Intimations of Lifelessness
Sirk's Ironic Tearjerker

"Where John Stahl transcended the lachrymose dramas of *Imitation of Life* and *Magnificent Obsession* through the force of his naïve sincerity, Sirk transformed the same plots in hilarious comedies through the incisiveness of his dark humor."

~ Andrew Sarris, "The American Cinema," *Film Culture*, (Spring 1963)

This article originally appeared in issue 6 (1977) of the discontinued print edition. This issue, devoted entirely to Douglas Sirk, was published in conjunction with the first major American Sirk retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Long out of print, the entire issue is now available online. An index follows.

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This critical argument is chiefly responsible for whatever critical attention (in English, at least) has been drawn to the films of Douglas Sirk. With the possible exception of Samuel Fuller, Sirk was the least known and most controversial of the directors Sarris proposed for the "second line" of his hierarchy, a rank that included such celebrated names as Ernst Lubitsch and George Cukor and such respected, albeit faded, ones as King Vidor and Frank Borzage.

While the "action" movie had long had its defenders as poor man's Hemingway, most of Sirk's best-known films were "woman's pictures," a genre regarded by male critics as the domain of that mythical incarnation of bad taste, the "shop girl," and even (especially?) disowned by feminists. It was thus an ingenious and understandable ploy to argue that Sirk's films were inside jokes by a fellow sophisticate revenging himself on a fatuous producer (Ross Hunter) and a mass audience too naive to realize it was being insulted.

Sarris must be given credit for calling attention to Sirk at all and for suggesting that his films are best apprehended by seeking a dialectic between the subject matter and the director's execution. But — in the case of *Imitation of Life* at least — the Sarris line remains cryptic, if not misleading: the promised hilarity never materializes.

As *Imitation of Life* is both Sirk's final film and, arguably, his masterpiece, a reexamination of its actual achievement is long overdue.

Sirk's remake and the 1934 John M. Stahl original were both follow-ups to previous moneymakers. The 1959 *Imitation of Life* had been on the Universal schedule for three years prior to actual production as a result of the hugely successful Sirk-Ross Hunter *Magnificent Obsession* (1954). Stahl's version was made to capitalize on a previous Fannie Hurst best-seller, *Back Street*, which he filmed so successfully in 1932 that it became the cornerstone of Universal's soap opera tradition and was itself remade *twice*.

The plots in both versions are generally similar. Two widows, one white and one black, meet and over a ten-year period raise their daughters to adulthood. The black girl is light-
skinned and denies her mother in order to pass for white.

The principal difference between the two films is that in the 1934 picture, the relationship between the two women (Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers) is a working one with Beavers as a sort of Aunt Jemima whose pancake flour recipe Colbert develops into a commercial product. Beavers (who throughout her career had to affect a Southern accent to get roles) defers completely to Colbert and declines a significant share of the company's profits.

In Sirk's version, the white woman, Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), comes to New York to fulfill the dream of her late husband, a stage director in the hinterlands, that she should become a great Broadway star.

Although the story begins in 1947, making the Turner character an actress lends a decidedly anachronistic air — redolent more of the movies of the 1940s. "Lora Meredith" seems calculated to draw on both Turner's soda-fountain-to-stardom iconography and an ancient Metro tradition of epics about girls who brave the urban wolf trap as show girls or models (including Turner's own Ziegfeld Girl and A Life of Her Own).

In general, the workaday world largely disappeared from films of the 1950s (except in the self-consciously realistic Chayevsky dramas), but Sirk takes credit for changing the character to a stage star. One suspects Sirk of using the genre's conventions to undercut the audience's identification with the protagonist.

The pancake business in the first Imitation of Life, like Joan Crawford's restaurant in Mildred Pierce, is a commercial adaptation of women's domestic role and, to an audience presumably weighted with middle-class housewives, an option they could plausibly identify with for a woman suddenly forced to support herself.

But Turner's Lora Meredith is not the usual burning ingenue; she is thirtyish with a seven-year-old daughter, making her aspirations somewhat impractical and self-indulgent. The parallel presence of the black woman further deprives Turner of "rooting interest" by denying her underdog status.

Turner's career and her relationship with Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) begin on the same day on the beach at Coney Island in 1947. Turner loses track of her daughter, Susie, whom she subsequently locates playing with the black woman's daughter, Sara Jane, who is about the same age. A photographer, Steve Archer (John Gavin), takes a mother-and-daughter picture that is bought for an ad and lands Turner further modeling assignments.

These early scenes allow Sirk opportunities for obvious irony. Turner, a would-be actress, does a flea powder commercial with an unruly dog. John Gavin, whose avowed aim is to be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, becomes a successful commercial photographer and an advertising executive. The further irony is that Imitation of Life is
itself so obviously a commercial project, with typical Ross Hunter "pre-sold" casting, i.e., Robert Alda—as a lecherous agent — for the oldsters, Sandra Dee — as the adolescent Susie — for the teenagers.

