

Written on the Wind (1956) Sirk

P Michell, March 2018

Compared to Michael Curtiz, Douglas Sirk is a completely different director. Now considered an 'Auteur' filmmaker.

Sirk films can be seen as Shakespearian – the more often one views the film the more there is to be discovered.

Often cited as the best of Sirk's American melodramas, this film though released by Universal was produced by independent Zugsmith. Excellent casting of four main characters.

Dorothy Malone won an Oscar. Robert Stack was nominated. Title song was nominated also.

Sirk one of the many Berlin émigré's to Los Angeles was fascinated by America. Its culture, the west and society. At the time his films were dismissively described as 'Women's Weepies'. The French rediscovered him.

Like Hitchcock nothing on screen is accidental or haphazard. Sets/settings not only breathe life in the film but are part of the action giving a deeper sense of character's development. Punctuated of course by music. Note how scenes change from light to dark in relation to the story development.

Synopsis:

Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) is a geologist working for the Hadleys, an oil-rich Texas family. While the patriarch, Jared (Robert Keith), works hard to establish the family business, his irresponsible son, Kyle (Robert Stack), is an alcoholic playboy, and his daughter, Marylee (Dorothy Malone), is the town tramp. Mitch harbours a secret love for Kyle's unsatisfied wife, Lucy (Lauren Bacall) -- a fact that leaves him exposed when the jealous Marylee accuses him of murder.

Douglas Sirk (1897 -1987) – Director. German. 48 films.

Reputation made on the Universal melodramas from late 1940s climaxing with *Imitation of Life*.

His reputation blossomed in the generation after his 1959 retirement from Hollywood filmmaking, was born Hans Detlef Sierck on April 26, 1900, in Hamburg, Germany, to a journalist. Both of his parents were Danish, and the future director would make movies in German, Danish and English. His reputation, which was breathed to life by the French nouvelle vague critiques who developed the "auteur" (author) theory of film criticism, casts him as one of the cinema's great ironists. In his American and European films, his characters perceive their lives quite differently than does the movie audience viewing "them" in a theater. Dealing with love, death and societal constraints, his films often

depend on melodrama, particularly the high-suds soap operas he lensed for producer [Ross Hunter](#) in the 1950s: [Magnificent Obsession](#) (1954), [All That Heaven Allows](#) (1955) and his last American film, [Imitation of Life](#) (1959).

Sirk eventually made it to the US by 1941, and he joined the community of émigré/refugee film people working in Hollywood. His first directorial stint in America was [Hitler's Madman](#) (1943), but it is for his work at Universal International in the 1950s for which he is primarily known. For producer Ross Hunter he made nine films, many of which involved the collaboration of [Rock Hudson](#), cinematographer [Russell Metty](#), screenwriter [George Zuckerman](#) and art director [Alexander Golitzen](#).

When he retired from American filmmaking (he was to make only one more feature length film, in German, in 1963), his reputation was that of a second- or third-tier director who turned out glossy Hollywood soap operas, a sort of second-rate [Vincente Minnelli](#) without the saving grace of Minelli's undeniable genius for musicals. In the nearly half-century since, Sirk has become one of the most revered of Hollywood's auteurs.

Quote:

I certainly believe that happiness exists, if only by the simple fact that it can be destroyed.

Senses of Cinema by Tom Ryan:

Much of Sirk's critical reputation currently rests on four of the melodramas he made during the 1950s: *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind*, *The Tarnished Angels* and *Imitation of Life*. Some recognition has been given to three other films from this period, including *All I Desire* (1953), *There's Always Tomorrow*, and *A Time To Love And A Time To Die*. And four of the films he made in Germany – *Stutzen der Gesellschaft*, his 1935 adaptation of Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, *Schlussakkord*, the Australia-set *Zu Neuen Ufern* (*To Distant Shores*, 1937) and *La Habanera* – have received a limited amount of critical attention.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/great-directors/sirk/>

No other director has been more closely associated with the concept of melodrama in cinema than Douglas Sirk... While popular with audiences, Sirk's films were often condemned by contemporary film critics as examples of the sensationalism and sentimentality of popular cinema. However, in France, the critics of the influential *Cahiers du Cinéma*, notably François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, praised Sirk's distinctive visual style. In the early 1970s a new generation of film scholars, notably Thomas Elsaesser, Paul Willemen, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and Fred Camper, "rediscovered" Sirk's films, hailing them as supreme examples of a subversive critique of postwar American society expressed through stylized mise-en-scène drawing on irony and Brechtian alienating devices. Sirk's work has influenced many subsequent filmmakers including Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Martin Scorsese, John Waters, Pedro Almodóvar, Jonathan Demme, and Todd Haynes."

