

# Visual and Other Pleasures

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## Notes on Sirk and Melodrama\*

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It has been suggested that the interest of Hollywood 1950s melodrama lies primarily in the way that, by means of textual analysis, fissures and contradictions can be shown to be undermining the films' ideological coherence.<sup>1</sup> These contradictions, whether on the level of form or of narrative incident, seem to save the films from belonging blindly to the bourgeois ideology which produced them. This argument depends on the premise that the project of this ideology is indeed to conjure up a coherent picture of a world and conceal contradictions which in turn conceal exploitation and oppression. A text which defies unity and closure would then quite clearly be progressive. Although this line of argument has been productive and revealing, there is a way in which it has been trapped in a kind of Chinese box quite characteristic of melodrama itself. Ideological contradiction is actually the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious thread to be picked up only by special critical processes. No ideology can ever pretend to totality: it searches for safety-valves for its own inconsistencies. And the 1950s melodrama works by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; its excitement comes from conflict, not between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love.

Melodrama as a safety-valve for ideological contradictions centred on sex and the family may lose its progressive attributes, but it acquires a wider aesthetic and political significance. The workings of patriarchy, and the mould of feminine unconscious it produces, have left women largely without a voice, gagged and deprived of outlets (of a kind supplied, for instance, either by male art or popular culture) in spite of the crucial social and ideological functions women are called on to perform. In the absence of any coherent culture of oppression, a simple fact of recognition has aesthetic and political importance. There is a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive, and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping-ground, the family. While the Western and the gangster film celebrate the ups and downs endured by men of action, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, like the tragedies of Euripides, probing the pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women, act as a corrective.

Roughly, there are two dramatic points of departure for melodrama. One is coloured by a female protagonist's point of view which provides a focus for identification. The other examines tensions in the family, and between the sexes and generations; here, although women play an important part, their point of view is not analysed and does not initiate the drama. Helen Foley's article 'Sex and State in Ancient Greece' analyses Greek drama in terms that illuminate the 'safety-valve' function of Hollywood's family melodramas. She argues that Aeschylus shows how overvaluation of virility under patriarchy causes social and ideological problems which the drama comments on and attempts to correct: 'male characters . . . overly concerned with military and political glory at the expense of domestic harmony and their own children', and 'the emotional domestic sphere cannot be allowed direct political power and the wife must subordinate herself to her husband in marriage; but the maternal or domestic claims are nevertheless central and inviolable, a crucial check on bellicose male-dominated democracy'.<sup>2</sup>

For family life to survive, a compromise has to be reached, sexual difference softened, and the male brought to see the value of domestic life. As art and drama deal generously with male fantasy, a dramatic rendering of women's frustrations, publicly acting out an adjustment of balance in the male ego, is socially and ideologically beneficial. A positive male figure who rejects rampant virility and opposes the unmitigated power of the father achieves (at least by means of a 'happy end') the reintegration of both sexes in family life. The phallogentric, misogynist fantasies of patriarchal culture are shown here to be in contradiction with the ideology of the family. These tensions are certainly present in both the Hollywood Western and melodrama; both tend towards a beneficial sacrifice of unrestrained masculine individualism in the interests of civilisation, law and culture. Rafe in *Home from the Hill* re-establishes the family and 'feminine' values on the grave of his overbearing father. But, as Sirk has pointed out, the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, the cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled, in the last five minutes, into a happy end.

Sirk, in the two films on which he had virtual independence (both produced by Albert Zugsmith), was able to turn his attention to the 'masculine' or family melodrama without conforming to a standard happy end. He turns the conventions of melodrama sharply. Roger Shumann in *Tarnished Angels* and Kyle Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (both played by Robert Stack) are tortured and torn by the mystique of masculinity, haunted by phallic obsessions and fear of impotence. Both are suicidal, finally taking refuge in death. In these two films Sirk provides an extremely rare epitaph, an insight into *men* as victims of

patriarchal society. He shows castration anxiety, not (as is common) personified by a vengeful woman but presented *dreadfully* and without mediation. In dealing with the male unconscious Sirk approaches complexity near to the tragic. His Universal movies deal more specifically with women, and work more clearly within melodramatic conventions.

Significantly, discussions of the difference between melodrama and tragedy specify that while the tragic hero is conscious of his fate and torn between conflicting forces, characters caught in the world of melodrama are not allowed transcendent awareness or knowledge.

In tragedy, the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things. Tragedy is concerned with the nature of man, melodrama with the habits of men (and things). A habit normally reflects part of nature, and that part functions as if it were the whole. In melodrama we accept the part for the whole; this is a convention of the form.<sup>3</sup>

Melodramatic characters act out contradiction to varying degrees and gradually face impossible resolutions and probable defeats. However, the implications and poignancy of a particular narrative cannot be evoked wholly by limited characters with restricted dramatic functions – they do not fully grasp the forces they are up against or their own instinctive behaviour. It is here that the formal devices of Hollywood melodrama, as analysed by Thomas Elsaesser,<sup>4</sup> provide a transcendent, wordless commentary, giving abstract emotion spectacular form, contributing a narrative level that provides the action with a specific coherence. *Mise en scène*, rather than the undercutting of the actions and words of the story level, provides a central point of orientation for the spectator.

Sirk allows a certain interaction between the spectator's reading of *mise en scène*, and its presence within the diegesis, as though the protagonists, from time to time, can *read* their dramatic situation with a code similar to that used by the audience. Although this device uses aesthetics as well as narrative to establish signs for characters on the screen as for the spectator in the cinema, elements such as lighting or camera movement still act as a privileged discourse for the spectator.

