ESSENTIAL DISCRIMINATIONS: CLOSE READING AND DOUGLAS SIRK

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................................... 4

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................. 7

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ 8

CHAPTER

1 WHAT HAPPENED TO FILM CRITICISM? .................................................................................... 10

   Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 10
   Filmmaking Choices and Evaluation ............................................................................................. 11
   The Function of Criticism ............................................................................................................. 11
   Meaningful versus Successful ......................................................................................................... 12
   The History of Thematic Readings ................................................................................................ 15
   Film as Film .................................................................................................................................. 20
   The Two Routes .............................................................................................................................. 22
   Inflation Threatens ....................................................................................................................... 31
   Why Douglas Sirk? ......................................................................................................................... 36
   Teaching ....................................................................................................................................... 40

2 THE INSPIRED AND THE PARNASSIAN IN ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS .................. 45

   Sirk’s Parnassian ............................................................................................................................ 52
   All That Heaven Allows ............................................................................................................... 59
       Scene One: At the Train Station .................................................................................................. 63
       Scene Two: The Christmas Tree Lot .......................................................................................... 65
       Scene Three: The Christmas Carolers ....................................................................................... 67
       Scene Four: Christmas Morning ............................................................................................... 75
   Inspired Filmmaking ..................................................................................................................... 81
   Sirk Blackmailed ........................................................................................................................... 86

3 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH A FILM? ......................................................................... 88

   Pedagogical Problems .................................................................................................................. 89
       Hasty Evaluation ....................................................................................................................... 89
       Mere Entertainment .................................................................................................................... 92
       Initial Response and the Literary Level ....................................................................................... 93
       The Speed of Film ..................................................................................................................... 98
       The Problem of Indifference .................................................................................................... 100
   Definitions and Examples ............................................................................................................ 102
   Description and Filmmaking Choices .......................................................................................... 111
   Imitation of Life ............................................................................................................................ 114
4 ECONOMY AND EMOTION IN DOUGLAS SIRK’S SMALL-TOWN TETRALOGY 134

Sirk and Authorship ........................................................................................................ 134
The Films ........................................................................................................................ 142
   Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952) ........................................................................ 142
   Meet Me at the Fair (1953) ...................................................................................... 143
   Take Me to Town (1953) .......................................................................................... 145
   All I Desire (1953) .................................................................................................... 148
Economy ............................................................................................................................ 149
Camera Movement ........................................................................................................... 156
   Has Anybody Seen My Gal? ...................................................................................... 156
   Meet Me at the Fair .................................................................................................... 157
   Take Me to Town ........................................................................................................ 158
   All I Desire ................................................................................................................ 160
Framing ............................................................................................................................. 163
   Has Anybody Seen My Gal? ...................................................................................... 164
   All I Desire ................................................................................................................ 165
   There’s Always Tomorrow ......................................................................................... 166
Cutting and Shot Length ................................................................................................. 172
   Has Anybody Seen My Gal? ...................................................................................... 173
   Meet Me at the Fair .................................................................................................... 174
   All I Desire ................................................................................................................ 176

5 “YOU ONLY NEED ONE …” ......................................................................................... 181

LIST OF REFERENCES ..................................................................................................... 185

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................ 191
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Cary’s responses</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>Shot One (14 seconds)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Shot Two (3.5 seconds)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Shot Three (7.5 seconds)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>Shot Four (3.5 seconds)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>Shot Five (7.5 seconds)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-7</td>
<td>Shot Six (17 seconds)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-8</td>
<td>Continuity Error</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-9</td>
<td>Cary’s reflection</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>Cary’s reactions</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-11</td>
<td>Window shots</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>The intrusive extra</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Vermilion at the window</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-2</td>
<td>A single shot of Naomi’s dressing room</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-3</td>
<td>The camera conceals Vermilion</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-4</td>
<td>Establishing shot</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Dinner-table blocking</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>Shot nine breakdown</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>Shots nine and seventeen</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>Shot nineteen</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-9</td>
<td>Breakdown of a single shot of Naomi and Joyce</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I argue that evaluative film criticism can be a *rigorous* and legitimate academic practice. Film criticism provides a written history of what film writers and scholars value, and it has historically entailed the evaluation of a film’s aesthetic achievement. But once Film Studies became institutionalized as a discipline, it left the job of evaluation to journalistic film reviewers, who lacked the time, space, and inclination to do the detailed work of close reading that criticism demanded. I first define film criticism as a specific practice, distinct from history, theory, and reviewing, and with historical connections to the broader field of literary criticism. Next, I explore criticism’s historical role in Film Studies, drawing especially on the writings of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France and *Movie* in England. Finally, I seek to reclaim criticism for academic Film Studies by asking what the discipline can gain—especially in the classroom setting—by reviving criticism today.

My dissertation is a work of film criticism, with evaluation-through-formal-analysis as its central task, and I use the American films of Douglas Sirk as a test case. With minor exceptions, critics paid very little attention to Sirk’s films until the later, ideological era of film study. As a result, his work never received the extensive formal analysis that the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray, or Howard Hawks did from French and
British auteurists. In addition, Sirk’s reputation within Film Studies rests on merely a few of his films, a selection that has led to an insufficient, even inflated, view of his talent. I use formal analysis to open up a film that seems critically exhausted (All That Heaven Allows); to examine the role of an ordinary, seemingly insignificant, moment in a film of extraordinarily melodramatic scenes (Imitation of Life); and to provide a more accurate evaluation of Sirk’s oeuvre by exploring how he treats similar filmmaking choices (of framing, camera movement, and cutting) in films that have received almost no critical attention (Has Anybody Seen My Gal, Meet Me at the Fair, Take Me to Town, and All I Desire).
CHAPTER 1
WHAT HAPPENED TO FILM CRITICISM?

Introduction

Peter Harcourt describes the process by which great films manage to stay alive for successive generations as a miracle (25). For criticism to accomplish this feat proves even more difficult—for a certain insight or observation to keep on affecting or altering the way its readers perceive a film. As I wrote each chapter of this dissertation, the question of “So what?” consistently haunted me. Why does close-reading matter? Of what use is evaluation? Why should any reader bother with detailed analyses of Douglas Sirk’s films? I took comfort, though, when I recognized this same anxiety in a critic whom I admire. In his 2003 prologue to the revised edition of *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), Robin Wood reflects on the influence his criticism had on film studies. In the last half of his career, Wood laments the fact that his most personal criticism generated hardly any response and had no real effect on film culture. Part of the problem, he suggests, stems from the fact that criticism itself—the serious dialogue among a film, one’s personal response, and the responses of others—has ceased to be a legitimate practice: “In our present age, with criticism virtually expelled from the higher reaches of intellectual/academic activity, it has become thoroughly debased, the preserve of ‘popular’ journalism; there is almost no ‘criticism’ any more…” (xiv). Yet if his work matters little to others, it still remains a personal accomplishment: “The value of the individual work is no longer an issue, it ‘doesn’t matter.’ But it matters to me” (xliiv). So while this dissertation contains an elaborate defense of criticism, close reading, and evaluation, I often feel that Wood’s reason, too, must be my personal justification for this project: it matters to me.
But it matters to the discipline as well. What happened to formal analysis and evaluative criticism in film studies? What have we lost by abandoning these methods? What can we gain by reviving such practices today? To answer these questions comprehensively would itself require a lengthy project, and the history of film study is far too varied to attempt a general, linear account of how formalism and evaluation have fallen out of style. But there are nine specific issues that have influenced this project.

**Filmmaking Choices and Evaluation**

One central idea provides the foundation for this entire work, and I can state it simply: Filmmakers make choices as they find solutions for a filmmaking problem at hand, and these choices entail value judgments; a camera angle is more or less good, a take is more or less successful, and so on. These choices, in turn, serve a two-fold critical function: (1) they give the critic concrete material to evaluate; and (2) they allow the critic to evaluate films in a way that corresponds to how films actually get made. Thus, an intimate, and I argue, inexorable, link exists connecting filmmaking, formal analysis, evaluation, and our task as critics and teachers.

**The Function of Criticism**

This project is a work of film criticism, with evaluation through formal analysis as its central task. This fact distinguishes my writing from historical, theoretical, journalistic, or socio-ideological study. If, in 1952, F.R. Leavis could write that criticism is a pursuit neither commonly practiced nor favored, the situation has only worsened sixty years later (*Common Pursuit* vi). The fault lies not so much with other competing methods as it does with the laziness and imprecision of critics who fail to do the close analysis that must accompany any legitimate evaluation. The problem, then, is not with evaluation itself, but with the hasty, unreflective nature of those value judgments.
My work takes its cue from an important insight Peter Wollen offers in his essay “The Canon:”

I remain deeply skeptical about “relativistic” theories of taste, which tend to deny any intersubjective sense to words like “good” or “better” (let alone “best”), despite the fact that both producers and consumers of art constantly use an unreflective discourse of “taste” and “value.” Film-makers decide that this take or this edit is the “best,” they try to make their film as “good” as possible. Film spectators discuss among themselves how “good” this or that film is, say at a festival, and point out what was “wrong” with work they did not appreciate. Just subjective opinions? (217).

One can identify a crucial imperative within Wollen’s passage: to make these unreflective evaluations articulate. The critic can do so by anchoring his or her value judgments to a film’s details (or choices). The critic’s task, then, is linguistic in nature: to translate clearly and precisely one’s response to a given work’s concrete realization.

Leavis summarized his critical goal in this way:

The cogency I hoped to achieve was to be for other readers of poetry—the readers of poetry as such. I hoped, by putting in front of them, in a criticism that should keep as close to the concrete as possible, my own developed ‘coherence of response,’ to get them to agree (with no doubt, critical qualifications) that [the conclusions I make], when they interrogated their experience, look like that to them also (214).

I similarly hope that those who watch the films I discuss can read my work and say, “Yes, the film does work in this way.” Or since I focus on Douglas Sirk, I want to give an account of Sirk and his films that either accords with a viewer’s own experience or enables him or her to respond more fully. As Leavis comments, the critic should welcome readers who argue with or qualify his own ideas; through that process, his response becomes even sharper.

**Meaningful versus Successful**

In *The American Cinema*, Andrew Sarris distinguishes between the meaningful and the successful: “All that is meaningful is not necessarily successful” (35). In this
divide, film criticism sides with successful: moments, scenes, and films of exceptional quality. Anything can have meaning, but success marks a higher achievement. To make this distinction clearer, I suggest looking at similar scenes from two Sirk films, Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952) and All That Heaven Allows (1955). Each scene has the same goal: to show the ignorance, vanity, and emptiness of the film’s townspeople as they gossip about a May-December romance. I offer only a brief sketch of each scene to make my point.

Late in Has Anybody Seen My Gal, Mr. Smith (Charles Coburn), an older man, attempts to play Cupid for a young couple, Millicent (Piper Laurie) and Dan (Rock Hudson), at a movie theater. When his plan fails and Dan storms out of the theater, Mr. Smith puts his arm around Millicent to console her. As he does so, two gossips, a husband and wife, assume Mr. Smith is making at pass at Millicent, and the word soon spreads to her family when the couple attends a party later that evening at the home of Millicent’s parents. As the partygoers discuss the rumor of the illicit affair, they do not so much have a conversation as simply deliver exaggerations like “Our little Millicent, necking in public, and with an old man”; “This man is evidently a menace to the entire community”; and “It would be a very simple matter for an old scoundrel like him to turn the head of an innocent child.” Statements like these evince a cartoonish psychology, as the film overcompensates in poor dialogue for what it lacks in complexity of performance and mise-en-scène.

In All That Heaven Allows, we find a scene similar in content, but remarkably different in execution. Here, an upper-middle class widow, Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), introduces her young, working-class boyfriend, Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), to her friends
for the first time; they attend a party given by Cary’s best friend, Sarah (Agnes Moorehead), to celebrate the engagement of another couple—an older man and a young, vapid, gold-digger. Before Cary and Ron even arrive, various characters peer through the curtains and gossip as they await the “show.” Sirk structures the scene around various oppositions: (1) the hypocrisy surrounding May-December romances: they are acceptable only if the woman is younger; (2) the clash of classes: Ron is looked down upon because of his profession (gardener) and the car he drives; and (3) most interestingly, the characters’ mixed responses (as opposed to the one-sidedness in Has Anybody Seen My Gal): some characters clearly disapprove, but most feel jealous—the women, of Cary, and the men, of Ron. This scene, though, achieves its full significance only by its relation to another scene earlier in the film: the house party given by Ron’s friends, a party characterized by complete acceptance; a warm, familial atmosphere; and a mixture of ages, classes, and ethnicities. Thus not only does the scene itself have a structure, but it fits into a larger structure within the film.

Both scenes are equally meaningful. For example, both offer material to the critic interested in gender, age, or class. Or if thematic consistency interested a critic, he or she could use these scenes to demonstrate Sirk’s ongoing critique of bourgeois culture. In other words, both scenes provide evidence that can become charged with meaning by whatever reading, interpretation, or framework a scholar applies. For these critics, value matters to the extent that the films accord with the framework he or she uses. For example, if class were the issue, perhaps one would identify one film as more progressive than the other. But the films’ value as films would be a non-issue, and no disinterested evaluation would occur.
Both scenes, however, are not successful. The scene from *All That Heaven Allows* is, quite simply, better and more fully realized than the one in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*. Therefore, it merits the attention one affords it; when I watch the scene from *My Gal*, its flatness strikes me, and nothing about the scene encourages me to consider it further. On the other hand, repeated viewings of *All That Heaven Allows* suggest the scene’s richness and the profitability of close scrutiny. Within this work, I concern myself with identifying successful achievements because they reward the critic’s attentiveness. In no way do I believe that all film writing must be evaluative or that social or historical concerns should play no role in film studies. But in film criticism, all external approaches to a film are secondary.

**The History of Thematic Readings**

Scholars variously use the term “thematic,” so I must clarify how I employ it here. I use “thematic” when discussing any general approach (historical, theoretical, ideological, sociological, etc.) that emphasizes a film’s content or ideas (what it says) over its form (how it works). Though I argue for formal analysis and the study of film as film, I take a dialectical view of film studies’ methodologies: different eras require different methods. The decision to look at films in close detail is only partially a personal preference; it is historically determined as well. Repeated viewings of films—and close readings of them—were difficult, if not impossible, before home video and the ability to pause, fast-forward, and rewind. Thus, thematic, content-based criticism resulted because critics lacked the tools so widely available today. Despite the historical circumstances, certain critics, such as those at *Movie*, still managed to produce detailed close-readings in the pre-home video era.
Thematic, and specifically, sociological, criticism established institutionalized film study in America began when the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) established its film library in 1935, with Iris Barry as its curator. Though various film libraries and film museums had been organized and planned over the previous twenty years, MoMA had the first successful and lasting film archive in the United States. The secret to its success, however, was the museum’s emphasis on film’s sociological, rather than aesthetic, importance. As Peter Decherney observes, “From the mid-1930s through the end of World War II, MoMA’s film department worked under direct contract for the communication research wing of the Rockefeller Foundation and later for government intelligence agencies…” (124). Thus, MoMA worked to establish Hollywood filmmaking as the American, democratic art form, and the library had to remain politically neutral when not overtly pro-American. To accomplish this task, “MoMA tried hard to appear neutral at first by promoting the film staff as sociologists rather than taste makers or ideologues” (Decherney 133). Decherney later remarks,

MoMA’s sociological approach to film was relatively undefined. The invocation of sociology served largely to exempt MoMA from sticky aesthetic debates, on the one hand, and to disavow political responsibility for presenting European and Soviet films during the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin on the other (133).

Barry would collect the films of Eisenstein and Riefenstahl but insist these were “films of fact” that could teach Americans how Soviets and Nazis lived and thought, ignoring any potential aesthetic value the films might possess (Decherney 142).

While the film library was the nucleus of U.S. World War II government-sponsored propaganda, a sociological approach existed even outside propagandistic purposes. Decherney discusses an interesting—and telling—problem encountered at the museum’s first film programs:
We are so used to renting videos and watching vintage movie channels today that it is surprising to realize how ephemeral films seemed in 1935, and how resistant the Film Library’s first audiences were to films made just two or three years earlier. The most common observation reporters made about MoMA’s early programs was that audiences tended to laugh at silent films. Film Library publications continually combated the laughter by insisting on the sociological rather than the artistic importance of film (133).

Thus, to cope with the evolving tastes of moviegoing audiences, thematic readings (sociological, ideological, historical) replaced formal, aesthetic ones as keys to unlocking and to approaching cinema’s past. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, a film’s datedness provides a constant obstacle in the film studies classroom; students often respond to classical Hollywood films with a dismissive laughter that regards the films more as quaint than aesthetically viable. Melodrama is particularly susceptible to this response, and not surprisingly, Sirk criticism has taken the same approach that MoMA did with silent film: insisting on the ideological significance of Sirk’s films and not on their aesthetic value. In other words, this position implies, one cannot take Sirk’s films seriously as films, but their ideas have value—a view that this dissertation vehemently opposes.

Although I identify MoMA as the institutional origin of thematic film study, its library played an important disciplinary role; MoMA put together circulating rental programs that fed the emerging film societies at many universities (Polan 173). As Dana Polan writes, MoMA “established new possibilities for the academic study of cinema. In particular, MoMA’s rentable series of historic films offered universities a set of supposedly canonical works around which courses could be organized” (15). As a result, “virtually overnight there was a proliferation of scattered courses in film appreciation or film history that were based on the MoMA collection and that regularized the study of film in standard patterns that would still be in place when universities came
more systemically to introduce film curricula in the 1960s” (Polan 16). While MoMA’s methodology would eventually prove limiting, it was essential in the discipline’s foundation.

The idea of “reading” a film figures centrally in thematic approaches, and this method often overlooks formal complexity. Ellen Rooney cites several consequences that occur when a critic approaches a text thematically rather than formally: “the reduction of every text to its ideological or historical context, or to an exemplar of a prior theory (content)—form reduced to an epiphenomenon; the rapid exhausting of the entire roster of political and theoretical problematics ‘applied’ in this manner…; and the generalization of reading-as-paraphrase” (26). The practice of reading-as-paraphrase proves most damaging, overlooking a film’s details and treating movies as evidence for some larger historical, theoretical, or sociological argument. This issue, I argue, is one of respect: if, as Robin Wood comments, “the life of a film is in its detail,” then a critic cannot do justice to a work without engaging with film form (Personal Views 251). Rooney forcefully makes this very argument:

Formalism is a matter not of barring thematizations but of refusing to reduce reading entirely to the elucidation, essentially the paraphrase, of themes—theoretical, ideological, or humanistic. … When the text-to-be-read (whatever its genre) is engaged only to confirm the prior insights of a theoretical problematic, reading is reduced to reiteration and becomes quite literally beside the point. One might say that we overlook most of the work of any text if the only formal feature we can discern in it is a reflected theme, the mirror image of a theory that is, by comparison to the belated and all-too-predictable text, seen as all-knowing and, just as important, as complete (29-30).

Thematic readings would not be a problem if they were not so influential. At one point, for example, it was novel to call Sirk’s films progressive, to say that what looks like melodramatic trash is actually a sustained critique of the American family. But this
reading of Sirk's films set in forty years ago and has become the default mode of Sirk criticism. Once a stable set of Sirkian themes became established (that is, the question of meaning was settled), no critic has challenged them.

In film studies, a major origin of this thematic method occurred in 1941 when MoMA sponsored Siegfried Kracauer to emigrate to America and produce a study of Nazi propaganda, *From Caligari to Hitler*, which proposed that a national psychology/identity could be read through German films (Decherney 152). While many have criticized Kracauer's approach as naïve, much cultural study has not abandoned Kracauer's method. As George Levine laments, "The job of the critic [today] is not to study literature but to study culture—a disciplinary responsibility hitherto assigned to anthropology" (2). Likewise, Kracauer sought not to produce new knowledge of the films he studied, but instead new knowledge about national identity and culture.

In *Making Meaning*, David Bordwell charts how the basic process of "reading a film" that we see in Kracauer continues in the work of contemporary film scholars. According to Bordwell, film scholars study two types of meaning: implicit and symptomatic. Implicit meanings are "covert, symbolic" meanings through which a film speaks indirectly (Bordwell 8). Bordwell gives the name "thematic explication" or "explicatory" criticism to writing that identifies and interprets implicit meanings. But from the 1970s until the present era, symptomatic interpretation has been central. For Bordwell, symptomatic meanings are involuntary and unintentional meanings that arise from either a filmmaker's obsessions or from "economic, political, or ideological processes" (9). Symptomatic meanings are hidden, and the process of interpretation unearths and constructs these meanings, as if the critic were psychoanalyzing the text.
Bordwell describes the mold that most symptomatic interpretations fit: “An ‘objectively’ analyzable film secreting something significant about the culture which produces or consumes it: since the 1940s, this has been the text constructed by the most influential versions of symptomatic criticism” (73). This description fits Kracauer’s method exactly; MoMA and Kracauer’s goal was to use a method on German cinema that could be used on other national cinemas as well: to read the films symptomatically or allegorically as both diagnosing and describing national maladies. Bordwell identifies the same problem with this method as Rooney does: “‘It is foreknowledge of the meaning to be discovered that guides the interpretation.’ Many of a film’s nuances now go unremarked because the interpretive optic in force has virtually no way to register them. A more concrete way to put the charge is to say that in recent film studies interpreters have paid scarcely any attention to form and style” (260). Likewise, the guiding idea that Sirk’s films are ideologically progressive has become a banal starting point and has kept viewers and critics from considering that Sirk’s films do anything else.

Film as Film

In “Criticism and Philosophy,” F. R. Leavis defends his close-reading method by distinguishing between the critic’s concern and the philosopher’s. He uses the example of Romantic poetry to make the distinction. Leavis addresses Rene Wellek’s accusation that Leavis largely rejects Romantic poets because he finds “the romantic view of the world” unsuitable. Leavis takes this opportunity to reiterate that his business as a critic is with poetry—not ideas (the business of the philosopher):

“The romantic view of the world,” a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others—yes, I have heard of it; but what interest can it have for the literary critic? For the critic, for the reader whose primary interest is in poetry, those three poets are so radically different, immediately and finally, from one another that the offer to assimilate them in a common philosophy
can only suggest the irrelevance of the philosophical approach (*Common Pursuit* 216).

Leavis draws a clear line between those who deal with poetry as poetry and those who use poetry to abstract ideas from it. Though Leavis’s hardline stance offends many scholars, he does not make this claim with an oppositional attitude; rather, he wants to say that criticism has a limited scope—and not that it is the only legitimate field of literary study. Likewise, in film studies, one can study film historically, theoretically, or sociologically—all fruitful approaches. Film criticism is simply the field in which those who approach films aesthetically can practice. To do a psychoanalytical reading of *Imitation of Life* is not a wrong or unworthy pursuit—it is just not film criticism.

Later in the same essay, Leavis responds to Wellek’s attempt to read a Blake poem as “a text of symbolical philosophy,” and he remarks, “The confidence of his paraphrase made me open my eyes. It is a philosopher’s confidence—the confidence of one who in the double strength of philosophic training and a knowledge of Blake’s system ignores the working of poetry” (Leavis 217). Significantly, Leavis uses the verb “ignores,” which refers to attention, and not a verb that refers to vision or understanding. Consider how the sentence would change if it read, “One who … cannot see the working of poetry” or “cannot understand the working of poetry.” To adapt this phrasing for film study, we might say that the issue is not that the working of film hides beneath a film’s surface or that a film possesses an obscure or abstract meaning, but simply that we do not notice, that we do not pay attention to what is right before our eyes. Film criticism has long ignored the surface of a film, but I want to write “about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of” (Perkins, “Must We Say” 4). The film critic studies the concrete details available for all to notice and evaluate.
To approach film as film does not mean that one must discount external knowledge. For Leavis,

[The critic] is concerned with the work in front of him as something that should contain within itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. The more experience—experience of life and literature together—he brings to bear on it the better, of course; and it is true that extraneous information may make him more perceptive. But the business of critical intelligence will remain what it was: to ensure relevance of response and to determine what is actually *there* in the work of art (224-225).

In the study of classical Hollywood cinema, one works with the knowledge of Hollywood’s history, its continuity style, and its generic conventions always in one’s mind. Such knowledge inevitably enhances one’s ability to analyze and evaluate the films one studies. But as much as I may know about the conventions of melodrama, for example, and can see the principles at work in the films of various directors, the distinctiveness of individual directors and films confronts me. John M. Stahl, Vincente Minnelli, and Douglas Sirk all directed melodramas and worked within a studio system and its regulated filmmaking practices. Yet however much they have in common, these directors “are so radically different, immediately and finally, from one another” that we, as critics, have our work to do: to analyze and discriminate among the various achievements—not merely between different directors, but within each director’s oeuvre (Leavis 216).

**The Two Routes**

Early film study, when not instructional, was thematic and sociological—but out of necessity. On the one hand, the sociological approach justified the usefulness of film study. On the other hand, the technology was not available for easy close analysis. Given this history, we see that an eventual shift to concerns for film form over film content was inevitable; as Andrew Sarris remarks, auteurism—and its renewed
(apolitical) interest in visual style—reacts against thematic, sociological criticism—the kind typified by MoMA’s work. In “Toward a Theory of Film History,” Sarris comments, “Auteur criticism is a reaction against sociological criticism that enthroned the what against the how” (36). Sarris’s *The American Cinema* organizes film history into a history of directors, selected by taste and judgment. Sarris prefers this method to the sociological one, which sorts through film history and organizes films “clustered around an idea” (20).

The rise and fall of auteurist criticism is a well-known story: the critics writing at *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France and at *Movie* in England both renewed an interest in film form and inculcated a new-found respect for classical Hollywood cinema. But by the late 1960s, certain excesses and limitations lead to auteurism’s eclipse by more politically-based and “scientific” methodologies. As the humanities became newly politicized after May 1968, many now viewed the auteurists’ impressionism and apolitical approach as reactionary and politically irresponsible. Whereas an auteurist would find value in a film based on the director’s personal imprint (a quality difficult, if not impossible, to measure), critics now assessed a film’s value on its political subversiveness or progressiveness. Criticism largely became thematic, and formal qualities had value only insofar as they worked against the grain of a film’s reactionary surface. Critics still valued the same auteurs (John Ford, Nicholas Ray, Howard Hawks, etc.), but only to the extent that their work implicitly challenged the dominant ideology.

During this era, the humanities strove to become more like the sciences, and formalist, auteurist criticism simply was not objective and scientific enough. It is no surprise, then, that auteurism soon gave way to auteur-structuralism, an attempt to unite
auteurist study with the insights of structural linguistics. Auteur-structuralism emerged in the mid-to-late 1960s with scholars associated with the British Film Institute (Peter Wollen, Jim Kitses, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Nowell-Smith outlines their method: “The purpose of criticism becomes therefore to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author’s work its particular structure…” (Bordwell 79). One no longer searches for a film’s meaning on the surface, but unearths it. Although Nowell-Smith mentions that these patterns can be stylistic as well as thematic, “structuralism in the hands of the BFI writers remained resolutely thematic” (Bordwell 82). Bordwell continues, “Although Wollen distinguishes between a style-centered auteur criticism and one devoted to revealing a core of ‘thematic motifs,’ he puts the former aside. Indeed, in quoting Nowell-Smith on deep structures, he omits the remarks that the work’s motifs ‘may be stylistic or thematic’” (82). Thus, auteurism, which began as a reaction against thematic criticism, itself became thematic, and form lost its place again.

This narrative, while not inaccurate, makes formalism seem like a victim of the times—one methodology replacing another. What has not received attention, however, are the internal reasons, specific practices within the field of formalist film criticism itself that lead to its demise. My approach will be slightly different: I visit a certain unexplored moment in Anglo-American formalist criticism when evaluation became divorced from formal analysis.

In his 1960 essay, “The French Line,” Richard Roud outlines key problems with Cahiers’ auteurist method and suggests how film criticism could benefit from its method
while correcting its faults. In 1962, Roud’s essay received two responses, from Ian Cameron (co-founder and editor of *Movie*) and Andrew Sarris. Both *Movie* and Sarris address the method and goal of formalist criticism, but each offers a different route for the formalist critic to pursue: formal analysis without (explicit) evaluation, or evaluation without formal analysis. In the end, though, Sarris’s method will prove far more influential, while *Movie*’s method has never been popular outside of England.

Roud’s essay identifies the central problems and excesses of *Cahiers*’ auteurism, but he acknowledges the journal’s significant contribution: “The one thing [French critics] all have in common, I think, and that we would gain most by adopting, is the firm belief that form is at least as important as content” (171). While he admires what these critics do in theory, problems arise in practice: “There is nothing wrong with this purist theory. A critic should try to separate the literary qualities of a scenario or the intellectual qualities of a story from the purely formal qualities of a film…. The trouble, it seems to me, is in their application of this theory” (170). Though Roud praises *Cahiers du Cinéma*’s renewed emphasis on film form, a lengthy formal analysis of a film like Nicholas Ray’s *Party Girl* (1961) goes too far. Of course, one might argue, it takes such work to evaluate any film accurately. True, Roud might respond, but there are still two major problems.

First, *Cahiers du Cinéma*’s critics make up their minds from the beginning, and their criticism amounts to nothing more than a *critique des beautés*, in which “a critic concentrates entirely on the beauties of a work of art rather than attempting impartially to point out both the good and the bad elements” (169). Once *Cahiers* admitted, say, Nicholas Ray to its ranks, even Ray’s worst film possessed more value than the best
film on a non-auteur. This “aesthetic personality cult” (as Bazin terms it) then prevents any accurate assessment (Hillier 257). As Roud writes, “The only trouble about [Cahiers’] appreciation of Kiss Me Deadly was that it led them to elect Robert Aldrich then and there to their pantheon of the truly great: Hawks, Ray, Anthony Mann, Preminger, etc. And once a director is accepted by Cahiers, it automatically follows that all his subsequent (and even previous) works are ipso facto magnificent” (169). In other words, their very evaluative method hinders their ability to evaluate.

Second, Roud argues that the Cahiers’ critics evaluate narrative cinema without placing any value on the narrative content itself. It seems, Roud writes, that these critics “prefer the unimportant, second-rate, meaningless story” in order that the auteur in question can more easily overcome it and express his personality (171). Roud responds, “There is, in effect, nothing wrong with a B-picture story. And, to be sure, the great director can transform it into a work of art. But the most satisfying work of art is surely the one in which the content, or the story, doesn’t have to be transcended” (171). Movie will do much to correct this strict separation of form from content within formalist criticism. Since Classical Hollywood cinema is a narrative cinema, ignoring the narrative makes no sense. Movie writers treat plot and characterization as carefully as form (as inseparable, in fact: see Perkins’s notion of “how is what”) (Perkins 116).

Ian Cameron’s 1962 essay, “Films, Directors, and Critics” outlines Movie’s method, and from it, we notice Movie’s key contributions. First, the journal brought the practice of close-reading (developed out of the British practical criticism tradition) to film studies. Close reading, as Ian Cameron remarks, provides the basis for Movie’s work:

For talking about one small section of a film in great detail … we have been accused of a fascination with technical trouvailles at the expense of
meaning. The alternative which we find elsewhere is a \textit{gestalt} approach which tries to present an overall picture of the film without going into “unnecessary” detail, and usually results in giving almost no impression of what the film was actually like for the spectator (2).

Though detailed, \textit{Movie’s} criticism remains accessible to anyone who has seen the film under discussion. This close reading method allows the critic to maintain a close connection to both how films are made and how they are viewed:

> The film critic’s raw materials—apart from his own intelligence—are his observations in the cinema: what he sees, hears, and feels. By building up our theses about films from these observations, we are going through the same processes as the audience, although, of course, our reactions are conscious whereas those induced in the cinema, particularly at the first viewing of a film, tend to be reached unconsciously. We believe that our method is likely to produce criticism which is closer, not just to an objective description of the film itself but to a spectator’s experience of the film (Cameron 2).

