paradoxically however, even whilst the code limited what could be depicted or said in a film it also facilitated the emergence of a sophisticated film language that sought, in part at least, to circumvent the restrictions of the code. As Thomas Elsaesser notes,

the domestic melodrama in colour and widescreen, as it appeared in the 1940s and 1950s is perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of signification that the American cinema has ever produced. (1972: 10)

It is in this context that we should understand the films that are now regarded collectively as family melodramas and in particular the small selection of Douglas Sirk's films that have been singled out for particular critical attention. It was to be this small section of Sirk's directorial career, incorporating no more than five films made towards the end of his career in Hollywood that were to form the basis of his critical reputation both as an auteur and also as the supreme practitioner of the subversive and therefore progressive Hollywood melodrama.

Magnificent Obsession

Sirk's first melodrama for Universal was to become an unprecedented success and was to propel Rock Hudson, hitherto a minor movie actor, into Hollywood's A list. Characteristically for Sirk's Hollywood films the story

line of *Magnificent Obsession* is extremely implausible and is a remake of John Stahl's 1935 original film of the same name. A reckless playboy, Bob Merrick (Hudson), is the inadvertent cause of a philanthropist Doctor's death. His widow, Helen Phillips (Jane Wyman), is subsequently blinded after a car accident caused by her refusal to accept Bob's apologies. Merrick, racked by guilt, first befriends and then falls in love with the now blinded Helen who is oblivious to his real identity and escorts her around the world in her search for a surgeon who can restore her sight. After a trip to Vienna where she is finally told that her situation is hopeless, Helen disappears without trace. The distraught Bob trains to become a surgeon in an attempt to undo the trail of destruction and unhappiness his recklessness has caused. Helen returns to town unexpectedly and Bob realises that he is the only person qualified to perform the pioneering surgery that can save both Helen's life and her sight.

In his interview with Jon Halliday, Sirk was to identify the critical attitude that he adopted to the script that would characterise his subversive treatment of the sentimental material he was dealing with:

You have to do your utmost to hate it – and to love it. My immediate reaction to *Magnificent Obsession* was bewilderment and discouragement. But still I was attracted by something irrational in it. Something mad, in a way – well obsessed, because this is a damned crazy story if ever there was one. (1997: 109)

All That Heaven Allows

Originally conceived in some haste to capitalise on the huge commercial success of *Magnificent Obsession*, the film reunites Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman. *All That Heaven Allows* is widely considered to be the film in which Sirk is first able to fully realise the potential for social critique afforded by what some critics have seen as the banal scripts offered to him by Universal. The claim that Sirk deploys Brechtian techniques in his mainstream Hollywood output is also frequently evidenced by reference to this film. The film was an immense inspiration to the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder who used it as the basis for his own *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973). *All That Heaven Allows* is the story of a wealthy suburban widow Cary Scott (Wyman) who develops a relationship with her gardener, a working class, and younger, freethinking non-conformist, Ron Kirby, played by Rock Hudson. The relationship between the two becomes the focus of local gossip amongst Cary's small-minded neighbours. It is, however, Cary's two



FIGURE 4 Mitch and Marylee in *Written on the Wind*

grown-up children who most object to her plans for marriage and they present their mother with an ultimatum: either she gives up her younger lover or lose her children. The anguished Cary chooses respectability rather than love and gives up Ron. The futility of this act of self sacrifice is revealed when her children announce that they are both leaving home anyway and that Cary will need to sell the family home and be left alone. A freak accident (Ron falling from a snowy cliff and becoming gravely ill) reunites the couple and Cary realising the error of her ways, is left nursing the incapacitated Ron back to health.

Written on the Wind

In Sirk's words: 'It was a piece of social criticism, of the rich and the spoiled and of the American family' (1997: 130). *Written on the Wind*, an expose into the corrupting influences of wealth and privilege, was to form the blueprint for subsequent family melodramas such as Mark Robson's *Peyton Place* (1957) as well as a generation of prime-time television soap operas such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *The Colbys* and *Falcon Crest*. Told in flashback, the film recounts the events that result in the tragic death of Kyle Hadley (Robert Stack), alcoholic and impotent heir to the Hadley oil empire. The story concerns the friendship between the wealthy Kyle and

his lifelong friend Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson), who form a love triangle with Kyle's new bride, Lucy (Lauren Bacall). An added complication to this already inflammatory constellation of characters is introduced by Kyle's sister, Marylee (Dorothy Malone). Marylee is in love with Mitch, though these sentiments are unrequited, and substitutes her feelings for Mitch through illicit encounters with local men. Whilst Kyle is impotent and drowns his frustrations in drink, Marylee is presented as a nymphomaniac who brings her family's name into disrepute. She is ultimately the inadvertent cause of her father's demise, who literally dies with shame as a result of her actions. When Kyle discovers that his wife is pregnant, he presumes that Mitch is the father and in a drunken rage shoots himself. Marylee vindictively accuses Mitch of murdering her brother and the true sequence of events are not revealed until a dramatic court scene. The film has a peculiarly ambiguous ending with Lucy and Mitch driving away from the Hadley mansion and Marylee, stripped of her sexual independence, dressed in a conservative suit, caressing an unmistakably phallic model of an oil pump, beneath a portrait of her dead father. As Sirk notes,

The end of *Written on the Wind* is highly significant as far as this is concerned: Malone has lost everything. I have put up a sign there indicating this – Malone, alone, sitting there, hugging that god-damned oil well, having nothing. The oil well which is, I think, a rather frightening symbol of American society. (1997: 133)

The Tarnished Angels

The least typical of Sirk's films during this period, *The Tarnished Angels* reunites the love triangle of *Written on the Wind*, Rock Hudson, Dorothy Malone and Robert Stack in an adaptation of William Faulkner's novel *Pylon*. Filmed in black and white rather than the luxurious, widescreen Technicolor of Sirk's other Universal melodramas, the film is set in depression-era America where a celebrated fighter pilot Roger Schumann has been reduced to performing as a daredevil pilot to make ends meet and support himself and his wife Laverne (Malone). Hudson plays a reporter, Burke Devlin who becomes fascinated by the lives of the couple and increasingly romantically interested in Laverne. The film very vividly illustrates Sirk's interest in failure as a narrative theme, especially in the characterisation of the doomed fighter pilot Schumann who crashes his plane towards the end of the film. In Sirk's observation, Schumann is 'seeking his identity, a man standing on very uncertain ground. The ground doesn't give him any

security, he is reaching for a certainty in the air – a crazy idea, and a grand one, I think' (1997: 137). The difference in inflection in Sirk's own view of the source material for *The Tarnished Angels* (he describes it as 'grand') is interesting here and is an issue that we will return to later. The film however is perhaps best known as Barbara Klinger notes for a scene where 'Laverne parachutes from a plane as her dress blows up and conveniently reveals her lower torso for an extended period of time' (1993: 151).

Imitation of Life

Sirk's final film for Universal (and his last film in Hollywood) is also perhaps his most bitter, pessimistic and overt comment on American society and values. Once again the film is a remake of an earlier film by John Stahl.⁴ The film concerns itself with the tribulations of two single mothers – one white, Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), and one black, Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), and their two daughters Susie and Sarah Jane (played by Sandra Dee and Susan Kohner respectively). Lora is a struggling actress and Annie becomes her maid and constant companion. The story charts the rags to riches rise of Lora's character along with the development of the daughters of the two women. Whilst Lora's daughter, Susie, has a life representing many young girls' dreams, Annie's daughter, Sarah Jane, is deeply troubled and refuses to accept her subordinate status as both poor and black. Sarah Jane becomes increasingly rebellious and tries to 'pass for white'. When this strategy is no longer feasible she rejects her mother and the security of Lora's luxurious home and becomes a showgirl in a nightclub. Her mother Annie quickly falls gravely ill and decides that she must find Sarah Jane in order to reconcile their differences. Finding Sarah Jane dancing in a nightclub, Annie pleads with her daughter in perhaps the most affecting and genuinely moving moment in any of Sirk's films. Sarah Jane, however, refuses to accept her mother's pleas and Annie returns home and dies. This sets the scene for one of the most memorable and best-known sequences in any of Sirk's films: Annie's funeral. A lavishly mounted and extraordinarily extravagant affair, attended by a guest list of extras including famed Hollywood producers, agents, actors and directors, the funeral is centred on a performance by the renowned gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. The scene suggests that it is only in death that Annie can achieve the level of status and recognition that Lora Meredith, her white mistress, has enjoyed in life. The film ends with Sarah Jane's appearance at the funeral, literally throwing herself on her dead mother's coffin. Sirk observed that the character of Sarah Jane was his specific interest in the film:

The only interesting thing is the Negro angle: the Negro girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family, etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville. The imitation of life is not the real life. Lana Turner's life is a very cheap imitation. The girl (Susan Kohner) is choosing the imitation of life instead of being a Negro. The picture is a piece of social criticism – of both black and white. You can't escape what you are. (1997: 148)

The progressive Sirk

During the 1970s Sirk's status and significance was to be substantially elevated. No longer regarded as merely a skilled manipulator of the poetic or stylistic potential of cinematic aesthetics, increasingly he was to be identified as a director who deployed cinematic *mise-en-scène* in a strategic fashion to subvert the apparent meanings of a film and to critique bourgeois ideology. During the early to mid-1970s a surprising reversal seems to take place in the ways in which Sirk's films are understood. Working within the constraints of what were seen as the deeply reactionary narrative and generic conventions of the woman's film and the 'weepie', Sirk is now regarded as a progressive auteur using the conservative form of the romance to his own subversive ends.