In the opening scene of *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary (Jane Wyman) looks at Ron (Rock Hudson) with the first inklings of desire. The emotion is carried through into the second scene through the presence of the autumn leaves he has given her, so that we, the spectators, share with Cary his secret importance. The touch of nature he has left behind marks the opening seconds of her preparation for what is to prove a barren evening at the Country Club. The children comment on Cary's red dress, interpreting it, as we do, as a sign of newly awakened interest in life and love but mistaking its object as the impotent and decrepit

Harvey, her date and their preferred future stepfather. The camera does not allow the spectator to make the same mistake, establishing in no uncertain terms the formal detachment with which Cary sees Harvey, in contrast to the way in which in the previous scene Ron had been subtly extracted from the background and placed in close face-to-face with Cary.

Lighting style clearly cannot be recognised within the diegesis, and in *All That Heaven Allows* it illustrates the basic emotional division which the film is actually about: Cary's world is divided between the cold, hard light (blues and yellows) of loneliness, repression and oppression and the warmer, softer light (red/orange) of hope, emotional freedom and sexual satisfaction. In keeping with the pace and emotion generated by a particular scene, Sirk occasionally changes lighting from one shot to the next, for instance, in order to use the dramatic potential of an intricate screen which dominates Cary's confrontation with her son Ned.

Although it is impossible to better Rainer Werner Fassbinder's plot synopsis of *All That Heaven Allows*,<sup>5</sup> it might be useful to bring out some different emphases. The story-line is extremely simple, if not minimal (concocted specifically to repeat the success of *Magnificent Obsession*)<sup>6</sup> and is told strictly from a woman's point of view, both in the sense of world view (the film is structured around female desires and frustrations) and point of identification (Cary, a widow with two college-age children and a standard of life in keeping with her late husband's elevated social and economic position). The narrative quickly establishes lack (her world is sexually repressed and obsessed simultaneously, offering only impotent elderly companionship – Harvey – or exploitative lechery – Howard). She then discovers love and a potentially physically and emotionally satisfying *country* way of life in Ron Kirby, her gardener (whose resonance shifts from that of the socially unacceptable in the Country Club world to that of the independent man in harmony with nature out by the old mill where he grows trees). Cary's transgression of the class barrier mirrors her more deeply shocking transgression of sexual taboos in the eyes of her friends and children. Her discovery of happiness is then reversed as she submits to pressure and gives Ron up, resulting in a 'flight into illness'. The doctor puts her on the road to success through self-knowledge and a happy end, but, by an ironic *deus ex machina* in reverse, their gratification is postponed by Ron's accident (caused by his joy at seeing Cary in the distance). A hidden shadow is cast implicitly over their perfect, joyful acceptance of love, although as the shutters are opened in the morning, the cold, hard light of repression is driven off the screen by the warm light of hope and satisfaction.

Jon Halliday points out the importance of the dichotomy between contemporary New England society – the setting for the movie – and

'the home of Thoreau and Emerson' as lived by Ron. 'Hudson and his trees are both America's past and America's ideals. They are ideals which are now unattainable. . . .'<sup>7</sup> The film is thus posited on a recognised contradiction within the American tradition. The contemporary reality and the ideal can be reconciled only by Cary moving, as it were, into the dream which, as though to underline its actual ephemeral nature, is then broken at the end by Ron's accident. How can natural man and woman re-establish the values of primitive economy and the division of labour when the man is bedridden and incapable? 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?

In other films, particularly *All I Desire*, *Imitation of Life* and *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk ironises and complicates the theme of the continued sexuality of mothers. The women perform professionally (from the depths of Laverne's parachute jump in *Tarnished Angels* to the heights of Lora's stardom in *Imitation of Life*) and attract the gaze of men and the curious crowd. Their problems are approached with characteristically Sirkian ambiguity as they try to brazen out their challenge to conformity as best they can. Cary, on the other hand, has no heroic or exhibitionist qualities, and the gaze and gossip of the town cause her agonies of embarrassment. It is only very occasionally that the setting and the narrative move away from Cary and, when they do, it is significant. The gaze of Cary's friends at Sara's party is established in a scene before Cary and Ron arrive. The camera takes in the prurient voyeurism which turns the sexual association of a middle-aged woman with a younger man into an act of public indecency (this view is then expressed and caricatured by Howard's drunken assault on Cary).

Melodrama can be seen as having an ideological *function* in working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form. A simple difference, however, can be made between the way that irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas are finally resolved in, for instance, *Home from the Hill*, and are not in, for example, *All That Heaven Allows*. It is as though the fact of having a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognisable, real and familiar traps that escape is closer to a day-dream than to fairy story. Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind tell a story of contradiction, not of reconciliation. Even if a heroine resists society's overt pressures, its unconscious laws catch up with her in the end.

**Notes**

1. Paul Willemen, 'Distanciation and Douglas Sirk', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 2. Paul Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System', *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 4. Stephen Neale, 'Douglas Sirk', *Framework*, no. 5.
2. Helen Foley, 'Sex and State in Ancient Greece', *Diacritics*.
3. R. B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).
4. Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', *Monogram*, no. 4.
5. R. W. Fassbinder, 'Six Films by Douglas Sirk', Halliday and Mulvey (eds) *Douglas Sirk*, Edinburgh Film Festival Publication (Edinburgh, 1972).
6. Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971).
7. *Ibid.*