\textit{Movie’s} method fits Randall Jarrell’s definition of a good critic: one who learns to show others what he or she sees in a work of art (91). Films not only move quickly, but the average viewer will not likely watch a film more than once and, thus, cannot register much of what happens on a film’s formal level. The ideal film critic, then, is the ideal film viewer: one who, through repeated viewings, pays attention to the details that create the experience most spectators cannot consciously articulate.

Cameron addresses Roud’s problem with hardline auteurism through his discussion of aesthetic flexibility:

> One’s aesthetic must be sufficiently flexible to cope with the fact that Joseph Pevney, having made dozens of stinkers, can suddenly come up with an admirable western in \textit{The Plunderers}, or that [Vincente] Minnelli, after years of doing wonders often with unpromising material, could produce anything as flat-footed as \textit{The Bells Are Ringing} (2).

Whereas for \textit{Cahiers}, Howard Hawks’s worst film is still better than \textit{Casablanca}, \textit{Movie} can recognize the genius of Vincente Minnelli and yet still call \textit{The Bells Are Ringing} a
mediocre accomplishment. The critic must always be ready for auteurs to let us down: when a film career spans decades, a director's name may generally indicate quality—but not always. *Movie* recognizes that good directors can make bad films, and bad directors can make good films (Cameron 2). Although *Movie* had its pantheon, individual films were always more important than judgments for or against a director. They also recognize that films can have merit from sources outside the director; stars, writers, and even cinematographers can be auteurs, and films can be interesting for nonaesthetic reasons, such as their relationship to external (historical) events or to other films (Cameron 3). Even Sarris admits, “Obviously, the auteur theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema” (“Notes” 512).

Evaluation would seem like the natural end for *Movie*’s close reading method. But though its critics constantly made implicit value judgments, they frowned on explicit ones. Though Robin Wood wrote for *Movie*, he distances himself from their anti-evaluation stance:

> Hostility to evaluation … begins with *Movie* in the early ’60s. … *Movie*’s rejection of evaluation always seemed to me somewhat rhetorical, more apparent than real. It seemed based on an honourable but misguided notion of the “democratic:” to offer an explicit value-judgment was to attempt to force that on readers, an act of coercion, and the critic then became a kind of dictator of norms. Instead, it was the critic’s task to describe, as accurately as possible; the reader, his/her own perceptions fortified or corrected by this “accurate” description, would then be in a position to reach an enlightened response to the work in question (*Personal Views* 340).

But as Wood points out, *Movie* writers only described films they liked, and thus implicitly made value judgments all the time. Yet if the critic never addresses a negative work or the negative in a generally positive work, he or she will be unable to make the necessary discriminations that evaluative criticism demands.
I return to Andrew Sarris’s essay, “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” and his 1968 book, *The American Cinema*, several times throughout this work, so I discuss him here only in relation to Roud’s and Cameron’s essays. Like Robin Wood, Sarris stresses the importance of aesthetic discrimination and criticizes *Movie*’s decision to only write about films the critics like (*American Cinema* 33). Although I admire this belief in the necessity of evaluation, his method proves lacking. One can easily see the difference between the methods of *Movie* and Andrew Sarris with a brief example: it took Robin Wood roughly two-hundred pages to evaluate only a handful of Hitchcock’s American films in *Hitchcock’s Films* (1965); Sarris’s entry on Hitchcock in *The American Cinema* (1968) lasts just over four pages. To borrow a phrase from Greg Taylor, if *Movie*’s method is one of depth—extensive analysis of individual films—Sarris’s method is one of breadth—the extensive evaluation of American film directors (90). As Taylor writes, “Sarris began to offer a connoisseurship of lists instead of details” (79). *The American Cinema*’s controversial rankings still make the book famous today. Sarris’s work makes evaluation democratic and user-friendly: simply watch hundreds of films, and you, too, can notice directorial style and then discriminate among and rank various film artists. As Taylor writes, “While [Sarris’s auteur theory] carried the cultural cachet of scholarship, it was also simple enough for the reader to absorb, because at root it was merely a polemical assertion that at least the personalities of the most interesting movie directors manage to shine through their humdrum, generic material” (87). That film criticism is “simple enough for the reader to absorb” is not a problem, but an important value of Anglo-American auteurist writing. *Movie*’s writing style, for example, is as clear and uncluttered as Sarris’s. The difference comes not in level of difficulty,
but in the kind of work each does: Sarris forsakes the hard work of formal analysis, upon which sound evaluative judgments must rest, for hasty, quick evaluations:

“Lengthy explanations were not required, simply because Sarris’s cultism offered the critical gesture [of ranking] as adequate and effective cultural provocation” (Taylor 92). By divorcing evaluation from formal analysis, Sarris makes evaluation quick and easy, and film criticism becomes film reviewing. Though Sarris is critical of journalistic film reviewers, his method provides the foundation for such work. One must only ask oneself this question: if we take the most debased form of film reviewing today—the thumbs-up/thumbs-down or star rating system—whose method does it most resemble—Movie’s or Sarris’s?

Though Sarris himself attacks critics who take a short-cut to evaluation, his own method reduces “careful discernment … to oppositional rankings” of directors (Taylor 93). In 1962 and again in his introduction to The American Cinema, he writes,

Un fortunately, some critics have embraced the auteur theory as a short-cut to film scholarship. With a “you-see-it-or-you-don't” attitude toward the reader, the particularly lazy auteur critic can save himself the drudgery of communication and explanation. … Without the necessary research and analysis, the auteur theory can degenerate into the kind of snobbish racket that is associated with the merchandising of paintings (“Notes” 503; American Cinema 32).

In the 1968 formulation, Sarris adds, “Welles is not superior to Zinnemann ‘of course,’ but only after an intensive analysis of all their respective films” (32). Though I agree with Sarris, his book itself unfortunately does not live up to the high standard he sets for evaluative criticism.

Evaluation without formal analysis inevitably devolves into film reviewing. Once film studies moved away from formal analysis in the 1960s, evaluation was left to journalistic film reviewers. It comes as no surprise that Sarris, though the author of
several books, would go on to spend his career writing for newspapers (The Village Voice and The New Republic). As late as 1962, two routes—one emphasizing close-reading, the other evaluation—co-existed, but never coalesced. With minor exceptions (Robin Wood, V. F. Perkins), there have been few critics who pursue evaluation through formal analysis, but I want to unite these two practices.

**Inflation Threatens**

Why is evaluation so important today? After all, the internet age offers no shortage of judgments. For example, David Fincher’s The Social Network was the critically highest-rated film of 2010, and its IMDB page contains links to four hundred and fifty-nine film reviews—from professional reviewers and amateurs alike. Through various social media, anyone can instantly comment on and evaluate the movies he or she watches. As a result, popular new releases today often undergo a process of instant canonization. Examine these comments made about The Social Network upon its release:

Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*:

*The Social Network* is a great film not because of its dazzling style or visual cleverness, but because it is splendidly well-made. Despite the baffling complications of computer programming, web strategy and big finance, Aaron Sorkin’s screenplay makes it all clear, and we don’t follow the story so much as get dragged along behind it.

Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*:

*The Social Network* is the movie of the year. But Fincher and Sorkin triumph by taking it further. Lacing their scathing wit with an aching sadness, they define the dark irony of the past decade. The final image of solitary Mark at his computer has to resonate for a generation of users (the drug term seems apt) sitting in front of a glowing screen pretending not to be alone.

Calvin Wilson, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:
Working from a screenplay by Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), director David Fincher (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*) delivers a film that’s at once timely and timeless.

Richard Corliss, *Time*:

*The Social Network*’s most obvious touchstone is Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*; Fincher has called it “the *Citizen Kane* of John Hughes movies.” IndieWire’s Todd McCarthy detailed *The Social Network*’s kinship to that Greatest American Film: a rich young man’s rise in a burgeoning medium (in Kane, the daily newspaper), as recollected by his colleagues; his difficulty communicating with women; his estrangement of his best friend, etc.

Praise for the film rarely contains more than a fleeting mention of aesthetics, and instead largely focuses on two qualities: (1) the film’s pacing—its ability to give a drama the pacing of an action movie—and (2) the film’s ability to provide a portrait of people in the era of social media. For Calvin Wilson, the newly-released film is already “timeless,” and Richard Corliss mentions a cinematic analogy frequently made in many reviews: *The Social Network* as this new century’s *Citizen Kane*. Astonishingly, these film reviewers made these audacious claims and observations within days of the film’s theatrical release. Clearly, no work went into most of these reviews other than watching the movie once.

Film reviewing, though, is a specific practice with its own lengthy history, and just because so many more film reviews appear today does not mean they dramatically differ from ones written decades ago. Film reviewers write for those who have not seen a film, and they primarily answer one question: is this film worth the average consumer’s time and money? The real problem is that film evaluation today only takes the form of the journalistic film review. Evaluation has been out of style in film studies almost since its beginning, and film reviewing took over the task that only film critics can properly perform. Evaluation may be the end of criticism, but more so than ever, we need a
method that slows down the evaluative process and reintroduces the hard work of close reading when assessing a film’s achievement. As Peter Brooks remarks, “The evaluative moment—discrimination of high from low, of more successful from less, of precious from cheap—was by no means unimportant, but it could wait: wait, precisely, on understanding, which risked narrowness and blindness if there were a premature closure to exploration of the field” (155). Yet film reviewers long ago closed the case on *The Social Network*; film reviewing thrives on newness, and 2010’s masterpieces are already old news. Professional film reviewers lack the time and space to take a pause and do the necessary work, and for those reviewers who write for blogs and websites, the online format favors shorter pieces.

Yet without formal analysis, we lack the skills to make the essential discriminations within a given field of study. The business of criticism has long gone unattended, and there is work to be done. Writing about poetry criticism, Leavis comments on what happens when criticism does not do its job: “An effective concern for the future of English poetry must express itself in a concern for the present function of criticism; for it is the weakness of that function during the last twenty years that has permitted the most elementary and essential discriminations to pass unregarded…” *(Common Pursuit* 32). Likewise, since the 1960s, evaluation has been left to film reviewers, and the question of aesthetic value has been rarely raised in film studies. In addressing the same issue in Victorian studies, Jonathan Loesberg cites this very reason for why a return to aesthetics is necessary: “Perhaps more to the point of direct ends we might have for such a turn, one might note how little work has actually been done in the area of analyzing Victorian literature from an aesthetic perspective” (541).
After all, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Movie* did extensive work on relatively few directors:
Alfred Hitchcock, foremost, and then Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli, Roberto Rossellini, and Jean Renoir. Beyond this small pantheon, cinema’s history remains wide-open for aesthetic evaluation—and reevaluation of the existing canon and its enshrined auteurs.

Film critics must sort through cinema’s history, deciding not just what is valuable, but why we think it so. The goal of evaluation is not to make lists or to solidify an unchanging canon—but simply to stay on guard, to tend to the canon. As Peter Wollen writes,

Marginal adjustments are being made all the time [to the canon] and even its central pillars are not necessarily fixed in concrete. It is a work of bricolage. New elements are assembled and outmoded areas are tacitly discarded. It is being patched up and pushed in one direction or another, through a complex process of cultural negotiation among a motley set of cultural gatekeepers, [academics] included. These gate-keepers both influence opinion and make practical decisions (218).

The academic film critic, then, plays a crucial role in canon formation; when we choose to talk about, to write about, and to teach certain films, we keep those works alive and viable for exploration. Thus, it matters which films we value, and we need a method that helps us make such decisions. Greg Taylor comments,

Critics are needed, quite simply, to help build and maintain a constituency for film art. Here the Arnoldian ideal of critical disinterestedness—seeing the movie itself as it “really is”—might serve as a useful corrective, … encouraging sensitive response and honest, tough appraisal instead of patronizing affection and relaxed standards (157).

“Patronizing affection and relaxed standards” are precisely what we see in film reviews: it is *troubling* how quickly film reviewers proclaimed *The Social Network* a masterpiece. But considering reviewers make such claims with scarce regard for aesthetic quality, we should not find these judgments surprising. Taylor remarks,
We may be faintly amused when a popular cable network labels *Back to the Future, A River Runs Through It, and A Fish Called Wanda* “the new classics,” and faintly disgusted when the American Film Institute includes *Stars Wars, E.T., Tootsie, and Forrest Gump* (but neither *Greed* nor *Sunrise*) in a 1998 list of the hundred best American films of all time. … Perhaps these movies are Great Works, after all. How would we know otherwise? (156).

Without formal analysis, we cannot. It is not the case, of course, that one can *prove* a film’s quality with scientific precision. But formal analysis gives one the tools to make a rational claim about a film he or she values based on a film’s concrete details; it enables one to translate an initial impression into a sound value judgment. Robin Wood writes, “A value judgment cannot, by its very nature, be proven. But that is its strength, not a weakness: a value judgment is there precisely to stimulate thought, debate, argument, to be discussed, modified, rejected; it leads to dialogue, not to the sense that, ‘Well, we know that now, let’s pass on to the next’” (*Rio Bravo* 8). Though film reviewers evaluate, they only perform their function superficially: their various rating systems are designed to settle the score before the reviewers move on to next week’s new releases. One does not have to search far to find film reviewers throwing around evaluative terms like “great” or “masterpiece” each week. Film reviewers do not so much keep the gates of the film canon, but throw them wide open. Yet Godard warns,

> Opening the door to absolutely everyone is very dangerous. Inflation threatens. … The important thing is to know how to distinguish between the talented and the untalented, and if possible, to define the talent, to analyze it. There are very few who try (“Interview” 196).

This task confronts the film critic, and within this present work, I take on the films and reputation of Douglas Sirk and perform the necessary evaluative work that has long gone unattended.
**Why Douglas Sirk?**

Though Douglas Sirk first achieved success as a German filmmaker before emigrating to America (where he initially worked both independently and for Columbia Pictures), I will focus exclusively on the most influential phase of Sirk’s career, at Universal Pictures (1950-1959). Unlike other celebrated classical Hollywood auteurs, Douglas Sirk entered the film canon during the era of ideological criticism, and as a result, Sirkian criticism has suffered all the effects that thematic methods bring about. Except for occasional, brief mentions in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no extensive analysis of Sirk was undertaken until the publication of Jon Halliday’s *Sirk on Sirk* in 1972, *Screen’s* 1971 Sirk issue, and the Edinburgh Film Festival’s 1972 Sirk retrospective. Barbara Klinger writes, “In Sirk, critics found a filmmaker who, in addition to embodying one of the major axioms of the auteur theory concerning the ability of gifted directors to create films of substance within conventional Hollywood genres, seemed dedicated to critiquing the bourgeoisie” (xi). In the era of textual politics, critics became concerned with the relation between film and ideology and praised films that seemed reactionary, but actually offered a beneath-the-surface critique in order to “subvert dominant ideological values” (Klinger 14). Halliday’s Sirk interview approached his films through this paradigm, and one can easily see how the interview made Sirk’s films attractive to ideological critics. In the introduction, Halliday writes,

> On the surface, *Heaven* is a standard women’s magazine weepie—mawkish, mindless, and reactionary. Yet just beneath the surface it is a tough attack on the moralism of petit bourgeois America. Within the story, and the genre (and the cast), Sirk has constructed a film which historicizes the lost American ideal of Thoreau and situates the barren ideology of bourgeois America in class terms (10).
Halliday’s discussion of *All That Heaven Allows* summarizes not only the basic approach to Sirk, but the symptomatic approach to film study. The surface of the film is “mawkish, mindless, and reactionary,” but the film truly lives beneath this surface. This surface/beneath-the-surface split so crucial to ideological criticism recalls Susan Sontag’s complaint about contemporary criticism’s “overt contempt for appearances” (6).

The project of ideological criticism is not in itself a flawed method; problems arise, though, from certain excesses. First, it became the *only* approach to Sirk’s films. When critics first discovered Sirk, this problem did not yet exist. Klinger writes,

*Cahiers’s* discovery of the director produced a situation of “pre-meaning,” wherein style was not fused systematically with significance. The “boom” period developed full-blown organic analyses of the aesthetic and ideological significance of style, but was characterized by a certain pluralism as critics rushed to authorize Sirk (32).

But once Halliday published his interview, and Sirk became enthroned as a subversive termite artist, this interpretation set in and has never been challenged. Halliday’s interview proved remarkably influential, and it is striking to realize that no account of Sirk has really differed from the one Halliday offered forty years ago. Academics critics rarely settle for taking an artist at his or her word—but that is precisely what happened. Klinger continues, “Once the Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches had further defined how Sirk should be approached, criticism began to demonstrate an increasing uniformity. … Substantial differences in interpretation almost disappeared…”(26). While early Sirk critics did frequently take an aesthetic approach to his films, those apolitical writings were soon overshadowed by ideological criticism (Klinger 12).

Second, ideological criticism not only limited how one might legitimately study Sirk’s films, but it limited *which* films scholars studied. Klinger remarks,
There was a thinning of the ranks in films considered important for analysis. Critics in the main line of film criticism no longer acted as if they had to prove Sirk's authorship by showing the consistency of his vision over his entire career. Their analyses focused instead on melodrama's transgressive relation to ideology, and Sirk's films insofar as they provided a particularly cogent instance of the transgressive potential of the genre (20).

While the consistency of Sirk's vision does not concern me, one issue does: the fact that critics abandoned looking at his entire career for only a handful of films. Ideological critics studied only the films that best fit their theoretical paradigm and that would work as evidence for their ideas: *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), and *Imitation of Life* (1959). Sirk made twenty-nine American films, twenty-one of those at Universal Pictures; yet Sirk's canonical status rests on the reputation of just five melodramas. He directed, among other genres, war films, a Western, a historical epic, several domestic comedies, and a series of small-town musicals—all films of wildly varying quality. Ideological criticism produced a reductive view of the films it valued and an inflated view of Sirk's oeuvre. Films like *All That Heaven Allows* have made Sirk's reputation, but what happens when we factor in *Mystery Submarine* (1950) or *The Lady Pays Off* (1951)?

Lastly, Sirk's critics purport to study form, but principally care about ideas. Perhaps no other director has been discussed in terms of style more than Douglas Sirk, but consider the paradox of the following statement from Sam Rodhie: ""The meaning and significance of [Sirk's] films are not overt or explicit but must be gathered precisely by means of an analysis of formal procedures"" (Klinger 13). But how can one claim to care about form and possess such disdain for a film's "overt or explicit" surface? Ideological criticism does indeed discuss form, but only after rerouting that interest
through ideas; Sirk critics value form when it “manage[s] to internally disrupt or ‘make strange’ conventions of representation”—in other words, when it performs the task that the ideological critic considers politically important (Klinger 14). While earlier, apolitical aesthetic criticism of Sirk’s films “fell from critical memory,” Sirk now mattered because he “[combated] the conventions and ideologies of Hollywood filmmaking” (Klinger 12). For Klinger, “Sirk’s case ultimately represents some of the hazards political canonization represents for ideological criticism” (33). She continues, “The problem with the textual politics project is that progressive readings—that is, specific appropriations of works for specific political purposes—were often imperceptibly transformed into political effects the texts themselves engendered” (Klinger 33). These critics, then, do not respond to a film’s form, but displace their own ideas onto that form. The repetitiveness of Sirkian criticism should come as no surprise: Sirkian critics do not make new discoveries, but merely discover in the same films the expected and the already known.

In my work, I seek to unsettle the critical stagnation by analyzing films both inside and outside the traditional Sirk canon. In Chapter 2, I analyze an iconic sequence from *All That Heaven Allows* (and in Sirk’s oeuvre in general) and explore the richness that ideological criticism has passed over. For Halliday, the film’s Christmas sequence “allows Sirk to indicate in one sequence the oppression of the gift within the family in a diseased society (the presentation of the TV set to Jane Wyman” (10). I will demonstrate the paucity of this reading (and it is, for the most part, the *only* reading of this scene) and take notice of how much has been missed in this famous sequence.

In Chapter 3, I investigate a small, ordinary moment in a film of famous big moments: *Imitation of Life*. The ordinariness of the film’s first half has kept it from
receiving much attention; but the film’s success, I argue, stems from its balance of small and big moments—not merely from the excessiveness of its obvious ones. Smaller moments provide an interesting opportunity to analyze Sirk’s talent because it is often more difficult to single out Sirk’s contribution within the bigger ones. The pressured, melodramatic moments owe their success as much to Frank Skinner’s swelling musical score or simply to the conventions of the genre itself. But we become aware of Sirk’s skill when we analyze moments so ordinary that they do not appear obviously significant.

Whereas Chapters 2 and 3 are largely descriptive and analytical, Chapter 4 provides an example of what evaluation through formal analysis looks like. I analyze and evaluate related films outside the established Sirk canon, Sirk’s small-town tetralogy: *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952), *Meet Me at the Fair* (1953), *Take Me to Town* (1953), and *All I Desire* (1953). I examine how Sirk approached specific filmmaking choices in these films—camera movement, framing, and editing—and how he grew in skill as a filmmaker over the course of these four films.

No matter the subject at hand—a familiar scene exhausted by interpretation, an ordinary scene without obvious significance, or an attempt to more accurately assess Sirk’s filmmaking skill—I stay close to a film’s concrete details so that any reader can check my close readings and evaluations against the facts of a given film.

**Teaching**

I spend a chapter on teaching, but here I want to briefly describe the influence teaching an introductory film analysis class has made on this work. In the class, I teach formal analysis through the close readings of films, and my class differs from other film analysis classes in three ways:
First, I address film theory sparingly. For beginning film students, film theory inhibits their ability to do close readings. The first two times I taught film analysis, I devoted roughly half the course to introductory theoretical readings. But no matter how simply I would break down theoretical ideas, students responded as if they were merely being given information. (Keep in mind, of course, that most students are non-majors). Theoretical interpretations tend to close off a film—to treat its meaning as settled—and students often see little reason to argue with the conclusions. Formal analysis, on the other hand, allows students to experience the processes of discovery and understanding, to have an “Aha!” moment with a film. With formal analysis, nothing is settled in advance, and one instead probes a film to see how much it reveals and to notice the surprising complexity or intricacy of its design. This method enables students to figure out precisely why a scene or a film really matters to them, and to have the ability to test their own reading against the film’s details.

Second, I treat film analysis as a matter of attention—not terminology. Most introductory film classes and textbooks approach film analysis as a class to teach the various vocabulary terms for mise-en-scène, editing, and sound. But I treat film analysis as an issue of attention. What we analyze is on the screen before us, but we must discipline ourselves to see what is in plain view. Teaching formal analysis, though, does not merely result in “movie-talk,” but in students learning a skill. As a time-based medium, the cinema passes before us too swiftly—at a pace easy for spectators to comprehend but too quickly to allow pause for analysis. As a result, most people comprehend movies and know which ones they like, but have little to no ability to articulate just how a movie works to produce an effect upon them. Thus, as a class, we
produce “slow-motion” readings of films, moving shot by shot and sometimes frame by frame in order to take into account a film’s process of signification (Barthes 12). If I can teach my students the value of this heightened awareness to cinematic signification and also cultivate their ability to articulate what they see into evocative, prose descriptions, I consider myself successful; and I also hope that my students will possess a rare, useful skill not only for future cinematic encounters, but for a more poetic appreciation of life.

Finally, I teach students how to read with the grain—not against it. Many teachers argue that “the problem with students is that they already identify too much—that they lack the ability to question and to achieve critical distance—to read against the grain” (Elbow 538). This problem especially occurs with Hollywood cinema because its films operate with a speed and a smoothness that makes them not only immediately comprehensible, but also enjoyable. Elbow continues, “Yes, students often don’t read against the grain, but that doesn’t mean they are good at reading with the grain” (539). For example, students often find it difficult to simply describe what they see onscreen. Reading films against the grain treats meaning as an occult, beneath-the-surface thing to uncover, and it tends to take two forms: demystification and progressivism. David Bordwell describes these approaches:

One approach, often called “demystification,” aims to show up artworks as covert propaganda, sugar-coated pills. Whatever explicit meanings can be ascribed to the work, the demystifying critic constructs reactionary implicit ones that undercut them. A second, contrary approach posits progressive implicit meanings lying behind whatever reactionary referential or explicit meanings the film may present (88).

But if film form is a film’s surface, and some method only treats beneath-the-surface, even unconscious, meanings, that method ignores film form. Furthermore, Bordwell argues (and I would agree) that such interpretations have grown stale and make for the
least interesting response one could have toward a film. He later concludes, “We need no more diagnoses of the subversive moments in a slasher movie, or celebrations of a ‘theoretical’ film for its critique of mainstream cinema, or treatments of the most recent art film as a meditation on cinema and subjectivity” (261). Not all films, of course, are ideologically innocuous, but any judgment—ideological or aesthetic—should be secondary to formal analysis. As Gavin Lambert writes, “Until we know how a film is speaking to us, we cannot be sure what it is saying” (Gibbs 100).

In addressing a similar issue in literary studies, George Levine remarks, “There have not been a lot of arguments about why—other than for the purposes of demystification or to learn what the culture itself takes seriously—*Moby Dick* or *Heart of Darkness* deserves and inspires attention and rereading (13). Students often ask similar questions, and I am not sure I would have ever considered the question of value so seriously had it not been for my interactions with students. A student who never participates in class discussion will still make remarks like, “I liked that film” or “That was incredibly boring.” For anyone who watches movies, questions of value are at the core of the film-watching experience, so I start with the very value judgments students make and conceive of the class in those terms: to slow down those judgments and to get students to pause and consider film form. In class, we repeatedly ask questions such as the following ones: What makes *this* film worthy of study? Why does *this* scene work and *that* one does not? What difference does it makes if x (some element of the mise-en-scène) were altered? When we call a scene or a film “good,” what does that specifically mean? Why value *this* moment/scene/film over *that* one? Will (or should) *this* film still matter in fifty years? We—critics, teachers, and students—implicitly ask
such questions anytime we watch, think, or write about a film, so why not bring these questions out into the open? They sound simple, but the path to answering them requires work.
CHAPTER 2
THE INSPIRED AND THE PARNASSIAN IN ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (1955)

Critics have historically approached Douglas Sirk’s films in two ways: through aesthetic or ideological criticism. Early Sirk critics (pre-1971) often emphasized aesthetic beauty as an end in itself; they recognized Sirk had taste and style, but they did little to establish the significance and implications of these claims. As Barbara Klinger writes in *Melodrama and Meaning*, critics, such as those at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, “were attracted to the excessiveness and artifice of Sirk’s style,” but that “at this initial stage of auteurism [this] style is contested in significance” (4). Though critics recognized an identifiable style, “reviewers did not yield a systematic sense of what the personal visions tying style and narrative themes together would be” (Klinger 5). For example, Godard’s review of *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958), one of the earliest pieces of Sirk criticism, makes no mention of the Sirkian keywords and phrases that later criticism so excessively deploys with his work: ideology, irony, subversion, “beneath the surface,” etc. Instead, we read a passage such as this one:

> The important thing, as Douglas Sirk demonstrates, is to believe in what one is doing in order to make it believable. In this respect, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* goes one better than *Tarnished Angels, Written on the Wind* or *Captain Lightfoot*. They are not great films, but no matter: they are beautiful. But why are they? In the first place, as we have seen, because the scenario is good. Next, because the actors are far from bad. And finally, because the direction is ditto (Godard 138).

As exciting and refreshing as Godard’s style may seem in his “madly enthusiastic review,” we easily spot all the major problems later critics will have with earlier criticism’s tendency to conflate impressionism with evaluative judgments (Godard 135). For if one were to paraphrase Godard’s words, fairly meaningless tautologies would result: Douglas Sirk’s films are believable because he believes in them. And his movies
are good because the story, actors, and direction are good. And for some, undefined reason, *A Time to Love* is better. A decade later, Andrew Sarris similarly evaluates Sirk: “Sirk requires no extreme rationalization, and his films require no elaborate defense. The evidence of his style is visible on the screen” (109). Here, Sarris only continues the common auteurist argument that Jacques Rivette made about Howard Hawks’s *Monkey Business*: “The evidence on the screen is the proof of Hawks’s genius: you only have to watch *Monkey Business* to know that it is a brilliant film” (126). One understands from these examples why critics came to view evaluative criticism as suspect—a method for convincing the already-convinced; by making rash judgments based on undefined notions of style, taste, and beauty with little or no formal analysis to support such claims, evaluative criticism could not survive the increasingly objective, scientific, and ideological criticism of the 1970s.

Though I agree that all the necessary evidence to evaluate Sirk “is visible on the screen,” I find that evidence, contrary to what Sarris believes, anything but self-evident. Sirk does require a rationalization, and his films do require an elaborate defense. We can make sound judgments about Sirk’s films, but not without the detailed work of close reading and formal analysis that Godard, Sarris, and other auteurist critics evade. In the present work I make an effort to rescue evaluative criticism from its association with film reviewing, rampant impressionism, and hasty judgments.

But one would make a mistake to assume that Sirk criticism improved in the post-auteurist, ideological era. Though ideological criticism would give a second life to Sirk’s reputation and provide a better understanding of Sirk’s talent (as I discussed in the introduction), the resulting criticism soon grew stale and repetitious. Once critics settled
on the meaning of Sirk’s films in the early 1970s, the discussion has scarcely changed. In his 1971 introduction to *Sirk on Sirk*, Jon Halliday describes Sirk’s films as many-layered, “and they have, therefore, to be read below their immediate surface” (9).

Halliday’s argument about *All That Heaven Allows*, for example, is typical and full of critical buzzwords: “On the surface, *Heaven* is a standard women’s magazine weepie…. Yet just beneath the surface it is a tough attack on the moralism of petit bourgeois America” (10). In an essay he wrote for the second major Sirk-revival event of 1971—*Screen*’s Sirk issue—Paul Willemen likewise uses a surface/depth metaphor; the second, beneath-the-surface level parodies and critiques the “extremely smug, self-righteous and petit bourgeois world view” of the American melodrama (272). Decades later, these same ideas remain commonplace and have filtered down from *Screen* theory to the back of the *All That Heaven Allows* DVD cover: “Jane Wyman is a repressed wealthy widow and Rock Hudson is the hunky Thoreau-following gardener who loves her in Douglas Sirk’s heartbreakingly beautiful indictment of 1950s small-town America.” Such a description combines auteurist and ideological ideas. It remarks on the film’s beauty and attributes authorship to Sirk; at the same time, the description speaks of repression and the film’s politically progressive stance toward small-town America.

I ideological criticism established what Paul Willemen termed the “Sirkian system”—the recurring formal techniques and thematic preoccupations of Sirk’s films. Once critics defined Sirk and matched his cinematic signifiers with particular signifieds, “radically different conceptions of [Sirk’s] ideological identity appeared as either unimaginable or simply wrong” (Klinger xiv). The DVD cover proves Klinger’s point:
how a viewer should interpret the film—as both beautiful and subversive—has already been settled before he or she even watches it. When Thomas Schatz writes that “All That Heaven Allows appears to us today as an obvious indictment of America’s repressive, sexist, and materialistic middle class,” the key term is “obvious” (252). Schatz’s quote merely reiterates that meanings are settled, and the case on Sirk is closed. Though the critical method has changed, Schatz’s “obvious” conclusion does not differ in tone from the self-evident style and beauty Sarris and Godard claimed years before.