The critical re-evaluation of Sirk's films, which commenced in the late 1960s, was to continue throughout the early years of the 1970s. As already observed in chapter one, Elsaesser had established the terms of reference for the discussion of melodrama in the Hollywood cinema in the 1950s in generic and stylistic terms, and his position was to be adopted by a succession of critics during the early 1970s, most notably, Fred Camper, Laura Mulvey and Paul Willemen. Willemen in particular is especially significant as he was to identify some of the key features of Sirk's filmic style that were to become central to the academic account of his significance. Equally importantly Willemen, like many of his contemporaries, was interested in the techniques of Bertolt Brecht and argued that there were clear parallels in the filmic strategies that Sirk deployed in this respect.

Brecht was perhaps the most important German dramatist of the twentieth century and his ideas have become central to our understanding of what experimental theatre is. As a politically motivated dramatist, Brecht rejected the dominant mode of realism in contemporary theatre.

He believed that theatre had the potential to deal with the major themes of human existence and should be concerned with enlightening an audience and motivating political change; for Brecht drama should be didactic.⁵ The dramatic strategy adopted to realise this goal was the deployment of what we now call alienation or distanciation. Brecht himself described it as the 'alienation effect' or 'A effect'. Seeing the realism of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre as intrinsically bourgeois, he proposed a new 'realistic' form of theatre that would enlighten audiences to the reality of the conditions of their existence and therefore motivate political and social change. Brecht was to become a figure of renewed interest for critics in the early 1970s because of these techniques and his stylistic challenge to dominant ideology; he indicates the direction that a progressive drama would take and for scholars searching for the 'progressive text' therefore Brechtian techniques provide evidence of progressive status.

Sirk's background in theatre played a part in the identification of Brechtian techniques in his films. He had directed Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* in Berlin in 1929, for example, and it was assumed therefore that he was not just familiar but also sympathetic to the concerns of Brecht's drama. In 1971 Willemen's essay 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk' positions Sirk as emerging from and belonging to the European artistic avant-garde. He sees Sirk as producing cinema that questions the illusion of reality that characterises the filmic strategies of the Classical Hollywood cinema. Willemen identifies Sirk's aesthetic style as being especially significant and suggests that it is inspired by artistic movements, most notably German expressionism and symbolism, though he is careful to qualify this claim:

for Sirk, such prescriptions represent a source of inspiration and become no more than echoes, detectable in his magnification of emotionality, his use of pathos, choreography and music, reverberating within the mirror-hidden walls of a Sirkian décor. (1971: 64)

Later in the essay Willemen identifies some of the techniques and devices deployed by Sirk that for subsequent critics were to become characteristic of his filmic style. He notes Sirk's deliberate use of visual symbols as representatives of characters, the use of long shots, giving the sets a stage-like impression, the use of extravagant colour schemes and choreography as 'a direct expression of character' (1971: 65). He also notes the self-conscious use of cliché in Sirk's films, suggesting that the stylisation of Sirk's extravagant *mise-en-scène* and his manipulation of the conven-

tions of exaggerated emotion and sentiment so evident in the Universal melodramas, reaches the point of parody: 'a deer and a Christmas tree are symbols for nature; a mink coat stands for success; a red-lit cabaret stand for depravity; a red dress and fast cars stand for loose living and irresponsibility' (1971: 66). Willemen notes that this parodic style should not be regarded as comedic but rather as a device that is designed to create a distance between the text and the critical audience for Sirk's films. Importantly here Willemen also notes that these self-conscious techniques were not necessarily evident to the audience for which these films were intended.

On the contrary, he mercilessly implicates the audience in the action. (Ample proof of this can be found in the audience's near hysterical reactions to his films involving abundant tears and/or self-protective laughter.) Such reactions seem to indicate that the distance Sirk is referring to is not necessarily perceived by the audience. (1971: 64)

In the essay 'Towards and Analysis of the Sirkian System', Willemen identifies more specifically the similarities between the techniques used by Brecht in the theatre and those used by Sirk in his Universal pictures. In particular he discusses Brecht's early technique known as the *boomerang effect*:

Brecht presented the theatre public with the image of life that it wanted to see on the stage, but in order to denounce the unreality of such an image, to denounce its ideological character. (1972: 128)

Willemen argues that a similar effect is achieved in Sirk's 1950s melodramas in which 'he depicted a society which appeared to be strong and healthy, but which in fact was exhausted and torn apart by collective neuroses' (1972: 133). In Halliday's interview Sirk was to note that he self-consciously used Brechtian techniques in his choice of film titles:

Take *All That Heaven Allows*: I just put this title there like a cup of tea, following Brecht's recipe. The studio loved this title, they thought it meant that you could have everything you wanted. I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I'm concerned, heaven is stingy. (1997: 140)

The idea that Sirk's films reveal hidden societal tensions was to become central to critical appraisal of his oeuvre and wider discussion of the cinema of 1950s Hollywood more generally which has subsequently been regarded as revealing the symptoms of an underlying crisis in post-war American society.

Willemen notes in his essay that Sirk's films were widely misunderstood when they were first released and points to Sirk's own commentary on the matter in which he suggests that the ironic nature of his many of his films was frequently lost on industry professionals and audiences alike. Certainly contemporary film reviews were almost uniformly critical. Reviewers tended to regard Sirk's films as either stark examples of failed naturalism due to their lavish sets, artificial lighting and garish colours or as indicators of Hollywood's inability to deal with complex issues with sensitivity, preferring instead to simplify and sentimentalise. As Barbara Klinger notes, the extravagant *mise-en-scène* and stylisation of Sirk's melodramas were singled out for particular criticism:

Written of the Wind's décor was 'luxurious and the colour is conspicuously strong, even though it gets no closer to Texas – either geographically or in spirit – than a few locations near Hollywood'. (1994: 78)

Similarly *Imitation of Life* was condemned for 'its lavish colour production, its tear-jerking qualities, and the irresistible circumstance that Lana Turner wears more than one million dollars worth of jewellery and a wardrobe of equal opulence and bad taste' (1994: 79). Such contemporary reviews are far removed from the positions adopted by intellectuals like Willemen during the early 1970s for whom Sirk's films become exemplars of modernist anti-naturalism, full of examples of Brechtian-inspired distancing techniques; films that, it was argued, are in fact rich with ironic subtexts and subversive critiques of bourgeois ideology.

In his essay Willemen moves on to identify five key aspects that epitomise Sirk's filmic style drawing on a wider number of films than those that would later be generally regarded as the canonical texts. Firstly, Willemen points out that what he describes as 'displacements and discontinuities in plot construction' (1972: 131) recur in Sirk's films. He refers here to Sirk's strategy of creating supporting characters in films that have a greater narrative significance than the lead protagonists. Kyle and Marylee Hadley in *Written on the Wind*, for example, are revealed as the 'hidden' leads of the

2 film and likewise Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*. Secondly, he notes 'contradictions in characterisation' (ibid.) illustrated by Kyle Hadley in *Written on the Wind* and by Taza in *Taza, Son of Cochise*. A clearer example is provided by Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life*, a split character in the classic Sirkian sense; neither entirely black nor white, she struggles to resist pressures to conform to society's expectations of her within the film, ultimately by rejecting her mother and the security of her home. Thirdly, Willemen identifies Sirk's use of ironic framing and camera positioning. Using examples from *All That Heaven Allows*, he notes that shot constructions make explicit the rift between Cary Scott and her two children. As we will observe later in this chapter, there are abundant examples of this technique in Sirk's films. Fourthly, he notes 'formal negations of ideological notions inherent in the script' (ibid.). This rather confusing expression refers to Sirk's use of cliché and parody, devices that undermine the apparently reactionary storylines that Sirk consistently subverted in his melodramas in order to distance audiences from the ideologies embedded in the narratives. Willemen illustrates this by using the example of the banal metaphorical comparison of spirituality to a domestic electricity supply used in *Magnificent Obsession*. Finally, he notes the ironic use of camera movement arguing that long and mid-shots are frequently used in Sirk's films to create a sense of distance, giving the action, as he had noted previously, a theatrical quality. He notes, however, that the camera is also constantly mobile and that this simultaneously emotionally engages the audience.

