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Word count: 552

SIRK, Douglas (26 April 1900 – 14 January 1987)

Douglas Sirk was a German émigré director widely celebrated for his melodramas produced for Universal through the 1950s that inspired generations of critics and filmmakers. In his commercially successful and critical acclaimed works such as *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), and *Written on the Wind* (1957), Sirk reinvented American suburbia as a perfect dramatic setting where individuals struggled against bourgeois norms and invasive modern technology. Sirk’s films are the hallmark for Hollywood melodramas in which thematic use of music, colour, and costumes propel the drama to a boiling point.

Born Hans Detlef Sierck in Hamburg to Danish parents, Douglas Sirk studied law, philosophy and art history in Munich, Jena, and Hamburg during the socially unstable post-WWI years, before starting a successful career in theatre. From a dramatist at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg in 1921, he worked his way up to the positions of art director and director. Through his staging of Bertolt Brecht’s *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*Three Penny Opera*) in Bremen, he met the director G. W. Pabst, and visited Ufa’s studio. In 1934, Ufa recruited Sirk after his successful direction of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in Berlin. As Detlef Sierck, he directed eight films for Ufa, before abandoning his promising career in order to flee Nazi Germany with his Jewish wife Hilde Jary.

Arriving in the United States via Switzerland and Holland, Sirk struggled to find work. After his fruitless contract with Warner Bros., he had a short stint as a writer at Columbia. It was through fellow European émigrés that Sirk found a foothold in Hollywood. For the émigré producers [Seymour Nebenzal and Rudolf Joseph, Sirk directed the](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0623873/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cr3) anti-Nazi propaganda film, *Hitler’s Madman* (1943), and the Chekhov adaptation, *Summer Storm* (1944). For Arnold Pressburger, he directed *A Scandal in Paris* (1946). Moving to Universal in 1950, Sirk found his audience, and a popular formula for glossy star-studded films that featured Rock Hudson (and later his protégé John Gavin), Jane Wyman and Barbara Stanwyck among others. Sirk worked within the studio system, working with scripts that were given to him by the producers: both *The Magnificent Obsession* (1954)and *Imitation of Life* (1959)were remakes of Universal’s melodramas from the mid-1930s directed by John Stahl.

At the height of his popularity in the United States in 1959, Sirk returned to Europe, resuming his work in theatre. It was also in this period that Sirk’s films were revalorized by advocates of the auteur theory who noted Sirk’s distinct aesthetic vision, which elevated his works above the common melodramas, or “weepies.” Jean-Luc Godard wrote an enthusiastic praise of Sirk’s sensibility, “a delirious mixture of medieval and modern,” in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Through an interview with Sirk in 1971, Jon Halliday consolidated the image of Sirk as an auteur who employed melodrama as a tool for social critique. Since the 1970s, feminist film critics have reread Sirk’s Hollywood melodramas as important sites where sexual norms were contested. Similarly grasping the political implications of Sirk’s melodrama, Rainer Werner Fassbinder directed *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) which paid homage to Sirk’s *All that Heaven Allows*. Fassbinder’s remake transplanted the story from Sirk’s bucolic New England to urban Berlin, and translated the interclass romance into a cross-racial romance between an older German woman and a younger Arab man. Todd Haynes also paid a tribute to the film with *Far from Heaven* (2002).

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List of Works:

(As Detlef Sierck):

*April, April!* (Ufa, 1935)

[*Stützen der Gesellschaft*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0027056/?ref_=nm_flmg_dr_46)(Ufa, 1935)

*Das Mädchen vom Moorhof* (*The Girl from the Marsh Croft,*Ufa, 1935)

*Das Hofkonzert* (*The Little Court Concert,* Ufa, 1936)

*La Habanera* (Ufa, 1937)

*Zu neuen Ufern* (Ufa, 1937)

*Boefje* (*Wilton's Zoo****,*** City Film, 1939)

(As Douglas Sirk)

*Hitler’s Madman* (PRC, 1943)

*Summer Storm* (Angelus Productions, 1944)

*A Scandal in Paris* (Arnold Pressburger Films, 1946)

*Lured* (Hunt Stromberg Productions, 1947)

*Sleep My Love* (Triangle Production, 1948)

*Shockproof* (Columbia, 1949)

*Slightly French* (Columbia, 1949)

*Mystery Submarine* (Universal, 1950)

*The First Legion* ([Sédif Productions](http://www.imdb.com/company/co0030789?ref_=ttco_co_1), 1951)

*Thunder on the Hill* (Universal, 1951)

*The Lady Pays Off* (Universal, 1951)

*Weekend with Father* (Universal, 1951)

*No Room for the Groom* (Universal, 1952)

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (Universal, 1952)

*Meet Me at the Fair* (Universal, 1952)

*Take Me to Town* (Universal, 1953)

*All I Desire* (Universal, 1953)

*Taza, Son of Cochise* (Universal, 1954)

*Magnificent Obsession* (Universal, 1954)

*Sign of the Pagan* (Universal, 1954)

*Captain Lightfoot* (Universal, 1955)

*All That Heaven Allows* (Universal, 1956)

*There’s Always Tomorrow* (Universal, 1956)

*Written on the Wind* (Universal, 1957)

*Battle Hymn* (Universal, 1957)

*Interlude* (Universal, 1957)

*The Tarnished Angels* (Universal, 1958)

*A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (Universal, 1958)

*Imitation of Life* (Universal, 1959)

**Paratextual material:**

**Interview, Douglas Sirk (November 28, 1979) [https://archive.org/details/cbpf\_00006, courtesy of the Pacific Film Archive Audio Recordings Collection, Copyright status unknown]**

**Still from *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), DVD copyright The Criterion Collection, [https://www.dropbox.com/s/7qftgmxdq0zu52i/vlcsnap-2014-05-22-13h06m27s174.png]**

**Still from *Imitation of Life* (1959), DVD copyright Universal Studio Home Entertainment, [https://www.dropbox.com/s/7qftgmxdq0zu52i/vlcsnap-2014-05-22-13h06m27s174.png]**

**Portrait of Detlef Sierck (Douglas Sirk), Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF), seek for rights if necessary, also downloadable from below,**

**[http://admin.d.efg.research-infrastructures.eu/thumbs250-images/http\_\_\_www.filmportal.de\_sites\_default\_files\_D128DF3D527D49B3B1117E48CB14987D\_Sirkx\_Douglas\_02.jpg.thumbnail.png]**

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