Forty years after the Halliday interview, Screen’s Sirk issue, and the Edinburgh Film Festival’s retrospective, we know a lot about Douglas Sirk, but we know very little about the films of Douglas Sirk. The more critics precisely defined the Sirkian system by cataloguing formal and thematic repetitions, the less important new discoveries became. This chapter attempts to destabilize and, thus, reinvigorate the critical discussion of All That Heaven Allows—one of Sirk’s most discussed and most representative films. If All That Heaven Allows has entered the film canon, remaining critically popular after nearly six decades, one cannot account for the film’s success merely because it exemplifies the critical theories scholars have applied to it. I believe we can better evaluate the film and its achievement without referring to irony, subversion, bourgeois ideology, etc., but instead through applying an evaluative principle.

This chapter takes up Christopher Ricks’s call for principles as an alternative to theory. In his essay, “‘Literary Principles as Against Theory,’” Ricks discusses G.M. Hopkins “Parnassian” principle at length, and here I will apply this idea to a discussion
of *All That Heaven Allows*. I merely seek a useful method and a new way of thinking and writing about Sirk's films, which have been marked by a particular critical myopia over the past forty years. His popular melodramas—*Magnificent Obsession, All That Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind, The Tarnished Angels,* and *Imitation of Life*—have become victims of a monotonous, limiting criticism. When one scholar can describe Sirk's style as containing a “famous ironic subtext,” one wonders whether such phrasing describes a film or a product with a registered trademark—a Sirkian brand (Harvey 54). Sirk criticism only continues this trend by finding the same themes and stylistic devices again and again in Sirk's films. But what else do Sirk's films contain? Can they still surprise us and do something other than the expected and the already known? I believe G.M. Hopkins's Parnassian principle can help us see that they can.

But what does Ricks mean by “principle?” For Ricks, principles are like proverbs, and the essence of a principle is its applicability (323). He writes, “Instances of a principle will matter because of the instances which the principles would themselves illuminate and be illuminated by” (Ricks 325). A principle, then, is useless without concrete instances of that principle at work. Principles, though, are not conclusive, but inaugurative; I will use Hopkins’s Parnassian principle to open up *All That Heaven Allows* in new ways and to begin a discussion not achievable through current critical means (Ricks 331). If, through the application of Hopkins's Parnassian principle, our comprehension and appreciation of the film's achievement increases, the principle will prove its effectiveness. Ricks uses Hopkins’s “Parnassian” to further explain what he means by a principle. Understanding Hopkins’s terminology will clarify its appropriateness for a study of Douglas Sirk.
The goal of Hopkins’s Parnassian principle is to distinguish the “language of inspiration” from “Parnassian,” which “can only be spoken by poets, but is not in the highest sense poetry” (Hopkins 129). Hopkins writes,

Great men, poets I mean, have each their own dialect as it were of Parnassian, formed generally as they go on writing, and at least,--this is the point to be marked,--they can see things in this Parnassian way and describe them in this Parnassian tongue, without further effort of inspiration. In a poet’s particular kind of Parnassian lies most of his style, or his manner, of his mannerism if you like. But I must not go further without giving you instances of Parnassian (130).

Later, Hopkins continues, “Now it is a mark of Parnassian that one could conceive oneself writing it if one were the poet. Do not say that if you were Shakespeare you can imagine yourself writing Hamlet, because that is just what I think you cannot conceive” (130). This principle has a particular applicability to Sirk’s films, for critics have extensively defined Sirk’s Parnassian—that which we expect from Sirk and which Sirk and other filmmakers can repeat and imitate. In film, we could define the Parnassian as follows: if one were a particular director (Sirk, Hitchcock, Bergman), one could imagine filming a scene or composing a shot in just this way—a way typical of the director’s established style. And we could define the inspired in the following terms: even if one were the director, one could not imagine doing that. We can mark as Parnassian in Sirk all the images and scenes about which we already know what to say; the signifiers have been matched with signifieds, either through the history of Sirk criticism or by Sirk himself through interviews. One can easily spot and teach the Parnassian, and it occurs when one can say it is just like Sirk to film a shot or scene in this way.

In film, the move from the Parnassian to the inspired is a move from the second circle to the third circle of Sarris’s auteur theory—from a recognizable personal style to an “élan of the soul.” Sarris’s phrase denoting true greatness, genius, and talent
(“Notes” 453). No one would disagree that Sirk ably passes through Sarris’s first circle, technique, and both auteurist and ideological criticism have established and defined Sirk’s personal style. Sarris’s third circle, however, seems to belong in the realm of connoisseurship—not criticism. Pauline Kael harshly dismissed Sarris’s third circle as nonsense, and indeed, many discussions of “great” directors stop when it comes time to define that ineffable, imprecise characteristic which separates a great from an average director. Kael correctly identifies and criticizes the overly impressionistic definition Sarris offers of a great director, but in her own criticism, she did not offer any solution to a true problem in film studies: how do we evaluate films and distinguish not merely the good from the bad, but the good from the great. Sarris was clearly on to something with his circles—that one can possess a recognizable, personal style (the second circle), yet still not be an auteur (the third circle). Or if we adapt Hopkins’s terminology, we could say that a consistent director can easily and regularly produce Parnassian work (a film typical of a particular director), but a truly inspired work proves more difficult to achieve.

I should pause, though, and remark that I do not have auteurist aims. Auteurists concern themselves with assessing careers, but I am concerned with moments, scenes, and films. Though I will study All That Heaven Allows, I do not intend to draw general conclusions about Sirk, but instead to make specific evaluations of the film and Sirk’s contribution to it. I will not raid the film for Sirkian elements—his Parnassian—and foreclose the possibility that the film may have more to offer than the Sirkian system allows. Robin Wood’s comments on the auteur theory and criticism mirror my own:

What I would like to see take place in criticism is a return from “auteurs” to films. Auteur theory in its more primitive and extreme manifestations has
marked a phase through which it was necessary for film criticism to pass. Now that the notion of directorial authorship has become a commonplace, it should be possible to move away from the position that sees the identification of authorial fingerprints as the ultimate aim, to a position that regards the director’s identifiable presence as one influence—probably the most, but certainly not the only, important one among the complex of influences that combine to determine the character and quality of a particular film (*Personal Views* 231).

As ideas and themes grew more important than the films themselves, the pressure to define Sirk and the Sirkian continually avoided detailed discussions. That Sirk repeatedly uses certain stylistic devices has been much remarked upon, but the aesthetic value of these filmmaking choices has received very little attention.

A close reading based on principles will avoid the impressionistic pitfalls that generally accompany evaluative judgments and allow for an examination of a director’s skill through concrete, material proof—the filmmaking choices a director makes. I will begin by defining Sirk’s Parnassian—the recognizable, repeatable, and often-imitated elements of Sirk’s style, which British critics first systematically defined in the early 1970s.

**Sirk’s Parnassian**

In his essays, “Distanciation and Douglas Sirk” and “Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System,” Paul Willemen clearly defines Sirk’s Parnassian using the classic “category e” argument: Sirk makes films “which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner” (Comolli and Narboni 691). Willemen takes his cue from and directly cites Comolli and Narboni, and all three believe a critic should primarily work to determine the precise relationship between film and ideology. As Willemen writes, “The main question raised by Sirk’s films: how should art relate to reality?” (268). Willemen’s
syntax proves deceptive, indicating the question—how art should relate to reality—arises from the films themselves. Clearly, though, Willemen brings this question to the films and imposes it on works that have no explicit ideological concerns. By posing this question in the manner he does, he limits the film’s ability to signify outside his paradigm’s boundaries.

Willemen’s choice of the word “system” points to his approach’s misguided nature; “system” has a mechanical, scientific connotation, as if “Sirk” denoted a machine that routinely manufactured reliable products. As I discuss Willemen’s Sirkian system, I do not argue that Willemen is wrong, that Sirk does not consistently compose shots in a similar manner or direct actors in certain ways, but simply that Willemen’s approach views cinematic meaning in a faulty way. His method, as I will demonstrate, makes watching a film like filling out a checklist—Irony? Check. Mirrors? Check. Split characters? Check—until one eliminates all surprise. When elaborating his ideas, Willemen even uses lists in composing these two essays. The Sirkian system concerns itself with recurring signifiers and stylistic devices that Sirk uses, but more so with a device’s mention than with its function. And, as Hopkins’s definition states, the Parnassian includes precisely those techniques that an artist commonly relies upon and repeats; thus, the truly inspired in Sirk must be something beyond the confines of the Sirkian system. Hopkins’s Parnassian principle, then, works well with my initial hunch about All That Heaven Allows—that something exceeding the expected and the already known accounts for the film’s continual success. But before I can discuss how Sirk’s film transcends the system that confines it, I must define the Sirkian system itself. As I discuss various devices within the Sirkian system, I will explain how Willemen ascribes
many techniques to Sirk that other filmmakers commonly practiced in other contemporary productions.

Willemen performs the usual critical move in enumerating the restrictions placed upon Sirk (by Universal, by genre) and how Sirk works within these restrictions, but against the grain. As Willemen writes, “The subject matter of these melodramas differs in no way from run-of-the-mill products…. However, by stylizing his treatment of a given narrative, he succeeded in introducing in a quite unique manner, a distance between the film and its narrative pretext” (Willemen 270). Then, over the course of two essays, Willemen precisely defines the Sirkian System:

- an anti-illusionist mode of representation. In other words, Sirk adopts a style that makes the spectator aware he or she is watching a film and a performance (269).
- “magnification of emotionality” (269)
- use of “mirror-ridden walls” (269)
- the intensification of generic rules/restrictions (270)
- “use of symbols as emotional stimuli” (270)
- stage-like settings and techniques (long shots, e.g.) (270)
- choreography as expression of character (270)
- “baroque color schemes” (270)
- a “distance between the film and its narrative pretext” and “between the audience and the depicted action” (270).
- principle dichotomy: surface reality versus secondary reality (271)
- ironic use of parody and cliché (271, 276)
- “Displacements and discontinuities in plot construction.” For example, using supporting roles as “hidden” leading character or “false” happy endings (276).
- split characters (271)
• “Ironic use of camera-positioning and framing” (271)

• ironic camera movements; Sirk’s camera remains mobile (implicating viewers on an emotional level), yet the scale remains distant—medium and long shots (thus distancing the audience at the same time) (276).

When one sees the contents of Willemen’s essays laid out in a list form, one quickly realizes how generic the points seem and how little the information tells us about Sirk’s films. Outside of brief, parenthetical expressions, Willemen includes practically no discussion of any film. Instead, he uses the Halliday interview (Sirk’s rewriting of his own career) to corroborate these claims. Note, however, that although Willemen bases his conclusions on formal elements (framing, props, camera movement), his conclusions derive only from the mention of those elements—not their use. W.V. Quine made a crucial distinction between use and mention that proves important for deciding what information is relevant for a formal analysis. Simply because a text mentions some detail does not necessarily mean that detail has a use within the text; context, patterns, repetition, and function matter in making that determination. But today, Marjorie Levinson writes,

W. V. Quine’s once crucial distinction between “use” and “mention” has vanished, giving rise to a situation where “[t]he fact that some item . . . is mentioned in a text . . . is sufficient to get the machinery of “archeology” and archive-churning going” (213). … We have forgotten, in short, that the material “gets to count as material in the first place by virtue of its relationship to an act … of framing, an act of form” (Levinson 561).

A detail not motivated by the work and without significant function counts as a mention (Levinson 565). And scholars more concerned with mentions generally care about some aspect of culture rather than the text at hand (Levinson 566). This description fits Willemen, Halliday, and most Sirkian critics, who consider Sirk’s films only as they relate to history (1950s America) or to theoretical ideas (distanciation, self-reflexivity, etc). For
Willemen, the mere presence of a mirror makes a film self-reflexive, while the actual function of such formal elements within the film itself does not receive mention; he makes such conclusions without any formal analysis.

If we examine Willemen’s system, we realize how problematic it is. We can scrutinize, for example, three related characteristics: stage-like settings and techniques, an anti-illusionist mode of representation, and distance between the audience and the depicted action. For Willemen, stage-like settings fit perfectly with Sirk’s anti-illusionism. The stage-like settings make the spectator aware of the film as a performance and make the spectator conscious that she does not view reality unhampered. One can attack this claim on two fronts. First, it perpetuates the myth of the naïve spectator found so often not only in Sirk criticism, but in film criticism in general. As Gilberto Perez writes, “Except perhaps for babies, nobody watching a movie believes reality to be present on the screen…” (25). Sirk criticism usually paints the 1950s spectator as unaware of a film’s ideological implications, unlike the wiser, politically-informed critics. But as Sirk’s initial audience principally comprised females, Walter Metz notes that “the hierarchization of the intellectual capacities of audience groups [thus] acquires gender implications” (4). Since Willemen’s essays and Screen’s Sirk issue, “the implication remains that there is one group of spectators duped by the film and another that transcends its surface message to comprehend its buried, critical operations” (Metz 4-5). But second, and more specifically, most major Universal/Ross Hunter productions of the late 1950s/early 1960s feature stage-like settings—usually a scene in a large mansion, always with a very open floor-plan and often with a massive staircase and foyer. Though we see such settings in various Sirk films (All I Desire,
*Written on the Wind,* *Imitation of Life,* etc.), we can find similar settings in Ross Hunter productions not directed by Douglas Sirk (*Portrait in Black, Midnight Lace, Flower Drum Song, Madame X)*.

Each setting has local significance within the specific film, as a setting upon which (sometimes major) action takes place (death, for example, in *Written on the Wind* and *Madame X*). But the meaning of such details will result from their function within the respective films, and to draw general conclusions (stage-like settings = an attack on illusionism) overlooks this specificity. Even a B-film like *Tammy and the Bachelor* contains surprisingly self-reflexive moments; the family that Tammy visits dresses up for “Pilgrimage Week,” a for-profit heritage festival in which the house transforms into a theater and the entire family performs. Stage-like settings are not unique to Sirk, but are simply the products of Universal’s regular set designers and decorators—Alexander Golitzen and Russell Gausman in particular. Film after film contains similar sets because the same producer and set designer collaborated on most of the productions and used Universal’s stock resources, whether or not Sirk directed.

Some points in Willemen’s system, such as the use of symbols as emotional stimuli, identify a property of cinema in general—not just Sirk’s films. Willemen cites the association of Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) with both Christmas trees and deer in *All That Heaven Allows*. Though a statement about Sirk’s films, doesn’t Willemen’s remark simply refer to the way Hollywood makes movies? From the puppies in *The Birth of a Nation* to the automobile in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, symbols flood cinema history, and the (potentially) symbolic use of objects seems endemic to cinematic signification.
Another of Willemen’s points—baroque color schemes—denotes probably the most celebrated, recognizable aspect of Sirk’s later melodramas. Beginning with *Take Me to Town* (1953), Sirk worked most frequently with Russell Metty as cinematographer. Though Metty’s work without Sirk may not have been as consistently good as when they worked together, Metty could compose and light in a “Sirkian” manner even without Sirk. One can find numerous examples of Russell Metty’s expressionistic use of color in non-Sirk films, especially *Portrait in Black* (left), *Flower Drum Song* (right), and *Madame X* (bottom).

However one interprets Willemen’s system, it either oversimplifies or overcomplicates the study of Sirk. The above examples present a *reductio ad absurdum* of the oversimplified argument—that these techniques are unique to Sirk’s films. If the Sirkian system represents nothing more than a checklist of techniques, this oversimplification provides the weakest method for claiming Sirk’s auteur status, and it reduces the study of Sirk’s films to a search for the already known.

Yet if we assume Willemen would acknowledge that other filmmakers rely on similar devices, then he would most likely add that Sirk does a better, more effective job at employing them. And I would agree with this point; baroque color schemes, for example, are not unique to Sirk, but Sirk gives this technique a significant organization lacking in others’ films. But to make this statement would require one to admit that Sirk’s real talent has nothing to do with these formal and thematic techniques in themselves, but with *something else*—a possibly indefinable skill or quality beyond Willemen’s system. If, ultimately, these techniques—color schemes, mirrors, distanciation, etc.—do not matter as much as the way Sirk puts them to work, the
techniques, then, should not be the focus, but instead some skill of Sirk’s more fundamental than anything on Willemen’s list. Thus, however one interprets Willemen’s argument, one must find it lacking, and the very fact that the techniques he mentions can be regularly imitated and repeated—by others and by Sirk himself—marks them as Parnassian.

Some, perhaps, could take my argument to imply that Willemen defines Sirk in one way, and I simply want to replace his definition with a more accurate one. But I have entirely different intentions. To do a close reading of All That Heaven Allows only to arrive at general conclusions about Sirk—a better definition of him—would be to make the same mistake previous Sirk critics (including Willemen and the auteurists) have made. Any conclusions I reach will be relative to the film at hand and its details. Thus, I take up Robin Wood’s call for a return from auteurs to films.

So if we define the Parnassian in Sirk as any element that could be categorized in Willemen’s Sirkian system, what in Sirk’s work is truly inspired? For if Sirk’s films do nothing more than what Willemen indicates, they would seem unable to continually surprise us—beyond the fact that they fit well within established critical categories. To attempt an answer to this question, I turn to All That Heaven Allows.

All That Heaven Allows

All That Heaven Allows marks a turning point in Sirk’s career. It is the first film Sirk made after the release and immense success of Magnificent Obsession (1954) catapulted him to the status of Universal’s top house director. (Two Sirk films appeared between these two—Sign of the Pagan (1954) and Captain Lightfoot (1955)—but Sirk had completed both before Magnificent Obsession’s release.) Also, Magnificent Obsession officially made Rock Hudson a star, which guaranteed larger budgets and
better stories for the movies Sirk would make with him. And, as I will explain, *All That Heaven Allows*’s Christmas sequence provides a more exact dividing line between Sirk’s earlier films at Universal and his later ones. Nothing Sirk did in his twenty-one films before this eight-minute sequence can match it. And with only two possible exceptions—*Battle Hymn* (1957) and *Interlude* (1957)—Sirk’s later career at Universal (eight films) far outweighs his early career.

I have proposed that something exceeding the expected and the already known must account for *All That Heaven Allows*’s success, but I should slightly amend and personalize this statement: I am drawn to one particular sequence—the film’s Christmas sequence—and emotionally affected by it, but nothing Sirk criticism has offered thus far has helped me understand my response. I can compare my experience to how Godard describes films that excite him: “These are films about which I don’t know what to say critically, which give me the feeling of having a lot to learn. … They are films which cut right through me. … They are films I want to talk about because I don’t really know what should be said” (231-232). Likewise, my close reading here will work to give tuition to my intuition about this sequence. After all, if we study the most representative sequence from one of Sirk’s most representative films, we stand to learn *something* about his talent. Halliday writes that *All That Heaven Allows* is not a major Sirk film (I would disagree), but it is “representative Sirk. And for this reason a good subject for analysis” (65). Because Universal hastily put the film into production to repeat the success of *Magnificent Obsession*, these circumstances gave Sirk much more freedom: “*All That Heaven Allows* has really no story worth talking about—unlike *Magnificent Obsession*, which has a very strong and inflexible story, and an unavoidable structure.
But it is precisely this flabbiness in Heaven (the result of its purely opportunistic origins) which gives Sirk much more room" (59). The newly-struck equilibrium between studio requirements and Sirk’s talents resulted in financial success for the studio, a certified star (Rock Hudson), and more creative control for Sirk. All That Heaven Allows marks the first film to benefit from this convergence.

I purposely stay away from discussing Parnassian elements—the kind of moments typical of Sirkian melodramas for which most critics go hunting. I will not discuss lavish color, self-reflexive mirrors, irony, beauty, distanciation—or any other element of the Sirkian system. I will examine the filmic qualities one cannot precisely calculate: the effect of capturing Jane Wyman’s face in this way, moving the camera just so—qualities one cannot easily classify and assimilate into a system. I will explore how Sirk handles the filmmaking basics: the camera, the performers, and the editing. It is on this level that I hope to show that Sirk exerts a great level of influence, control, and inspiration. When I discussed Sarris above, I mentioned that no one would disagree that Sirk ably passes through auteur theory’s first circle—technique. In one sense, this statement is true, for Sirk’s cinema is not one of technical incompetence. But because it seems so natural to move past mere technique to discussing Sirk as a stylist or an auteur, we have no criticism that studies Sirk on this elementary, yet crucial, level.

In All That Heaven Allows, Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), a widow and mother of two grown children, pursues a relationship with her young gardener, Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson). But beyond the age difference, the lifestyle difference between Cary and Ron disturbs both her children and the townspeople. One character describes Ron as a “nature boy;” he lives in a restored mill, farms trees, and, we are told, does not need to
read *Walden* because he already lives it. The relationship, of course, becomes the talk of the small New England community in which she lives, and the combination of country club chatter and her children’s pressure convinces Cary to cut off her relationship with Kirby. Her children, Ned (William Reynolds) and Kay (Gloria Talbott), beg her to do so for the sake of the family, but as soon as they get their way, it becomes clear they have no real concern for their mother’s happiness; Cary first realizes this fact during the Christmas sequence, and it marks a turning point for both Cary’s character and the film itself. The complexity, completeness, and thoughtfulness of the sequence’s design create an impact that far outweighs the facile symbolism of deer, nature, Christmas trees, and all other elements of the Sirkian system we find in the film. These eight minutes form the film’s emotional core and provide the key to its longevity, and its placement strategically elevates the entire film. Without this sequence, the film would still be good—with performances, cinematography, and a score far above average. And as it deals with usual Sirkian themes and situations, one could label it Parnassian. But with this sequence, the movie becomes something *more*.

The sequence begins as Cary goes to meet her children at the train station as they arrive home for Christmas break, and it comprises four scenes: the train station, the Christmas tree lot, the carolers, and Christmas morning. I will describe each in detail and demonstrate how this sequence rises above the Parnassian and exists as an inspired piece of filmmaking. Examining similarities between *All That Heaven Allows*, another Sirk film, *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1955), and a non-Sirk film, *Madame X* (1966), will provide comparisons for my argument.
Scene One: At the Train Station

In an extreme long shot, the camera pans right to follow Cary as she walks toward the train to meet Ned and Kay. A friend, there to meet her husband, accompanies Cary, and the first cut occurs when her friend spots her spouse stepping off the train. The camera frames Cary in a medium shot, but we cannot see her face. As her friend walks away, the camera pans slightly to the right, and we see Cary, now in profile, as she greets the town doctor. Thus, as soon as the two shot of Cary and her friend ends, Sirk immediately frames her in a two-shot again with the doctor; Cary has not yet solely occupied the frame. She complains to the doctor about persistent headaches (which he will later diagnose as the result of poor romantic decisions). The conversation soon ends and the doctor walks away, and both the camera and Cary remain in place. Now alone, she glances around as the train-whistle blows, and she suspects that her children might not have arrived. The train begins to move, Cary walks left out of the frame, and the second cut occurs as we see a messenger bringing Cary a telegram. The camera pans with the messenger as he moves right towards Cary, and she now enters the frame. After relaying the contents of the message and handing her the telegram, the messenger walks away, leaving Cary alone as she holds the telegram. The camera pans left as Cary slowly walks away from the train station (and offscreen), crumples the telegram, and throws it on the ground.

Though the shot-scale never comes closer to Cary than a medium shot and we are scarcely granted more than a profile view, Sirk uses the expressiveness of Jane Wyman’s face quite effectively—despite the distance he keeps from her. Through slight changes in expression, we witness the process of Cary’s thinking and her
emotions, as both she and the audience fully realize her children’s insensitivity and selfishness for the first time.

Figure 2-1. Cary’s responses. A) Concern, B) Worry, C) Realization, D) Anger.

This scene marks the moment Cary becomes aware of her loneliness, and the scene’s design enables us to share Cary’s recognition. We already knew her children were selfish and petty, but not to this extent. We can doubt whether or not Cary and Ron will end up together, but we never assumed Cary’s children would abandon her—leaving her completely alone. When she ends her relationship with Ron, she does so for her family, and, like Cary, we assume this decision will restore peace in the Scott home. This moment is the first of the Christmas sequence’s three key moments, and Sirk handles it adroitly. Like the other two (Cary at the frosted window, Cary’s reflection in the television), this shot ends the scene; but unlike the other two, Sirk does not use the fluid tracking into close-ups that alert the viewer to the moment’s special significance. Here, the camera simply presents the scene in a way that will best enable
us to witness Cary’s thought process and the resulting emotions. One could imagine a lesser director handling this moment more crudely, cutting in to close-ups or at least encouraging Jane Wyman to act more responsively rather than what Sirk has her do here: merely respond. In other words, either the camera and editing would do most of the work, or Wyman’s performance would carry the moment’s weight. But by presenting this information in both a medium close-up and in a single take, Sirk achieves an ideal balance between the camera and the performer; these stylistic choices arise organically from the drama rather than feeling imposed. Quite astoundingly, an emotional punch results from what seems like so little effort from either Sirk or Wyman. As the stills show, Jane Wyman responds by slightly varying her facial expressions: a slight furrowing of her brows and almost imperceptible movements of her face and eyes. But because the narrative itself puts pressure on this moment, excessive stylistic expenditure seems inappropriate. Sirk will make the opposite decision shortly later in the sequence’s final two scenes, but these scenes will demand the increased emphasis. Cary’s response here achieves even greater nuance when one compares this scene with the next one.

Scene Two: The Christmas Tree Lot

Cary leaves the train station and heads to a Christmas tree lot. Because the scene begins with Cary walking in the same direction as the last shot ended and wearing the same jacket and boots, we infer that Cary has gone directly from the train station to the lot. But Cary wears a different colored scarf, which, if not a continuity error, would indicate this scene takes place at a different time. Ron’s friend runs the lot, and Cary visits on a night when Ron is assisting him. She sees Ron for the first time since their breakup, and we notice tenderness and longing between them. They
converse briefly as Cary selects a tree, but Cary soon misreads Ron’s relationship with a female companion, grows angry, and leaves with her silver-tipped spruce—the very type of tree Cary and Ron discussed during their first conversation at the film’s beginning.

Of the four scenes in this sequence, this one feels the most Parnassian and, not coincidentally, it is the only one to feature Rock Hudson. Each scene about Cary and Cary’s self-realization succeeds; each scene about romance falls flat. In fact, their relationship seems particularly cold and unloving, especially on Ron’s part. But one does not find it surprising that a movie romance seems typical—even here, when mixed with issues of class and age. Cary’s scenes with Ron feel lifeless, while her scenes alone and with her children seem alive and convey a deep loneliness rarely seen in classic Hollywood cinema. Wyman shows more genuine emotion during the previous scene than she ever does with Hudson. Compare her non-verbal reaction (in the stills above) during the previous scene with the exaggerated smile during this one when, upon being asked if she would like to see a spruce tree, she delivers the line, “A silver-tipped spruce?” and Hudson responds, “You remembered. Oh, Cary!” By setting the scene in a Christmas tree lot, the film attempts to naturalize the silver-tipped spruce reference, but its overdone quality seems more like an attempt at a trite emotional payoff of its earlier mention (Cary and Ron’s first conversation).

At both the train station and the tree lot, Sirk manipulates shot scale and camera focus for precise, expressive effects. At the train station, we never see Cary closer than a medium shot. In that scene, Sirk also uses deep focus, leaving the spectator free to examine background and foreground. Deep focus seems like a natural choice, as both
Cary and the audience expect the children to enter the frame (from somewhere) at any moment. Thus, as the scene begins, Sirk’s technique offers hope to Cary. When we discover the children have not arrived and Sirk continues to use deep focus, the technique now achieves the opposite effect by highlighting Cary’s aloneness in the frame. At the tree lot, however, Sirk focuses and restricts our view of the action. Most of the scene involves a conversation between Cary and Ron—with Cary framed in a medium close-up and shallow focus. Here, Sirk concentrates our attention not only on the central action (the conversation) but also on whoever currently speaks. For example, when Cary speaks, only she is in focus. Because the setting itself here could offer diverse visual pleasures, one regrets the restricted view of the Christmas tree lot and Sirk’s concentration on only the important narrative information. The film proves least interesting when it focuses solely on Cary and Ron, and Sirk’s choices here corroborate this view.

Sirk’s Hudson movies are successful only to the extent they can overcome the setback of starring Rock Hudson. Paradoxically, Universal and Sirk manufactured Hudson’s stardom, which enabled Sirk to have larger budgets and better projects. So while Hudson detracts from the films’ quality, the films themselves would not have been made (or at least not by Sirk) without Hudson’s presence and success. But everything successful about All That Heaven Allows stems from Jane Wyman and her filmed performance.

**Scene Three: The Christmas Carolers**

The last two scenes both end with an iconic image: Cary at the frosted-pane window and Cary’s reflection in the television set. Each final shot creates a complex,
emotional punctuation, carefully placed and orchestrated, so I will spend more time on these two scenes.

The caroling scene contains six shots:

Figure 2-2. Shot One (14 seconds)
In an extreme long shot, we see Cary decorating the Christmas tree she purchased from Ron’s lot. As she decorates, we hear children singing “Joy to the World” outside and offscreen. Their caroling becomes audible just as Cary steps on the ladder. As she climbs a ladder to hang garland, Cary notices the sound, begins to step down, and (offscreen) walks to a window to see the carolers. As she begins her climb downward, the camera cuts to a second shot:

Figure 2-3. Shot Two (3.5 seconds)
This extreme long shot appears to be from Cary’s point-of-view (although without the windowpanes), yet there is no point-of-view figure to anchor this shot to her viewpoint.
The camera remains stationary, and the shot’s only movement comes from people walking and the sleigh moving towards offscreen left. The shot lasts for only a few seconds, and its purpose is questionable. Though we assume the shot will give a visual to the sounds we have just heard, this shot presents nothing clearly. Not until the third shot do we get a much clearer picture of what Cary hears. Initially, then, the mystery grows more mysterious, with a dark figure in the foreground, a sleigh carrying passengers we cannot see, and a diegetic sound with no clear onscreen source.

Figure 2-4. Shot Three (7.5 seconds)

In a long shot, we now clearly see the carolers. The sleigh moves from screen right to screen left and closer to the camera, which begins to track along with the sleigh around the middle of the shot’s length. We then have the first shot of Cary at the window:

Figure 2-5. Shot Four (3.5 seconds)
No movement occurs within the shot—neither characters nor camera—other than the falling snowflakes. This shot anchors the point-of-view figure completed in shots five and six.

Figure 2-6. Shot Five (7.5 seconds)

Then, the film cuts to the only “official” point-of-view shot, with Cary’s attention moving in the opposite direction of the sleigh. The sleigh moves from right to left, but her attention begins with the child riding the horse (left) and moves right (camera panning and slightly tilting downwards) to the children in the sleigh. The cut to the emotional sixth shot occurs precisely on the word “nature,” a bittersweet reminder of Ron, Cary’s “nature boy.” The sixth shot then begins with a medium shot:

Figure 2-7. Shot Six (17 seconds)

Though Cary weeps, the falling snow at first distracts us from the moisture flowing down her cheeks. When the camera tracks forward, the tears now glisten and become more
prominent. If the train station marks Cary’s first moment of self-awareness, this shot shows us that it was more than fleeting. The tears, in fact, look almost like scars, with her emotional state seared into her skin. The camera tracks until it frames Cary in a medium close-up.