Sirkian style

Drawing together the stylistic features of Sirk's melodramas identified by a wide range of theorists from Sirk himself to Elsaesser, Willemen, Mulvey, Camper, Truffaut and Schatz it is possible to identify a range of thematic and narrative patterns that collectively become emblematic of the Sirkian style. Similar techniques can be seen employed by several of Sirk's contemporaries such as Nicholas Ray, Billy Wilder and Vincente Minnelli though these patterns are most apparent in Sirk's films. We shall consider briefly these here.

In much of Sirk's cinema long- and mid-shots are far more regularly used than close-ups. This is especially apparent in both *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life*. The use of long-shots creates a very visible distance between the audience and the action on the screen giving the films a very theatrical quality. Long-shots additionally enable the possibility of

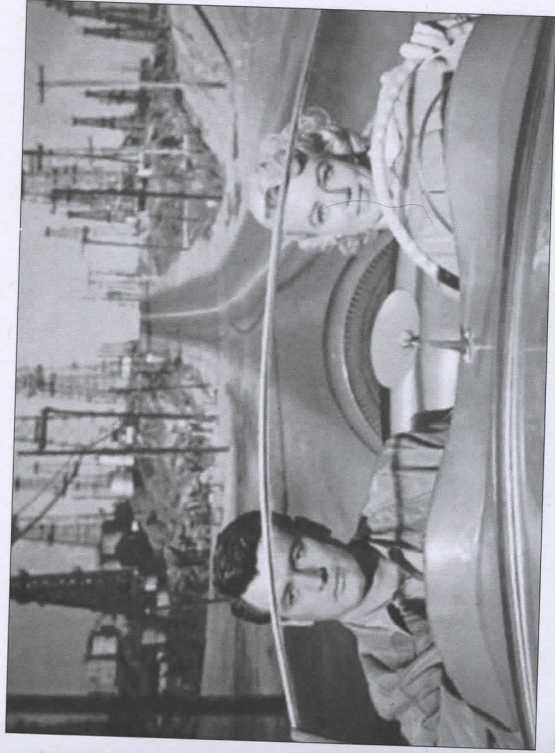


FIGURE 5 Emotional distance represented visually in *Written on the Wind*

elaborately structured visual compositions within the frame giving the audience the opportunity to see several characters at the same time.

Widescreen, deep-focus photography of the kind used by Sirk in almost all of his most celebrated melodramas makes it possible to illustrate the emotional distance between characters in physical terms and this is a technique that he was to take full advantage of. In *Written on the Wind* for example, Marylee professes her unrequited love for Mitch whilst driving a flashy red sports car. The emotional rift between the two characters and Mitch's lack of sexual interest in Marylee who he claims to love 'like a brother' is illustrated by a mid-shot of the couple through the windshield of the car in which both characters seem to be pushed to either edge of the frame.

The setting for Sirk's melodramas is usually the affluent middle-class American home, a setting in which décor plays a part as important as the characters in carrying meaning. In Elsaesser's words, 'the setting of the family melodrama almost by definition is the middle-class home, filled with objects ... that becomes increasingly suffocating' (1987: 61). In Sirk's films the décor and objects that surround characters seem overburdened with meaning and significance, everything in the frame means something giving the images that Sirk constructs at points a rather stifling impression. In *All That Heaven Allows*, discussed in greater detail in his essay, Cary is

frequently depicted surrounded by meaning-laden objects in her luxurious domestic environment.

A further common feature are mirrors, used as a significant feature of the *mise-en-scène* in Sirk's films with some degree of regularity. Sirk suggested that mirrors were of interest because they produce an image that seems to represent the person looking into the mirror when in fact what they see is their exact opposite. In Sirk's films we see characters looking in mirrors when they are conforming to society's rules, when they are playing a role, when they are deluding themselves. Mirrors, then, represent both illusion and delusion in his films, and were to become such an emblematic device in Sirk's melodramas that examples are almost too numerous to mention. One of the most vivid cases, however, occurs towards the end of *Imitation of Life* when the black housekeeper, Annie, realising that her death is imminent, tries to forge a final reconciliation with her wayward daughter Sarah Jane who tries to 'pass for white' as a showgirl. Annie pleads with her furious daughter in the dressing room of a nightclub trying to encourage her to accept her identity as black and her mother's love. Sarah Jane is completely unaware of Annie's illness and the cruelty of her rejection of her mother gives the scene an extraordinary emotional power. The emotional crescendo of the scene has Sarah Jane screaming, 'I'm white, I'm white' whilst her distraught face, and that of her mother's, is caught in the reflection of the dressing room mirror.

Another visual device used by Sirk has become known as 'frames within frames'. Characters are often seen contained within mirror frames, doorways, windows, pictures frames and decorative screens. These devices once again suggest that characters are isolated or confined in their lonely worlds, or oppressed by their environments. Elsaesser illustrates this point with an example from *Written on the Wind*:

Robert Stack in *Written on the Wind*, standing by the window he has just opened to get some fresh air into an extremely heavy family atmosphere, hears of Lauren Bacall expecting a baby. His misery becomes eloquent by the way he squeezes himself into the frame of the half-open window, every word his wife says to him bringing torment to his lacerated soul and racked body. (1987: 59)

Colour is used both symbolically and expressively in Sirk's films. The relatively new technology of the Technicolor process enabled filmmakers to fully realise the expressive potential of colour in film in the 1950s. The

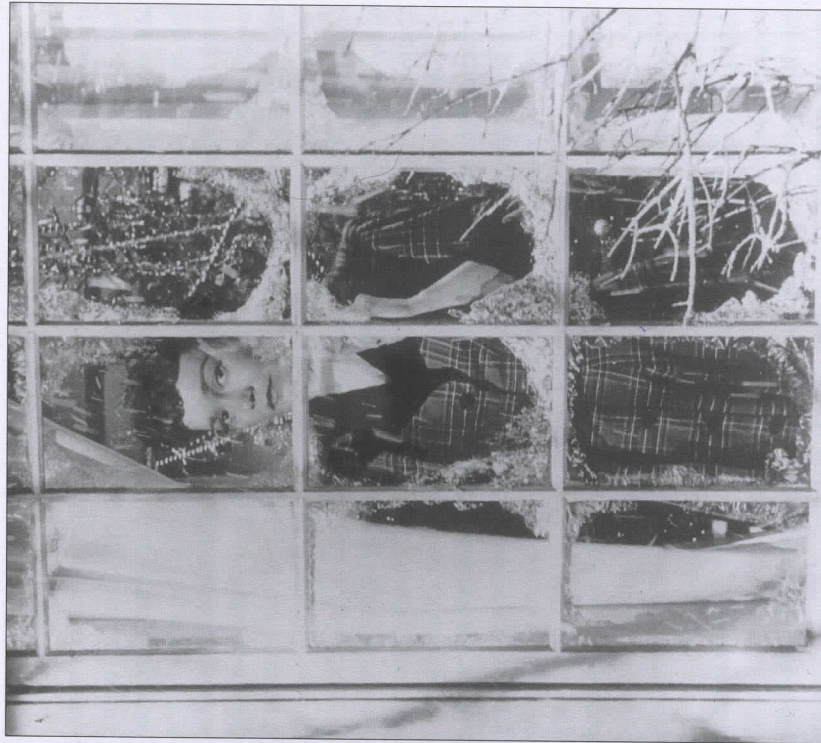


FIGURE 6 Cary, confined by convention and the window frame in *All That Heaven Allows*

harsh, garish colours of *Written on the Wind* for example were consciously chosen to emphasise the surface of objects and the centrality of materialism to the film. Marylee's red sports car, the red telephone and vivid red lilies in her bedroom all symbolise her sexual aggression. Similarly in *Interlude* one of Sirk's less well-known melodramas in which June Allyson plays Helen Banning, a young American secretary who falls in love with a charismatic and married orchestral conductor, Antonio Fischer (played by Rossano Brazzi), the psychological illness of Brazzi's wife, Reni Fischer, is made explicit by the oppressively decadent colour schemes of the music room in which she is first seen in the shadowy reflection created by the polished surface of a grand piano.

