

## ***All That Heaven Allows* (US 1955)**

*All That Heaven Allows* is perhaps now the most celebrated of Sirk's films and certainly the best known. There are several reasons why this is the case. In 1955 after nearly five years at Universal, Sirk was feeling secure with his collaborators and his star Rock Hudson. The studio was very pleased with him and had just had great commercial success with his previous film *Magnificent Obsession*, also starring Hudson and Jane Wyman. Studios like nothing better than a follow-up to a successful picture with the same stars in the same genre.

However, reviewers and critics were still generally dismissive of melodramas, especially female-centred melodramas or 'weepies' as they were commonly termed. As we know the critics and film scholars began to reconsider Sirk and his films in the 1960s in France and in the UK, Germany and the US in the 1970s and it was *All That Heaven Allows* that became the focus of that re-appraisal fuelled by two events in the UK. The Sirk Retrospective at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1972 (which Sirk attended) and a special issue of the academic journal *Screen* in 1971 drove scholarly interest and in 1974, Laura Mulvey's review of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Fear Eats the Soul* (1972), a clear response to Sirk's film, was published in *Spare Rib* magazine, an important outlet for feminist writing and discussion which attracted a wide readership at the time.

Gradually the interest in *All That Heaven Allows* began to grow and to extend to other films that Sirk made at Universal, primarily those also in colour and featuring major stars in melodramas – *Magnificent Obsession*, *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life*. Other prominent films from Sirk's output at Universal were in black and white and seen as not so interesting at first because of Sirk's fascination with colour. Lack of availability also hindered some titles.

### **What did feminist film scholars see in the film?**

On one level the film created interest simply because it was a successful film that women in the audience enjoyed despite what critics thought and it was also written by a woman, Peggy Thompson from an original idea by Edna L. Lee and Harry Lee. Interest in this film was referred back to the 'woman's picture' of the 1940s and revived interest in feminist thinking about cinema more generally. However, the specific interest in Sirk and in his family melodramas centred upon the suggestion that Sirk was able to subvert the way in which these genre films for women were seen as creating meaning in conventional ways. It was



**director:** Douglas Sirk  
**producers:** Ross Hunter  
**writers:** Peggy Thompson, Edna and Harry Lee  
**music:** Frank Skinner  
**camera:** Russell Metty  
**film editor:** Frank Gross  
**art direction:** Alexander Golitzen and Eric Orbom  
**set decoration:** Russell Gausman and Julia Heron  
**costume design:** Bill Thomas  
**runtime:** 89 mins

The film was screened in various ratios from 1.37:1 up to 2.00:1. The Criterion Blu-ray is presented at 1.75:1 as the 'most frequently used ratio' during a period when cinemas were still adjusting to widescreen.

### **Cast**

Jane Wyman	Cary Scott
Rock Hudson	Ron Kirby
Agnes Moorehead	Sara Warren
Conrad Nagel	Harvey
Virginia Grey	Alida Anderson
Goria Talbott	Kay Scott
William Reynolds	Ned Scott
Jacqueline de Wit	Mona Plash
Charles Drake	Mick Anderson

argued that Sirk intended a social critique of the Eisenhower era and the rapid growth of an affluent bourgeoisie in the growing suburbs of America. He did this through the use of *mise en scène*, colour, camerawork and lighting and the use of music. It was through the 'excessive' use of these elements that melodrama explored the emotions displayed by characters and generated through their interactions.

Particular scenes have been picked out and analysed. Perhaps the most prominent example is the scene in which Cary talks to her daughter Kay in the main room of the house when the TV set that Kay and Ned have bought for their mother is delivered. The shot is composed so that an image of Cary is reflected within the frame of the TV set. A very similar sequence is included with a different, but just as effective image in Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul*. There are several other such moments and the film has proved immensely rich as a text to be studied. The interest in Sirk from film scholars came originally from the *auteurists* of *Cahiers du cinéma* and as the interest grew he became bracketed with Nicholas Ray and Vincente Minnelli as an *auteur* who created cinematic melodramas with *mise en scène* to the fore. More recently, as *auteurism* has receded in film scholarship (even if it still persists in film journalism), questions have been raised about the study of directors like Sirk.

This begins with Sirk being seen as a contract director at Universal. He didn't choose the films he worked on, they were studio picks and three of them were studio properties that had been made before in the 1930s. So these are not 'personal films' in the original sense of the *auteur* polemic. Sirk did not write the scripts, though sometimes he drew on 'treatments' he had made which someone else turned into a screenplay.

A possible contradiction here is that Sirk himself didn't really approve of 'message pictures'. He thought it best if audiences worked things out for themselves rather than be given direct messages by the filmmakers. Given the strength of some of the 'excessive' moments in *All That*

*Heaven Allows*, this seems something of a conundrum.

The word often used about Sirk's films is 'ironic' but some scholars and critics point to the sense of real affection and real love between characters that Sirk is able to show.

Clearly, it isn't easy to decide exactly what Sirk's aims are in his treatment of the romance between Cary and Ron.

One point which perhaps sums up Sirk's experience in Hollywood is his anecdote about the titles of his films. Sirk was very interested in titles. He believed they could set up a story in terms of what the narrative might do. He used the example of his 1953 melodrama with Barbara Stanwyck, in which a young mother in effect runs away to become an actor, leaving her husband and small children behind. She returns after several years for a brief visit to see her daughter perform in a school play. The original novel was titled *Stopover*, which Sirk thought an excellent title. The studio changed it to *All I Desire*. He tells us that with *All That Heaven Allows*, the studio was delighted, thinking the title promised every happiness, whereas he thought that 'heaven' was stingy and restrictive, forcing the lovers through various tough decisions.

Viewers have been similarly divided in the meaning associated with the deer at the end of the film. Perhaps it is associated with ideas about *Walden*, the book by Henry David Thoreau (1854) outlining his experience living 'the simple life' in the woods. Sirk makes sure the book is clearly displayed. Sirk was very well read and he was genuinely interested in American culture. In the *The Tarnished Angels*, he makes a similar literary reference to Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918). Cary is the central character in *All That Heaven Allows*. Rock Hudson was Sirk's 'star', but although he saw much more in Hudson, his concern was to have a star in order to get the budget. In most of his films it is the central female character who interests him most.

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