Turner does indeed go on the stage and has a great career, portrayed in extremely old-fashioned montages of first nights and curtain speeches that bring the story up to 1957. One would never know from these scenes that Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams had ever existed, for the Broadway theater of the 1950s appears to consist exclusively of the polite pre-World War II drawing-room vehicles for the likes of Tallulah Bankhead and "Kit" Cornell. Turner even has a court playwright (Dan O'Herlihy) who writes to her style as S. N. Behrman did for the Lunts. Turner's career epitomizes what Bertold Brecht (whose plays Sirk directed on the European stage) must have meant when he coined the term "culinary theater."

In the meantime, Annie has been functioning as a governess to Turner's daughter, becoming in fact what Louise Beavers was in the old version by demeanor: a domestic servant.

Up to this point, Turner has been one of the coldest and strangest protagonists for a Hollywood film. The film maintains a surprising neutrality toward Turner's values, neither endorsing nor specifically moralizing against them. Sirk intimates a lifelessness at the center of the film with a pervasive ice-blue color scheme encompassing the costuming of Turner and John Gavin and the interior settings. This color scheme extends to the interior of the palatial country home she acquires to crown her success.

By mid-point in the film, Turner has accomplished her professional goals; she is at once the central character, yet extraneous to the narrative. (It is a more subtle version of what Hitchcock did when he killed off Janet Leigh one-third into Psycho.)

The classic woman's picture is the female variant of the archetypal plot defined by Robert Warshow in his "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" essay: working stiff becomes low-level hoodlum, attracted by big cars, fancy shirts, loose women, and shoots his way to the top; lest crime should appear too attractive an example, a peripeteia occurs in the middle of the film — the clean-up at City Hall, the rival mob closes in. The character we have identified with becomes a loser and a life of honest toil emerges as the wiser choice.

If the working-class male was the presumed audience for the gangster film, one supposes the hypothetical patron of the woman's picture to have been a housewife rather than the aggressive career woman the films depicted. As in Mildred Pierce, the first half of Imitation of Life allows the housewife to experience vicariously the excitement of a career — and a glamorous one. Turner wears $1,000,000 worth of jewels in the film and a $78,000 Jean Louis wardrobe — 34 costume changes at an average cost of $2,214.13 each. (Even the film's main title is superimposed over cascading jewels that eventually clog the screen.) Although she is supposed to be a great actress, Turner is utilized to conform to her negative critical reputation as a "clothes horse."
The second half of the classic woman's picture demonstrates that money does not buy happiness, which can only come from being successful in love, thereby reassuring the spectator that she was actually better off than the woman she has been encouraged to envy and enabling her to leave the film reconciled to returning to the domestic situation.

After achieving success, the protagonists may even find themselves competing with their own daughters for men. In *Mildred Pierce*, *Joan Crawford* discovered her daughter (Ann Blyth) in an affair with her stepfather, Crawford's second husband, Zachary Scott. A sanitized version of this operates in *Imitation of Life* as Sandra Dee imagines that her mother's longtime beau, John Gavin, is really in love with her, a notion of which she must be painfully disabused. James Agee found Ann Blyth in *Mildred Pierce* the embodiment of everything he found terrifying in American adolescents and Sandra Dee is a particularly irritating example of the 1950s variety. (Another probable reason for the casting of Lana Turner was to exploit her notoriety in that 1957 scandal when Turner's 15-year-old daughter by a previous marriage stabbed her mother's current lover, mobster Johnny Stompanato, to death, a life-imitating-art episode worthy of a James Cain/Raymond Chandler Southern California potboiler.) It's no wonder feminists hate "woman's pictures." Child-rearing is a no-win situation for career women; whether they neglect their children or spoil them rotten, the result is about the same.

A dogma of American film is that while *becoming* successful is exciting, *being* successful is not. After reaching the top of the modeling profession in *A Life of Her Own* (1950), Turner reflects that she expected there would be more to it; she spends the rest of the film in an affair with a hopelessly married Ray Milland. Woman's pictures seem determined to prove the dictum that adultery is the only tragedy of the middle class. Surely the second half of *Mildred Pierce* founders in contrast to the careerist drive of the first.

And the first half of *Imitation of Life* lacks even *Mildred Pierce*’s authentic smell of kitchen grease; it is a woman's picture reduced to the dry bones of plot convention. But at the point where other films begin to flag, Sirk still has his highest cards waiting to be played. Annie Johnson and her daughter Sara Jane (Susan Kohner) fill the movies' emotional void.

Annie is the self-sacrificing mother dear to tearjerkers but to little purpose. Sara Jane wants something that even Mildred Pierce's money couldn't buy: white skin.

Where it is a common fault of both liberal problem pictures and soap operas to talk their issues to death, *Imitation of Life* excels in explicit directness. When Kohner's boyfriend (Troy Donahue) discovers that she has been passing for white, he beats her mercilessly. Instead of underplaying the melodramatic scene in the name of "good taste," Sirk intensifies it.