Like colour, lighting is used expressively in Sirk's films. Through the use of shadows and coloured filters, extremely artificial lighting effects are achieved that represent the mood of a scene or a character rather than aiming for more naturalistic lighting. Marylee's nighttime rendezvous with Mitch in *Written on the Wind* is set against a vivid cobalt blue backlight that symbolises the cold reception that she is receiving and also the artifice of her attempts at seduction. In *Magnificent Obsession* the scenes set in Austria, during which Helen seeks medical help to restore her sight, are shot almost entirely as nighttime, both expressing the character's increasing despair and symbolising her loss of sight. In a scene from *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary has a tearful conversation with her daughter Kay who has been the subject of ridicule as a result of her mother's relationship with the gardener Ron Kirby. The scene takes place in Kay's bedroom which is dominated by a circular oriel window through which an extremely unnaturalistic, rainbow light shines on the couple. This lighting effect is reminiscent of the effect of a stained-glass window and creates an expressionistic metaphor for the conversation and its implications. As Cary listens to her tearful daughter she realises that she must end her relationship with Ron. The lighting effect here symbolises Cary's 'revelation' that her love for Ron is doomed.

Central to Sirk's aesthetic vision, however, is irony and he is most consciously recognised for his use of an ironic *mise-en-scène*. The settings, décor, lighting, music and camera framing of Sirk's films often seem to contradict or place an alternative emphasis on what is taking place within the narrative. In simple terms, the story or the characters seem to be saying one thing and the *mise-en-scène* seems to be saying something else and drawing our attention to the irony of the character's delusions. Irony, then, becomes a central component of Sirk's status as a progressive or subversive auteur; he appropriates the conventions of the Hollywood romance and through the deployment of an ironic *mise-en-scène* uses a popular form of cinema as a tool for social critique.

Sirk's ironic *mise-en-scène* is perhaps best illustrated through his self-conscious use of cliché. Sirk frequently deploys clichéd imagery and scenarios to seemingly draw attention to their very artificiality. For Sirk, this is yet another Brechtian device, reminding an audience, sensitive to such ironising techniques, that they were witnessing a fiction. In *All That Heaven Allows* for example, Sirk uses clichéd symbols of nature to the point that they approach parody. Ron Kirby is seen feeding a tamed deer, which also appears in the miraculously artificial panorama revealed when the nurse

pulls back the shutters at the Old Mill at the end of the film. The very artifice of this final fantasy of nature calls into question the happy resolution that the narrative of the film seems to suggest.

Narrative themes

It has often been said that Sirk, as a contract director, was often given clichéd and derivative material to work with that he had no control over. Thomas Schatz, for example, characterizes Sirk's Hollywood career:

Sirk's films were assigned to him by studio bosses and he retired just at the point when he might have taken charge. Conceivably, though, personal control over his projects might well have undermined Sirk's particular talents. He was one of those rare directors who thrived on adversity, whose best work was done with outrageous scripts and dehumanising working conditions. (1981: 246-7)

It is notable that the films aimed at a primarily female audience (*All That Heaven Allows*, *Imitation of Life* and *Magnificent Obsession*) or those based on popular women's fiction (the work of Fanny Hurst for example) are singled out for particular criticism. Sirk himself demonstrates distaste for this kind of source material verging on contempt for both the scripts and the audiences for such films, describing them as 'trash' and 'crazy'. Likewise, critics like Willemsen, Halliday and Schatz also decry the supposedly 'banal' or 'sentimental' nature of material aimed at women, priviledging a critical reading position afforded by familiarity with the supposedly subversive intentions of Sirk whilst regarding an uncritical, empathetic, response to these films as inferior. By contrast, Sirk speaks of the 'grand' themes of failure in films such as *The Tarnished Angels* and *Written on the Wind* both of which feature male protagonists. In both the critical accounts and first hand testimony of Sirk there is a very apparent failure to either acknowledge or engage seriously with the pleasures or political significances of the emotional responses that Sirk's most popular films so clearly provoke in audiences. This is a problem surrounding the discussion of melodrama that Linda Williams was to later acknowledge and is a subject that we will return to in chapter three.

In actual fact as Universal's 'star' director, Sirk was often able to rework scripts, in his own words 'bending' the narrative to incorporate his own specific interests:

I became a kind of house director of Universal. Conditions were not perfect, but when I complained about a story, they would say to me, 'If you can get a star, great; you can have more money and pick a better story.' But at least I was allowed to work on the material – so that I restructured, to some extent, some of the rather impossible scripts of the films I had to direct. (1997: 97)

Through his revisions and rewrites of scripts a succession of distinctive themes start to emerge in the Universal melodramas, and we shall consider some of these here.

One consistent thread is blindness. As Sirk notes:

I have always been intrigued by the problems of blindness ... What I think would be extremely interesting here would be to try and confront problems of this kind via a medium – the cinema – which itself is only concerned with things seen. It is this contrast between a world where words have only a limited importance and another world where they are nearly everything that inspires my passionate interest. (1997: 111)



FIGURE 7 Reformed playboy Bob Merrick's bedside vigil in *Magnificent Obsession*

Blindness has been identified by both Jon Halliday and Fred Camper as a recurrent theme in Sirk's films. It is used, either literally, as in *Magnificent Obsession* where Helen is accidentally blinded or, more often, in a metaphorical sense. Frequently Sirk's films deal with characters who seem oblivious to their isolated or helpless conditions and cannot see the possibility of change. In *All That Heaven Allows* for example, Cary gives up Ron in ignorance of the fact that her children no longer need her and that her act of motherly self-sacrifice will inevitably result in her own isolation.

Circularity and hopelessness are also common narrative motifs in Sirk's melodramas; characters seem to repeat the same mistakes, not only oblivious to these patterns, but also seemingly unable to escape their conditions. Sirk noted an interest in failure and hopelessness that inspired the production of both *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels*: 'Failure and being blocked is indeed one of the few themes which interests me passionately. Success is not interesting to me' (1997: 133). The implicit suggestion in a film such as *Imitation of Life*, for example, being that there is no escape from prejudice and social control. Annie the black house-keeper dies without any reconciliation with her daughter. This sense of fatalistic circularity demonstrated in the narrative means that Sirk's films are often – ironically, given their superficially 'happy' endings – very pessimistic in their outlook.

An important element of Sirk's narrative thematics is the so-called *deus ex machina*, a term he uses in his interview with Jon Halliday. The term often has derogatory connotations akin to those associated with 'divine intervention' and originates in the Classical Greek theatre referring to the practice where actors playing gods would be attached to a winch-like machine and suspended over the action towards the end of a play. In these circumstances the gods would appear to intervene to resolve difficult situations and bring the play to a satisfactory conclusion. In modern usage the term refers to the use of contrived coincidences and circumstances that occur to resolve a narrative. In Sirk's melodramas there are many such instances. *Magnificent Obsession*, for example, has a narrative that is based around a sequence of improbable events; Bob Merrick inadvertently is the cause of the death of Helen's fiancée, then is the cause of her blindness, and finally, through training to become a pioneering surgeon, saves both her sight and her life. Similarly in *All That Heaven Allows* Ron's accident, caused in part due to Cary's sudden arrival at the Old Mill, is also the catalyst for their reunion. The endings of Sirk's melodramas, due in part to the contrivances of the *deus ex machina* resolutions, often feel rather artificial, and

a recurring feature in the films is the 'false happy ending'. In some cases, as in *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*, the seemingly happy endings feel rather unsatisfactory and give the impression that they have been tacked on through necessity rather than design. Sirk acknowledged the nature of these, so-called, happy endings: 'you've got to have a happy end even in the most goddam awful situations' (1997: 152) and argued that they were there in part at least due to the requirements of the studio and the restrictions imposed as a result of the production code: 'Of course, I had to go by the rules, avoid experiments, stick to family fare, have "happy endings" and so on' (1997: 97). However, given these restrictions Sirk still suggested that the happy endings of his melodramas were self-consciously artificial, that he was in fact deliberately creating false happy endings that draw ironic attention to the tensions and inconsistencies within the conventionalised storylines of his films: 'you don't believe the happy ending and you're not really supposed to' (1997: 151).