We can notice three types of “precipitation” in this shot: the falling snow, the ice on the glass, and Cary’s tears. Sirk and Metty commonly use red for interiors and blue for exteriors, with the accompanying connotations of warm and cold. But here, binaries like inside/outside, red/blue, and warm/cold overlook the shot’s richness. If one isolates this shot, one could give it the standard ironic interpretation: though Cary’s home has the appearance of warmth, the empty house has become, for Cary, a cold, lonely place. But in the film’s context, a more complex operation occurs here, and we should analyze this shot as part of a pattern before settling on an interpretation. Throughout the film, Sirk develops a pattern using images of Cary standing at a window. Before her romantic entanglement with Ron, we see Cary at an unfrosted window. But after she and Ron begin their troubled relationship, Cary now stands at frosted windows, which subtly symbolize her muddled, cloudy vision of her situation. I say “subtly,” because unlike the film’s overt symbols—Christmas trees, deer, the television set—the full meaning does not become apparent without repeated viewings. When we witness Cary crying on Christmas Eve, we do not yet realize we will never again see Cary looking through a frosted window. The next time she stands at a window, we will see snow outside, but the window will be clear; she will have decided to go back and to stay with Ron, and the window now reflects the clarity of her vision. Though Christmas Eve finds Cary at her loneliest, we soon discover it is also the turning point in a pattern. If we
interpret this shot within this pattern, Cary does not so much cry as she thaws and melts—a necessary, cathartic stage before she comes fully alive as a character and decides to return to Ron. Yet the film makes such an interpretation available only retrospectively. Without repeated viewings and close, formal analysis, one understands how the aforementioned ironic interpretation, though overly simplistic, seems plausible.

Though the shot of Cary at the window has historically received the most attention, I have learned as much from the second shot as I have from anything else Sirk composed and directed. I initially found myself puzzled by this shot and its purpose; it seemed unnecessary and out of place. The closer I looked, the more was unlocked, and my discoveries led me to conclusions I never could have reached without careful analysis.

In shot two (Figure 2-8A), the sleigh moves forward on the left side of the frame. On the right side, we see a hedge and, behind that hedge, a couple waving—a man in a grey coat, carrying a present and wearing a hat, and a woman in a brown coat. They stand just past the hedge and turn to the left and wave as the sleigh goes by. In shots three (Figure 2-8B) and five (Figure 2-8C), the same couple appears—in the same position and still waving. Thus, what seems to be a progression (a sleigh moving forward while Cary watches) is actually a subtle use of overlapping editing; we witness the same event, three times, from slightly different camera setups. But while shots three and five are essentially the same shot with a slightly different scale and camera movement, shot two is considerably different: it is shot from the completely reverse angle. Notice that in shot two, we see the hedge on the right with the couple behind it. In shots three and five, we now see the hedge on the left and the couple in front of it.
Thus, Sirk breaks the 180-degree rule, but we do not notice because the sleigh always moves forward, from right to left, on the left side of the frame—though it literally reverses direction from shot two to shot three. But even the sleigh movement is not as continuous as it appears. In each shot, the sleigh moves past the same waving couple; but just as the couple repeats their wave in each shot, so the sleigh simply repeats its movement. After shot two, each new shot of the sleigh (shots three and five) shows the
sleigh starting back in its original position. Thus, the sleigh never actually moves forward, and the movement truly is an illusion. The images we view in shots two, three, and five are essentially the equivalent of a stuck, looping record.

So what does give the continuity here, since the film breaks basic continuity style rules? Music. We perceive movement because objects in the frame move, the camera moves, and time does progress, but “Joy to the World” is the only truly continuous element here. We perceive the scene as moving forward because the lyrics carry us forward. The song, thus, overlays the images and gives them a continuity they do not possess on their own. This close reading gets at the core of Sirk’s style: melodrama as “melos” plus “drama.” As Sirk comments, “The word ‘melodrama’ has rather lost its meaning nowaways: people tend to lose the ‘melos’ in it, the music” (Halliday 93). One could not make as strong an argument had this scene used Frank Skinner’s nondiegetic score—whose melodramatic sound provides an obvious example of “melos” plus “drama.” Here, we have a diegetic Christmas carol enacting and enabling drama and, in this case, one of the film’s most poignant images and crucial emotional moments. We see and hear melodrama boiled down to its essentials and naturalized within the diegesis.

But beyond the song itself, a musical rhythm establishes the scene’s pacing. Narratively, shot two has a questionable purpose, but rhythmically, it works. Shot two (lasting 3.5 seconds) exists to rhyme with shot four (3.5 seconds) and also to set up a rhythmic relation between shots three (7.5 seconds) and five (7.5 seconds). The contents of the images, though important, do not matter nearly as much here as the precise timing and pacing. After the first shot (14 seconds), the middle four shots have
a pure, rhythmic alternation, and the scene concludes with shot six held for a slightly longer seventeen seconds—like the final note of a musical composition.

Even though Universal allowed Sirk to cut his pictures, surely, one must argue, no Hollywood director working at Universal Pictures in the 1950s would have taken such a structural approach to a scene's design as I detail here, with alternating shot lengths and rhyming movements. The other three scenes I discuss, for example, lack the rigid structure of these six shots. If Sirk intentionally aimed for precision, he would not have included shot two; rather, he intuitively established the rhythm here. Even if intentions do not matter, we still have the effect realized onscreen. In fact, if the scene's design were intentional, it would weaken my argument for this entire sequence as an inspired—as opposed to a Parnassian—piece of filmmaking, for Sirk (and others) could easily repeat it. At least in this sequence, Sirk works from what Robin Wood would call a “spontaneous-intuitive centre” (Wood Hawks 22). For all of Sirk's emphasis on precise technique, he also claims to have worked by feeling and intuition (Stern, Harvey 57). So whether Sirk intentionally timed the six shots from All That Heaven Allows or whether he edited the scene in a way that simply “felt” right, it does not matter. Sirk is the variable, consciously or not, who makes this shot (and scene) alive.

**Scene Four: Christmas Morning**

On Christmas morning, Ned and Kay arrive home and burst through the front door. In a literal image of the selfishness we have just witnessed through Cary's reactions, the children head straight for the presents. After a perfunctory “Merry Christmas!” Ned picks up his present and comments, “Hey, look at all that loot!” Kay at least makes some small talk before mentioning presents. But, like Ned, she looks at the presents and exclaims, “Is that big present for me?” Ned immediately notices the television set
he purchased for his mother (against Cary’s will and presently unbeknownst to her) has not arrived. Cary responds, “Don’t worry about it. Just having the two of you is enough for me.” The camera has framed the scene in a long shot until this point, but as Cary delivers the line, the camera tracks into a medium shot and marks the scene’s sincerity (she really wants nothing more than her children’s presence) and its sadness (we know she will never have that with these children).

While Ned runs upstairs to phone the television salesman, the scene’s first cut occurs, and we see Kay removing her glove and revealing an engagement ring. The camera remains on Kay as Cary enters the frame, stunned. Cary questions whether Kay is too young, but Kay quickly reminds her she was seventeen when she married. With her left hand, Cary slowly clasps the left side of her face (turned away from the camera) and heads to the couch to sit down, the camera panning with her as she moves right. As she sits, saying, “But … it’s so soon,” the camera tracks in and reframes Cary on the couch and Kay kneeling beside. A shot/reverse-shot pattern then begins between Cary and Kay. Kay reveals that she realized she truly loved her fiancé, Freddy, the day she and Freddy fought about Cary’s relationship with Ron. Earlier in the film, Cary consoled Kay after that fight, as Kay sobbed and proclaimed that Cary’s relationship was ruining her life. When Cary subtly reminds her of her actions, Kay responds, “I was being childish. You shouldn’t have let me get away with it. …You didn’t really love him, did you?” In other words, Kay criticizes her mother in a passive-aggressive manner. As Kay asks the question, Sirk cuts to Cary’s reaction—a blank face. In fact, though she converses with Kay, she rarely makes any eye contact with her and instead stares directly ahead.
But another cut soon occurs as Ned reenters the scene. He announces they should all enjoy Christmas because it is the last they will spend together in this particular house. Ned has received a scholarship to go to Paris and will have a job offer in Iran; Kay will marry. And the house, too big for one person, must be sold. Selling the house, of course, was Ned’s major hangup (“You’re planning to give up a home that’s been in the family for … I don’t know how long”) when Cary was to marry Ron. As Cary delivers her lines and responds to these several sudden revelations from Ned, her voice evinces disbelief—not just that this is happening, but that it hardly seems possible that Ned and Kay cannot understand their callousness. The doorbell rings, and Ned goes to answer it, as the camera cuts back to Cary and Kay.

In the scene’s longest shot (44 seconds) Cary sighs deeply, her forehead grows wrinkled, and then she rests her face in her hands, tilts her head directly towards the ground, and closes her eyes. Kay grows worried, yet Cary responds, “Don’t you see, Kay? The whole thing’s been so pointless.” Kay then breaks into tears, rises up to sit next to her on the couch, and apologizes. Cary remains unmoved by this act, yet Kay attempts to console her: “Mama, it still isn’t too late. If he loves you.” Cary lets out another heavy sigh and sits upright again, and softly says, “Please, Kay,” as she shakes her head and still stares downward. Offscreen, Ned says, “Mother, Merry Christmas,” and the film cuts to Ned and the television salesman wheeling in a television set. The scene soon concludes with one of cinema’s most iconic images: Sirk’s camera tracks into the blank television screen, and Cary sees her reflection as the salesman remarks, “All you have to do is turn that dial, and you have all the company you want—right there on the screen. Drama. Comedy. Life’s parade at your fingertips.”
This scene recalls the relationship between Clifford Groves (Fred MacMurray) with his children in There’s Always Tomorrow, which Sirk made in the same year (1955) with William Reynolds again co-starring as a selfish, ungrateful son (now named Vinnie). In that film, however, the parent-child relationship is eventually restored—or at least the ending suggests this restoration. In There’s Always Tomorrow, both Barbara Stanwyck’s character, Norma, (whom Vinnie suspects is having an affair with his father) and Vinnie’s girlfriend, Ann, have the opportunity to berate Vinnie and his siblings for their despicable behavior and attitude towards Cliff. Eventually, the children even believe they have caused their father to stray. And by the film’s end, they have “learned their lesson” and seem repentant. Though All That Heaven Allows will end with Cary and Ron together again, the film does not resolve Cary’s relationship with her children. In fact, after Ned presents Cary with the television set on Christmas morning, we never see the children again for the remainder of the film (its final 15 minutes). There’s Always Tomorrow, however, ends on a shot of the three children as they gaze upon their parents and the younger daughter comments, “They make a handsome couple, don’t they?” But in All That Heaven Allows, Ned and Kay never have anyone tell them off or make them aware of their behavior. Though Kay will apologize to Cary here, Ned
seems even more disgusting as the scene progresses and he takes such pride in giving Cary a television. In interviews, Sirk often spoke of how Ross Hunter forced happy endings, and he suggests the viewer should interpret them ironically. One can easily give *There’s Always Tomorrow’s* ending the ironic interpretation: the children’s sudden turnaround cannot efface Cliff’s misery. But I would argue that the possibility for one to interpret the film this way makes *There’s Always Tomorrow’s* ending the weaker of the two. For as trite, or even silly, as one may view *All That Heaven Allows’s* final scene, with Cary and Ron reuniting after his near-fatal fall, one feels Cary truly deserves a happy ending, however problematic, after the way her children have treated her.

Throughout this scene Jane Wyman’s face absorbs loneliness and loss like a sponge. Though an emotional outburst seems well-deserved here, we witness none—not even tears like she cried in the previous scene. We can catalogue Cary’s reactions in this scene:

![Figure 2-10. Cary’s reactions. A) Reaction to Kay’s engagement, B) reaction to “Our last Christmas in this house,” C) reaction to “I think we should sell the house,” D) reaction to the television.](image)

A B

C D
Like Cary at the window, the image of Cary in the television belongs to a pattern—of Cary’s blank-faced responses to the people and situations she encounters. In other words, had we not repeatedly seen Cary’s reactions before, we might still find the television image striking, but it would not have the emotional depth that it does. Take, for example, Wyman’s characteristic gesture of being at a loss for words. In the film’s early scenes with Ned and Kay, Cary often does not know how to respond to them; she appears hesitant or even stares at them somewhat blankly, just as she does here. But when you see her face as Ned presents her with the television, her loss for words suddenly seems devastating in a way that it did not earlier in the film.

Wyman’s star-making role in *Johnny Belinda* (1948) provides an excellent comparison. As a deaf-mute young woman, Wyman spends the entire film reacting to what others say and do to her. Sirk uses this talent adroitly, not by making her inarticulateness the explicit subject of the movie (as in *Johnny Belinda*), but by using her talent for reacting. Cary responds here as she has throughout the entire sequence, but seeing her reaction in the television adds an inflection by giving her expression a sense of permanence; the television screen’s amber, almost sepia, tone gives her face the look of an aged photograph. When Cary sees her reflection, it is not a moment of self-awareness (that moment has already occurred), but of prophecy: her fate sealed and her loneliness crystallized. A haunting image supports this view: as the camera tracks closer to the television, its dark shadow passes across the screen and creates a ghostly, ominous presence.

An important moment, however, comes just before the final shot, and involves Cary moving her mouth. Considering how controlled Cary’s reactions have been
throughout the film (and this sequence in particular), one could argue that Wyman intentionally performs this gesture, but it seems quite unconscious. Just before the cut to Ned and the television, Cary’s mouth opens and twitches twice, as if she restrains herself from speaking. Kay has just delivered her line about how nothing matters as long as Ron still loves her, and Cary responds, “Please, Kay.” The first twitch occurs as we hear Ned saying, “Mother,” in order to get her attention. The second one occurs as Ned continues, saying, “Merry Christmas.” Cary still stares downward, her mouth opens again, and then she looks up just before the cut. Her mouth moves so slightly that one requires repeated viewings to notice the gesture and register its poignancy. The image of someone opening her mouth to speak, but stopping just short of an utterance, of having something to say, but suppressing it, both fits within the pattern of how Cary responds throughout the film and reveals emotions and thoughts almost disclosed, but instead kept private.

**Inspired Filmmaking**

What, then, does *All That Heaven Allows* teach us about the language of inspiration in film? While background “noise”—genre, conventions, ideology, biography—influences any art, this fact does not rule out the role individual creativity plays in artistic creation. For the most part, a single individual produces a literary work, while it takes numerous people to create a film, making it impossible, at least within Hollywood, for any one person to have total creative control. But while no one filmmaker has complete control, a single filmmaker can give a film coherence, shepherding the film’s production and incorporating all disparate elements into an organic whole. As Sirk comments to Halliday, coherence, not control, proves more important:
You shoot completely out of continuity. … You shoot scene No. 8 and maybe only half of it. You go to 126, just take the long shot, which is 5,000 miles away from the studio, come back to the scene after weeks, then finish scene No. 8, and continue in this bewildering way. The matching of the mood of scene and characters, of light and length: all this has to be present at all times in one man’s mind—the director’s (96).

Though the shots of Cary at the window and in the television set seemed significant, I did not find them truly meaningful until I realized the role these shots played in an overall pattern. In other words, I discovered that the film, shot completely out of continuity, had a formal design, rather than merely a narrative structure, holding it together. And whether intentional or not, such coherence does not result haphazardly; at the very least, we can credit Sirk for giving a shape to the material that it would otherwise lack.

Consider, for example, two similar shots:

Figure 2-11. Window shots. A) The window shot from *All That Heaven Allows*, B) the window shot from *Madame X*.

Compared to the organization evident in Sirk’s film, the relative disorganization of a similar shot in *Madame X* (1966) will prove instructive. *Madame X* is particularly significant, as Ross Hunter initially planned the film for Sirk to direct. Many of Sirk’s regular collaborators worked on the film as well: Russell Metty (cinematography), Milton Carruth (editing), Alexander Golitzen (art direction), and Frank Skinner (score). To understand this comparison, one must first know something of the film’s first minutes.
The film tells the story of Holly Anderson (Lana Turner): the wife of an aspiring politician, Clayton Anderson (John Forsythe); the mother to their son, Clayton Jr.; and the daughter-in-law of a controlling, protective mother-in-law, Estelle (Constance Bennett). Clayton spends the majority of his time away from home on State Department trips. While he shows tenderness and genuine love for Holly, his political aspirations—guided by his mother—are his true love. Neglected by her husband, Holly begins an affair with a known lothario, Phil Benton (Ricardo Montalban), but she never stops loving her husband. The affair originates in boredom, and Holly somewhat reluctantly enters into it. The shot in question occurs roughly thirteen minutes into the film. Holly has not yet begun her affair with Phil, and in the very next scene we witness his second offer to her to attend a concert, which she will finally accept. In two scenes prior to this shot, it is a rainy day, and we see Holly discussing her unhappiness about Clayton’s absence with Estelle. Estelle responds that Anderson men are ambitious and that Anderson women must patiently accept a life of loneliness.

This scene dissolves into a short scene that takes place outside at the mailbox, with Holly and Clayton Jr. checking the mail for a letter from Clayton. When they find no letter, Holly puts her arm around Clayton Jr. and they head up the driveway. Another dissolve transitions to a shot reminiscent of Cary in *All That Heaven Allows*. As the rain falls and the camera remains motionless, Frank Skinner’s score plays, and Holly walks forward to the window and gazes aimlessly. The filmmakers intend the scene—done in a single, eleven-second take—to carry a great emotional weight and to make the audience sympathize with her loneliness and her upcoming decision to have an affair.
In *All That Heaven Allows*, Sirk makes the window shot both the final shot in the scene’s rhythmic pattern and part of a larger pattern of window shots throughout the film. In *Madame X*, the director handles this moment rather sloppily, and it feels more like an unnecessary insert that does not fit logically with the film’s development. Holly stands at the same window in the room where she just conversed with her mother-in-law. In both the mother-in-law scene and the window-shot, Holly wears the same outfit. But between these shots, we see the brief mailbox scene—with Holly in a different dress, earrings, and hairstyle, and with clear, not rainy, weather. An incongruity occurs because the window scene follows the mailbox one—back to the rain and the previous outfit, jewelry, and hairdo—although we witness the events in chronological order.

The impact of Sirk’s shot results as much from its placement in a sequence of events than from its content. As I have argued, you can take the same shot (as *Madame X* does) but not produce the same effect. In other words, I do not base my argument on simply two shots that look alike; both shots share an intended emotional effect: to show a lonely mother and wife/widow. As if in a Sirk film, Clayton chose Holly to play a role, not to be loved. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary contemplates her role as a mother just as Holly contemplates her role as a wife. Both have been abandoned (by children and by a husband); both contemplate controversial emotional decisions (do I go back to Ron? and do I have an affair?). But the shot in *Madame X* cannot carry the emotional weight it needs to because the filmmakers did not develop it as part of a pattern. Because the *Madame X* shot occurs just thirteen minutes into the film (compared to over seventy minutes in *All That Heaven Allows*), the film simply has not had enough time to build the emotional payoff Sirk achieves.
Just as we would benefit from discussing coherence rather than control, we should realize inspired filmmaking results not so much from what a filmmaker creates as what he or she enables. Ross Hunter’s production unit repeatedly employed the same crew, even after Sirk retired. Thus, in movies like *Madame X* (1966), *Portrait in Black* (1960), *Back Street* (1961), and even *Tammy and the Doctor* (1963), we witness the same filmmakers at work—simply without Sirk. But if one analyzes any of these films (as I did above with *Madame X*), one quickly realizes that Sirk brought out qualities in these technicians completely absent from these other films. That Ross Hunter’s unit could produce both *All That Heaven Allows* and a film as bland as *Tammy and the Doctor* indicates that Sirk not only enabled his fellow technicians to do their best work, but he also balanced and restrained their baser impulses.

Quite remarkably for someone who speaks so much of ideas in his interviews, Sirk did not make his films in this way:

In film you have to learn to use what you find on the set. You can never visualize that situation beforehand because it is always different. … You must leave yourself perfectly open and flexible. You may get an idea from the last word or the last gesture of the day’s shooting. My first film experience, I worked everything out and nothing worked out. But once I had shed my beginner’s ideas, my stage director’s notions, I never prepared myself too much. Also, I learned to improvise on the set—a method I used to some degree in all my pictures (Harvey “Sirkumstantial” 56).

Thus, Sirk did not first decide on an idea or message and then go about choosing the appropriate images and organization to deliver it. The inspired moments I discuss here—especially how Sirk captures Cary’s reactions throughout the sequence—result not from any meaning imposed upon them, but from a quality Sirk considers essential: “a constant flow of inspiration between camera and people” (Stern). Godard once wrote of two problems that preoccupied him: “Why do one shot instead rather than another?”
and “What is it ultimately that makes one run a shot on or change to another?” (223). In other words, how does one choose among the various ways to compose a shot, and when does one start and stop the camera? Such questions almost sound too basic, but how a director handles these essential concerns determines the value of the filmmaking choices he or she makes. Sirk, at least in *All That Heaven Allows*, demonstrates that he can make inspired choices at this fundamental level.

**Sirk Blackmailed**

Like Cary, I often found myself unsure of how to react to this sequence’s events. I sensed their importance, and they continually moved me, but I, too, found myself at a loss for words. A close reading, though, allowed me to unlock the sequence and to permit the film’s rich details to, in Andrew Klevan’s phrase, “shepherd my prose” (“A Reply…”). Each thought and each conclusion of this chapter originated with the idea of applying Hopkins’s Parnassian principle to thinking about *All That Heaven Allows*; I took a principle and followed it as far as it would lead by pursuing certain moments that interested me without knowing precisely why. The work may at times seem tedious—timing shot lengths, counting shots, comparing and contrasting the smallest of details—but it has a larger purpose. As I argue for the necessity of formal analysis, brief, general descriptions simply would not suffice. But the Sirkian system and traditional Sirk criticism only offer such generalities.

In his autobiography, Roland Barthes wrote of the artist’s potential do something beyond the definable, the classifiable, and the expected:

> Many … avant-garde texts are *uncertain*: how to judge, to classify them, how to predict their immediate or eventual future? Do they please? Do they bore? Their obvious quality is of an intentional order: they are concerned to serve theory. Yet this quality is a blackmail *as well* (theory blackmailed): love me, keep me, defend me, since I conform to the theory
you call for. … But Artaud is not just ‘avant-garde;’ he is a kind of writing *as well;* Cage has a certain charm *as well* … --But those are *precisely* the attributes which are not recognized by theory… (Barthes 54).

Though I criticize Willemen, it is not because Sirk does not do the things he says he does, but because those qualities cannot account for his films’ lasting success. For Sirk does something else *as well,* and this chapter attempts to account for that "as well"—the attributes not recognized by the Sirkian system. That this unspecified quality cannot be pinned down and categorized is a benefit, not a fault or a criticism. This fact simply demands that critics continually return to Sirk’s films themselves and apply to them the fastidious, detailed attention they deserve. A critic must be one on whom nothing is lost, yet the Sirkian system misses so much; *All That Heaven Allows* lives a complex, vivid life outside any system.
CHAPTER 3
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH A FILM?

To my knowledge, very few film scholars have written about teaching the introductory class on film style (a course often titled Film Analysis, Introduction to Film, or Film Appreciation). Peter Harcourt’s introduction to his *Six European Directors* and Andrew Klevan’s “Notes on teaching film style” present two notable exceptions: essays that address the day-to-day classroom work of screening and discussing films. Though we spend much time in classrooms, the classroom itself seems largely absent from our work—a phenomenon Dana Polan notes in his study of early film pedagogy, *Scenes of Instruction*,

Disciplines, their historians seems to say, are formed through professional activities and institutions such as scholarly journals, professional societies, and their meetings, the reading and writing of specialized research, credentialing of graduate acolytes, and so on, but rarely through what happens in the average classroom session. It is as if the everyday work of imparting instruction to a student population is taken to be a secondary activity with no direct impact on the field’s constitution and continuance (20-21).

In this chapter, I will work to correct this lack by exploring a crucial, practical question: what does it mean to teach a film? Of course, as any history of film pedagogy demonstrates, teachers have put film to numerous uses over the last century: as patriotic training for immigrants; as an exemplary business model; as a minefield for sociological research in communications departments; and, only more recently, as an art form in itself—this latter stage largely corresponding to the birth of film studies as a discipline in the 1960s.

Here, I suggest that the introductory class on film style should train students to develop a heightened attentiveness to film form and to articulate what they see through precise, detailed prose descriptions. Yet before I can discuss how to accomplish this
goal, I must first begin by exploring numerous problems an instructor encounters when teaching film—from the issue of initial, personal response to perhaps the most difficult problem: indifference. I then closely examine one type of text that does discuss introductory film instruction: the film textbook. Using Wittgenstein’s discussion of ostensive definitions, I explain how these textbooks use flawed methods when teaching film form. In opposition to the definition-and-example method of textbooks, I then advocate the study of filmmaking choices through descriptive analysis as an effective way to alert students to film form. And finally, I put the principles from this chapter into practice by exploring a single filmmaking choice in a scene from Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959).

**Pedagogical Problems**

**Hasty Evaluation**

In *Culture and Value*, Ludwig Wittgenstein poses an evaluative problem that film studies instructors confront in classroom teaching:

> If I say A has beautiful eyes someone may ask me: what do you find beautiful about his eyes, and perhaps I shall reply: the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids. What do these eyes have in common with a gothic church that I find beautiful too? Should I say they make a similar impression on me? What if I were to say that in both cases my hand feels tempted to draw them? That at any rate would be a narrow definition of the beautiful.

> It will often be possible to say: seek your reasons for calling something good or beautiful and then the peculiar grammar of the word “good” in this instance will be evident (24).

For Wittgenstein, evaluative judgments do not require a specialized vocabulary for their validity; rather, they must be expressed with greater precision, moving from abstractions like “good” and “beautiful” to narrow definitions: “the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids.” Wittgenstein’s advice for seeking the “peculiar grammar” of evaluative
terms corrects a problem George Orwell sees as indicative of modern prose in general: a move away from concreteness and into abstraction (278). Ideally, Wittgenstein suggests, evaluation should lead one back to the concrete. And, as Francois Truffaut comments, the film critic works in this way as well: “Having to analyze and describe one’s pleasure may not automatically change an amateur into a professional, but it does lead one back to the concrete and … to that ill-defined area where the critic works” (Dixon 5). The problem, as Wittgenstein points out, is not that we evaluate, but how we do so. We make value judgments all the time, yet rarely do we refine these judgments and form what Wittgenstein calls a “narrow definition” when we respond to and evaluate art.

These initial remarks on evaluation require that I provide a context for the discussion that follows. While most of this chapter applies to any course on film style, my comments about evaluation and how students respond to films apply primarily to introductory classes. For example, I begin by discussing evaluation, because it is the most familiar way introductory students respond to films, a situation no doubt noticeably distinct from a more advanced class. And, of course, I talk here only about one kind of film class—one on style; issues of form and evaluation may not play as great a role (or any role) in a class with more historical or theoretical aims.

There is also a personal context: much of this chapter arises from my own experiences teaching an introductory film class. When I first began teaching, I thought very little about questions of value, and such questions did not enter into my pedagogical methods. But my interaction with students, coupled with my own reading, generated a concern about evaluation that initially did not exist. A key question
constantly arose: what do I want my students to take away from this class? Most of my students are non-majors, and this course will be the only film class they will take. Yet whether comprised of majors or non-majors, a film class differs from other humanities courses in at least one important way: while one could imagine a student taking an ancient philosophy or Victorian literature class and never again reading Diogenes or Dickens, it seems unimaginable that a student would take a film class and never watch another movie. Thus, not only do students enter a film class primarily responding to films through evaluative judgments, but also they more than likely will continue to do so after the course ends. As Peter Wollen comments, consumers of art constantly make evaluative judgments without reflection (217). The film instructor, then, should alert students to the overlooked nuances of film form and provide a model for how to make sound, well-supported evaluative judgments.

Though we make hasty evaluative judgments in casual conversation all the time, we aim for more in a class on film style. For most students, their response to a film either is an evaluation, or an evaluation soon follows an initial response. While the ability to make sound evaluations is one goal of a class on film style, the first goal must be elucidation: making students aware of film form, which a film’s narrative often obscures. Evaluation should not be the first order of business, but the last—the result of careful, close scrutiny of film style. As a teacher, one attempts to slow down these value judgments and switch the emphasis to analyzing the filmmaking choices that compose a film. As Peter Brooks writes, “Students need in the work on literature to encounter a moment of poetics—a moment in which they are forced to ask not only what the text means, but as well how it means…. American pedagogical practice still
tends to go right for the interpretive jugular. It does not sufficiently pause, and reflect, in the realm of poetics” (160-161). In the film studies classroom, we must make explicit the reasons for the value judgments we make, and this task requires one to develop sensitivity to a film’s work on the formal level.

This process of “slowing down” is a central goal of an introductory class. When Roland Barthes writes about realist narrative structure in S/Z, he speaks of the necessity of delays and stoppages in narratives, which postpone the inevitable ending of a story and allow it to develop. These delays prevent a story from ending as soon as it has begun. Similarly, I want to put up delays and stoppages in the usual critical “narrative,” which often follows a familiar pattern: one watches a movie, quickly judges it, and then moves on to the next film. Interestingly, Roland Barthes uses the cinematic metaphor of slow motion when describing his own “step-by-step method” of close textual analysis (12).

**Mere Entertainment**

As a popular art, film does not seem worthy of close scrutiny, so we tend to make judgments rather quickly. This condition does not result solely from viewers themselves, but from the commercial system that produces this art. As Barthes writes, popular art is characterized by its disposability: we read one magazine, then purchase the next; we watch one film, then move on to the next. Spending too much time on one text keeps us from purchasing others; thus, this commercial system practically outlaws rereading and re-watching, essential tools for developing an attentiveness to form. Barthes remarks,

Rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us ‘throw away’ the story once it has been consumed (‘devoured’), so that we can then move on to another story, buy
another book, and which is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors) [is] here suggested at the outset (15-16).

Students are often puzzled, and even frustrated, when we spend a large amount of time on one particular scene or when an analysis moves shot-by-shot or frame-by-frame. Treating film in such a way, for many of them, seems tantamount to a close analysis of a newsstand magazine or a current fictional bestseller. Certain films, say, European ones, seem more important (as if they require interpretation), but Hollywood films do not seem to demand such detailed attention. Of course, serious analysis of Hollywood cinema was the revolution of Cahiers du Cinéma and Movie criticism in the 1950s and 1960s: these critics opened up Hollywood cinema for meaningful study. As Bordwell writes, “Cahiers’s willingness to turn its exegetical lens to the most overlooked products of the Hollywood industry marked a significant point in cultural criticism generally” (47). For example, it seems unimaginable today that Robin Wood began his 1965 book on Hitchcock’s films with this question: “Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?” (55). But over fifty years later, that prejudice still exists in popular conceptions of Hollywood—that it is mere entertainment—and it has crept back into academic film studies as well. In many ways, what counts as “serious” cinema today is any cinema that can pride itself on its distance from Hollywood—contemporary or classic.

Initial Response and the Literary Level

Though one’s enjoyment of a film depends on its form, one’s enjoyment does not depend on knowledge of a film’s form. Just as one can admire an automobile without being a mechanic or savor a dish without being a chef, one can enjoy a film without being a formalist. Although when one wants to know why a film affects one in some
way, one must inevitably turn to formal concerns. Yet a viewer may like a particular film for multiple reasons, and none may be formal. I concur with V.F. Perkins here:

It is a man’s own, and legitimate, decision whether to concern himself with any medium for its own sake. He may decide this his own political, racial, religious or even hygienic objectives are of such overriding importance that he will give his admiration to any picture, regardless of formal integrity, which seems to promote those values. … What any of us wants from the movies is his personal affair (187).

There is, after all, nothing wrong with responding to films for non-formal reasons, but a film class should make students conscious of how a film functions on this level. And contrary to many students’ preconceptions, they do not miss some below-the-surface meaning; though a film’s narrative may obscure its style, we tend to miss what is right on the surface. I find that students have no problem generating a ten-page research paper, but ask them, using ordinary language, to produce a description of a shot or a short scene, and the results are usually disheartening. What is easiest to see proves the most difficult to describe, for the “most important aspects of things are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. One is unable to notice something—because it is always in plain view before one’s eyes” (Kenny 53). When teaching, I emphasize, as V.F. Perkins does, that the class will focus on things that are “in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of” (4). The hard work, of course, is to become alert to what we do see onscreen, and this chapter will address methods for accomplishing this task.