<http://www.theyshootpictures.com/sirkdouglas.htm>

Quite good biography here:

http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0802862/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

Auteur filmmakers often work with same creative personnel.

Albert Zugsmith – Producer (1910-1993)

Produced 36 films 1952-1968 inc Touch of Evil (1958) Welles, Trashed Angels (1957) Sirk.

Famous for making the 'Beat Generation' film (1959), thus popularizing the term.

A genial, multi-faceted entrepreneur already in his teens. Founded the Atlantic City (NJ) newspaper "Daily World" in 1935, also acting as its publisher and editor. Subsequently active as consultant to newspapers, radio and television stations. As an attorney, represented [Jerry Siegel](#) and [Joe Shuster](#) (creators of Superman) in their 1948 lawsuit against DC Comics. First in Hollywood as a band publicist, later returned as producer of prestige films directed by [Orson Welles](#) and [Douglas Sirk](#) at Universal. Subsequently headed his own independent production company, turning out cheaply made exploitation films. Best of these, and accorded cult status, is [Confessions of an Opium Eater](#) (1962), starring [Vincent Price](#).

Russell Metty - Cinematography – (1906 – 1978)

168 movies inc Spartacus (1960) [academy award], Touch of Evil (1958), Bringing up Baby (1938), Flower Drum Song (1961), The Misfits (1961). Rich Man Poor TV series – 7 episodes (1976), Columbo – 5 episodes (1971)

A superb craftsman who worked with directors as John Huston, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg and Orson Welles, was born in Los Angeles. Entering the movie industry as a lab assistant, Metty apprenticed as an assistant cameraman and graduated to lighting cameraman at RKO Radio Pictures in 1935. Metty's ability to create effects with black-and-white contrast while shooting twilight and night were on display in two films he shot for Orson Welles, [The Stranger](#) (1946) and the classic [Touch of Evil](#) (1958), the latter showing his mastery of complex crane shots. (Metty shot additional scenes for Welles' second masterpiece, "The Magnificent Ambersons", whose lighting cameraman was [Stanley Cortez](#) but had the look of "Citizen Kane", which was shot by [Gregg Toland](#).) At Universal in the 1950s, he enjoyed a productive collaboration with director Douglas Sirk on 10 films from 1953 through 1959, including shooting Sirk's masterpieces "Magnificent Obsession" (1954) and the 1959 remake of "Imitation of Life". However, his collaboration with director Stanley Kubrick on [Spartacus](#) (1960) proved troublesome.

Frank Skinner (1897 – 1968) – composer –

401 films mostly for Universal from 1938 – 1966. Famous for Sirk & horror films! Started off in Hollywood as arranger for The Great Ziegfeld filmed at MGM (1936). 'Oh Shenandoah' from the film (1965) became popular. Wrote many books on composing and arranging.

Alexander Golitzen (1908-2005) – Art Director. 336 films.

Legendary art director, a field in which most workers' names remain relatively unknown. His prolific work in hundreds of films, predominantly at Universal, made his name familiar to many film-goers, at least among those who read credits. Possibly only **Cedric Gibbons**, at MGM, shared a similar fame. Golitzen was nominated for Academy Awards fourteen times, winning on three occasions.

In 1954 Alexander was named Supervising Art Director at Universal, a title he held until his retirement in 1974. Although considered a genius for his work in color films, with his contributions adding considerably to the impact of diverse film subjects, including westerns, musicals, and even the science fiction film, **This Island Earth** (1955), he was also adept in black & white, earning an Oscar for **To Kill a Mockingbird** (1962). Golitzen also did some notable work for television series such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959) and **One Step Beyond** (1959). He retired on a high note, with his very last work, on the film **Earthquake** (1974), being Oscar-nominated.