Case study: *All That Heaven Allows*

As already noted, *All That Heaven Allows* was produced, primarily, to capitalise on the phenomenal success of *Magnificent Obsession*, featuring the earlier film's two leads, the established star Jane Wyman and the emerging star Rock Hudson. Given the conditions of its production and also the fact that Sirk himself, when interviewed by Jon Halliday, could scarcely remember the film at all, it is rather ironic that *All That Heaven Allows* has become something of a touchstone not just for academics concerned with Sirk's style but also for subsequent filmmakers inspired by Sirk's techniques. The narrative of the film is deceptively simple, whilst at an aesthetic level it is complexly structured and elaborately stylised. Sirk, commenting on the film during a BBC interview in 1979, described it as containing a lot of his 'handwriting',⁶ notably the elaborate use of mirrors and other visual symbols, as well as his use of literary references in narratives. The film is significant because it elegantly encapsulates many of Sirk's key stylistic techniques and narrative preoccupations and is therefore well suited to a case study for analysis of the Sirkian style and over time has become peculiarly susceptible to a multitude of readings. For our purposes, *All That Heaven Allows* illustrates four key stylistic and narrative issues; subversive social critique, Cary's oppression, the alternative offered by Ron Kirby and the problematic 'happy ending', each of which will be considered in turn.

The film can firstly be regarded as a subversive social critique of suburban American attitudes and prejudices. The opening title sequence locates the film very clearly in affluent, smalltown America with a craning, panoramic, aerial shot of the fictional town of Stoningham, radiating from the steeple of the local church. This opening image is accompanied by Frank Skinner's musical score, which takes the poignant melody of Franz Liszt's piano piece, *Consolation No.3* and reworks it as the basis of a lush symphonic score with the sweeping romantic proportions of Rachmaninov. The musical accompaniment makes the romantic content of the film immediately apparent and it is this musical theme that will be returned to over and over again throughout the film at moments of dramatic significance. Whilst the opening sequence offers the audience an idyllic image of suburban America it is not long before the rather less attractive sides of smalltown life are revealed. From the outset we understand that Cary Scott is recently widowed and has two grown up children at college. Left alone in her large home she is becoming lonely and is invited by her friend Sarah for drinks at the Stoningham Country Club. Although reticent, Cary agrees. The notion of the country club, clichéd shorthand for elitism and privilege, is presented as the social focus of the small community and we quickly realise that it is also a locus of gossip and snobbery epitomised in the character of Mona Plash. The country club is also the location for two dramatic sequences that illustrate the community's attitude towards Cary as a widow, and later, to Cary and Ron as a couple. In the first scene set in the country club, Cary arrives with her escort, the elderly hypochondriac, Harvey (Conrad Nagel). Harvey is single and therefore regarded as a suitable partner for the widowed Cary by both her children and the wider community. Cary's daughter Kay, for example, identifies through reference to Freud that Harvey is an appropriate consort primarily because he offers no sexual threat. At the club, however, Cary's status is questioned by the community, symbolised by Mona. Cary chooses to wear a red evening gown, illustrating her new status as a single and available woman, a choice that has already been commented upon by Ned her son. At the club Mona echoes Ned's unease with the remark 'There's nothing like red for attracting attention.' After this exchange Cary is asked to dance by Howard Hoffer, a married lothario who makes a clumsy and rejected attempt to seduce her. Cary returns home, disillusioned by her unsatisfactory evening only to receive an equally unwelcome doorstep marriage proposal from Harvey, which she also declines. Harvey suggests that companionship is all that Cary and he could possibly want at their time of life. These scenes

illustrate Cary's predicament as a middle-aged widow in her community; either the lecherous and adulterous attentions of a married man or sterile companionship from an elderly single man seem to be the only options available to her.

Rather than choosing between Harvey and Howard, Cary falls in love with her gardener Ron Kirby, a younger man and, equally importantly, a tradesman and therefore her social inferior. This choice, and its consequences, brings the prejudice of both Cary's community and family into stark relief. The second scene at the country club illustrates this vividly. After Cary and Ron have received a frosty reception from Cary's children they visit the club on Sarah's suggestion. As Cary leaves her home with Ron she notices his car (a tradesman's van) and, in a vain hope of preserving some vestige of her respectability, suggests that they arrive in her, rather more suitable, family car. Cary's face, shot in close-up, demonstrates her concern. Ron, seemingly oblivious to her concerns, refuses her request. The scene at the club opens with the members peering through net curtains, excitedly awaiting the arrival of the couple. Long shots are used at this point to distance the audience from the characters. There are no point of view shots at this stage so that the audience is not privileged to the crowd's view through the window which makes their gossip and evident excitement appear simultaneously threatening and ludicrous. Once Cary and Ron arrive at the club they become the focus of the group's voyeuristic attentions. Mona, dressed in emerald green satin, symbolising her jealous character, is once again positioned at the centre of the community's scandalised responses, evidently taking pleasure in Cary's discomfort with cutting remarks drawing attention to Ron's subordinate social status, such as 'Oh my dear he's fascinating. And that tan! I suppose from working outdoors. Though I'm sure he's handy indoors too.' The scene culminates with an aggressive physical encounter between Ron and the drunken Howard who confronts Cary about her previous rejection of him claiming that Cary had put on 'The perfect lady act. Making me apologize. If I'd have known then what I know now the story would have had a different ending.' The aggressive encounter between Ron and Howard only provides more fuel for Mona's gossip: 'Cary and Howard, I'd never have thought it ... Howard as the earthy type, but you seem to attract that don't you, Cary?'

Returning from the ugly scene that confirms Stoningham's prejudice, Cary is finally, and brutally, confronted with the spectre of snobbery in her own home in a scene with her son Ned. Ned accuses his mother of being distracted by 'a handsome set of muscles' and says that she must choose

between Ron and her family. The stylistic elements of the scene illustrate the forces conspiring against Ron and Cary's happiness. The scene takes place in Cary's lounge, which is backlit with a highly artificial blue light. Cary is shot, seemingly trapped, against a decorative screen, cast in shadow, with only her face illuminated by high-key lighting. Ned, shot from behind in shadow, looms threateningly over his mother as he presents his ultimatum.

The first part of the film presents Cary as a victim; oppressed by the rigid codes of her society, by her gender position as widow, wife and mother, by the restrictions placed on her by her family and by her own attitudes. This sense of Cary's oppression is vividly expressed through *mise-en-scène* and especially the domestic environment in which she is most consistently placed. The Scott's home is presented as a luxurious mausoleum for Cary's dead husband. The lounge, for example, is dominated by a huge fireplace, adorned with the deceased Mr Scott's sporting trophies and a similarly vast, marbled mirror covering the whole wall. This sense that Cary's home is a tomb is made explicit in an early conversation between Kay and Cary. Kay tells her mother that she should re-enter the social world and perhaps find a suitable partner. Kay tells her mother, 'I don't subscribe to the old Egyptian custom of walling the wife up along with the rest of the dead husband's possessions ... of course that doesn't happen anymore.' Cary's response to this remark is telling; 'Doesn't it? Well perhaps not in Egypt.'

Cary's oppressed and isolated state is also expressed visually through the repeated use of mirrors and reflections. After her first encounter with Ron, Cary is seen at her dressing table gazing at her own reflection. At this point her children arrive home and are introduced, visually, caught in the mirror's reflection with their mother, emphasising the oppressive nature of their relationship. Later Cary is seen playing the piano in her lounge, the music stand of the piano is replaced by a mirror, reflecting Cary's image back at herself, as she sits in splendid isolation. The Scott residence seems through these aspects of the *mise-en-scène* to be full of cold reflective surfaces that painfully illustrate Cary's isolation and alienation from her environment. The key narrative motif of the television salesman is also introduced to both demonstrate the shallow substitutes for love offered to Cary and to illustrate the trajectory of her relationship with Ron. Embedded in the motif of the television is another ironic and sly subtext; at a historical point at which television was challenging the dominance of cinema, a critique of television – as a substitute for companionship – is introduced.