The film instructor sympathizes with Brecht’s desire to create a “sporting public” of theater audiences: “The demoralization of our theatre audiences springs from the fact that neither theatre nor audience has any idea what is supposed to go on there. When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place” (6). While perhaps some may watch a sporting event as pure
entertainment, the majority of sports fans know the rules of the game being played. With a film, though, most are not aware of its “rules,” the formal possibilities of cinematic expression. At least with Hollywood cinema, filmgoers do have some idea of what to expect: a compelling narrative. But they lack knowledge of the form that expresses this narrative. And it is to this literary level that students respond when they seek to broaden their responses beyond the purely evaluative. In fact, every film class I teach confirms Jonas Mekas’s succinct statement: “Most people do not like films, they like stories” (Small 38). One should not take this remark as a criticism, but as a truth: without being aware of film form, spectators primarily respond to a film’s plot, characters, and themes. This tendency results from our relative familiarity with discussing literature (as learned in grade school) and our general unfamiliarity with discussing aesthetics—especially of non-verbal forms. As Peter Harcourt writes, films affect most spectators on the “level of incident,” or plot and characterization: “It is the most literary level, the level that most closely binds film to the techniques of the novel, that most easily allows the established literary-critical vocabulary to be employed in the discussion of it” (26). He later continues, “For most spectators, the film is chiefly about characters who are doing things and saying things—characters in action” (33). Even when responding on this literary level, students may recognize a film works on some formal level to affect them; they simply lack the training to articulate just how a film produces this effect. The class on film style, then, should train students “to search for suitable words to evoke a medium that is originally visual and aural” (Klevan 222). As Harcourt comments, the formal level is “the most important level, yet the most difficult to analyze precisely. It is difficult to analyze partly because we lack a vocabulary
adequate to describe the possible richness of the many visual, verbal, psychological, balletic, and musical effects” (31). Both Klevan and Harcourt confirm what Wittgenstein notes in the aforementioned passage from *Culture and Value*: the importance of language, diction, and precision in the way we respond to art.

For André Bazin, responding to film form shares something in common with having a refined palate, and he makes an apt analogy between film evaluation and wine connoisseurship: “The evaluation of a [film] shares something in common with wine-tasting. The wine-lover alone can discern the body and the bouquet, the alcohol content and the fruitiness, and all these nuances intermingled, where the uninitiated can only make a rough guess at whether it is a Burgundy or a Bordeaux” (Bazin 165). But when Bazin speaks of the “uninitiated,” Perkins discusses the “naïve response of the film fan,” and Peter Harcourt writes of “ignorant” response to film, such language inevitably raises the problem (or at least the criticism) of elitism, a charge Robin Wood takes on in his essay, “In Defense of Art.” Wood notes that elitist art is “art you have to learn to appreciate,” and the elite, as a group, “consists of people who either spontaneously want, or deliberately choose to want, to educate themselves” (66). The problem, for Wood, is one of definition: “If the term ‘elitist’ is defined as ‘anything that cannot be fully appreciated by anyone, irrespective of background, training and education,’ then all art is elitist. As soon as one allows for the desirability of discrimination, then elitism creeps in” (Wood 67). While most people would trust a sommelier to make a wine selection without putting up much of a fight—we assume he or she has some discriminating skill that we lack—no mediator seems necessary when it comes to film. In addition, popular art does not seem to demand such detailed attention because it often does not appear
obviously significant. As Wood remarks, “There are great works of art—plenty of them—which have been enjoyed readily by the general public, but a condition of this enjoyment seems to be that they are not perceived as art” (67). Classic Hollywood, for example, developed an invisible style, a style made subordinate to a film’s narrative and one that should not draw attention to itself. Thus, to take notice of style and to respond to film, especially classic Hollywood cinema, as significant art takes “effort, discipline and patience” (Wood 66). While there is certainly no obligation to take notice of a film on this aesthetic level, certain films, as I will discuss with Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), will otherwise remain relatively closed off to contemporary spectators—or worse, be of mere historical interest.

These comments do not diminish the importance of untrained response to films. Personal response, in fact, provides the basis for exploring film in greater detail:

> To recapture the naïve response of the film-fan is the first step towards intelligent appreciation of most pictures. The ideal spectator is often a close relation of Sterne’s ideal reader who would be pleased he knows not why and cares not wherefore. One cannot profitably stop there; but one cannot sensibly begin anywhere else (Perkins 156).

When we first view a film, we can approach it from two directions: the direction of knowledge (or scholarship) and the direction of ignorance, and Peter Harcourt sides with ignorance over knowledge when it comes to our initial response to a film: “We undoubtedly need scholarship to help us *understand* a given work of art…. But scholarship in the arts is secondary. Response is primary” (21). For Harcourt, the real danger is to approach film on a conceptual level—raiding films for ideas or seeing films as merely examples of some concept. Knowledge (historical, theoretical, etc.) should instead follow response so that it does not prematurely close off a work’s potential plurality of meanings (Harcourt 21).
The Speed of Film

To approach a film as a literary object does not only result from our familiarity with literature, but it is also encouraged by the speed of film itself. For most viewers, a first viewing is the only viewing, and one simply does have the ability to pay detailed attention to form when trying to understand the narrative. We must slow down, pause, and repeat moments, scenes, and entire films in order to appreciate film form. When we do so, “key moments and meanings then become visible that could not have been perceived, hidden under narrative flow and the movement of film at twenty-four frames per second” (Mulvey 231). Laura Mulvey would agree with Wittgenstein and Perkins that nothing is actually hidden; the speed of film merely prevents us from seeing what is already present onscreen:

The paradox here is that, while it would be almost impossible to pick up these aesthetic reverberations consciously at twenty-four frames per second, once halted and analysed, the meanings invested in such a segment are not hard to identify. From this perspective, there is a built-in or ‘pre-programmed’ demand, within the film itself, to break down its more obvious narrative continuities, its forward movement, in the interest of discovering these, otherwise hidden, meanings (232).

Even if one does find time to notice form on a first viewing, it often occurs at the expense of the narrative. For when one devotes extra time to thinking about a shot’s or a scene’s significance, the movie has continued on with its story (Mulvey 234). Close analysis, on the other hand, allows us to separate, “in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface, imperceptibly soldered by the movement of sentences, the flowing discourse of narration, the ‘naturalness’ of ordinary language” (Barthes 13). Though Barthes writes of literature, his basic idea applies to watching films as well. We break this process by re-watching films, a practice many students resist because they see popular
entertainment as a passive experience. As Barthes remarks, we tend to view the
making of art as a creative, even glamorous act, yet we view the consumption of art as
a passive, parasitical response (10). Barthes’s *S/Z* reacts against this idea by
considering reading—and especially rereading—as a form of work (10).

That watching films could likewise require work is a foreign concept for most film
viewers. Yet re-viewing a film marks an essential first step for close analysis: it stakes a
claim for a serious consideration of the film at hand, and it releases (or begins to
release) one from an exclusive focus on the narrative. Barthes advocates “a second
reading, the reading which places behind the transparency of suspense (placed on the
text by the first avid and ignorant reader) the anticipated knowledge of what is to come
in the story…” (165). Of course, he continues, “This further reading [is] unjustly
condemned by the commercial imperatives of our society, which compels us to
squander the book, to discard it as though it were deflowered, in order to buy a new
one…” (165). Today, though, new technologies make it easier than ever to do the work
of formal analysis and to analyze films in ways once available only to those with an
editing table. Beyond the fact that DVD players and computers allow one to manipulate
film time, most home computers now feature programs with basic editing capabilities.
The tools for formal analysis, as Mulvey writes, have been democratized: “New
technologies have also brought new dimensions of possibility to textual analysis, not
only for critical and for academic purposes, but also for the spread of film appreciation
outside these limited circles” (Mulvey 229). Whereas an earlier generation of film
scholars had to rely on memories of single viewings of films or on subpar versions (for
example, a 16mm, cropped, black-and-white print of a Technicolor Vistavision film),
today there is simply no excuse to not closely scrutinize the films we write about:

To my mind, the new ways of consuming old movies on electronic and digital technologies should bring about a ‘reinvention’ of textual analysis and a new wave of cinephilia. Now, anyone can view a favourite movie by selecting special scenes, stopping the film on a privileged moment or gesture, returning to and repeating images that suddenly seem to acquire new significance and beauty and demand further thought and interpretation (Mulvey 242).

Though commercial imperatives suggest the disposability of popular art, new media technologies enable spectators to give a film under consideration the attention it deserves. Yet though the tools for textual analysis have been democratized, the practice remains the domain of the very few who take the time.

**The Problem of Indifference**

Although we may begin with personal response and acknowledge its legitimacy, the film class itself is an exercise that refines an initial response through the close, formal analysis of films. Often, though, a teacher faces an equally difficult task before this process can even begin: the problem of indifference. If teaching and learning are collaborative processes, indifference on the part of students presents a problem. Andrew Klevan stresses the importance of collaboration when discussing films in detail with students. After screening films for his class, he and his students move slowly through potentially significant shots and scenes:

Although I have a broad sense of moments that may be eventually revealing, I only intermittently have a prepared articulation of these moments ready and waiting. Where possible, I want to be involved in the students’ moment-by-moment endeavour to find appropriate words, and I want them to sense my involvement, so their pursuit will feel original (221).

Though the situation sounds so basic—a film on the screen behind you and a classroom of students in front of you—nothing could be more daunting, or even
demoralizing, than when students simply do not bother to respond. Ideally, for Klevan, an instructor prepares minimal remarks so that he or she does not appear to force the discussion in some way; the real learning begins, then, as the teacher and students move through the film together. Klevan’s method resembles that of F. R. Leavis: “If one’s concern is essentially with literature one doesn’t think of oneself as ‘teaching.’ One thinks of oneself as engaged with one’s students in the business of criticism—which, of its nature, is collaborative” (109). For Leavis, the business of criticism is evaluation, and such judgments take a particular form: “This is so, isn’t it?”, the question is a request for corroboration; but it is prepared for an answer in the form ‘Yes, but—’, the ‘but’ standing for qualifications, reservations, additions, corrections” (110). But more often than not Leavis’s ideal (“This is so, isn’t it? “Yes, but…”) deteriorates into this disheartening exchange: “This is so, isn’t it?” “So what!” There is no easy answer to indifference, but I suggest at least two possible justifications for the study of film style: one directly related to film, the other to the question of style itself.

Even if a student has no response to any film screened during a semester, what will she have learned? At the very least, students learn to put into words why they respond to a film in a certain way—whether positively or negatively. After all, film analysis is a skill, like writing well or the ability to formulate arguments. It is no easy task to translate a wordless response into a precise articulation of how a movie formally unfolds. If nothing else, students learn a method they can then apply to any film they watch. They now have the proper tools to make reformed evaluative judgments; of course, they may never do so again outside of class discussions and assignments, but
the class will have at least have made them conscious of what it takes to adequately evaluate a film.

I also emphasize that achievement in film is similar to achievement in anything else. People admire exceptional accomplishments in all areas of life—in sports, architecture, automobiles—the list is endless. As Alfred North Whitehead remarks:

Style in art, style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution have fundamentally the same aesthetic qualities, namely, attainment and restraint. The love of a subject in itself and for itself, where it is not the sleepy pleasure of pacing a mental quarter-deck, is the love of style as manifested in that study (Williams 142-143).

I simply try to give my students the tools to recognize, describe, and analyze exceptional cinematic achievement. If you admire a dish, you can get the recipe. If you admire a building, you can study its architecture. If you admire a sport, you know how a game is played and when it is played well. For most people, film remains a mystical art, but approaching a film as a series of material filmmaking choices gives students access to the decision-making process that created the effects we witness onscreen. A class based on formal analysis of film style gives students a method to accomplish this task.

Definitions and Examples

There is, of course, one place where introductory film instruction does receive attention: film textbooks. But if indifference is a key problem, these textbooks only further encourage students' indifference to film form. These books function as massive vocabulary manuals, filled with copious definitions, examples, and information. For example, one book defines sixty-four terms in the chapter on cinematography alone, and hardly any major introductory text contains fewer than five hundred pages. But despite any superficial differences among various texts, each major textbook teaches film form by a single method: definition and example. The authors verbally define some
term, and then they either describe a shot from a movie where this term can be seen, or they include a film still that ostensively defines the term in question. Even though these books present information that can be useful, the definition-and-example method they employ fundamentally misunderstands how we learn. If students learn form through definition and example, they will never learn to sense the importance of film style. Only when one already grasps the importance of style do these textbooks offer useful, even invaluable, material.

My argument may seem like a minor quibble. Indeed, this issue would not matter so much if it were not the way every major American film textbook works. Teachers could use the textbooks in a productive way, but only if they adapt the books to fit a method that matches how we actually learn (as I will discuss below). But when teachers use textbooks, they tend to do so because they assume the authors have already taken the trouble to effectively organize the material. In other words, one should be able to use a textbook without radically altering one’s approach.

I will offer a more precise view of how these textbooks work by considering four popular introductory film textbooks: Anatomy of Film by Bernard F. Dick; The Film Experience by Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White; Film: An Introduction by William H. Phillips; and Film Art by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Consider how each book defines a single term: the low-angle shot:

Anatomy of Film:

Definition: “If the camera shoots up at the subject from below, it is a low-angle shot. Serving the opposite function of a high-angle shot, a low-angle shot makes the subject appear larger than it actually is” (55).
Example: “Such a shot can suggest dominance or power, as it does in *Citizen Kane* when Kane’s guardian hovers over him as he presents the young Kane with a sled” (55).

**The Film Experience:**

Definition: “Low angles view the subject from a position lower than it is” (112).


**Film: An Introduction:**

Definition: “A view of the subject as seen from below eye level” (680).

Example (accompanied by a still): “In this frame from nearly 81 ¾ minutes into *Raging Bull* (1980), Jake La Motta is celebrating winning the world middleweight championship. At his moment of triumph, he is shown from a low angle shot that makes him seem prominent, dominating, and powerful. Filmmakers often use low angles in shots emphasizing a person’s physique, sexual power, or powers of intimidation” (92).

**Film Art:**

Definition: “The low-angle framing positions us as looking up at the framed materials” (194).

Example: a still from John Ford’s *They Were Expendable* (1945) (194).

A single term defined by four texts proves telling. First, consider that Dick’s and Phillips’s texts do not just offer a definition and an example, but a possible interpretation as well: low-angle=dominance. Dick describes his book’s method in this way:

The essential goal has always remained the same: to help students develop an appreciation and critical awareness of film with a brief, clear, and enjoyable text.... This book introduces film as a text that should be ‘read’
as any other and helps students identify the components of a film in order to interpret it (v).

Not only does such a statement discount any uniqueness to film as a medium—it should be read like any other text—but it also suggests film form is mostly useful for producing interpretations, a task both Dick and Phillips perform through their respective definitions. The other two texts (Corrigan/White and Bordwell/Thompson) at least spare the reader preliminary, facile interpretations and instead present short definitions and visual examples. Either method, though, remains ineffective.

In these four definitions, we also see the two possible ways to define: verbally and ostensively. If one were to define, for example, a medium close-up, a text might offer a verbal definition such as this one: “A medium close-up shows a character’s head and shoulders.” As a result, every time one sees a shot framing a character’s head and shoulders, one can say, “That is a medium close-up.” Such a method may work as a vocabulary-building exercise that enables one to pass a multiple-choice test, but a verbal definition tells us absolutely nothing about the use of the term under discussion. For many terms, then, textbooks choose to include visual examples that provide ostensive definitions. For while one can easily define shot scales through a verbal definition, other terms, like “jump cut,” benefit from an ostensive one, so a teacher inserts Breathless into the DVD player, fast-forwards to the proper scene, and says: “This is a jump cut.” But as Wittgenstein reminds us about chess, it does no good to know only that “This is a king” without knowing the king’s use within this particular game, “This is a jump cut” will remain nothing more than a fact—trivial information—without addressing its use within a particular film.
This problem occurs in all textbooks that present definitions and then show film
stills or excerpted clips to enable the instructor to ostensively define what she teaches.
Students already have trouble responding to examples from films they have not viewed,
and excerpted clips only make the problem worse. Stanley Cavell writes of this very
problem and uses the example of identifying a point-of-view shot:

If one calls what is shown a “point of view shot,” one may go on to say that
such a shot may be established by, for example, cutting to it from the face
of a character and cutting back from it to that face. … If, however, you go
on to say why this way of establishing a point of view is used, and why
here, and why with respect to this character, and why by way of this
content, then you are proposing a critical understanding of this passage. …
But what will you be saying if you say, speaking about this work, that this
shot is a point of view shot, and you go on to say nothing further about this
shot in this work? Unless your words here are meant to correct a false
impression, they do not so much as add up to a remark. They are at most
the uttering of a name, which, as Wittgenstein puts is, is a preparation for
going on to say something (187-188).

Thus, definitions of film’s formal elements are meaningless unless we discuss how
filmmakers have employed them for a particular purpose within a specific film. If we
only watch a clip, we miss something essential: that element’s context, its relationship
with everything else within the shot, scene, or film. Clips, of course, can be immensely
useful when teaching, but not in the way textbooks use them. They do not use them to
examine how some formal element functions within a film; they merely point: “Here,
look: a low-angle shot.”

Without a doubt, students can benefit from specialized vocabulary at a certain
level of study. As one develops a keener attentiveness to film form, more technical
knowledge can enable one to notice aspects she had previously overlooked. But for
most introductory students, film form remains out-of-focus, and these textbooks cannot
accomplish the focus-pull these students need. Film textbooks may work for vocabulary building, but they fail to impress upon students the importance of film form.

V.F. Perkins and other _Movie_-influenced writers (Andrew Klevan, John Gibbs, Douglas Pye, etc.), reverse the process found in film textbooks: rather than evoke a film scene as an example of a certain formal term, any formal discussion arises when examining and describing the film itself. In “Moments of Choice,” Perkins is not writing a textbook, but he does share a somewhat similar aim: to enumerate several formal choices available to filmmakers. He does so, fortunately, in a few short pages and without the claim to exhaustiveness that textbooks attempt to achieve. I will quote Perkins at length to demonstrate just how much his approach differs from the standard film textbook. Here, he discusses the effect a low-angle produces in a scene from Nicholas Ray’s _The Lusty Men_ (1952):

To shift the frame via camera movement, on the other hand, is to impose an order of perception on objects which exist in a continuous time and space so that they could, in principle, be seen all at once. [In] _The Lusty Men_, Ray introduces his rodeo-star hero in a shot which starts with the camera looking in through the gate of a bull-pen. The animal charges along its track to halt at the gate with its eyes glinting in fierce close-up. At this the image tilts upwards to frame Mitchum above the animal, preparing to mount. A direct contrast is drawn between two kinds of strength—the power of a natural force, and the force of human determination. But the camera’s movement links these two images in comparison as well as contrast. For all his apparent mastery, as we look up to him outlined against the sky, Robert Mitchum is like the bull in being contained within the structures of the rodeo: his image, too, is framed, hemmed in, by the wooden posts of the bull-pen.

The movement and angle of the shot give a precisely calculated degree of overstatement to the assertion of mastery. Within fifteen seconds Mitchum will be floundering, injured, in the dirt of the arena. His previous inward smile of self-satisfaction at the commentator’s tribute to his prowess, his pose of confident virility as he tightens his belt on the words ‘one of the all-time rodeo greats’ are opened up to irony by the camera’s too hearty endorsement of his supremacy (5).
Perkins avoids assigning any single, set meaning to a formal technique; one can only make sense of the low-angle shot of Mitchum by also paying attention to the fenced-in framing and the shots immediately following the one in question. “Film is a matter of relationships!” Perkins exclaims in *Film as Film*, and no valid discussion of form can take place that does not adhere to this maxim (109). Notice, also, that Perkins does not use a specialized vocabulary when discussing form. Quite strikingly, in an essay almost entirely about mise-en-scène, Perkins never once uses that term. He simply looks at various scenes in detail and examines the choices facing the director. In Perkins’s style, we witness a crucial difference from the way textbooks discuss form: instead of definition and meaning, he discusses use and function: not “What is a low-angle,” but “How does a director use a low-angle?” or “How does a low-angle function in this scene?” The meaning of a word, as Wittgenstein says, lies in its use (Kenny 77).

Wittgenstein’s discussion of teaching someone about chess pieces will help to further explain why I view introductory textbook methods as ineffective. First, one cannot fully understand a term’s definition without first knowing its function. Textbooks, though, offer definitions without regard to a formal technique’s actual function within a particular film’s context. Thus, to learn about film form in this way amounts to accumulating mere facts. Wittgenstein writes, “When one shews someone the king in chess and says: ‘This is the king,’ this does not tell him the use of this piece—unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point: the shape of the king” (72). In other words, to begin with a definition (as textbooks do), one must already know something’s use; knowing use comes before knowing a definition. Otherwise, the definition will merely be a fact without actual understanding. For example, if I show a
still of a low-angle shot, and say, "This is a low-angle shot," this ostensive definition gives my students a fact, but tells them nothing about the use or function of low-angle shots. To accomplish this task, one must discuss form within the context of a given film, as Perkins does above with *The Lusty Men*.

Film textbooks, though, do not teach in this way. Instead, they teach film like someone who teaches chess by ostensively defining each piece ("This is a king, this is a rook, etc.") without indicating the piece’s use. A player might register "This is a king" as a fact about a particular chess piece, but will have no real understanding of that piece—i.e., how it is used. If one begins with an ostensive definition, one must immediately define its use for it to make any sense. But film textbooks begin with verbal definitions, support these definitions with ostensive ones, and never address use.

Though textbook authors use ostensive definitions, they fundamentally misunderstand what such definitions require in order to work. A second analogy about learning chess is particularly useful here:

I am explaining chess to someone; and I begin by pointing to a chessman and saying: "This is the king; it can move like this, … and so on."—In this case we shall say: the words “This is the king” … are a definition only if the learner already "knows what a piece in a game is." That is, if he has already played other games, or has watched other people playing “and understood” (73).

Thus, if one points to a piece and says, “This is a king,” *before* explaining the piece’s use, the learner will at least have to know what game-playing and game-pieces are in general before that statement can begin to make sense. For the most part, almost all people have a general knowledge about games before they learn to play some new game in particular; ostensive definitions, then, require previous knowledge of a more general language. But the language-game of film form is a specialized language, for we
do not have the same kind of general knowledge about film aesthetics, which we can then apply to a particular case (angles, camera lenses, shot scales, etc.). Defining a low-angle shot may be relatively easy; after all, we understand the term “low-angle” because we recognize the words “low” and “angle” from other uses in our language. A similar instance occurs, Wittgenstein remarks, if you try to teach an English speaker the German word for “book” by pointing to a book and saying, “This is what the Germans call ‘Buch’” (Kenny 75). The English speaker will understand because of the similarity of the word in both languages. But if one tries to ostensively define a telephoto lens, for example, confusion could more easily set in because most lack familiarity with the language of optics.

We need, instead, an ordinary language with which to teach and talk about film form, and we have such a language in one that we already speak: the language of “making choices.” We know how to talk about choices because we make decisions every day. And if “making choices” is our general language, “filmmaking choices” is the language we can adopt to examine film form. Because we know how to talk about choices, we can talk and write about film clearly and precisely without first learning a new vocabulary. As Wittgenstein writes, “People sometimes say they cannot make any judgment about this or that because they have not studied philosophy. This is irritating nonsense, because the pretence is that philosophy is some sort of science. People speak of it almost as they might speak of medicine” (Kenny 69). After all, in terms of format and methodology, is a film textbook really much different from a biology textbook? These textbooks work on a level of generality that Wittgenstein sees as indicative of science and its “contemptuous attitude towards the particular case” (Blue
and Brown Books 18). What could be more indicative of this attitude than when Phillips claims that his book provides “thorough attention to film language,” but then mentions that the book accomplishes this goal through “brief marginal glosses” and illustrated examples (vi). Wittgenstein continues,

On the other hand we may say that people who have never carried out an investigation of a philosophical kind, like, for instance, most mathematicians, are not equipped with the right visual organs for this type of investigation or scrutiny. Almost in the way a man who is not used to searching in the forest for flowers, berries, or plants will not find any because his eyes are not trained to see them and he does not know where you have to be particularly on the lookout for them (Kenny 69).

In general, students have not carried out an investigation of the aesthetic kind, and we must use a method that trains them to see what they miss. We need a new way of seeing, and a descriptive method of writing provides us with this new view and accomplishes the necessary task of elucidation, a task at which standard film textbooks fail. One must analyze filmmaking choices through detailed descriptions in order to teach film form in a way that causes students to truly sense the importance of film style.

Description and Filmmaking Choices

Though I focused on the topic of definitions in textbooks, one could also argue that these books make an even bigger mistake: what often matters—what we really care about in a film—is not what can be defined through general definitions, but those aspects Wittgenstein refers to as “imponderable evidence:” “subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone” (Philosophical Investigations 194). This imponderable evidence—such as the way someone moves on screen or how an actor delivers a line—has no precise definition and proves difficult to describe. Such subtle qualities captivate us without our knowing precisely why, yet through description we seek words to articulate our experience of the film. This task of description must occur before a more technical
knowledge of film form (as offered in textbooks) will have any real meaning. If one cannot detect and describe significance in ordinary language, what good would a specialized language do?

For Peter Harcourt, description is one of the primary tasks in the film studies classroom:

As with painting, unless we can translate the multi-sensorial experience of watching a film at least partly into words, we have nothing we can talk about. One cannot quote from a film except by accurately describing it.... Any critical method concerned with film must begin by offering some kind of description of what the critic proposes to criticize, an observation of what has appeared on the screen (15).

Thus, it is more important to accurately describe a film in ordinary language than to know the technical terms for mise-en-scène, editing, and sound. As Harcourt writes, the teacher "must attempt to describe how key moments in the film actually have been organized, how they appear, how they sound, how they move" (15). But teachers most often encounter a relative lack of attentiveness to the kinds of subtleties I have been describing. If we keep the discussion at the level of imponderable evidence, it may seem overly impressionistic, and students will remain confused as to what exactly they should write about. Thus, we must continually return to the concrete in the discussion of film form, and perhaps no method could be more useful than Perkins’s idea of filmmaking choices.

In “Moments of Choice,” V. F. Perkins writes, “Directing a film is always about making choices…-hundreds of them every day and at every stage in the translation from script to screen” (1). We can draw two important conclusions from this remark. First, when we analyze a film through filmmaking choices, we use a method that corresponds to how films are actually made. Films are not made from ideas, but from
concrete decisions, and this method gives us a way to analyze these decisions. As Noel Burch writes, “Film is made first of all out of images and sounds; ideas intervene (perhaps) later” (144). Second, when we study filmmaking choices, we have a concrete means by which to make evaluative judgments, for we can evaluate the quality and the appropriateness of the choices a director makes. If we talk about filmmaking choices, we automatically address value: “Film-makers decide that this take or this edit is the ‘best,’ they try to make their film as ‘good’ as possible. Film spectators discuss among themselves how ‘good’ this or that film is, say at a festival, and point out what was ‘wrong’ with work they did not appreciate” (Wollen 217). As Wollen remarks, filmmaking itself involves value judgments: a take is more or less good, an angle more or less appropriate. Thus, a pedagogical or critical method that emphasizes filmmaking choices inevitably engages with questions of aesthetic value.

Perkins views the director as a coordinator; she may not have control over casting or editing, but she does have freedom in terms of arranging elements within the frame: “The expansiveness of a film style is so much a matter of balance, of what happens when you put together, in a particular way, a posture, a facial expression, an off-screen voice and camera viewpoint. At the very centre of the director’s job is this task of co-ordination” (Perkins 5). One develops a heightened attentiveness to film’s formal details when one takes notice of filmmaking choices. For directors do not make choices in isolation, but in relation to other elements within a specific scene or to a pattern developed across an entire film. As John Gibbs writes, “It is terribly difficult to make claims for an individual element or moment without considering it within the context provided by the rest of the film” (39). In other words, when one gives attention
to a single detail, one automatically notices others, and this process elucidates a film’s formal level. Additionally, as one attempts to become more precise in a description, one notices elements one had previously overlooked.

*Imitation of Life*

Students need to see that form matters by reading criticism that takes form seriously, so I now turn to explore *Imitation of Life* by using the techniques advocated throughout this chapter. I will closely examine a scene that strikes me each time I view the film. After I carefully describe the scene, I will then hone in on a specific filmmaking choice.

Before I can analyze the film, one must know something about the film’s plot. Universal Pictures first made Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel into a movie in 1934, directed by John Stahl and starring Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers. Though Douglas Sirk’s 1959 version will alter both plot and characters, the basic situation remains the same: two struggling single mothers, one white, the other black, befriend each other, and move in together in order to create a more stable (financially and otherwise) home for their daughters. Sirk’s film then covers more than a decade in the lives of these four individuals: from the immense success of the white mother, who neglects her daughter, to the intense sorrow of the black mother, whose daughter renounces her own race and passes for white in seedy night clubs. I must condense the scenario to its most basic elements because so much occurs over the film’s 124-minute running time. In my synopsis, I will focus on events that occur in the film’s first forty-five minutes, as those events most closely relate to the scene I discuss. As my scene analysis will require them, I will make mention of other relevant plot points.
The film opens at Coney Island and introduces the five central characters: Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), a white, single mother and a struggling actress; Susie, her young, carefree daughter; Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), a single, currently unemployed, black mother; Sarah Jane, Annie’s vulnerable, resentful daughter; and finally, Steve Archer (John Gavin), an amateur photographer who will become Lora’s romantic interest. When we first see Lora, she has lost Susie, and her search will bring all five characters together for the first time. Lora’s search leads her to Annie, who has found Susie, and the two become friends just as quickly as Susie and Sarah Jane do. Lora soon discovers that Annie and Sarah Jane are currently homeless; Annie has a difficult time finding housekeeping jobs (the only profession seemingly open to her) because she insists on never parting from Sarah Jane. Lora invites them to stay for one night in her coldwater flat. Annie clearly offers herself as a maid, but Lora insists she cannot afford to hire her. But after Lora awakes the next morning to find breakfast prepared and laundry finished, she agrees to let Annie and Sarah Jane stay on. Annie’s role within the house is never precisely defined, but Lora clearly gives her a room in exchange for taking care of the house.

The film’s first part (roughly forty-five minutes) works to establish these relationships and to show Lora’s life before she becomes a famous actress in the film’s second half. While Lora hunts for respectable acting jobs, Annie takes care of the home. Annie becomes a mother not only to Susie, but to Lora as well, who needs frequent consolation when job after job goes bust. Lora also begins a relationship with Steve, but when he gives her an ultimatum—marriage or a career—she chooses a career. And soon after she makes this choice, the film moves into a fifteen-minute
transitional period where we witness Lora's first big break and her theatrical success. The film's second part then occurs ten years later: Lora achieves stardom on both stage and screen, grows immensely self-absorbed, and completely neglects Susie; Annie remains in charge of the (now much larger) home, but is driven to an early death when Sarah Jane disowns her; Susie (Sandra Dee) comes to know only a life of privilege—except the privilege of having a mother who genuinely cares; and Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), passing for white, brutally mistreats Annie and moves from nightclub to nightclub in an effort to escape her past.

*Imitation of Life*’s first half merits a formal analysis for three reasons: (1) the early scenes privilege narrative economy over melodramatic excess, and are thus generally overlooked because of their ordinariness; (2) the film seems to demand a socio-ideological approach because of its content and themes; and (3) the datedness of the film’s content makes the film seem difficult or inaccessible to contemporary audiences. Compared to the film’s second half, the first half presents a rather plain mise-en-scène, a stylistic choice that corresponds to the narrative situation: Lora and Annie are financially struggling. Clearly, the intentional drabness makes the second half look all the more extravagant. Once Lora becomes famous, the film showcases more expensive sets, more elegant costumes, and more expressive lighting. In terms of the narrative, the first forty-five minutes are expository, giving the audience the history of these characters and setting up everything significant that will happen in the film’s second part.