Other films inc: *Spartacus* (1960), *Madame X* (1966), *Flower Drum Song* (1961), *Peter Gunn* (TV series), *Trantaula* (1955), *Play Misty for Me* (1971).

Overview:

Below is part of Filmsite's analysis. The full description is at:

<http://www.filmsite.org/writt.html>

Written on the Wind (1956) is generally regarded as the best of director Douglas Sirk's 1950s lush, vibrantly colorful melodramatic masterpieces. His absorbing, flamboyant, overwrought potboiler films were noted for their glossy and excessive style, soap operish and brightly-colored film noirish characteristics, and exaggerated and overheated emotions. This film provides Sirk's clear commentary and critique of the underlying hollowness and shallowness of American society in the placid 1950s, and misfit lives stunted and corrupted by mental anguish, alcoholism, sexual frustration, and corruptible materialistic wealth.

Sirk's most successful melodramas of the mid-to-late 50s decade included the following - predominantly from Universal-International:

- *All I Desire* (1953)
- *Magnificent Obsession* (1954)
- *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)
- *Written on the Wind* (1956)
- *The Tarnished Angels* (1957) - reuniting stars Stack, Malone, and Hudson
- *Imitation of Life* (1959) - Sirk's last American film
-

This vivid, gaudy and slightly campy Technicolor film, from a screenplay by George Zuckerman that was adapted from Robert Wilder's best-selling novel of the same name, centers on the frenzied dynamics within a self-destructing, filthy-rich (literally) Texas oil family named Hadley. The bourgeois, immoral, blood-poisoned, money-corrupted clan is composed of a tycoon patriarch (Keith), an alcoholic, profligate, insecure playboy heir Kyle (Stack), a lustful daughter Marylee (Malone), and their stable, responsible, less-wealthy family friend and boyhood playmate Mitch (Hudson) who supportively holds the family together. Dysfunctional tensions rise when the patriarch's booze-soaked son quickly courts and marries the company's respectable, sensible good-girl executive secretary Lucy (Bacall) and his self-pitying fears of impotency (sexual and otherwise) and jealousy - inflamed by his debauched and trashy sister - soon lead to the film's climactic shoot-out (shown in flashback in the film's opening).

Film Spectrum Analysis

<http://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=19608>

Trivia:

[Douglas Sirk](#) wanted it to be stated that Kyle Hadley was gay in the film. However this could not be mentioned directly due to the Hay's Code. Nevertheless it is still implied that Hadley is secretly in love with Mitch Wayne.

One of [Rainer Werner Fassbinder's](#) favorite films; he referenced it frequently in his own work.

Title song is sung by [The Four Aces](#). The song is featured very prominently, and the group is fully credited.

The movie was rumored to be based on the death of tobacco heir Zachary "Smith" Reynolds. The youngest son of tobacco magnate R.J. Reynolds, the 20-year-old playboy had a complete disinterest in the family business, an inexhaustible allowance and a volatile temper. Smith owned a plane and literally stalked Broadway musical comedy star [Libby Holman](#) until the 27-year-old singer married him in 1931. Their marriage was a clash of wills and, during an alcohol-fueled July 4th holiday party in 1932 at the family's estate, Libby announced she was pregnant. Stories differ, but there was reportedly a tense confrontation, a gunshot and the young Smith was dead. Libby and Ab Walker, a close friend of Smith's who was whispered to be her lover, were indicted for murder. Fearing scandal over their son's activities, the intensely secretive Reynolds family "persuaded" authorities to drop the charges. The death was officially ruled a suicide.

Reviews:

A Douglas Sirk masterpiece

13 March 2003 | by [The Big Combo](#) –

[Paul's note – underlines are mine]

Director Douglas Sirk once said 'there's a very short distance between high art and trash, and trash that contains craziness is by this very quality nearer to art'. This statement defines his cinema perfectly, a very unique body of work that includes classic stage adaptations, adventure and war films, westerns and of course, his famous melodramas.