FIGURE 8 Cary trapped in her 'Egyptian Tomb' in *All That Heaven Allows*

Sara advises Cary to buy a television, a suggestion that she resolutely refuses. Sara's response questions Cary's thinking: 'Why? Because it's supposed to be the last refuge of the lonely woman?' In the same scene Ron, Cary's true alternative to loneliness, arrives unexpectedly to whisk her away to dinner. Later on, in the midst of Ron and Cary's romance, the television salesman arrives, once more, at Cary's door. She turns him away telling him that she is too busy to watch television. The bitter irony of this scene only becomes apparent later, in perhaps the most discussed sequence in the whole film which most fully encapsulates Cary's oppression through the full range of Sirkian filmic devices.

Cary, finally realising her impossible situation, splits up with Ron and returns to her old life as a lonely widow. The sequence opens with a short scene of clichéd Christmas-card sentimentality that illustrates Cary's isolation. Outside snow is falling and children are seen singing carols on a sleigh. These idealised images of Christmas are inter-cut with a mid-shot, zooming slowly into a close-up, of Cary staring through the frosted window-panes of her home on the scene outside. Giving up Ron, Cary's isolation is complete. She can only watch and not participate in this fantasy. This short scene fades into the arrival of Kay and Ned for Christmas. The Scott residence is an image of affluent abundance, dominated by an enormous Christmas tree. Presents are exchanged and Ned leaves the room to prepare his mother's gift. This leaves time for Kay to announce her engagement to her mother. In the scene Kay is dressed in a red dress, echoing

that worn by Cary at the start of the film, with connotations of Christmas, romantic passion and love. Kay's dress is contrasted with her mother's sombre black widow's outfit, speckled at the shoulders with diamante detail, resembling both snow and, perhaps more tellingly, tears. The exchange between Kay and Cary is shot in medium close-up. As Kay's romantic dreams are realised the look on Cary's face and the irony of the vase of red roses in the background, tells the audience that she realises her own dreams have been crushed. Cary's hopes are dashed further when Ned reveals that he will also be leaving and that the time has come to sell the family home. Cary's act of self-sacrifice in order to preserve her family has amounted to nothing, a sentiment that she articulates to her daughter: 'Don't you see, Kay? It's all been so pointless.'

The scene is then set for Ned to present his mother with her Christmas gift, which in the cruellest twist of fate is a television set. The 'last refuge of the lonely woman' that Cary had previously rejected is now presented to her as a substitute for a real life. As the television is wheeled into the room, the camera tracks round and pulls in close on Cary's distraught face caught in the reflective surface of the screen. The emblematic nature of this sequence has been referred to many times previously, its power is such that, as Fred Camper suggests:

In an instant, in one of the most chilling moments in any film, we have a complete representation of the movement of the film as a



FIGURE 9 Cary isolated in her bourgeois home at Christmas in *All That Heaven Allows*



FIGURE 10 Cary, trapped in the reflection of the television screen, in *All That Heaven Allows*

whole, the attempts of the other characters to reduce the apparently more real feelings she has for Ron Kirby to 'drama ... comedy ... life's parade at your fingertips'. The film, taken as whole, can almost be said to pivot around this single shot. The expressive force of every image, the meaning of every surface, is to some extent informed by its presence and implications. (1971: 54)

The gardener, Ron Kirby, offers an alternative to Cary's lonely and isolated existence. Ron's iconography, attitude and milieu are set up in contrast to the convention and conservatism of Cary's home and social life. From the opening scene of the film Ron is symbolically linked to a typically clichéd notion of nature. He is first seen outside tending Cary's trees, dressed in warm, earthy-coloured clothes in contrast to the sombre suit worn by Cary and the artificiality of Sara's appearance. As Thomas Schatz observes:

Sirk's colour-coding of wardrobe indicates how material objects can become laden with thematic significance. This cumulative strategy develops along with the narrative and eventually provides as much information as the words and actions of the principal characters. (1981: 250)

In their opening conversation Ron is presented as enigmatic and distant, not caring for the niceties of the polite conversation that Cary tries to

engage him in. Ron is the archetypical example of Sirk's 'immovable' character, in contrast to the constantly vacillating and uncertain Cary.

Later in the film Cary is introduced to Ron's friends Mick and Alida who have rejected the rat race and live a more 'natural' simple existence. Mick and Alida throw an impromptu party for Cary, inviting their disparate selection of bohemian friends. The revellers, Cary and Ron are seen dancing merrily, though we are reminded that Cary's introduction into this carefree world will be the cause of problems later, as during their festivities we notice, through a window in Mick and Alida's home, a fierce storm is gathering outside. In this scene Sirk makes an explicit link with Ron's 'natural' way of life and the Classical Liberal principles upon which American society was originally based. Cary notices that Mick is reading Thoreau's *Walden*, a nineteenth-century book dealing with the author's retreat from 'civilised' American society that is imbued with a strong social conscience and a passionate belief in individualism epitomised by the famous maxim, 'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.' After reading this, Cary asks Alida if this book is Ron's bible (as it is Mick's); Alida tells her that Ron *lives* this ideal. Ron's lifestyle then is indicated as exemplifying an American ideal that has perhaps been lost and is certainly not evident in Cary's social circle.

Though it is hard for a contemporary audience to comprehend the ways in which *All That Heaven Allows* would have been read by its original intended audience it certainly seems that, as Schatz notes, 'the alternative "lifestyle" shown in *All That Heaven Allows* is scarcely a radical departure from the one that Cary has known' (1981: 251). Mick and Alida, irrespective of their surroundings, are still a conventional married couple, with Alida occupying a domesticated role. Ron, though a younger man, and seemingly free thinking, still adopts a paternalistic attitude towards Cary, forcing her to choose between the life and security that she has known or his 'new' way of living. Cary as widow, wife and mother, is the person who is expected to compromise and make sacrifices. As Alida tells Cary, Ron is absolutely not prepared to compromise. The only real alternative that Ron seems to offer Cary is symbolised by the home that he is building at the old mill. Rather than the cold tomb-like interior of the Scott residence, Ron offers Cary a modishly appointed barn conversion with a huge picture window overlooking a panoramic landscape.

The famous Christmas scene discussed earlier seems to be a point of temporary narrative resolution, though with Cary isolated and separated

from Ron, a far from satisfactory one as it precludes the possibility of a happy ending. In order to achieve a satisfactory conclusion in such seemingly hopeless situations it is necessary to introduce a sequence of events governed by fate and chance rather than the, rather more 'logical', conventions of cause and effect. It is at this point that the film recurses to the *deus ex machina*. Cary visits her doctor complaining of persistent headaches. The doctor, an authority figure frequently positioned as the voice of reason in 1950s melodrama, suggests that Cary's headaches are physical manifestations of stress and that she should reconsider her decision to break up with Ron. Cary decides that the doctor is right and drives to the old mill to speak with Ron. When she arrives he is not at home and she leaves. Ron is in fact hunting with Mick and sees Cary's car from a rocky outcrop. He waves frantically to attract her attention but fails, in the process losing his balance and falling from a cliff, leaving him gravely injured in the snow. Later, Alida tells Cary of Ron's accident and she rushes to his bedside spending a sleepless night waiting for him to awake in the beautiful home he has made for her. When Ron does wake, it is to a snowy scene of picturesque beauty and artifice, seen from the picture window of the mill, and to Cary telling him, 'I've come home.'

A rapid and improbable sequence of events finally unites the couple with Cary seemingly forgetting the previously insurmountable obstacles of social convention and class differences that had separated them. The very fact of this speedy *volte-face* on Cary's part calls the 'happy ending' of the film into question but this resolution is made yet more problematic by the nature of their final union. As both Laura Mulvey (1977/78) and Jackie Byars (1991) have suggested, the ending, with Ron incapacitated and Cary nursing him, suggests not the happy union of the couple but Cary returning to a more socially acceptable role as 'mother' to Ron. As Mulvey notes:

How can a mother of grown children overcome the taboo against her continued sexual activity in 'civilised society', when the object of her desire is reduced to child-like dependence on her ministrations? (1987: 79)

The influence of Sirk

Many film directors have cited Sirk and his distinctive cinematic style as an influence, from Martin Scorsese and Jonathan Demme to John Waters and Pedro Almodovar (discussed in the final chapter). However, the direc-

tor whose work has been most closely linked to that of Douglas Sirk and whose style is most clearly informed by it is that of the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Already an avant-garde theatre director with a film to his name, *Love is Colder Than Death* (1969), Fassbinder saw a retrospective of Sirk's films screened in Berlin and was reputedly so inspired by Sirk's techniques that he drove to Switzerland to speak with the retired director who was to eventually inspire the style and direction that Fassbinder's cinema would take for the rest of his short but prolific career. Combining Sirk's stylistic language with his own experience in experimental theatre Fassbinder would create a distinctive filmic language drawing together Sirkian, Brechtian and Artaudian devices.