*Imitation of Life*, like many melodramas, is known for its “big” moments: Sarah Jane passing at school; numerous confrontations between mothers and daughters;
Annie catching Sarah Jane at various nightclubs; Susie confronting Lora about being a bad mother; Sarah Jane’s brutal beating; and Annie’s death and funeral. We expect such moments from melodramas, and Sirk manages them well. But what about the film’s “down time,” which largely includes its first hour (where Lora’s rise to stardom is the only major event)? The first forty-five minutes seem risky because they are so uneventful. The one “big” scene occurs when Annie catches Sarah Jane passing at school, but it ends rather quickly. But other than this moment, the film remains calm until its second hour in which one melodramatic event after another occurs. Though a film of big scenes and pressured moments, the smaller moments, like the one I discuss, are where this film finds its pulse. When Truffaut panned Marcel Camus’s *Black Orpheus* for equating extravagance with significance, he remarks, “Good films are ones that are made in ordinary rooms, with one’s backside on a chair” (156). We know Sirk can handle the big scenes (and the history of Sirk criticism can attest to this fact), but as I demonstrated when discussing *All That Heaven Allows*, those scenes are not where true inspiration occurs. In Chapter 2, I showed how close analysis could open up scenes we already seem to know so well. And, as I wrote, that film’s Christmas sequence finds life in its smaller moments, ones that previous criticism had neglected. This analysis takes a different approach: here I examine a scene that seems merely perfunctory and that does not appear overtly significant. Formal analysis, though, can penetrate the ordinariness. I begin by exploring a simple, unremarkable scene and discover how the film is alive in unsuspecting ways.

Additionally, *Imitation of Life* seems to demand socio-ideological criticism. After all, race, gender, and class are the explicit subject matter, and obvious binaries
structure the film: black/white, mother/daughter, failure/success, poverty/wealth, marriage/career, etc. To focus on the film’s form, then, goes against the grain of traditional criticism. Consider the introduction to Lucy Fischer’s edited volume on the film. In it, she bemoans the lack of “concrete social history” on the film and suggests we approach the film from these three angles: “(1) the question of women and work, (2) the issue of race, (3) the matter of star biography” (Fischer 5). She complains about the hermeticism of previous work on the film: “Imitation’s formal and narrative structures have been favored at the expense of its links to the social terrain” (5). Such an interest, though, appears more sociological than cinematic: her real concern is the culture that produced the film, not the film itself. Likewise, all of the newer essays selected for the collection stress these themes. It is not that Fischer’s work does not have legitimacy; rather, I take issue with her idea that criticism has already exhausted the film on both the formal and narrative levels, and that new work on the film should move in a more historical or sociological direction. As I hope my work argues, certain films (and I believe *Imitation* to be one of these) seem formally *inexhaustible*, and the prospect for continual discovery keeps such films alive decades after their theatrical run. Yet I can also sympathize with Fischer’s point: since most formal discussions of Sirk have a one-track focus on Sirk as an ironic visual stylist, the standard, formalist way of investigating his work has grown stale.

Contemporary viewers (particularly students) often find the film’s content considerably dated, and a formal investigation can give us access to the film in a way that our contemporary sensibilities cause us to resist. As Barthes writes, a text’s cultural codes (references) cause it to stale, rot, and “[provoke] an intolerant reading”
These codes “appear to establish reality, ‘Life.’ ‘Life’ then, in the classic text, becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas” (206). For example, Hurst’s novel deals with social issues circa 1933, which are then translated into the 1959 film, and then viewed again over fifty years later. Our thinking about race and gender has changed radically since 1933 and 1959, so the film’s content cannot help but feel dated. About this datedness, Barthes continues, “What is outmoded, of course, is not a defect in performance, a personal inability of the author to afford opportunities in his work for what will be modern, but rather a fatal condition of Replete Literature, mortally stalked by the army of stereotypes it contains” (206). In other words, we cannot fault Hurst, Sirk, or the film itself: they were merely reproducing the stereotypes of their era. Formal analysis, though, can provide us with a fresh view of a film that initially appears closed off because of its dated content.

But beyond the film’s content, the melodrama genre itself can make the film inaccessible. Charles Affron provides useful advice here; in his comments about connecting with Greta Garbo’s films, Affron remarks that her films have “areas of sentiment that are attainable if we are prepared to pitch our tension of awareness as high as [her own]” (Klevan 6). Certain films operate on certain registers, and understanding those films requires us to literally see the world through the very lens provided by the film. *Imitation of Life*’s success depends on our learning to experience the world the same way the movie does. Often, we must allow a film itself to teach us how to view it. In *Imitation of Life*, we experience a stylized, soap-operatic, overtly symbolic, and, at many times, ridiculous world, but the film does possess a consistent,
sometimes rigorous, organization of its material—and we must become conscious of this formal level through our analysis.

The Scene: Summary and Description

At thirty-seven minutes into the film’s running time, Steve and Lora have a conversation in the hallway outside her apartment. An extra appears, carrying a Christmas present and a sled; he walks through the middle of the two characters while uttering a gruff, “Pardon me,” and then he pushes Lora up against the wall as he turns the corner. This analysis focuses a single filmmaking choice: Why did Sirk choose to include this extra here? Though it seems like a minor detail, a great deal of the scene’s significance arises from its inclusion.

On the narrative level, the scene exists to accomplish two tasks: to show Lora and Steve’s break-up and to show how Lora gets her first major acting job. Thus, any filmmaking choices made within this scene work to forward these aims. I will begin with a brief summary of the entire scene, move to a detailed description of specific parts of it, and then work to understand why Sirk includes this extra. Thus, I will move through the process we lead our students through: from the literary level (a summary of the action), to a detailed description, and finally to an analysis and evaluation of a filmmaking choice.

In this scene, Steve and Lora are going Christmas shopping. As they walk into the hallway outside her apartment, Steve hints that he has bought a Lora gift—an engagement ring. Once the subject of marriage comes up, they stop their progression down the hallway. Suddenly, an extra appears, forcing his way in between Lora and Steve and shifting them back closer to Lora’s apartment door. They continue to talk about marriage, with Steve trying to convince Lora. Before long, Lora hears the phone
ring inside her apartment, and she decides she must take the call once Annie mentions that her agent has called to offer her a job. Lora accepts the job, which angers Steve, and they begin their trip down the hallway again, eventually continuing their conversation in the stairwell as Steve attempts to convince Lora to choose him over a career. Lora, though, angrily rejects Steve, and runs both out of the apartment building and out of Steve’s life for the next decade.

Notice, of course, how much a summary misses. Too often, though, descriptions of films are nothing more than mere summaries, and most “analyses” stop here. As Ellen Rooney comments, most critics today do not work from texts themselves, but from paraphrases of those texts (26). A summary, quite reductively, covers the “level of incident”—characters and their actions. I use one here only to provide a useful context, but the real work of analysis begins with a detailed description.

I am particularly concerned with the action that takes place in the hallway outside Lora’s apartment. Two particular parts of the scene will not receive as much attention here: the conversation that occurs over the telephone in Lora’s apartment in the middle of the scene, and the action that takes place in the stairwell at the scene’s end. Before we can discuss a single filmmaking choice, though, we need a detailed description of the scene itself.

Steve arrives late at Lora’s apartment to pick her up for a day of Christmas shopping. He apologizes for his tardiness, but soon opens a magazine and places it in front of Lora’s face: the picture he took of Susie, Sarah Jane, and a fat man in the film’s first scene has been published as a beer ad, and the photo landed him an advertising job for a beer company. Here, the beer-can photo makes its third appearance in the
Steve took the photo the first time he ever met Lora at Coney Island, and he then uses the photo as an excuse to get Lora’s address so he can deliver the developed print in person—and pursue a possible romance. The photo has now doubly paid off for Steve—with both a girlfriend and a job—and he proudly presents it to her in this scene. Lora shows excitement, but responds, “But, darling, is it really what you want?” Earlier, Steve had revealed his artistic ambitions—including showing his work at MoMA. Steve replies, “Well, it’s not the Museum of Modern Art, but they pay in the nicest-looking, green folding-money.” Lora manages a smile, but no comment in reply. She is happy for Steve, but as we will see, wary of anyone who settles for less.

They then head out into the hallway. They pause briefly several feet from the doorway at a corner where they must turn to enter the longer corridor. The pause, though, occurs as more than just a need to turn; it happens as Steve faces Lora and mentions that he bought her a Christmas gift. She seems bothered, but Steve seems sure. They make it only a few feet farther before they stop again, Lora expressing her embarrassment that she does not have the money to buy Steve anything. A cut occurs, as the camera now frames Steve in a close-up as he says, “I guess you’ll have to marry me.” Immediately, Sirk cuts to Lora’s mute reaction, a reaction more appropriate to a moment of horror. The extremity of her reaction makes the quick cut back to Steve even more ridiculous. He grins and remarks, “I love you.”

After these three close-ups, we now see the characters in (roughly) a medium two-shot. Lora begins to list her legitimate concerns about marriage, and Steve has a response to each. Throughout the shot, Lora gradually turns more and more away from Steve and toward directly addressing the camera—her characteristic pose throughout
the film when she consciously performs. This turning occurs within a single take and corresponds to specific lines that Lora delivers as she comes up with reasons why she and Steve should not marry. She delivers her first reply while facing Steve: “But, darling, you’re just getting started.” After all, he proposes to her immediately after getting his first big professional break. In other words, she does not give a direct “yes” or “no” to his proposal, but addresses a financial issue. But to call her statement merely vain would be too reductive; as Lora will state directly in a few minutes, she is disappointed, more than anything else, that Steve would be so satisfied selling photos for beer company ads—precisely the kind of work from which she desires to escape.

Lora turns roughly forty-five degrees away from Steve before she delivers her next line: “It would be foolish.” Thus, she does not look him in the face when she says a line that could be interpreted in multiple ways: would it be foolish to get married in general? Or merely to someone with low financial prospects? Or foolish on the part of Steve because marriage would slow down his career potential? As the scene continues, this third interpretation seems to be the one Lora intends: she does not respect Steve because he would so easily give up a chance at a career to settle down in a marriage. When Lora now turns away from Steve and faces directly forward, she delivers a third line—a trite, depersonalized one: “But marriage is … such a big step.” In other words, the more Lora wants to sidestep the real issue why she does not want to marry Steve, the less personally she addresses him, the third line being nothing more than a theatrically-delivered cliché. Even Lora’s choice of sentence subjects corresponds to her movement here: the personal “you” in the first line; the ambiguous “it” in the second; and, finally, the abstract “marriage” in the third. Lora’s movements and subtle
manipulation of language make concrete the thought process she cannot yet explicitly express to Steve, for she does not want to hurt his feelings. Her reticent movements give shading to the dialogue she delivers, causing the viewers to see a difference of degree between what she states aloud and what her movements imply. Later, when they argue, she will instead tell him directly to his face how little respect she has for him.

Steve, though, does not pick up on the interpretation offered to the viewer here, in part because he and Lora are soon interrupted when a neighbor, holding a Christmas package and a sled, comes up the hallway. He forces himself between Steve and Lora, pressing Steve flat-backed against the wall, and forcing Lora to move back closer to her door—and eventually against the wall as well. The camera tracks back as the characters move forward in the frame, and the camera now frames Steve and Lora in a medium close-up—in the reverse positions as before (Steve—left; Lora—right). All the action since the last close-up has occurred in a single take (their debate about marriage, their moving up the hallway). A series of alternating close-ups begins as Steve and Lora continue to debate marriage. But to Steve’s “Do you love me?” Lora can only muster, “I think I do, but….” Steve moves in for a kiss, but just before their lips meet, Lora hears the sound of a neighbor’s door opening, and she pulls Steve all the way back to the corner of the hallway where her apartment door lies. But just as their kiss begins, the phone rings inside Lora’s apartment. She hurriedly unlocks and opens the door and sees Annie answering the phone. Steve grabs her left arm to restrain her from entering. He pulls her back and completes the kiss he has been attempting for some time now. Sirk cuts away from the kiss to Annie talking on the phone in a medium close-up: “Who, Mr. Loomis?” we hear Annie say. Mr. Loomis (Robert Alda), Lora’s
agent, is on the phone, calling to offer Lora a job, the one that will eventually lead to her stardom. Lora breaks free of Steve’s embrace and heads to the phone. Loomis informs her that a prize-winning playwright, David Edwards (Dan O’Herlihy), has seen the lowly flea powder ad she posed for earlier in the film and wants her to audition for his latest production. For the second time within this one scene, a photograph from earlier in the movie pays off: first for Steve, now for Lora.

Though Lora will criticize Steve for using his photograph to sell beer, she quickly forgets that posing with a Saint Bernard leads to her first real job. Sirk cuts back and forth between Lora and Loomis on the telephone, and when Lora realizes Loomis is not playing a joke on her, she agrees to immediately pick up the script from Loomis’s secretary. Sirk cuts to Steve’s reaction as he realizes their date has now ended. Earlier in the film, Lora’s meeting with Loomis has not gone well, with Loomis telling Lora she would have to sleep with any man who wanted her in order to jumpstart her career. Steve, thus, is rightfully suspicious, and he demands that Lora not accept Loomis’s offer: “I’m not asking you not to go down there, Lora. I’m telling you,” he says sternly. Lora then indignantly replies, “And what makes you think you have that right?” When he responds that he loves her, she tells him that is an insufficient reason, and she turns away from him to leave. The camera pans right as Lora scurries down the hallway and starts down the stairs, with Steve following closely behind.

**Analysis of a Filmmaking Choice**

I began to think more deeply about this scene because I was puzzled by Sirk’s choice of the intrusive extra. Had it not been for my desire to pursue this interest and see where it led, this analysis would not exist. To understand the extra’s function, we must start slightly later in the scene, with a moment that forces the viewer to reconsider
the scene’s action from a different perspective. After Lora’s phone call with Loomis, Steve’s actions become blatantly aggressive. When Lora gets off the phone, she decides to cancel her date and go pick up the script instead. Steve then moves to intentionally block her. She moves around him, but just below the frame, he grabs her arm. Her alarmed response alerts us to this action, for we can only see his thumb.

During their first time in the hallway, neither Lora nor we saw any overt aggression on the part of Steve. After all, we sympathize with Steve when Lora rejects him, as we come to view Lora as increasingly shallow and selfish. But now, Steve’s aggression makes us rethink the first hallway action. When we return and re-view it, we notice Steve has been intentionally directing, blocking, and grabbing Lora since the beginning; we simply did not register these as aggressive acts. In fact, just moments before Lora spoke with Loomis, Steve had grabbed her in order to kiss her. In a grand gesture, Steve takes hold of Lora’s arm and pulls her back to finish an incomplete kiss, but his reason seems romantic, not forceful. This view changes, though, once he roughly grabs her after the phone conversation. Now, both Lora and the viewer realize that Steve is holding her back, trying to prevent her from leaving. When Lora realizes his aggression, she experiences an aspect change: Steve is more interested in controlling her, not loving her. Notice the way her eyes deliberately move up his body as he grabs hold of her; we witness her realization that she has misinterpreted Steve’s intentions.

But just as Lora has to rethink Steve’s intentions, we, too, must rethink Steve’s actions here. And retrospectively, we discover that Steve has been directing her all along—not merely beginning with his use of restraint here. When they first enter the hallway, Steve announces that he has bought Lora a gift, which comes as a surprise to
her because she did not think they were exchanging gifts. But rather than let her respond, Steve interrupts her verbally, “This way, m’am,” and directs her physically, by taking hold of her arm and leading her down the hall. Once they pause for a second time and discuss marriage, Steve does not block or restrain her in any way. She could freely move down the hallway if she chose. But then the extra passes through, interrupting Steve and Lora’s forward progression and forcing them to switch positions.

By why does Sirk include this extra here? What function does he serve?

Figure 3-1. The intrusive extra

On the one hand, the extra solves a merely technical problem: Lora and Steve are leaving to go shopping. But if they continue down the hallway, down the stairs, and out the door, Lora will not hear her telephone ring—the call that will give her a job and put into motion the film’s second half. The extra, then, functions as an obstacle that stops Steve and Lora’s forward movement and pushes them slightly back toward her apartment so she can hear her phone ring.

But why did the filmmakers use an extra to solve this problem? They could have used something or someone other than an extra; for example, Lora could forget her purse or need to tell Annie something. But any other option one can imagine would seem forced; for example, we would view the action as scripted and unnatural if Lora
had forgotten her purse and went back to the apartment at the precise moment the phone rang. Using an extra, however, adds a realistic detail that naturalizes the action here. As a result, when the extra and the offscreen sound force Lora back toward her apartment, we view these occurrences as merely coincidental. We do not yet have the perspective that would lead us to suspect anything intentional in the characters’ movements here. They just happen quite naturally, and Lora and Steve merely seem like the victims of annoying, incidental intrusions.

If using an extra is the best option, why did the filmmakers select this particular extra? Why use a gruff, heavy-set, older man? What difference would it make if it were a young child—even Susie or Sarah Jane; a young, handsome man; or a kindly, elderly woman? Here, we can notice another key role the extra plays: the forcefulness of the extra keeps the viewer from noticing Steve’s aggression at this point. After all, he does not treat her this roughly. It is significant that the extra is male, pushy, and rude, for he works as a counterpoint to Steve’s character. Though Steve’s latent aggression will surface later in the scene, the film does not enable us to have this perspective just yet. At this point, the film still wants us to view Steve with some sympathy. And when we compare his actions with those of the extra, we do not think to consider Steve’s aggression.

Once the extra passes by and moves behind the camera, Steve and Lora continue their conversation. Not only has Steve been interrupted, but also he now begins to realize Lora may not accept his proposal. He must, then, become more persistent; Steve grabs Lora’s arm to turn her around to face him. For a brief moment, Lora can still freely move backward or forward down the hallway. But then, for the first
time, Steve does not merely direct Lora—he now blocks her with his left arm. We can give various interpretations to why Steve now blocks her. Perhaps Steve forces an intimate framing here so that no other intrusion (another neighbor) can force them apart and interrupt their conversation. He also may begin to sense that Lora will reject him, so he becomes more aggressive as a response. For now that Steve has given her nowhere to move, he continues to convince her to marry: “I want to give you a home, take care of you, love you.” “Oh Steve,” she replies, “You don’t know me at all. I still love the theater.” But we can interpret Steve’s blocked arm in a third way: when Steve fails with his words, he turns instead to another form of manipulation: romance. When he pins Lora in, it creates a more intimate space in which he can persuade her to give in. Though she clearly does not want to marry Steve, she does want to give into the heat of the moment, for she continues to protest while swooning at Steve’s advances. But just as they are about to kiss, the sound of a door opening offscreen interrupts them, and Lora moves back even closer to her apartment door. Lora is now backed into a corner (literally and metaphorically), with reentering her apartment the only direction she can go. And clearly, she is about to give in to Steve’s proposal. As they embrace and nuzzle, Steve mumbles, “I want to kiss you so badly.” She whispers, “But if you did … the ways things are right now … I might say something I wouldn’t really mean.” Lora does give in to the moment, but the second their lips lock, her phone rings offscreen. Lora goes to answer it, leaving Steve clearly frustrated.

On a second viewing, it now seems more than merely coincidental that Lora is pushed back toward her home as Steve increases the pressure of his proposal. She is not simply pushed toward her apartment, but toward the life of domesticity inherent in
Steve’s offer. The first time we view the film, external circumstances—the extra and the offscreen sound—push her. But now, those external forces combine with the pressure Steve exerts upon her to give up her career and settle down. On the first viewing, these movements seem natural; on the second viewing, Lora appears overwhelmed and trapped. Where we once sympathized with Steve, we now feel more acutely Lora’s desire to escape.

If the first two interruptions (the extra and the offscreen sound) have pushed Lora back toward her apartment and support the interpretation that Steve forces Lora to accept a life of domesticity, the film soon reverses such a view: what seemed like entrapment soon becomes liberation. When the phone rings and the apartment door opens, the trap opens up. For once Loomis offers her the job, Lora moves forward—down the hallway, down the stairs, and out the door with great determination—no matter how many times Steve tries to reestablish his dominance and block her. Both Lora and the viewer experienced an aspect change when Steve grabbed her arm. Now the viewer experiences a second aspect change: the film switches the initial interpretation we had of the action.

To speak of the interpretation as “switched” or “reversed,” however, is slightly misleading, for we can plausibly accept both interpretations at the same time. Though the interruptions appear to initially work in Steve’s favor, they work for Lora in the end. Lora is being pushed back into the home, back to a life she does not want, at the same time as this very movement is necessary to free her. In fact, we need both interpretations simultaneously in order to realize the scene’s full significance. Furthermore, the complexity of these interpretations is only available retrospectively, for
one does not consider Steve’s aggression in the scene’s first half until watching the entire scene—and then re-watching the scene again. And unless we realize Steve’s aggression, Lora’s treatment of Steve seems too caustic. For if one watches this scene only once, one sympathizes with Steve; he seems to be the victim of Lora’s vanity and selfishness. This vanity is clearly suggested by the film: she wants money and fame over everything else in life—a husband, friends, or even the daughter she already has. Recall, for example, that she responded to Steve’s proposal with a financial concern.

But the intricateness of the action here complicates the one-sided interpretation of Lora’s personality that the film initially suggests and that most viewers register when they watch the film. Retrospectively, we realize this shading and grading (to use V. F. Perkins’s terms) of Lora’s character begins with the inclusion of the extra, who reverses Lora and Steve’s forward progression. The extra is not important by himself, but he becomes significant through his relationship to other elements of the mise-en-scène and to their development within this scene. The extra provides the film with a subtle, plausible reason for Lora to be pushed backward. For if we cannot interpret Lora as being forcibly pushed into the home, her desire to reject and to escape from Steve lacks sufficient motivation—she merely seems cruel. Thus, when we re-watch the film, we feel for Lora’s situation more deeply because we are aware from the beginning that Lora is being forced back—yet she still manages to escape. Thus, at least in this one scene, the film offers two, competing interpretations of Lora’s actions that, working together, give nuance to Lora’s character. We recognize her significant personal flaws (vanity, egoism), yet understand her desire to escape the false dilemma forced upon her (marriage versus career).
**Evaluation**

What is the value of the way Sirk shot this scene? Could he not have solved the problem at hand in a *much simpler way*? Why have Lora and Steve leave the apartment at all, since they must return there anyway to hear and answer the phone? Everything that the scene needed to accomplish could have been done inside Lora’s apartment. *This* fact gets at the key evaluative point here: this scene could have been treated like the minor scene it actually is. In a film of grand visual excess, this particular, drab scene—the bare hallway of a dismal coldwater flat—lacks the usual Sirkian visual excess we find later in the film. In addition, the scene does not stand out because it appears merely functional. It exists to tie together and cover a lot of information: the beer-can photo, Loomis, the flea-powder photo, Steve and Lora’s breakup, and Lora’s first real acting job. The narrative itself keeps viewers so occupied that they do not become aware of style. The scene becomes stranger, though, the more one thinks about it. After all, it takes *six full minutes* for a character to leave her apartment building. Sirk takes a scene that required a simple, easy setup and expands it through the complex coordination of the characters’ blocking and the various interruptions of the scene’s action. As a result, Sirk develops Lora’s character in a subtle, indirect way that would have either been absent, or been told rather than shown. The effort put into the scene’s construction does not seem equal to the amount of attention viewers afford it. Thus, I attempted to account for a neglected scene I have long *sensed* was important, but I previously lacked the words to express this significance precisely.

Noel Burch (once) believed that the films of certain filmmakers “‘stood out above the pack’ not because of the stories they told—everybody told stories, and theirs were
not fundamentally different—but because of Something Else, because of the way in which they organized the formal parameters of their discourse” (vii). One can compare Burch’s statement to a similar one made by Perkins: “In terms of the package and its ingredients, there is not much that separates The Reckless Moment (1949), Johnny Guitar (1954) or Written on the Wind (1956) from dozens of mediocre products of the Hollywood machine. The crucial factor is the direction of Max Ophuls, Nicholas Ray, and Douglas Sirk” (1). Indeed, given similar material, certain directors will make specific choices that bring the material to life, while other directors will only falter. And for many viewers, Imitation of Life does not stand out from dozens of other outdated Hollywood tearjerkers. But when we examine the decision-making process that created the film, we can see through its datedness and gain access to its form. We must do justice to the richness of the film’s details, which are not hidden, but merely dormant—lying in plain view and simply waiting for someone to take notice.
CHAPTER 4
ECONOMY AND EMOTION IN DOUGLAS SIRK’S SMALL-TOWN TETRALOGY

Sirk and Authorship

Throughout this work, I have emphasized the importance of filmmaking choices in analyzing and evaluating film scenes, for these choices provide the critic with concrete material to assess. In Chapters 2 and 3, I performed close readings of individual scenes and sequences. This chapter has a more ambitious goal: to demonstrate more extensively how to use close-reading to evaluate not merely individual scenes, but a director’s career. Since Sirk’s reputation rests on four or five films from his later career, his earlier career at Universal Pictures requires attention if we are to have a more accurate view of his particular talent. Here, I will examine four related Sirk films and consider the value of various filmmaking choices Sirk makes. From this evaluation, we will learn about Sirk’s technical skill, while also gaining a clearer view of his development as a director. As I evaluate these four films, I will explore how Sirk approached choices of camera movement, framing, and cutting/shot-length—choices that, with relative certainty, one can say that Sirk made. In his interview with Jon Halliday, Sirk himself suggested the relation among the films I discuss, period films set in small, American towns: Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952), Meet Me at the Fair (1953), Take Me to Town (1953), and All I Desire (1953). These films provide apt material for evaluation, not simply because of this similarity, but also because of the clear growth in quality that happened within two short years before continuing throughout Sirk’s career at Universal. Close analysis can reveal specifically how this development occurred. With the exception of All I Desire, the other three films have attracted no critical attention, and this essay, to the best of my knowledge, marks...
the first extensive work on these films. This situation at least partially results from the unavailability of either *Meet Me at the Fair* or *Take Me to Town* on any home video format; and only within the past few years has Universal released *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* and *All I Desire* in the United States—as part of actor-based DVD collector sets, however, and not as stand-alone discs.

I begin by discussing evaluation and the kinds of choices we can attribute to directors—Sirk in particular. Then, I move to a general discussion of these four films, offering plot synopses and comments that prove essential because so few have seen these movies. Next, I state and define the central filmmaking quality one sees developing over these four films: Sirk’s economical style. This value, however, emerges from my close work on the films themselves and was not merely some idea I imposed on the project from the outset. I did not, for example, decide that Sirk was an economical filmmaker and then search through the films for the most economical moments; rather, close analysis suggested this idea to me. Thus, I devote the remainder of the chapter to close readings and comparisons of the formal techniques employed throughout these four films.

My method here is simple: evaluation through comparison. Clement Greenberg made this link explicit:

> Esthetic evaluating means, much more often than not, making distinctions of extent or degree, of more or less. Relatively seldom does it mean a flat either-or, a yes or no, a guilty or not guilty. Esthetic judging tends to mean shading and grading, even measuring—though not with quantitative precision, but rather in the sense of comparing (and there’s no refining of esthetic sensibility without exercises in comparing). Esthetic evaluating is more on the order of appraising and weighing than on that of verdict-delivering (7).
This chapter reacts against the journalistic practice of verdict-delivering evaluations, the thumbs-up/thumbs-down, for-it-or-against-it style commonly found in film reviewing. The types of quick evaluations found in Andrew Sarris’s *The American Cinema* provide the relevant contrast for my work in this chapter.

I must begin with brief comments about evaluation and filmmakers’ choices. In “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” Andrew Sarris remarks, “What is bad director, but a director who has made many bad films?” (511). From this statement, it follows that good directors make good films, and bad directors make bad films. Besides the statement’s tautological nature (and hence, its uselessness), an even bigger problem is at stake here: the level at which the evaluation occurs. Though Sarris’s criticism is evaluative, it begins at a much too general level. Since Sarris aims to produce a ranking of directors, he does not spend much time on individual films, let alone scenes or moments from those films. He lacks either the time, the inclination, or, as a journalist, the space to do so. How else could he praise or dismiss entire careers in a single paragraph as he does in *The American Cinema*? For Sarris, the unexamined film itself is a basic unit, evaluated by critics of immense taste—a taste developed and honed by watching as many movies as possible. Of course, one does develop cinematic taste by watching, comparing, and ranking thousands of movies. But as a critical method, Sarris’s lacks rigor. The method may work for journalism, but no authoritative evaluation can occur without fastidious attention to an individual film’s details.

Yet if we amend Sarris’s statement, we have something to work with: good directors make good *choices*, and bad directors make bad *choices*. If we move the
level of analysis from whole films to the choices that compose those films, we can make sound steps towards a credible, more objective evaluation. I use the phrase “more objective” deliberately, and one should not take it to mean that value judgments can possess a scientific objectivity. This lack is not a fault, but instead a necessity for Leavisian critical debate: a critic puts forth a judgment, and others accept, reject, or amend it. If one could determine a film’s value objectively, one would have no reason to rewatch films and do close readings because one would have already solved the issue of value. But value judgments fall on a scale, from the impressionistic to the more objective. On the far end of the scale, we find the purely subjective, initial response one has to a work of art: “I like it” or “I don’t like it.” The very method of close reading used throughout this chapter should suggest my distance from such impressionism. So although value judgments cannot possess the rigor of scientific proof—“This is a good film. Q.E.D”—value judgments can be more or less objective, more or less sound, based on whether or not they correspond to the way a film formally works.

Also, critical debate would cease to exist if evaluations were merely lofty judgments. One must fault Sarris here; although he intends that his polemical rankings spark debate, they come across as theological, his reasons too personal and impressionistic to argue with. He rarely gives the reader anything concrete with which he or she can objectively debate. The issue is not the correctness of Sarris’s conclusions in The American Cinema (his entry on Sirk, in fact, is particularly insightful), but his journalistic approach, which contributes to academia’s low opinion of evaluative criticism. Consider, for example, a few sentences from his entry on John M. Stahl (Universal’s top melodramatic director of the 1930s):
Stahl’s strong point was sincerity and a vivid visual style. Who can forget Gene Tierney on horseback spreading her father’s ashes in *Leave Her to Heaven* or Margaret Sullavan having one last tryst with her forgetful lover on the second level of a duplex or Irene Dunne having a somber farewell dinner with hopelessly married Charles Boyer …? (139-140).

This brief passage contains everything frustrating about Sarris: while he clearly knows classical Hollywood cinema well and makes a clear, concise argument (“Stahl’s strong point was sincerity and a vivid visual style”), he then defends it with a simple list of favorite scenes. How does one seriously engage a critic who begins a sentence with a phrase like “Who can forget…”? It is no wonder that evaluation has remained the province of journalism.

Yet if we move the discussion to the level of choices, problematic issues about authorship arise. For if we discuss choices, who is responsible for these choices? The director? Various collaborators? Hollywood filmmaking conventions? Because I concern myself with analyzing the effects of what I see onscreen, citing an origin for each aesthetic choice is not important. But as I will explain, there are choices we can safely assume a director made. Not even the strictest auteurist believes that a director’s intentions control every aspect of a film’s meaning, but it is hard to deny that certain directors bring a certain quality to their films—even if we have trouble precisely defining that quality (Wood *Hitchcock* 9). It is not illogical to believe that while Sirk is not responsible for every aesthetic choice in his films, a film like *All I Desire*, for example, would not be the same film if directed by someone else. After all, a director’s contribution is not *nothing*. In his book on Hitchcock, Robin Wood makes an excellent point:

To reject the “intentionalist fallacy” (the notion that an artist’s *expressed* intentions have a definitive authority in interpreting his or her work…) is not to reject the fact that on certain levels the creation of a work of art or an
artifact constitutes an intentional act. Hitchcock generally knew … why he wanted to place his camera where he did, why he wanted to move it, why he wanted to cut, why he wanted his actors to move in certain ways, turn their heads at certain moments, speak their lines with certain intonations (20).