Sirk's melodramas were, as the very word signifies, dramas with music. The music sets the tone for his masterful style, and every stroke of his brush (Sirk was also a painter) leaves a powerful image on the screen-turned-canvas. But this ain't life but its representation, an imitation of life. Sirk never tried to show reality, on the contrary. None of the directors of his generation made a better use of all the technical devices provided by Hollywood (most notably Technicolor) to distinguish the artificial from the real thing. Let's remember that his golden period coincides with the time when Hollywood films turned its attention into the social drama (Blackboard jungle, Rebel without a cause). Sirk always knew that cinema was meant to be something else.

Another of Sirk's statements summarizes this: 'You can't reach, or touch, the real. You just see reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself your fingers only meet glass'. I defy anybody that has seen *Written on the wind* to count the amount of mirrors and images reflected that appear on screen. One ends up giving up.

Therefore, we are in a hall full of mirrors where there's no difference between real and its false copy. Nobody can say that the Hadley are real people. That town ain't real either, with those hideous oil pumps all over the place. So in this realm the acting is affected, the decore is fake, the trick is visible. Everything is pushed a little bit off the limit (the sexual connotations of Dorothy Malone with the oil tower, for example). Sirk was criticizing and theorizing at the same time.

'The angles are the director's thoughts; the lighting is his philosophy'. In *Written on the wind* we follow the fall of a traditional way of life both in a geometrical way and in terms of light and shadows. The Hadleys house, with its different levels connected by the spiral staircase operates in a strictly metaphorical way. A house that resembles a mausoleum, that no party can cheer up. As tragedy progresses from luminous daylight to shadowy night, Sirk's photography becomes an extension of the inner state of his characters, and so are the colours of the clothes they wear. Drama is thus incorporated to every element at the service of the director's craft.

Sirk considered himself a 'story bender', because he bended the standard material he was assigned with to his style and purpose. *Written on the wind* is a good example. It

wouldn't work in any other hands.

The other director that was using similar strategies was Frank Tashlin, who was for 50's comedy the same that Sirk was for melodrama. Their films are full of the machinery of American life -advertising, TV sets, jukeboxes, washing machines, sport cars, vacuum cleaners- to depict its emptiness and decay. I'm inclined to think that their films were regarded in a different way by their contemporary audiences. The game was played by both sides, so it was camp. Now we regard them as 'cult' or 'bizarre', because we are not those spectators anymore. That is why Todd Haynes's homage 'Far from heaven' turns into a pastiche, because it reproduces Sirk's work nowadays as if nothing happened in between. Then Sirk turns exactly into that painting hanging in the art gallery that Julianne Moore and the gardener discuss in the aforementioned film.

Sirk understood the elements of melodrama perfectly. There were always immovable characters (Rock Hudson and Lauren Bacall here) against which he could assemble a series of split ones. His balance through antithesis is remarkable and not surprisingly we root for the split characters, because these are the ones Sirk is interested in too. When Robert Stack flies the plane and 'tempts' Lauren Bacall with all sorts of mundane comforts of the world below them (obvious Faustian echoes) we are strangely fascinated with him too, as we are when the devilish nymphomaniac little sister painfully evokes her past with Mitch alone by the river.

In the Sirk's universe the studio often-imposed 'happy ends' have no negative impact. In fact they worked just great. Sirk was fond of Greek tragedy and considered happy endings the *Deus ex machina* of his day. Thus the final courtroom scene fits well and one must also remember that the whole film is told in flashback, so we know from the very beginning that tragedy will fall nevertheless over the Hadley feud.

It was pointed out the many similarities between Written on the Wind with the Godfather saga. I absolutely agree and I'm sure the parallel is not incidental. Both share the theme of the old powerful father head trying to keep his empire going while protecting his family. The temperamental son portrayed by Robert Stack has an amazing physical resemblance with Jimmy Caan's Sonny Corleone. The action of fighting her sister's male friend is symmetrical. The non-son in which the old man put his trust is also common in both films, as the fact that both families carry the names of their town. Even details as the gate that gives access to the property, and the surroundings of the house covered by leaves, suggest that Coppola had Written on the Wind in mind while setting his masterwork. Because both films deal with the subject of Power: the acquisition of power, its manipulation and legacy (even Kyle Hadley's sterility, the event that hastens the turmoil, is an issue easily tied to the central theme of Power, in this case, a weakness in sexual power). The other great film that deals with power and uses American life as its representation is Citizen Kane. One wouldn't think at first of similarities between Welles and Sirk's films but there are a good many, starting with the petrol business as the origin of the family's fortune and ending in the fact that Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson), as Charles Foster Kane, was adopted by a tutor, having his own father alive. Amazingly, the same actor (Harry Shannon) perform both Wayne and Kane's fathers. This detail is

cannot be a coincidence.