Fassbinder was born in provincial Germany into a middle-class family and raised by his mother following her divorce from her husband (a doctor). It is interesting, and not a little ironic, that Fassbinder was brought up in a bourgeois household given his later involvement in political activism and the avant-garde theatre and film work he was to eventually become associated with. There are many parallels between the lives of Sirk and Fassbinder. Like Sirk, Fassbinder was to start his career in the theatre. In Munich in 1967 he joined *Action Theatre* where he was to meet many of the actors that would regularly appear in his later work in film. Jane Shattuc summarises the approach adopted by the *Action Theatre* collective:

This leftist group was communally controlled by approximately seven members. The group adapted canonical works such as *Antigone*, *Leonce and Lena* and *Iphigenie*, investigating their intrinsic value by brazenly substituting for their themes the contemporary German political issues of the 1960s. (1995: 64)

Following Fassbinder's increasing involvement, *Action Theatre* was reorganised under his control as *Anti-Theatre* in 1968. *Anti-Theatre* was identified by the company as socialist theatre and Fassbinder's theatre work, from 1967 to 1974, was inspired and informed by the Marxist political activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This political dimension to his artistic endeavours was to continue to be important throughout his career. In short, Fassbinder was a politically motivated film director.

In 1969 Fassbinder made his first film *Love is Colder Than Death*, inspired by both the French New Wave (and in particular the work of Jean-Luc Godard) and the gangster films of Classical Hollywood. However, following his encounter with Sirk, Fassbinder's cinematic direction was to

change and it is at this point that his mature and distinctive film style began to emerge. Fassbinder was extremely prolific, making 41 films in total over a relatively short period of just over ten years. During this period of frenetic activity, Fassbinder became a notorious figure in the German media due to his unconventional personal life and was recognised internationally as one of the key directors of the so-called 'New German Cinema'.

The majority of textual analyses of Fassbinder's films highlights the connections between the director's techniques and the distancing devices deployed by Brecht. As Shattuc observes:

Fassbinder's films share Brecht's interest in politics and form. In fact, many of them have strong affinities with Brecht's working-class subject matter and his alienating performance style. (1995: 87)

Though there is consistent evidence for these claims it was a connection that Fassbinder himself was to repeatedly refute. As Shattuc later notes Fassbinder's alienation techniques are stylistic rather than intellectual. It is perhaps more accurate to see Fassbinder's use of distancing devices emerging out of the inspiration and adoption of Sirk's techniques, which we have also noted have been related to Brecht. Fassbinder's work, like Sirk's, demonstrates traces of Brechtian techniques rather than a clear and direct relation to them. In fact, as an avant-garde director of the late 1960s, Fassbinder's style is perhaps even more clearly inspired by the techniques of Antonin Artaud, another hugely influential dramatist of the early twentieth century. Like Brecht, Artaud rejected the idea of a realistic theatre in favour of an extremely stylised and mannered form that he called the *Theatre of Cruelty*. Unlike Brecht however, Artaud was interested in exploring psychological states rather than questioning social order. In his *The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto*, written in the mid-1930s, Artaud called for a radical new form of theatre that would 'arouse universal attention' (2001: 68). For Artaud, 'There can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty as the basis of every show' (2001: 77). Artaud lays out the form that this theatre would take, encompassing everything from subject matter to staging, costumes, theatre space and most importantly performance, which in his estimation should contain 'shouts, groans, apparitions, surprise, dramatic moments of all kinds' (2001: 72). Fassbinder's interest in Artaud was clear from his early days with *Action-Theatre* and this influence is not only evident in the stylised performances of his actors but made explicit at certain points in his films, as Shattuc points out:

The film *Satansbraten* (1975–76) begins with a quotation from Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double. Despair* (1977) is dedicated to 'Artaud, Vincent Van Gogh, Unica Zurn'. And in 1981, the year before his death, he wrote and directed a film, *Theater in a Trance*, that combined dance pieces with Artaud's writings. (1995: 96)

From 1971 onwards, Fassbinder's films demonstrate the drawing together of disparate influences: Hollywood cinema, Douglas Sirk, Brecht and Artaud. He was to frequently use a repertory company of actors, first encountered during his involvement with *Action Theatre*. Most notably the actress Hanna Schygulla would become something of a muse and appear in many of his films. Like several of Sirk's Hollywood melodramas, many of Fassbinder's films are concerned with the predicaments of female characters, frequently making huge demands on the ability to convey dramatic intensity in his actors, who, reputedly, he often treated notoriously badly.

Fassbinder used stylistic devices borrowed directly from Sirk in almost all of his films. The Sirkian use of vivid colour, for example, is echoed in *The Marriage of Eva Braun* (1979) and *Lola* (1981), a revision of Von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. The symbolic use of on-screen distance is deployed in *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1971) and *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973). Sirk's use of reflections and frames within frames is also very evident in *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* though the most excessive example of the use of reflections is found in *Chinese Roulette* (1976), seemingly set in a hall of mirrors. Sirk's love of elaborate and stylised *mise-en-scène* and anti-naturalistic lighting is also evident in *Querelle* (1982).

Following a technique favoured by Brecht and originally borrowed from the nineteenth-century tradition of theatrical melodrama, Fassbinder creates static visual compositions that act as momentary pauses in the action to illustrate the power relations and social and emotional rifts between characters. In *Fear Eats the Soul* this is illustrated by the scene in which Emmi first enters the Moroccan bar. Sitting alone at a table, her isolation is emphasised by the extended length of the narrow bar and the positions of the other patrons, seen in long-shot, seemingly miles away from her. Similarly in *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, Petra's psychological collapse is visually conveyed at her birthday party where her guests stand in huddled compositions whilst she crawls around on the floor in a state of hysteria.

In many of Fassbinder's films the actors perform in a highly stylised and self-conscious manner, drawing attention to the very process of perfor-

mance. This method, favoured by both Brecht and Artaud, is very apparent in *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* in which Margit Carstensen's performance imitates the mannered theatricality of classical Hollywood performance, a style of acting that would, today, be regarded as 'melodramatic' in a pejorative sense. Referencing Artaud more specifically, Fassbinder encourages an even more stylised method in his last film, *Querelle*, in which the actors deliver their lines in a monotonous, ritualistic, fashion, as if they were being read. This effect is emphasised by his use of post-production dubbing, distancing the actor's voices from their performances yet further. Whilst this method of delivery is almost the exact opposite of melodramatic, declamatory performance, through the use of gestural actions and movement the effect achieved is not dissimilar to the highly theatrical manner of silent film performance.

Fassbinder also uses narrative and rhetorical techniques that can often have a disruptive effect. Most notably his films are stripped of the artifice of the happy ending so evident in Sirk's melodramas. In *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* for example, Petra is left alone at the end of the film. Trying finally to show some kindness to Marlene, the maid who has been a silent witness to the disintegration of her relationship with Karin and to whom she has shown nothing but contempt and cruelty, she is finally rejected. Marlene packs her bag at the prospect of their relationship being more equal and leaves Petra alone in the darkness. Fassbinder's films often end rather abruptly, precluding the possibility of a satisfactory conclusion, leaving the audience and the film's characters in an uncertain state of limbo. In *The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1974) for example, the protagonist, Hans Epp, dies, leaving his wife a widow. His death, however, is not presented as a tragic moment but rather as the inevitable and convenient conclusion to the life of a 'worthless' man. In the final scene his wife agrees to move in with Hans' best friend and the film seems to end almost in the middle of this highly significant and revelatory conversation. In *Querelle*, Fassbinder takes this disruptive approach still further: Lysianne's angry outburst in the bar of *La Feria* literally halts the narrative progression of the film in freeze-frame.

Fear Eats the Soul

Fear Eats the Soul is perhaps Fassbinder's most direct reference to the Sirkian melodrama. It is not (as has often been suggested) a remake of *All That Heaven Allows*, though it does make use of the same narrative



FIGURE 11 Emotional pressures lead Ali to infidelity in *Fear Eats the Soul*

formula of a relationship between an older woman and a younger man. In Fassbinder's film though, the older woman is not a wealthy bourgeois widow but an elderly, working-class cleaner, Emmi Kurowski (Brigitte Mira). Her lover-to-be is not a non-conformist gardener, but a black Moroccan labourer (played by Fassbinder's lover El Hedi ben Salem) whose noble Arabic name is shortened to 'Ali' by those around him.