In my evaluations, I make precisely these kinds of claims for Douglas Sirk: perfectly reasonable ones. I continually return to an interview Godard once gave to *Cahiers du Cinéma*:

The problem which has long preoccupied me, but which I don’t worry about while shooting, is: why do one shot rather than another? Take a story, for example. A character enters a room—one shot. He sits down—another shot. He lights a cigarette, etc. If, instead of treating it this way, one … would the film be better or less good? (Godard 223).

As Godard remarks, even he does not always consciously think of such questions while shooting; but whether consciously or not, the director still deals with the question of why to compose this shot in this way.

We can know, with relative certainty, the kinds of decisions we can attribute to a director. Each day on the set, the director makes decisions about framing, camera movement, and performance. Thus, for any film, we can say that the director did these things at the very least. In the specific case of Sirk, we have evidence that he had considerable control on the set once he began working with producer Ross Hunter on *Take Me to Town* (and nine subsequent films). At least two sources besides Sirk himself confirm that Hunter would meet with a director before shooting began and often intervene at the narrative level (imposing happy endings, for example), but he would never go on the set, leaving the filmmaking process entirely in Sirk’s hands (“Zugsmith on Sirk,” Harvey 378). Sirk exerted control over camerawork (placement, movement) and, he claims, even editing (though it is unclear whether this control over cutting was merely in-camera, post-production, or both) (“Zugsmith on Sirk,” Halliday 86).
Additionally, Sirk no doubt benefitted from the B-picture mentality at Universal in the 1950s: as long as he worked efficiently and completed assignments on time, little to no intervention occurred.

Yet whether Sirk was a great, expressive artist or merely a director doing a job, decisions had to be made, and we as critics can analyze and evaluate those choices. The intentions behind those decisions do not matter, but we can assume there was one intention (common to classical Hollywood directors): aesthetic choices were made that best supported the narrative. Even in a film as wildly stylized as *Written on the Wind* (1956), the aesthetic choices support the craziness of the story and its characters. But just because aesthetic choices work to support a narrative does not mean those choices are givens. Yes, there are conventional ways of, for example, filming a conversation, and a director can easily fall back on the conventional methods. But working within those conventions, directors can work creatively and do more than simply what is required (as in, for example, Sirk’s dinner scenes, which I will discuss). Only when we analyze several films by the same director can we determine whether moments of greatness in one film were merely lucky accidents—or signs of filmmaking skill. The conclusions I reach about Sirk here are confirmed by the fact that Sirk continued to make similar decisions for the rest of his career.

One must compare the kind of simple (but not simplistic) questions raised by Wood and Godard to the auteurist account of Sirk suggested by Jon Halliday’s interview. For example, Sirk credits himself with the idea of doing a series of films about small-town America: “As I told you, *Take Me to Town* was supposed to be part of a larger idea I had—a group of stories about small-town life. I felt that with the little
money at my disposal it was best to stick to relatively modest projects” (Halliday 88). One gets the idea from Halliday’s interview that Sirk chose personal projects in which he could use cinema to express “his vision of America,” an unlikely possibility (9). Not until Sirk worked with producer Albert Zugsmith (*Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels*) would he have the privilege of choosing a project to direct (Halliday 9). And before the success of *Magnificent Obsession* in 1954, Sirk was simply another Universal house director, whose assignments were chosen for him. No one at Universal Pictures in the 1950s would have conceived of a series of films as a “study” in this way. Sirk takes this view when reflecting in the 1970s era of a personal cinema, but it does not correspond to the way films were made—as a communal, studio-based art—in the 1950s.

The view of Sirk we get from Halliday fits Wood’s category of “primitive auteurism” (*Vietnam to Reagan* 10). Such a strictly auteurist account would concern itself with detecting traces of Sirk’s personal imprint throughout his films. I, on the other hand, do not wish to account for the “Sirkian,” but rather to assess the quality of these four films by examining specific choices Sirk made. As Wood comments, “The error of primitive auteurism lay in its reduction of the potential interest of a film to its authorial signature, so that a film was worth examination only in so far as it could be shown to be characteristic (stylistically, thematically) of Ray, Mann, or Hawks, for instance” (*Vietnam to Reagan* 10). I am interested in how Sirk developed as a filmmaker—not in how successfully Sirk was able to express himself personally through his films. Whether or not Sirk had a grand statement to make with his films (the portrait that emerges of him from the Halliday interview) does not interest me. Statement or no statement, there is
still a film to be made with lights, cameras, actors, and props—the concrete materials of filmmaking. We can largely avoid the traditional criticisms of auteurism if we can move the level of questioning from “How does Sirk express his vision here?” to “Why did Sirk place the camera here?”

The Films

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952)

In *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*, an aging millionaire, Samuel Fulton (Charles Coburn), poses as an artist named John Smith in order to decide whether or not to donate his entire fortune to the middle-class Blaisdell family: Charles (Larry Gates) and Harriet (Lynn Barr), and their three children, Millicent (Piper Laurie), Howard (William Reynolds), and Roberta (Gigi Perreau). Years ago, Fulton almost married Harriet’s mother, but when she rejected him, he instead devoted his life to the career that brought him fortune. Now, he wants to give his fortune to the family he never had. But first he wants to test them out to see how they would handle the money, so he poses as an artist, rents a room in their home, and takes a job as a soda jerk at Mr. Blaisdell’s pharmacy, where he works alongside Millicent’s love interest, Dan (Rock Hudson). Fulton/Mr. Smith tests the family with a small amount—$100,000—and they instantly become unbearable, nouveau-riche social climbers. They blow through the money on a new house, new clothes, and large parties, and the family soon finds itself in debt. But the ruin is more than financial; Harriet refuses to let Millicent date the working-class Ron, and instead forces an engagement between Millicent and the wealthiest bachelor in town, Carl Pennock (Skip Homeier). Once they go bankrupt, the family soon “learns its lesson,” and they move back into their old house and old life. Fulton never blows his
cover as Mr. Smith, and he leaves town at the end of the film, having decided that making the Blaisdells his heirs would ruin the family he has come to love.

Most of this film simply exists to put the characters through the motions the plot requires. Two performances, though, elevate the film: those by Charles Coburn and Gigi Perreau. Scenes involving the friendship between Mr. Smith and Roberta, the youngest Blaisdell, elevate the film and account for its quality. Their interaction creates perhaps the most natural and relaxed relationship in all of Sirk’s films, resulting, no doubt, from Coburn’s acting skill.

**Meet Me at the Fair** (1953)

*Meet Me at the Fair* has the weakest story of the four films under consideration, and any synopsis will inevitably sound as spotty as the story itself. Doctor Tilbee (Dan Dailey) and Enoch Jones (Scatman Crothers) travel with their wagon, perform shows, and hawk “Doctor Tilbee’s Wonder Tonic” throughout small towns. One day, they pick up a young boy, Tad (Chet Allen), who has escaped from maltreatment at a detention home/orphanage. On the one hand, we have the story about the relationship among these three characters. On the other hand, the film contains a subplot about crooked small-town politicians diverting funds from the children’s home (Halliday 87). Once Doc Tilbee and Enoch learn of the orphanage’s conditions, they work to expose those conditions and also to maintain custody of Tad. A woman, Zerelda Wing (Diana Lynn), knows of the conditions as well, but is engaged to one of the politicians. Eventually, she realizes her fiancé’s involvement and takes Doc Tilbee’s side.

*Meet Me at the Fair* marks the nadir of Sirk’s American films. Its plot unfolds awkwardly, with several third-rate musical numbers and fantasy flashback scenes. Many musical numbers were clearly inserted to showcase the casting of Chet Allen, a
child opera singer recently made famous by the first made-for-television opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951). What else could account for the strange inclusion of “Ave Maria” in a B-grade musical? In addition, the film contains several flash-back fantasy scenes, where Doc Tilbee spins tall tales about hand-to-hand combat with Chief Rain-in-the-Face or his role as an understudy for Edwin Booth in *Romeo and Juliet*. Sirk himself clearly realized the film’s faults, citing both the lack of hits for musical numbers and the title’s similarity to a successful A-feature, MGM’s *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) (Halliday 87-88). The film does show potential with the rapport between Dan Dailey and Scatman Crothers, but it realizes that potential only intermittently.

Though the script presents problems, the mise-en-scène presents an even bigger one: cluttered framing. The basic mise-en-scène practice here is to completely fill the frame with characters and other objects in order to obscure the cheap (and often non-existent) sets. As a result, Sirk composes *Meet Me at the Fair* with an excessive number of medium shots; and even when medium shots are not used, Sirk fills the frame in order to obscure the background. This mise-en-scène practice abstracts characters from their environment, and as a result, this small-town film lacks any feeling for small-town life. In fact, the first wide-scale shot of the town occurs twenty-five minutes into the film and only lasts ten seconds.

When trying to assess Sirk’s weaker films, Jon Halliday suggests the critic keep in mind that the “ups and downs in [Sirk’s] career are attributable to the conditions of production and not to oscillations in his own artistic vision” (9). While I reject Halliday’s statement that Sirk possesses a clear artistic vision, the first half contains a truth: of
Sirk’s Universal films, *Meet Me at the Fair* suffers the most from the conditions of its production.

**Take Me to Town (1953)**

*Take Me to Town* marks a transitional point in Sirk’s career at Universal (1950-1959). For the first time, Sirk worked with four key collaborators, who contributed to the success of his best films: Russell Metty (cinematographer), Ross Hunter (producer), Julia Heron (set decorator), and Alexander Golitzen (art director). Through these collaborations, Sirk became a better filmmaker, and it becomes unclear whether to treat Sirk as an individual or Sirk’s production crew as a creative unit. Either way, two facts are true: (1) Before Sirk collaborated with any of the above four, his output at Universal was mediocre; and (2) when the same production unit made films after Sirk’s departure from Universal, the results lack stylistic sophistication. Throughout the four films I discuss, we witness Sirk and his collaborators growing more familiar with each other, becoming more assured of their skills, and honing their filmmaking craftsmanship.

The story involves three young children (Petey, Corny, and Bucket) who decide to find a new mother and wife for their widower father, Will Hall (Sterling Hayden). They do so when they meet Vermilion O’Toole (Ann Sheridan), a saloon entertainer on the lam. Vermilion committed no crime, but her association with a known criminal and escaped convict, Newton Cole (Phillip Reed), has resulted in her being pursued by Marshal Ed Daggett (Larry Gates). Will, a logger and the town preacher, returns from work one day to find that the children have invited Vermilion into their home; she agreed to watch the children simply as an excuse to get away from Marshal Daggett when he arrived in town. Will at first demands that Vermilion leave his home, but he soon comes to accept her. The townspeople, though, do not like Will’s association with a saloon
entertainer (they are precursors to the wretched gossips of *All That Heaven Allows*), but Will suggests Vermilion prove herself to them by taking charge of the town fundraiser to raise money for a new church. The criminal subplot plays a minor role in the film (Newton is captured, Vermilion exonerated), with the real focus on Vermilion’s growing acceptance within the Hall home and reluctant (but eventual) acceptance by the townspeople.

A scene occurs late in *Take Me to Town* (1953) that today seems self-reflexive, commenting on Sirk’s changing, growing career at Universal Pictures. In this scene, Vermilion directs a play to raise money for the town’s new church building. Here she inspects various aspects of the production as everyone prepares for the opening. At one point, she directs two female performers as they rehearse a musical number. As they dance and sing “Take Me to Town,” their lifeless, amateur performance frustrates Vermilion. She tells the piano player, “More lively, please,” and to the performers she remarks, “Girls, girls, more zip! Here, let me show you.” Vermilion then performs the song.

The comparison lends itself to some particularly cinematic commentary because we see two treatments of the same material, one by “amateurs,” the other by a professional. Where the women are timid, Vermilion is confident. Where their movements are clumsy, hers are precise. Where their voices are creaky and shrill, hers is sure and bold. When the rehearsal first begins, the trumpet player is on the wrong page, and the pianist cannot keep up; when Vermilion performs, the tempo picks up, and the musicians remain in sync. When the ladies perform, one pays attention to the silly lyrics; when Vermilion performs, we focus on her energy. The lyrics have not
changed, but her treatment of the material elevates what was laughable when performed by amateurs. Vermilion knows what the amateur performers do not: style is essential. The difference between the amateurs’ performance and Vermilion’s is the difference between Sirk’s earlier Universal films and his post-\textit{Take Me to Town} films. Though not a great film, \textit{Take Me to Town} possesses a visual sophistication that Sirk’s previous Universal pictures lack. For the first time, one senses control behind the camera and care behind the choices being made. It comes as no surprise that \textit{Take Me to Town} contains the first shot in Sirk’s Universal films that is designed to be both functional \textit{and} aesthetically pleasing. Here, Vermilion and Will have just finished a conversation in which Will thanks her for cooking a good meal, but still demands that she leave the next day. The framing, lighting, and performance of Vermilion work to seduce Will; if she can attract him, perhaps he will let her stay on. The shot below takes place just as Will has reentered the house, and Vermilion remains standing on the porch:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure4-1.jpg}
\caption{Vermilion at the window}
\end{figure}

Without a doubt, the shot results from the new and fruitful collaboration between Sirk and cinematographer Russell Metty. Sirk’s previous films contain no shots like this one, but Sirk and Metty will frequently return to window-framings when working together.
All I Desire (1953)

Though All I Desire has received some critical attention (by Lucy Fischer, V.F. Perkins, Michael Walker, and Deborah Thomas), it still remains largely unknown and underappreciated. It is the first great American Sirk film. I will not spend as much time here on the film because it receives the closest attention in this chapter. It is no coincidence, of course, that the best film under discussion reveals the most through formal analysis.

The plot involves Naomi Murdoch’s (Barbara Stanwyck) reintegration into the family she abandoned roughly a decade ago: her husband, Henry (Richard Carlson); an older daughter who resents her, Joyce (Marcia Henderson); a younger daughter who idolizes her, Lily (Lori Nelson); and her son, Ted (Billy Gray). Naomi left town at the turn of the century both for personal freedom (to pursue her acting career) and to escape the scandal of an affair with a man named Dutch Heineman (Lyle Bettger). But while her family thinks she is a Broadway star, she describes herself as “not quite a the bottom of the bill yet, and not quite at the end of my rope.” Unbeknownst to the family, Lily has written a letter to Naomi, requesting her presence at her own performance in a high school play. Naomi decides to return to Riverdale, Wisconsin, where she causes quite a stir among her family (especially, Henry’s reluctant and Joyce’s bitter reaction) and the townspeople. Once the basic plot is set-up, the film is far more streamlined than the other three, with the focus largely on the emotions of Naomi and her family as they cope with her return. For Henry and Joyce, it all happens too quickly: for them, a wife and mother cannot simply abandon her family and cheerfully return a decade later and expect acceptance. From the beginning, however, Naomi treats her return as a performance. Though Naomi acts as if she had never left and seems to treat the
situation casually (sharing meals, flirting with Joyce’s boyfriend, volunteering to tuck Ted into bed), Stanwyck’s excellent performance reveals the clear pain behind Naomi’s loss.

**Economy**

Past critics have admired Sirk for his irony, his mastery of melodrama, and his filmic statements about the disintegrating 1950s America; they viewed him as a termite artist, stealthily crafting “beneath-the-surface” critiques of the American family. Through close analysis, I argue here that Sirk’s central skill is far more basic and formally definable: his economical approach to filmmaking. His skill is that, given the materials at hand (script, actors, sets, camera, etc.), he makes use of these materials in ways few filmmakers do. Most directors organize the frame in order to present the clearest view of the action and the characters’ dialogue; Sirk uses framing in this way, yet accomplishes more. In classical Hollywood films, character movement motivates camera movement; Sirk also generally uses motivated camera movements, but he uses these movements to do more. Filmmakers use editing to tighten the action and continually provide the ideal vantage point; cuts occur as characters move and speak in order to seamlessly weave various shots into a coherent form; Sirk cuts for these reasons, but again does more—often establishing a dialectic between long takes and cutting that has thematic resonance within a given scene. Within the formal options available to filmmakers, Sirk continually makes choices that satisfy the requirements for classical Hollywood’s continuity style, while working within those conventions to formally engage viewers. Sirk has the same choices available to him that all filmmakers do (see Wood and Godard above), but he tends to make better use of those “givens.”

In “The Aims of Education,” Alfred North Whitehead makes the connection between economy and style:
Finally, there should grow the most austere of all mental qualities; I mean
the sense for style. It is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the
direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste. Style in art,
style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution
have fundamentally the same aesthetic qualities, namely, attainment and
restraint. …

The administrator with a sense for style hates waste; the engineer with a
sense for style economises his material; the artisan with a sense for style
prefers good work. Style is the ultimate morality of mind (Williams 142-143).

Whitehead’s notion of style as “an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct
attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste” provides the precise definition
for what Sirk accomplishes in his best films (142). To be an economical filmmaker
means one finds a solution for the filmmaking problem at hand both by using and
rigorously organizing the available resources and by making everything within the frame
count. This chapter traces how Sirk became a better, more economical filmmaker
throughout the course of four films.

Yet the best way to discuss economy is not to define it, but to show examples
from Sirk’s movies. To demonstrate what I mean by “economy,” I first explore how Sirk
uses a single prop—a mirror—in the opening scenes of two films, the earliest and last in
the series. I then expand my scope to the broader concerns of mise-en-scène and
editing for the chapter’s remainder.

Sirkian criticism has often identified mirrors as the stock-in-trade of the Sirkian
mise-en-scène. Scholarly discussions of mirrors typically leap to a discussion of self-
reflexivity. Sirk himself encourages such a view; when Jon Halliday questions Sirk
about the use of mirrors in a scene from To New Shores (1937), Sirk cannot recall any
specifics, but he makes a general remark about mirrors instead: “I can’t quite remember
the mirror business in Zu Neuen Ufern. But the mirror is the imitation of life. What is
interesting about a mirror is that it does not show you yourself as you are, it shows you your own opposite” (Halliday 48). This pop-philosophical answer tells us nothing and does not even arise from the film’s specific details. A more useful question would resemble the following one: What is the function of mirrors in Sirk’s films? If Sirk’s formal choices become more economical, we can look at the differences in how Sirk employs mirrors in an earlier film versus in a later one. An answer to this question will help us in our exploration of Sirk’s economical style and its development. With the case of mirrors, what works as a decorative, realistic detail in an earlier film becomes expressively employed in the later one.

After a few establishing shots, Has Anybody Seen My Gal? opens with Samuel Fulton going over his will with his attorney. Fulton sits up in bed, while his attorney sits in a chair next to it. A large mirror figures prominently in the background, but its purpose remains questionable. More than likely, it exists as a realistic detail: bedrooms generally have mirrors, and so does this one. The mirror provides neither us nor the attorney with a view not already available through the blocking. The attorney and the viewer simply see a different side of the profile. If, for example, the blocking obscured Fulton’s face, but the mirror gave us a view of it, that framing would offer a more interesting aesthetic choice. In other words, the mirror seems merely decorative, providing us with nothing we do not already see; its potential to do more is wasted. In addition, the choice to soon begin cutting through shot-reverse/shot makes the mirror seem even more unnecessary. The mirror could have served to create intimacy in a unified space and in real time, but the characters are soon abstracted through cutting. Whereas a more creative approach could have turned an introductory, perfunctory
scene into a more interesting one (as with the hallway in *Imitation of Life*), here
collection merely takes over with the shot-reverse/shot breakdown of the cinematic
space. The mirror provides creative possibilities that Sirk does not put to use.

Compare this opening scene with the opening of *All I Desire*, which takes place
in Naomi’s dressing room as she receives a letter from her younger daughter, Lily,
asking her to return home after many years away to attend her performance in a school
play. The shot lasts for fifty-six seconds as Naomi’s co-star reads the letter and Naomi
responds. The shot begins with both characters framed in a medium-shot: the co-star
at her dressing table and Naomi in the mirror, looking at the letter (Figure 4-2A). The
co-star senses a disturbance as Naomi looks at the letter, and the camera pans right as
she asks Naomi, “What’s the matter, honey? You look like you saw a ghost” (Figure 4-
2B). Within a few seconds, Naomi hands the letter to her co-star to read, the camera
pans back to the left, and she begins to read it (Figure 4-2C). When she finishes
reading it, the co-star begins to remark, “Why, you never said…,” and Naomi finishes,
“That I had a kid? I’ve got three.” As they speak, and she hands the letter back, the
camera pans right again, repeating the movement that occurred in the second still (4-
2D).
Figure 4-2. A single shot of Naomi’s dressing room. A) Still one, B) Still two, C) still three, D) still four.

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Figure 4-2. Continued

But why shoot the scene in this way? After all, the set-up of still two (and four) could have been used for this scene: both characters in (roughly) medium shots having a conversation. So why does Sirk add the camera movement and the mirror-framing of Naomi? These stylistic choices give a visual coloring to the characterization of Naomi that Sirk establishes in this first scene. Naomi’s family believes she does Shakespeare productions throughout Europe, but she is actually a bottom-billed vaudeville act. Naomi listens as Lily refers to her as a “great star,” and the irony does not escape her. The reading of the letter is a moment of deflation for Naomi, and the formal choices make the viewer sensitive to Naomi’s emotional state in a way that mere dialogue cannot. Rather than use the medium two-shot framing that we see in still two, Sirk moves the camera to frame Naomi in a mirror while her co-star reads the letter. The mirror, though, adds an interesting effect: within the mirror-frame, we still see Naomi in a medium-shot just as we see her co-star in a medium shot, but Naomi is smaller because of the mirror. Sirk frames Naomi using the same shot scale, yet reduces her size through the mirror. This framing occurs, of course, as Naomi listens to her
daughter describe her as a “great star” and her pride diminishes. The mirror-framing brings Naomi down to size—literally. If Sirk had instead framed Naomi in a medium shot without the mirror (Figure 4-2B), she would have taken up a significant portion of the 1.37:1 frame, and this interpretation would have been lost. The most common technique for heightening emotional impact at a moment like this would be to cut-in to a close-up. At least here, though, Sirk is economical—not cheap. Additionally, the framing visually juxtaposes Naomi and the letter—the fictional Naomi and the real Naomi, introducing a crucial thematic structure in the film regarding how people perceive her character. The formal choices Sirk makes here do not add something beyond the drama (that is, narration), but they deepen its impact.

In Has Anybody Seen My Gal? and All I Desire, both scenes have a single purpose: exposition. The former is merely expository: we receive the information the film wants us to have, which sets up the film’s story. The latter does something more on the formal level. It, too, introduces the film’s action, but does so in an aesthetically engaging way. Sirk makes formal choices that—unobtrusively—enrich Naomi’s characterization.

In Theory of Film Practice, Noel Burch distinguishes between the practical use and the structural use of a formal technique. “Structural” is a dense term for Burch, but at its basis, he means that an intention other than practicality exists for a technique’s use. In other words, the filmmakers give special thought to an aesthetic choice, making it part of a structure or pattern in a given scene or entire film. For example, every film has off-screen space, but very rarely does the dialectic between onscreen and offscreen space structure a film as it does in Jean Renoir’s Nana (1926): “If Nana seems such an
important film today, it is not merely because it marks the beginning of the extensive
use of off-screen space but, more importantly, because it marks the first structural use
of it” (Burch 24). For Burch, Hollywood cinema takes a technique that could be used
more creatively, like off-screen space, and renders it banal: “Off-screen space came to
be used almost exclusively as a way of suggesting events when directors felt that
simply showing them directly would be too facile” (28). Burch makes the same remark
about framing part of a body to suggest off-screen space: “This technique has become
banal today as a way of situating a reverse angle shot (for instance, the back of a head
on the edge of the screen)” (28-29). Burch himself admits that very few films (and
virtually no Hollywood films) meet his rigorous ideas, but after all, he intended his text a
handbook for potential filmmakers. Nevertheless, we can take away from Burch a
useful idea: the difference between sensing that a particular formal choice plays a
practical, “accidental” role (to use Burch’s term) and sensing intention, even structure,
behind a specific choice (Burch 127). Burch describes the “typical Hollywood product”
as having “only a very slight formal awareness,” and any formal structures “can at best
be regarded … as fortunate accidents resulting from commercial practicality” (129).
“Awareness” is a good term for thinking about the problem at hand: when we analyze a
given formal choice, can we detect that the filmmakers were aware of why this choice
and not others? I believe we can by examining and charting the development of
camera movement, framing, and cutting throughout Sirk’s small-town tetralogy.
Throughout these close readings, I will demonstrate that choices made by convention
and practicality in the earlier films become complex and purposeful in All I Desire.
**Camera Movement**

Camera movement provides an apt aesthetic choice to examine in these four films because it precisely follows this trajectory from unawareness to awareness. Obviously, an exhaustive catalogue of camera movements would be unnecessary, so I have selected a few typical instances to make my point. In the first three films, camera movement supports character movement—and little else. Sirk continues to use motivated camera movements in *All I Desire*, but the camera suddenly comes alive in a way it had not before; it moves, looks, examines, follows—even when a static camera would have done the job sufficiently.

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*

In this scene, Millicent’s date, Carl Pennock, arrives to take her out. The shot begins with Harriet carrying a coffee service, setting the tray down, and walking toward the door. The camera pans left as she moves across the screen and stops to acknowledge Carl’s entrance. We now see Roberta, who yells upstairs to Millicent that Carl has arrived. Roberta then follows the reverse path that Harriet took, walking from the foyer to the serving platter Harriet set down. The camera pans right and follows her as she does so. After picking up a sugar cube from the tray, Roberta steps a few feet to the left and stands in the doorway to watch Carl enter and greet the Blaisdell family. The camera pans left with her movement, and then tracks slight forward, removing Roberta from the frame. Within a few seconds, cutting begins. The movement here merely serves a function: it covers the characters’ movements and actions. In addition to Carl’s entrance, the movement shows Roberta picking up sugar cubes, one for her and one for the dog. Since Carl’s entrance marks the central focus, one can imagine why the filmmakers chose a camera movement to connect his entrance with Roberta’s
action: it would have been too awkward to cut away from the central action to show Roberta getting sugar cubes. But by uniting her action with the central one, her action fits in more organically. Thus, we have a purely practical reason, the very kind Burch discusses.

**Meet Me at the Fair**

In this shot, Doc and Enoch have arrived at the orphanage to rescue Tad. A crane shot is used to follow the two characters' movement up the stairs to the third floor. The camera remains outside, starting at the ground level, craning up to the second floor, and then craning up and right to the door Doc and Enoch presently enter. Within the context of the film, this camera movement comes across as strange and quite noticeable, partly because the shot differs from any other in the film. Sirk composes *Meet Me at the Fair* primarily with static compositions and medium shots. In the first two films, not only does the camera rarely move, but also crane shots never do more than work as establishing shots to set up a scene. This crane shot neither adds anything to the scene nor fits with any pattern the film develops. One could assume that, like other aesthetic choices in this film, the camera remains outside so that the filmmakers did not have to construct an extra interior set. The shot, though, does provide the kind of framing through windowpanes that would later become a staple of Sirk's visual repertoire. But if one compares this window-framing with the aforementioned window-framing shot from *Take Me to Town*, one can see precisely the difference I trace between a technique's accidental and intentional function. Here, the window-panes merely allow a clearer view of the action from outside; in *Take Me to Town*, Sirk coordinates window-panes with character blocking and lighting to achieve an aesthetic effect: to make Vermilion look attractive to Will since she cannot directly state
what she wants. Sirk and Metty could have framed Ann Sheridan in any number of ways, but selected a formally interesting option. Neither of these instances, though, can match this technique’s use in later Sirk films, where the window-framing will carry greater thematic resonance.

_Take Me to Town_

_Take Me to Town_ is the transitional film in this series. Thus, I have selected two different camera movements: one typical of the earlier films, the other a more complex one. In the first, the camera merely follows character movement: as Newton Hall rides out of town (on a white horse), and Petey, Corney, and Bucket ride into town (on a black horse). The camera begins with Newton in the frame and pans right as he rides out of town. Once the boys enter the frame, the camera pans left with them as they move into town.

Compare this movement, though, with another from the film. Here, two events happen: first, the boys have come to ask Vermilion to live with them, and they await an answer. At the same time, Marshal Daggett has shown up and searches for Vermilion as her friend, Rose (Lee Patrick), attempts to stall him. Her potential arrest, of course, leads Vermilion to accept the boys’ offer. The camera movement here may seem simple, but it differs slightly from the previous two films. The shot begins as Vermilion climbs out her dressing room window and crouches down just as Rose and the marshal enter (Figure 4-3A). The boys stand offscreen left, where Vermilion told them to wait moments before. After the marshal walks forward, looks out the window (forcing Vermilion to duck even lower), without seeing her, the camera tracks forward, placing Vermilion offscreen (Figure 4-3B). We now see only the marshal and Rose, with the window itself providing additional framing. Once the marshal realizes Vermilion has left,
he immediately begins flirting with Rose, and they soon walk out of the dressing room.

The camera now tracks back from the window and to the left, framing Vermilion and the boys (Figure 4-3C). As she and the boys begin a conversation, a cut occurs, and the shot ends.

Figure 4-3. The camera conceals Vermilion. A) Still one, B) still two, C) still three

How exactly is this movement more complex than previous ones? I do not argue that this movement here is complex—merely that it is more complex than previous camera movements in the first two films. It achieves this increased complexity because it uses offscreen space in a way the previous examples do not. As Burch writes, “Any camera movement obviously converts off-screen space into screen space or vice versa” (29). But in the previous examples, off-screen space is not charged as it is here. When in *My Gal* Harriet temporarily moves offscreen and the camera follows Roberta, we give
no thought to Harriet’s brief disappearance. In *Meet Me at the Fair*, we do not wonder what happens on the first floor when the camera rises to the third. But in this second example from *Take Me To Town*, the outcome of something within the frame affects something else hidden outside the frame; not only a relation, but also a tension, exists between screen space and offscreen space here. When Vermilion occupies offscreen space, we remain aware of her presence. For not only does she hide, but the camera has moved to hide her as well. Thus, the camera movement emphasizes the moment’s tension by both observing and participating in the action.

*All I Desire*

This breakfast scene takes place on the morning of Lily’s high-school graduation. The shot in question lasts fifty-six seconds and begins with only Lena and Ted in the frame. Lena remarks, “Where is everybody? Big day like today, and everybody’s lazy.” As Lena finishes this statement, Lily appears, walking down the stairs. Lily scurries to the window, saying, “Oh, isn’t it a wonderful morning,” and the camera pans left with her, leaving Lily and Lena in the frame, but Ted offscreen. Lily moves right to embrace Lena, and the camera pans with her movement again. Ted enters the frame again, but he now gets up from the table. As he does, the camera pans right with him and tracks slightly forward, but never comes to a complete stop. Lily, in a reproaching tone, remarks, “Good morning, Theodore.” The camera continues to follow Ted from the breakfast nook to the living room, but it now tracks right rather than panning. Lena follows Ted into the living room to inquire where he is going, and the camera temporarily stops tracking to frame them through an interior window. As Ted exits, Joyce comes down the stairs, and the camera pans slightly right to frame Joyce and Lena in the middle of the windowpane as they embrace. Joyce and Lena walk left into the breakfast
nook, and the camera tracks with them. Notice, however, that once Joyce sits down at the table with Lily, the camera never remains completely still. No full pans, tilts, or tracks occur for a few seconds, but the camera slightly wobbles instead. As we soon find out, the camera movements anticipate something: Naomi’s entrance from upstairs. The camera makes three quick movements as Naomi appears. When Lily made the same entrance earlier, the camera did not move until she was all the way down the stairs. But the moment Naomi enters the frame, the camera tilts up, quickly tilts down, and then pans left with her as she enters. Once Naomi sits, the camera remains wobbly, but no significant movements occurs; soon, Henry comes downstairs, and the scene’s first cut occurs as he greets Naomi. The coordination among the narrative situation, camera movement, framing, performance, blocking, and sound occurs on a grander scale here than in Sirk’s previous Universal films. It is Lily’s graduation day and also the moment when Henry reveals that Naomi may stay permanently in Riverdale. Thus, the general mood is one of anticipation, and the style here fits the scene’s mood perfectly.