Kohner's escape from her racial identity takes the form of dancing in nightclubs; although
the chorus lines are all white, this is a form of show business traditionally open to blacks
as opposed to the "legitimate" theater of Turner's career. (Nevertheless, Lana Turner
provides an indirect role model for Kohner just as Juanita Moore functions as a mother
substitute to Dee.) In further contrast to the subdued colors of Turner's world, the
nightclubs are a garish wonderland of reds and purples and all the gaudiness
stereotypically associated with blacks merchandised to sensation-seeking whites.

Moore chases Kohner to Hollywood, where she finally agrees never to embarrass her
daughter again by being seen with her.

Considered strictly as a problem picture about racial passing, Sirk's version is probably
less honest than Stahl's. (And while Susan Kohner is memorable as Sara Jane, she cannot
dim the memory of Fredi Washington, a light-skinned Negress who brought her own
anxieties to the role, seemingly aware that there was no future for an attractive,
intelligent black woman in the Hollywood of the 1930s.) But Sirk's film surpasses Stahl
in its ambitious schema of American race and class relations.

For me, the key moment in *Imitation of Life* occurs when Juanita Moore, lying in bed
dying, and rejected by her daughter, tells Lana Turner, re: her rivalry with Dee over
Gavin: "You've got a real problem with that girl."

The irony is that Turner's "real problems" are the concerns of the comfortable, recycled
from the imitation-of-life movie melodramas of the 1940s. The problems of soap opera
are individual, personal, and capable of resolution by individual moral choice. (Dee can
be made to see that her crush on Gavin will not be reciprocated.) The problems of Moore
and Kohner are those of survival and identity; they are collective, racial, social, and
open-ended — incapable of resolution within the conventions of the woman's picture.
Sirk employs the convention to emphasize the limitations of those conventions and to
show the need for a larger, more ideological world-view. No wonder Sirk said of
*Imitation of Life*: "I would have made it for the title alone."

It is only with Annie's death that Sara Jane again acknowledges her mother. For the
funeral scene, Sirk pulls out all the stops, even to Mahalia Jackson singing "Trouble of
the World." Yet all the brilliant hues of the stained-glass windows and floral
arrangements serve to throw into relief the most potent visual elements in this color film
about color that are black and white: the white hearse requested by Annie, the white
casket upon which Sara Jane flings herself hysterically when she finally realizes the
emotional cost of this posthumous whiteness. As a final inversion, the white women,
Turner and Dee, and Kohner, who wanted to be white, are reunited in Turner's black
Chrysler limousine, temporarily equalized by the black of mourning.

The Sarris "camp" or self-parody theory underestimates the extent to which the finale of
*Imitation of Life* is genuinely moving even when one is aware of Sirk's ideas and
methods.
And the problem with interpreting Sirk's style in terms of Brechtian "distancing" or "alienation" effects is that *Imitation of Life* was Universal's highest-grossing picture to that time, despite bad reviews.

The woman's picture had been in retreat since the 1940s and was no longer sure-fire. Ross Hunter's success in the field was partly a monopoly-by-default such as the Disney organization enjoys today.

So where did the audience come from? When demographic research into the motion picture audience began to include race in the late 1960s, the industry was stunned to learn that 30 percent of the audience was black — out of all proportion to the population and higher than anyone had suspected.

In the South, Universal booked the film "day-and-date" in white and Negro theatres — the Jim Crow circuit normally got the dregs or important films only at the end-of-run — to unprecedented business. The picture was also a natural for racially mixed audiences in big-city palaces like New York's Roxy. (Although Pittsburgh newspapers rejected ad mats with the catch-line "I'm going to pass for white.")

In the racial upheavals of the next decade, the Jim Crow circuit would disappear as, ironically, whites would avoid the downtowns, leaving the remaining large theatres increasingly to blacks. The "Black Is Beautiful" slogan would ease, outwardly at least, the torture of an inescapable, unwanted identification.

But for 1959, *Imitation of Life* provided white audiences with a novel twist on a familiar soap opera plot and black audiences (for whom Kohner's feelings provided a highly accurate imitation of life) with a rare emotional release.

### Notes
1. Although he subtly undercuts her throughout the film, Lana Turner remained steadfastly enthusiastic about her treatment at Sirk's hands. Appearing in John Springer's "Legendary Ladies" series at New York's Town Hall in 1975, Turner replied to a question (from Jeanine Basinger) about her sole experience with Sirk: "Douglas Sirk. Such a gentle man. Very quiet... but the wheels were going all the time. But when he would give you direction it was not (like some have done who didn't last long) sitting in a chair saying 'Hey babe! Do this, and that, and the other thing.' Mr. Sirk would ask, 'May I speak with you?' and sit down and say, 'I think this should be done this way. And how do you feel about it? Do you feel it that way?' He didn't yell or throw his weight around. Everyone had the most marvelous respect for him because he was a true craftsman."