At the start of the film Emmi goes for a drink in a local Moroccan bar where she meets Ali who tells her that he has to share a small apartment with a group of other immigrant workers. The kindly and widowed Emmi invites Ali to stay with her instead and they eventually become lovers. To begin with Emmi is unquestionably proud of her handsome and strong young boyfriend but increasingly becomes conscious of the prejudicial attitudes of those around her, including her work colleagues, neighbours, shopkeepers and her own relatives, who she financially supports with her lowly cleaning job. This prejudice is demonstrated, in Sirkian fashion, through dramatic compositions and confrontations that illustrate the increasing strains placed on the relationship between the naïve Emmi and Ali. Fassbinder undercuts the overt elements of social criticism with Sirkian irony. In a notable scene, Emmi takes Ali for a meal at Hitler's favourite restaurant, the *Osteria Italiana*. Emmi is seemingly entirely oblivious to the irony of choosing the Nazi leader's favourite restaurant as a venue for

the celebration of her marriage to a black migrant worker. The couple sit, viewed in long-shot through a constricting doorway, in total isolation in the austere environment, whilst a waiter eyes them with silent distaste. The film ends, like Sirk's, with the romantic lead incapacitated, though this does not (as in the case of *All That Heaven Allows*) provide the opportunity for a happy resolution. Ali is diagnosed with a perforated stomach ulcer, which we are told is a perpetual hazard for immigrant workers. Added to this we discover that the complaint will recur after six months as immigrant workers are not entitled to the period of convalescence that they would need to fully recover. Hearing this catastrophic news, Emmi sits with the unconscious Ali, their reflections captured in a mirror, and cries at the hopelessness of his condition.

Todd Haynes: Far From Heaven

Whilst Fassbinder was renowned for utilising the stylistic techniques of Douglas Sirk there are other examples of filmmakers who have chosen not just to imitate the techniques but also to create contemporary recreations of the 1950s period melodrama. French director Francois Ozon for example, in *8 Women* (2002), freely adapts George Cukor's *The Women* transforming it into a melodramatic thriller with the lavish cinematic spectacle of a Technicolor 1950s melodrama. Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* is another interesting example of an attempt to update the Sirkian melodrama for a contemporary audience. Earlier in his career Haynes had already engaged with melodrama's preoccupation with the stifled existence of the bourgeois housewife in his second feature, *Safe* (1995). Set in contemporary California, *Safe* recounts the story of affluent homemaker Carol White (Julianne Moore) who unexpectedly develops allergies to her environment that become so extreme that she is ultimately forced to leave her family home and relocate to a sanctuary in the desert. Filmed primarily in detached long shots the film's ironic critique of New Age philosophy and the shallow and empty quality of bourgeois life is evocative of Fassbinder's approach to such material. With his later film, *Far From Heaven* (2002) (also starring Julianne Moore), Haynes was to reference Sirk's style far more explicitly. The title of Haynes' film clearly indicates its source material (*All That Heaven Allows*) whilst simultaneously making the ambiguity of Sirk's original film title rather more literal; from the outset the audience understands that this film is located in a world that is far from perfect. Unlike Sirk's contemporary reception, Haynes' film has received almost

unanimously positive reviews and both the film's script, cinematography, Elmer Bernstein's score and Julianne Moore's performance have received Academy Award nominations, indicating not just the skilled realisation of a now anachronistic filmic style but also the extent to which the status of the once reviled Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk and his contemporaries has changed over time. Though in Haynes' own estimation, the melodrama is still 'perhaps the most degraded form of narrative experience you can pick for a contemporary audience', it is now clearly regarded as a legitimate vehicle for social critique. The film has been described in popular reviews as a 'post-modern' melodrama, working as a meticulous exercise in style, creating a painstaking facsimile of the aesthetic patterns of a 1950s film. Haynes himself is partly responsible for the 'post-modern' tag applied to the film through his identification in interviews of elements of self-reflexivity in the excessive style of the 1950s melodrama. In production notes appearing in the film's website he observes,

While the look and style of those 1950s melodramas is anything but realistic, there's something almost spookily accurate about the emotional truths of those films. They are hypereal, that's why we call them melodramas. (www.farfromheavenmovie.com/index2.html)

Whilst *Far From Heaven* most clearly references *All That Heaven Allows*, like Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul*, it is not a remake but rather takes the narrative outline of Sirk's film, conflating themes from *Imitation of Life* and *Written on the Wind*, into a film that echoes, rather than imitates, the originals. Additionally, *Far From Heaven* deals with themes that would have been impossible for the 1950s melodrama to countenance for both societal reasons and also due to the stipulations of the production code. Homosexuality, for example, a forbidden subject in 1950s Hollywood, is presented as the reason for the problems that lie beneath the superficially successful marriage of the Whitakers. Sirk himself noted that it came to his attention after filming was complete that his film *Interlude* was, in fact, a Hollywood rewrite of a James Cain story, *Serenade*, dealing with homosexuality:

I did not know that *Serenade* was behind it at all. I only found out afterwards that Universal had owned *Serenade* for years, and that the Stahl picture, too, had been based on it. If conditions had been

different, and especially if I had a different script based on the original James Cain novel, I think that it could have been a terrific picture – at least a very unusual one. The original James Cain story is a cruel story, partly set in Mexico – and, of course, it is about homosexuality. All that had to go, and in the process the story lost its bite. (1987: 127/8)

Similarly both Vincente Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) and William Wyler's *The Children's Hour* (1961) had to be extensively altered in order to make their themes of homosexuality and lesbianism respectively, acceptable.

Cary Scott's widowhood in *All That Heaven Allows* is transformed in Haynes' film into Cathy Whitaker's loveless marriage, her oppression and isolation is turned in on itself even more maliciously than in Sirk's film through the dilemma of carrying the burden of a secret (her husband's homosexuality) that it is genuinely impossible for her to share with anyone.

The romantic alternative to Cathy's loveless life in *Far From Heaven* is, as in the case of *All That Heaven Allows*, presented by her gardener. Here, however, it is not merely the problems of class and age difference that are barriers to the couple's romance but also the rather more inflammatory question of race; Raymond Deagan is black. Once more Haynes introduces a narrative device – the potential of interracial relationships – that for some sections of an American audience might still be regarded as politically loaded but would have been completely inconceivable within the constraints of 1950s Hollywood cinema. Haynes further complicates the possibility of romance between the couple by presenting societal pressures as exerted not exclusively by white racism but from within the black community itself where Cathy is treated with similar hostility and suspicion that she receives from her friends. Whilst *Far From Heaven* lacks the systematic stylistic techniques that are so marked in Sirk's films, carefully coded *mise-en-scène* is still used, creating environments that fill in the absences created by what cannot be said or demonstrated by characters. In a notable scene, Cathy visits her daughter at a ballet recital. Cathy asks her daughter where her friends are, and she points to the back of the venue where a group of mothers and daughters are grouped in a brightly-lit back room, silently staring at Cathy and her daughter who appear isolated in the darkened auditorium. The rhetoric of this sequence, dramatically emphasising Cathy's rejection by her community represented through on-screen

distance, and the use of the frozen tableaux of the mothers and daughters echoes the stylistic techniques used by both Sirk and Fassbinder.

The work of Fassbinder and Haynes illustrates that melodrama continues to exist outside of 1950s Hollywood cinema and also the ways in which the stylistic techniques, originally attributed to Douglas Sirk, have been appropriated and developed by a generation of filmmakers informed by debates around melodrama within film criticism. The work of these directors also begins to demonstrate the need for a more encompassing and progressive theoretical framework in which to understand melodrama in cinema, an approach that is not constrained within the confines of the 'family melodrama', nor by auteurist debates, genre theory, Neo-Marxist ideological critiques or feminist concerns about the 'women's film'. What is needed is an approach that can build upon the body of literature that has emerged concerning melodrama in cinema and additionally acknowledges the ways in which melodrama can manifest itself across genres and connects with audiences through rhetorical techniques designed to elicit emotion and empathy. This third way of thinking about melodrama, as a sensibility rather than as a genre or style, will be explored in the final chapter.