In addition to the more noticeable camera movements, observe how the camera never stops making very slight movements and adjustments throughout the scene. The camera moves anxiously, as if it observes with the same intensity and excitement that these characters feel on this day. “Bird-like” may prove the best simile here to describe the camera movements, a comparison the film itself suggests by the soundtrack’s prominent chirping sounds. A remark Sirk once made to actor George Sanders appropriately describes how Sirk moves his camera here: “With Sanders I’d tell him, ‘Now we’ll pan with you as you move.’ And he’d say, ‘Why in the hell do that?’ … And
I’d say, ‘Because the camera is interested in you’—which is true. ‘The good camera is curious’” (Stern). Though a personification, this curiosity comes across in this scene.

Once Henry enters, though, the mood soon turns serious when Lily discovers that she will not accompany Naomi to New York because Naomi will remain in Riverdale; arguments begin, Lily grows angry, and the composition becomes more static. The only significant movement occurs as Lily grows angry with Naomi for the first time. Sirk initially frames Naomi, Henry, and Lily in the same frame, with Joyce offscreen right. Yet once Lily gets mad, she stands up, and a camera movement now connects Lily with Joyce, highlighting their emotional connection.

Sirk expressively blocks the character movements in other ways as well. Lena is the only character who remains throughout the entire scene; she has been the family’s backbone since Naomi left, and she is the one constant here as well. Lily, Naomi, and Henry all enter from the same staircase; thus, their entrances connect these sympathetic characters and distinguish them from Joyce, who enters from another staircase in the living room. Joyce must walk a greater distance to the breakfast table (a place of warmth) than the other characters must travel; this details seems significant since Joyce, at this point, still remains emotionally distant from Naomi in a way that that Lily (in the scene’s first half) and Henry do not.

One detects Sirk’s sense of economy in the way he describes his camera movements, and he makes a subtle distinction worth noting:

But every movement followed one rule, which was a rule of iron with me. (It has been discarded today.) That is, that a camera movement ought to be justified by your actors’ movements, and that your actors’ movements must be justified by the camera. I lay out my camera moves before plotting the actors’. There must be a constant flow of inspiration between camera and people (Stern).
Sirk first gives the definition of a motivated camera movement: the characters’ actions motivate the camera movements. With his second statement, though, he adds an interesting point: a motivated camera movement can (or should) add something to characters’ actions. Sirk describes his camera movements in a way that emphasizes that characters and camera are both acting and acted upon at the same time. Usually, when a camera “acts upon” a performer, the movement is obtrusive and unmotivated—a tracking shot that rushes towards an immobile character, for example. As Sirk mentions, such unmotivated movements occur more frequently in post-classical Hollywood. But working with motivated camera movements, Sirk makes his movements “count” twice—an important quality of the economical filmmaker: the camera functions to present the characters and their actions, but it also adds a creative stylistic inflection. In this scene, for example, the anticipatory mood is suggested by the story (via the character’s dialogue) and in two ways by the camera. On the one hand, it frequently moves to cover the character’s movements and the bustle of a spring morning; on the other hand, the camera itself seems anxious through its constant, sometimes imperceptible, movements throughout the scene.

**Framing**

In *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* and *Meet Me at the Fair*, Sirk makes framing choices that best support the characters’ dialogue delivery. The framing, particularly in medium shots, serves to isolate characters as they deliver their lines, as if the spectator cannot be trusted to know to whom he or she should pay attention; a cut generally occurs as soon as the characters move beyond a medium shot. This practice changes, though, with *All I Desire* and subsequent Sirk films. In this section, I look at how Sirk frames three different dinner scenes: in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*, *All I Desire*, and
There’s Always Tomorrow (1955). Although There’s Always Tomorrow lies outside the four films in this chapter, I find it useful to compare the earlier films with this later one in order to indicate how Sirk’s skill continued to develop beyond its early peak in All I Desire. We can observe how Sirk treats roughly the same ingredients—families, an outsider, a set dinner table—differently and more creatively with each progressive film, from the rudimentary set-up of My Gal to the expressive organization of There’s Always Tomorrow.

Has Anybody Seen My Gal?

I begin with a shot breakdown of a dinner scene from Has Anybody Seen My Gal. For the sake of space, I only discuss the first six shots out of nineteen. One first sees an establishing shot. The scene takes place during Mr. Smith’s first dinner at the Blaisdell household, and he complains that he cannot eat the food Harriet serves. Roberta steps in: “Taste it, Mr. Smith.” The first cut occurs as she continues: “Mama makes the best stew in Hilverton.” As Howard begins to talk about his wish for a car, the second cut occurs to show Howard and Charles talking. The third cut happens as Harriet responds: “Howard, didn’t we just buy you a brand-new raccoon coat? Howard replies as Sirk cuts back to him: “Brand-new used one.” A fifth cut then occurs as Roberta chimes in on the conversation: “Sometimes I wish we were so rich that we didn’t have to pay our bills.” This pattern of cutting on whoever currently speaks fits with the standard continuity style practice—common to any film. Throughout this entire film, framing choices never vary: framing decisions support character dialogue. Sirk frames characters in medium shots, often two-shots, but even then, isolated from others within the scene. As a result, one does not feel the relationships here, and they do not develop organically. For example, when Mr. Smith mentions his affection for the family
later in the film—“[They] couldn’t be nicer if they were my own”—it contradicts how the viewer perceives Mr. Smith’s feelings. After all, Charles and Harriet treat him unkindly, and Mr. Smith witnesses the family’s breakdown once they receive his money. Mr. Smith feels an affection for this family that the dramatic situation and the film’s style do not suggest.

So what would it look like to treat a dinner conversation as something more? Dinner scenes from All I Desire and There’s Always Tomorrow provide an answer.

**All I Desire**

In All I Desire, Sirk uses framing to show visually the conflict Naomi brings to the Murdoch household with her arrival. One sees the four family members present within a single frame and, thus, a single shot, before they become aware of Naomi’s presence. When she arrives, the first cut occurs, and one sees a close-up of Naomi’s face. Then, Sirk shows how each family member reacts to her arrival—all within a single shot, but with one major change: the entire family is never present within a single frame as before. Instead, the camera pans (and sometimes tilts) around the table as they react. A third framing choice then occurs as Naomi enters the home: once Lily opens the door and lets Naomi inside, the family will never again be all present within a single shot or a single frame throughout this scene. The framing choices demonstrate how Naomi literally interrupts the familial space and any harmony within the home.

Once Naomi enters the house, she always shares the frame with at least one other character until the framing noticeably changes when she greets Joyce, her staunchest opponent. The coldness of Joyce’s greeting resonates over the next two shots of Naomi—close-ups that completely abstract her from the family. One sees this second close-up as Sirk cuts on the mention of Dutch’s name (the man with whom
Naomi had an affair. Once Ted (innocently) mentions the name, the framing further divides the family. Before meeting Joyce and the mention of Dutch’s name, only two shots contained individual characters. Once these two events occur, there are seven—with Naomi, Joyce, and Henry all seen in isolation at various times. Since Henry and Joyce struggle most with Naomi’s return, the framing makes one feel more strongly the emotion present within this scene. Through such deliberately modulated framing—how characters are framed, who is included, who is excluded—one sees both the damage Naomi has caused her family and the emotional rift she causes by her return.

**There’s Always Tomorrow**

In *There’s Always Tomorrow*, the organization is simpler—but more rigorous. This dinner scene shares a similar narrative situation with *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*: an outsider dines with a family for the first time; it also bears a similarity to *All I Desire* because we see an outsider bringing conflict into a once-peaceful family. Though I recounted the film’s plot in Chapter 2, I will briefly recapitulate in order to establish the scene’s action. Clifford Groves (Fred MacMurray) has recently rekindled a friendship/romance with an old girlfriend, Norma Vale (Barbara Stanwyck), and he invites her to dinner with his family; the couple sits at the head of the table. Clifford’s son, Vinnie (William Reynolds) and elder daughter, Ellen (Gigi Perreau), suspect their father of cheating, and Norma’s presence angers them; they sit together on the table’s right side. At the far left, you have two characters completely ignorant of Clifford and Norma’s developing relationship: Clifford’s wife, Marion (Joan Bennett), and his younger daughter, Frankie (Judy Nugent, just offscreen in the still below). At the third place on the left sits Ann (Pat Crowley), Vinnie’s girlfriend, who finds Clifford and Norma’s relationship harmless even though she knows that Vinnie and Ellen suspect an affair;
even if it is an affair, Ann believes Clifford deserves the attention he receives from Norma because he does not receive it from his ungrateful family.

Figure 4-4. Establishing shot

Here, Sirk frames with an almost mathematical precision, and one clearly senses the work of creative individuals—not merely conventions. Quite remarkably, Sirk accomplishes much of this organization by the use of candlesticks. As in *All I Desire*, it matters who is in the frame and who is outside of it; but here, it also matters who is framed together and where the characters sit. Sirk uses the framing to divide characters based on two things: what they know of Clifford and Norma’s relationship and their feelings about it.
After the scene begins, the organization becomes clear. Clifford places a carnation in his jacket’s buttonhole, and Norma recalls that Clifford used to do so when she knew him years ago. Vinnie saw Clifford do the same thing when he first spotted Norma and Clifford together earlier in the film, and this action visibly increases his anger. When Sirk cuts, he makes clear divisions between the “guilty,” the suspicious, and the ignorant: Sirk then moves from simply dividing the characters through cutting to dividing the characters within the same shot through the careful framing of candlesticks.

A slight pan occurs in the ninth shot, and the camera reframes from the first to the second still:

Figure 4-6. Shot nine breakdown. A) Shot 9a, B) shot 9b

In the first still (Figure 4-6A), Ann appears especially marked as a single character tightly framed by the candlesticks. This framing seems appropriate since she is the only character who knows of Clifford and Norma’s affair and does not judge them. The camera then pans right, and we see the framing of the second still (Figure 4-6B), with a
single candlestick marking the major opposition within the film. Once Sirk sets up these divisions, he carefully maintains them, and the three “groups” remain separated, even when present within the same frame. One never, for example, sees Vinnie and Norma in the same space without a division, and the “ignorant” characters—Marion and Frankie—never mix with the suspicious ones.

Further signs exist of the filmmakers’ intentions here. For example, why have Ann sit apart from Vinnie, her boyfriend? Logically, it makes more sense to sit them next to each other; instead, though, Sirk blocks the characters to create a visual pattern here. Because of her place at the table, Ann works as a buffer between the guilty characters and the ignorant ones, and so her placement between Norma and Frankie proves essential. In addition, if Ann and Vinnie sat together, that blocking would throw off the grouping of the suspicious characters, Vinnie and Ellen.

For even more evidence, one could also compare shots nine and seventeen:

Figure 4-7. Shots nine and seventeen. A) Shot nine, B) shot seventeen

In both shots, the characters sit in the exact same positions, and the shot scale is almost precisely identical; the camera is tilted slightly lower in shot nine, and this change marks the only noticeable difference. Therefore, if one sees a candlestick in the second shot (Figure 4-7B), one should also see that candlestick in the first (Figure 4-7A). Yet the opposite occurs here: while the table contains four candles (a fact
established in the opening shot of the scene), one candle is removed in shot nine, only to be replaced in shot seventeen. One could, of course, attribute this change to a continuity error, and were it, say, a background prop, one could more likely assume such an error occurred. But an error seems unlikely here: the character groupings are too controlled and the candles are too prominent within the frame to go unnoticed by the filmmakers.

So why does the candlestick disappear in one shot and reappear in another? On the one hand, a technical reason exists: the camera moves in shot nine, from the framing that specially marks Ann to a framing that divides Norma and Clifford from Vinnie and Ellen (Figure 4-6). So having the fourth candle in place at the beginning of shot nine would throw off the reframed shot’s symmetry (Figure 4-6B). But the addition of the fourth candle and the separation of Clifford and Norma in the seventeenth shot serve a dramatic purpose as well: by this point, Vinnie and Ellen’s rudeness towards Norma has roused Clifford’s anger. By separating Norma and Clifford, the framing now draws attention to each character as an individual rather than as a couple, and this change corresponds to the drama: once Vinnie leaves, Norma begins to realize the reason behind Vinnie and Ellen’s anger, and she only reacts for the remainder of the scene. Clifford, though, goes on the offensive: when Ellen gets up from the table to leave, Clifford insists that she sit back down. Ellen remarks, “I’m sure you’ll pardon me, Ms. Vale,” but Clifford responds sternly, “Well, I won’t pardon you.” And once Clifford delivers this line, one now sees the candlesticks separating Norma and Clifford for the first time.
The addition of the fourth candlestick also sets up a possible interpretation for shot nineteen (Figure 4-8). Soon, Clifford has had enough and stands up both to reprimand Frankie and to demand that Ann bring Vinnie back inside. As he does so, he stands with a candlestick dividing his body, and he crosses over into Norma’s space. As he defends Norma, he physically enters her domain, and one visually witnesses Clifford coming to Norma’s defense. The framing also literalizes the metaphor of “carrying the torch” for an “old flame.” Without the replacement of the fourth candlestick, the scene would lack this effective, yet subtle, visual underscoring.

Figure 4-8. Shot nineteen

In these later films, Sirk uses dinner table conversations to show conflicts and allegiances through careful blocking, precise framing, and, in the case of There’s Always Tomorrow, the controlled use of props. These techniques are not excessive and do not impose themselves on the narrative; rather, they both serve the drama and heighten it in a way that the story and dialogue alone cannot accomplish. The dinner scene in Has Anybody Seen My Gal could have been directed by anyone, and the framing choices do nothing more than follow convention; the other two dinner scenes evince far too much creativity to be simply anonymous.
Cutting and Shot Length

In his earlier films, Sirk not only shows a lack of trust in his audience through his framing choices, but he also demonstrates a lack of trust in his performers through excessive, unnecessary cutting. I focus here on editing within a scene, as opposed to between scenes. There are various reasons why a filmmaker would cut within a scene: perhaps the characters move, and a cut makes the action more legible; a match-on-action occurs as a character moves from one room to another; or a shot/reverse-shot pattern accompanies a conversation. Filmmakers can choose among such editing choices when deciding how to best break down a scene to achieve an intended effect. The central problem in the earlier Sirk films is that unnecessary cutting often ruins the effect the filmmakers attempt to achieve. Each film here is about relationships, either among families or de facto families (Meet Me at the Fair). But how can one hope to organically develop relationships between characters when they are too frequently abstracted from each other through cutting? The films’ narratives inherently demand fewer, smarter cuts so that the filmmakers can establish the relationships so central to these films. Economical editing means (1) that filmmakers cut only when necessary and (2) that they get more out of the “ingredients” of a single shot by carefully directing performers. When filmmakers edit economically, they allow the actors to carry the drama instead of guiding the viewer’s attention through editing, resulting in a more organic, felt experience. One can clearly observe the difference between non-economical and economical cutting and shot-length decisions when comparing the scenes from Has Anybody Seen My Gal? and All I Desire below. I discuss Meet Me at the Fair in between these two films because that shot represents a fortuitous
economical moment—as opposed to the more clearly intentional decisions made in *All I Desire* and later Sirk films.

When I discuss *Meet Me at the Fair* and *All I Desire*, I look at two shots that occur in a continuous take. For if economical filmmakers use cuts only when necessary, longer takes inevitably result. The long-take in *Meet Me at the Fair* is an exception; *All I Desire*, though, extensively uses long takes, and when cuts do occur, they do for an expressive purpose (as in the dinner scene, for example). I find these two shots significant because they are exactly the kind that Sirk would usually break down through multiple cuts.

**Has Anybody Seen My Gal?**

Consider this short scene between Dan and Mr. Smith in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*. The scene opens as the two characters arrive at Dan’s apartment. This shot works as the scene's establishing shot, and one understands why Sirk would want to cut away from this long shot to focus the spectator’s attention on the conversation itself. Thus, as their conversation begins, a match-on-action cut occurs as Mr. Smith hangs up his umbrella. One now sees the two characters in a medium-long shot. For the purposes of this scene, another cut proves unnecessary—and a future shot will demonstrate this point momentarily. The spectator already has a clear view of the two characters and an ideal vantage point to witness their discussion. But another cut does soon occur on the action of Dan hanging up his scarf atop the drapes. Dan and Mr. Smith now occupy a medium shot, but one soon realizes this cut was unnecessary. When Dan removes his jacket, he tosses it on a chair just to the left of Mr. Smith—the chair visible in the second shot. So, Sirk cuts *again* to a medium-long shot so that the audience can see this action. Why did Sirk cut away in the first place when he has to
cut back a mere ten seconds later? The framing now repeats the framing in shot two. After the cut to shot four, though, there are no more cuts, and instead the camera moves to keep both characters in the frame as they move.

This unnecessary cutting demonstrates the lack of creativity (or awareness) that goes into the editing decisions here: when the characters stand in place and talk—and there is absolutely no need to cut—Sirk cuts. In the logic of the scene’s editing (and of this film in general), almost every adjustment of the characters results in a framing adjustment through cutting. But in the fourth shot (where a cut would seem more likely based on the film’s decision-making logic), the camera moves in a continuous take, even though the characters move around more than they have in the previous three shots. The editing here would make more sense if Sirk had employed a shot/reverse-shot pattern; but each shot is a two-shot, making the cuts even more unnecessary.

Perhaps defects in performance played a role in this scene and throughout the film: with the (minor) exception of Charles Coburn, a character actor, the film has no stars. At this point, Rock Hudson was still three years away from his breakout role in Magnificent Obsession (1954); this film was also his first with Sirk. Without a doubt, working with a star like Barbara Stanwyck in All I Desire opened up the formal possibility for longer takes and less coverage to cover up performance errors. With the exception of A Time to Love and a Time to Die (1958), all of Sirk’s post-1954 films feature star performers.

Meet Me at the Fair

I now examine a scene from Meet Me at the Fair that resembles the one from Has Anybody Seen My Gal. Like the previous scene, this one involves editing when
characters remain roughly in the same position throughout the entire scene. One can notice how a long take makes sense here and benefits the performances.

A characteristic framing occurs throughout the entire film because the main characters ride on a wagon: a two- or three-shot with the characters sitting at the front of the wagon, with the camera either at an oblique angle, or facing them head-on. Because of this framing, any cuts will need sufficient motivation; otherwise, they will be simply unnecessary. Since the characters remain in close quarters while traveling, the film has an opportunity to develop a real rapport between them. Though *Meet Me at the Fair* is the least successful film overall, one senses a natural friendship between Doc and Enoch that resembles the one Mr. Smith and Roberta share. Although thoughtless editing constantly threatens to ruin this opportunity (and generally does), one particular moment stands out. Here, the characters sing a song with a call-and-response structure, so the cuts back and forth between Doc/Tad and Enoch make sense in this context. I examine one particular shot: the second shot of the scene, a long-take that lasts one minute and thirteen seconds. It is precisely the kind of shot on which Sirk would usually cut in his early work. For example, in the scene from *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*, a character cannot even perform simple actions like entering and room and taking off a coat without cuts.

In the scene’s first shot, Doc tells Enoch to grab his guitar so that they can cheer Tad up with a song. A cut occurs as Enoch turns around to grab his guitar, and the second shot begins. Before the cut, Tad questions whether or not Doc is a real doctor. At the beginning of shot two, Enoch responds, “Son, Doctor Tilbee is an A.T.W.S.D.T.S.” As soon as Enoch delivers the line, he reaches into the back for his
guitar, and Tad questions exactly what kind of doctor Enoch means. Enoch briefly stops his search to answer Tad, “That means ‘Doctor of anything worth seeing, Doc Tilbee’s seen.’” Once Enoch has responded, he resumes the search for his guitar, and Tad continues to question Doc about the wonders he has seen. Within moments, Enoch finds his guitar, and he and Doc begin their song together. Soon, Tad joins in on the song, and the camera tracks in to frame him in a medium close-up in order to mark the occurrence. The shot lasts well over a minute before Sirk cuts at the beginning of the song’s second verse. The cut has no noticeable expressive purpose, and it probably occurs simply because one was overdue. But for the shot’s length, Sirk lets the action play out in real time, and this decision results in a rare, relaxed moment where one witnesses the characters’ camaraderie. In addition, one observes Enoch’s search for the guitar as he pauses to respond to Tad and then resumes his search—just the type of ordinary activity that filmmakers generally elide through ellipsis. Moments like this one rarely happen in Sirk’s early films, and this one likely falls into Noel Burch’s “accidental” category; one still does not sense a guiding intelligence behind what one watches.

All I Desire

Once again, All I Desire provides an example of technical sophistication. I explore a scene that Sirk more than likely would have broken into multiple shots in earlier films. One should notice how much Sirk accomplishes here through long-takes and reframing—and the benefit these afford the characters’ performances. This shot occurs in a single, continuous take and lasts approximately fifty-eight seconds.

Russ, Joyce’s boyfriend, has arrived to invite both Naomi and Joyce to go horseback riding. Joyce has grown jealous of Naomi, fearing her boyfriend prefers her
fun-loving mother. Naomi tells Russ she cannot go because she did not pack any riding clothes, but Joyce comments that she can find her old riding clothes in the attic (Figure 4-9A). Naomi responds enthusiastically to the news by yelling out to Russ, “We’re saved!” and telling him that both she and Joyce will be dressed and downstairs momentarily (Figure 4-9B). Naomi gets up from the window and excitedly scurries to where Joyce stands, and Sirk uses a medium-long shot to frame them (Figure 4-9C). But Joyce’s sour attitude soon dampens Naomi’s excitement as she announces that she has decided not to go. “But he asked you, didn’t he?” Naomi questions. In a snarky tone, Joyce replies, “Maybe he wanted a chaperone while he rode out with my glamorous mother” (Figure 4-9D). Naomi’s attitude now changes as she responds to Joyce’s rudeness. “Wait a minute, Joyce,” Naomi says, as both she and Joyce take a step toward the camera; Naomi sidesteps a chair in her way (Figure 4-9E). So far, the camera has not moved, but it now tilts just slightly upward to frame Naomi and Joyce in a medium shot (Figure 4-9F). The conversation soon turns nasty. Joyce remarks, “You just can’t help amusing yourself with every attractive man in sight, can you?” Naomi responds aggressively to this question (Figure 4-9G): “Suppose that were true, what are you going to do about it?”

Notice how much Naomi’s expression changes simply by leaving her mouth open and showing her teeth once she speaks this line. Naomi questions Joyce: “I thought you liked Russ, but you wouldn’t put up a fight for him. Afraid of my competition?” Upon delivering this line, Naomi not only leaves her mouth open, but turns and slightly cocks her head as well, revealing a slightly better view of her face’s right side (Figure 4-9H). Naomi then slightly chuckles and says, “We’re a big disappointment to each other,
aren’t we? You’ve got a mother with no principles. I’ve got a daughter with no guts.” Joyce turns to leave, but Naomi grabs her arm and reprimands her: “Oh, don’t be a fool, Joyce. Put on your riding habit!” The two cross paths in front of the camera, Joyce going to get dressed, Naomi leaving the room. The camera, though, remains in place as the scene ends.

Figure 4-9. Breakdown of a single shot of Naomi and Joyce. A) Still one, B) still two, C) still three, D) still four, E) still five, F), still six, G) still seven, H) still eight.
If Sirk had divided the action into multiple shots, what would the shot lack? Most importantly, cutting would too quickly defuse the tension between Joyce and Naomi that the scene attempts to build. One can better feel this tension by experiencing their interaction in real time. Normally, one could expect a close-up when the scene grows heated and expect a shot breakdown like the following one:

*Close-up of Joyce:* “You just can't help amusing yourself with every attractive man in sight, can you?”

*Cut to close-up of Naomi’s reaction:* “Suppose that were true, what are you going to do about it?”

*Cut to close-up of Joyce’s reaction* and so on.

Cutting would mean that one could not see one character acting (speaking) and the other reacting simultaneously; instead, the camera would privilege one over the other as the film cuts back and forth. Yet this scene emphasizes an equal tension between characters, so it is important that the viewer sees one character speaking and the other character responding within the same frame. Cutting into close-ups would weaken the performances; the viewer would know that the tension was constructed on an editing table and not allowed to arise naturally. Here, the pressure instead falls on the performers, and they work together admirably to create a genuine antagonism between mother and daughter. The long take allows one to read the process of Naomi’s emotions through her body language. Certain minute details arise that one can only notice and appreciate on repeated viewings. One observes the expressiveness of Stanwyck’s posture, face, and movements—how her mouth forms a slight snarl when angry or how she cocks her head when provoked. Neither cutting nor elaborate camerawork is needed here; aside from a slight tilt, the camera remains a motionless observer, and the performers carry the scene. Not only has Sirk learned when *not* to
cut, but also when not to intervene in general, getting the most out of a shot by expertly directing the actors. Stylistically, this shot showcases lean, economical filmmaking—the essential quality of Sirk’s best work.
CHAPTER 5
“YOU ONLY NEED ONE …”

Perhaps more than any other quality, critics praise Sirk’s ability to transform a poor script into art. In *Imitation of Life*, for example, “Sirk has used his command over ‘style,’” Halliday writes, “to transform the awful story more by light, composition, camerawork, and music than by anything else” (10). But when one watches Sirk’s non-canonical films, one quickly runs into a conflict with Sirk criticism’s major tenet: that he transformed trash into quality. If that were so, *Mystery Submarine* (1950) would be the equal of *All That Heaven Allows*. The story of *Magnificent Obsession* often receives the most criticism, but such a judgment usually means that one has not seen a film like *Meet Me at the Fair*—arguably the least promising Sirk screenplay. Does Sirk simply redeem some scripts, but not others?

As much as I have praised Sirk’s particular filmmaking contributions, Sirk is not a director who can do something with nothing—as Jacques Tourneur could, for example. The truth, though hardly ever discussed, is that all the films in the official Sirk canon had better scripts, bigger stars, and bigger budgets than his less successful films. When he had those things, not only did he do better work, but he brought out the best in those performers and technicians as well. Though Sirk had worked with stars in several early films, they tended to be past their prime (Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck, Ann Sheridan). That Universal was able to secure Jane Wyman—at that time a major star—for *Magnificent Obsession* perhaps accounts for the success of Sirk’s career more than anything else: the film brought substantial box-office returns; it catapulted the fledgling Rock Hudson into Stardom on the coattails of Jane Wyman; and it made Sirk Universal’s top house director. As for scripts, Sirk’s earlier work at Universal suffers from the
problem of many lesser screenplays: the story’s concept matters more than its characters. For example, in *My Gal*, the premise’s mechanizations—a middle-class family strikes it rich—take precedence over any genuine human qualities and emotions. But contrast *My Gal* with *All I Desire*, and one can clearly see the difference. *All I Desire* had the same potential to feel more like a scripted premise than a human story: a mother, who abandoned her family, returns home a decade later, both causing turmoil within her family and reigniting the passion of her former illicit lover. Yet Sirk employs formal techniques—camera movement, framing, and editing—not to transform or subvert the script, but rather to center the viewer’s attention on the emotional experience of Naomi’s homecoming.

Throughout the present work, I have tried to discount Sirk’s reputation as an ironist—the quality that most critics consider his work’s supreme value. When we call a classical Hollywood director’s approach “ironic,” we often mean that a director managed to make a good film in spite of the studio system’s limitations. In other words, given all the bad things one could say about Hollywood—its hokum, its commerciality, etc.—is it not astounding that great works were actually produced—and still matter today? To call Sirk a great ironist, then, is not so much to praise a quality Sirk applied to those films, but simply to acknowledge the difficulty of producing quality art at Universal Pictures in the 1950s. If Sirk were merely an ironist, I do not believe he would be an artist we still care about. Sirk responded to scripts not through irony, but through seriousness, often treating throwaway or ridiculous material with more respect than it deserved; at his best, he achieved an emotional honesty rare in Hollywood cinema.
Sirk’s oeuvre as a whole lacks aesthetic consistency, but he matured as a filmmaker—even up to his last film. Many auteurs, of course, demand aesthetic consistency from their directors; yet when both the medium itself and the culture evolve so quickly, this criterion seems exorbitant. Or to put it more simply, when a director makes twenty-one feature films for a studio within nine years, he will occasionally fail. But what if Sirk had only made *All That Heaven Allows* or *There’s Always Tomorrow* or *Imitation of Life*? Peter Bogdanovich recalls a conversation he had with Orson Welles:

One time Orson Welles and I were talking about Greta Garbo. Welles adored her as an artist and was raving about her extraordinary presence, her mystery, her magic. I agreed. But wasn’t it too bad, I said, that out of all the many films she’s appeared in, only two (George Cukor’s *Camille* and Ernst Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka*) were really good movies? Welles looked at me a long moment and then said, quietly: “You only need one …” (3).

If one is enough, Sirk has at least four—and probably closer to eight.

As I unearthed even the rarest Sirk films, I sought to remain open to the aesthetic experiences they had to offer. Yet *Meet Me at the Fair, The Lady Pays Off*, and *Week-End with Father*, for example, simply did not offer the formal richness I continually found in a film like *Imitation of Life*. Thus, at the end of this project, it strikes me that I celebrate the same films critics have historically recognized—but for different reasons. Clement Greenberg remarked that great works of art are valued for many different, even opposing, reasons, but that eventually, “differences of taste fade into one another; the agreements become more important and conspicuous than the disagreements” (26).

Despite all the differences, there is a “consensus over time” about the works that last (Greenberg 26). For example, the ideological critic values *All That Heaven Allows* for its sharp critique of empty, upper middle-class morals; I argue that approaching the film ideologically causes one to miss the aesthetic density that goes beyond its political
message. But we both are still talking about *All That Heaven Allows*. On some level of value, then, we both agree, and the film remains alive. Though I hesitate to assign any single quality to great art, inexhaustibility must be one of those qualities. Peter Wollen, citing Frank Kermode, argues this point as well: “Permanence (as a classic, within a canon) means that a work is ‘timeless’ not because its meaning or value is frozen permanently across time, but precisely because it proves itself susceptible to a range of different readings and evaluations across time (and across cultures as well)” (230). Yet as Greenberg remarks, the agreements about which films we value will outlive critical differences. We must recall, then, the humble truth Randall Jarrell admonishes the critic to remember: “At your best you make people see what they might never have seen without you; but they must always forget you in what they see” (94). After all, the work of art will survive—not the critic. I write about films on which I am neither the only word nor the last word, yet I focus my attention and offer my words to honor and preserve their achievement.
LIST OF REFERENCES


*Take Me to Town.* Dir. Douglas Sirk. Universal, 1953. Film.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles R. Newsom grew up in the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee. He first attended the University of Memphis, where he earned a B.A. in philosophy (2006). He then continued his education with an M.A. in cinema studies from The Savannah College of Art and Design (2008). After being introduced to the work of Robert B. Ray, he decided to study film at the University of Florida. He received his Ph.D. in English from UF in May 2012.