Written on the Wind is a masterpiece in every aspect, in execution and vision, in style and technique, a highlight in the career of this wonderful director. Some say that this is his best film. In my opinion, 'Magnificent obsession', 'All that heaven allows', 'There's always tomorrow' and 'Imitation of life' are just as good. And for those who put Sirk in the level of Dallas or Dynasty I wish them no happy end.

Gilded Trash

15 December 2002 | [MICHAEL O'FARRELL](#)

At the Academy Awards ceremony on March 27, 1957, Dorothy Malone won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her torrid, over-the-top portrayal of a spoiled heiress of a Texas oil tycoon in WRITTEN ON THE WIND. The 1956 potboiler, adapted from Robert Wilder's novel, was a veritable three-ring-circus showcasing alcoholism, greed, impotence and nymphomania.

Malone's performance as Marylee Hadley, a lonely rich girl who picks up men to assuage the pain of rejection from a former childhood sweetheart, was representative of the movie as a whole. Mesmerizing to watch even as it resorts to the "lowest -common-denominator" melodrama, WRITTEN ON THE WIND is ultimately the work of one man, the incredibly gifted director Douglas Sirk, an émigré from pre -World War 2 Weimar Germany who left his European theater heritage behind to pursue a career in Hollywood.

An extremely erudite man, Sirk made a name for himself in the 1950's as Universal Studios' reliable director of lavish soap operas, most notably with Ross Hunter's productions of MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS and IMITATION OF LIFE. Independent producer Albert Zugsmith offered Sirk the opportunity to work outside the limiting constraints of Universal's demure entertainments and create a more adult, "sensational" product, hence the sultry WIND and its follow-up, 1957's TARNISHED ANGELS, both released under the Universal International banner. It's anyone's guess why Sirk didn't pursue loftier themes, but apparently directing these exaggerated dramas appealed more to his artistic sensibilities.

WRITTEN ON THE WIND could be considered Sirk's epic soap opera; indeed, it is so rife with human vulnerability and neurosis as depicted among the very rich that it is as compelling to watch as any real life domestic squabble among the rich and famous, perhaps more so. Robert Stack (not an actor typically known for over -emoting) nearly matches Malone in intensity with his offering of the weak-willed brother Kyle Hadley, a mere shadow of his patriarchal father. When he finds out that he is unable to impregnate his new bride (a beautifully leonine Lauren Bacall), Hadley goes off the deep end, escalating an already serious drinking problem with a "secret" gun fetish that threatens to make him a human time bomb. Both brother and sister, as venal and unlikeable as they are, are presented as victims of their past, giving them a human quality that makes them seem less monstrous (and far more interesting than the "good" side of the family, mainly

Bacall and the impossibly handsome Rock Hudson , young Hadley's old boyhood friend and business associate, a surrogate son to the old man and Malone' s unattainable object of desire.)

Despite all the domestic co-dependency on display , it's not so much the story that is memorable here as the way it is filmed. With a real panache for pictorial composition and editing, director Sirk draws his audience into this picture with the most heightened Technicolor cinematography imaginable : every single shot in this film is an eye-filling canvas of saturated colors, from the sight of a tank-like pink Cadillac pulling up to an enormous mansion's front doors to the garish decor of a luxury Miami hotel , a spectrum of hues almost blinding in their diversity. Action and dramatic scenes feature Sirk's adept use of tilted camera angles , shadowy lighting and cross-cut editing , shown to greatest effect in the scene where a rebellious , drunken Malone dances uninhibitedly in her upstairs bedroom to the loud blaring of a record player while her stricken father precariously ascends the huge staircase ; the scene is so riveting that you swear you are experiencing a great oedipal drama unfold. What you're really watching is trash of an enormously entertaining kind, gussied up in lurid Technicolor and polished to perfection by a visual genius.