

FILMOGRAPHY:

Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud (1985) (also writer) [not distributed]

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (1987) (also writer, producer) buy @ <http://www.illegal-art.org/video/dvd.html>

Poison (1991) (also writer, editor) [on DVD: rentable]

Dottie Gets Spanked (1994) (TV) (also writer) [on DVD: rentable]

Safe (1995) (also writer) [on DVD: rentable]

Velvet Goldmine (1998) (also writer) [on DVD: rentable]

Far From Heaven (2002) (also writer) [on DVD: rentable, TESC library]

RELATED FILMS FOR FURTHER VIEWING:

All That Heaven Allows (1955) Dir. Douglas Sirk (US) [TESC library]

Imitation of Life (1959) Dir. Douglas Sirk (US) [TESC Library]

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1974) Dir. Rainer W. Fassbinder (Germany) [rentable @ Rainy Day, Netflix]

Haynes' *Far From Heaven* borrows elements of story, staging, and genre from the 1950s Hollywood melodramas of director Douglas Sirk, specifically *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) is itself a reinterpretation of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, restaging it in 1970s Munich as a troubled love affair between a petit-bourgeois (lower middle class) white German widow and a younger Moroccan "guest worker." Though the US critical reception of *Far From Heaven* has focused mostly on its connection to Sirk's work, one might argue that Haynes' film is best read through both Sirk's and Fassbinder's work. All three worked with the genre of melodrama in order to address contradictions and hypocrisies rampant in bourgeois life, specifically class and racial privilege and prejudices.

Melodrama has been defined as a dramatic style that uses exaggeration, heightened emotion, and stock characters and plot. Some interpret these aspects of melodrama as indicative of its shallowness, simplemindedness, and crassness (associated with "low" culture, very often gendered "feminine"). Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes engage the form for exactly those reasons (and Haynes says as much below in an excerpt from an interview). They're interested in the way the genre's apparent "shallowness" and refusal of complexity is symptomatic of the very culture they depict/critique in their films. They use a dominant language of popular culture in order to critique it; they use a genre obsessed with surfaces in order to depict and critique the superficial. The exaggeration of emotion and style characteristic of melodrama is of particular interest to Fassbinder and Haynes precisely because of its unreality—they make films not to make windows onto some "reality" (in fact, they reject the idea that film can or should try to do this) but to present in a contained space a set of social contradictions painted in the language of light, characters, sets, props, and dialogue.

Further complicating *Far From Heaven* is the fact that it is also very much a *film about film*—it appropriates Sirk's particular cinematic take on melodrama, which may look to contemporary audiences to be very "dated" or "quaint", even funny. But Haynes insists that his engagement with Sirk's work is very sincere. What do we do with that knowledge? Is this an academic exercise? Do we read *Far From Heaven* as simply an homage to Sirk? What is an "homage", anyway, and what might be productive uses of homages? In what ways does *Far From Heaven* successfully pull Sirk's language out of the 1950s into the 2000s for reconsideration?

>From Interview with Todd Haynes by Amy Kroin, *Salon.com*, Nov 11, 2002

ON HIS USE OF GENRE:

Kroin: [Your 1991 film] "*Poison*" was an exploration of a theme through multiple genres, and "*Far From Heaven*" is a 1950s melodrama filtered through a contemporary sensibility. How does rooting a film in a specific and recognizable genre open up possibilities for you?

Haynes: Genre is definitely something I've always been interested in, because genres bring a series of historical references along with them and, as a result, create expectations in viewers that I like to tap into and slightly derange.

ON MELODRAMA:

Kroin: *Most of the time with film we're manipulated by music in a very insidious way; it cues emotion and tells us how to feel. But here [in "Far From Heaven"] you're not trying to conceal the role music can play, the way it prompts or reflects emotion in this grand, almost operatic way.*

Haynes: The Latin root of melodrama is "melos," which is music plus drama. The very construction of the term implies this intense marriage between what drama and music do to us, whether that's music literally interacting with drama or drama that provokes intense emotional feelings that aren't always articulated or able to be verbalized.

>From *Imitation of Film: Todd Haynes Mimics Melodrama in "Far From Heaven"* by Anthony Kaufman
www.indiewire.com, Nov 2002

indieWire: *I feel that "Far from Heaven" may be one of the biggest, most experimental mainstream films of all time. Do you think it's fair to call it experimental?*

Todd Haynes: Yes, because it refuses a lot of familiar narrative touchstones that makes us feel like we're watching a genuine drama: contemporary codes of naturalism, psychological realizations, redemption, and any sort of heroic victory. So it refuses all of those things and maintains a completely synthetic language that comes directly out of the world of cinema. And yet it's done in complete faith that that language in some way embodies more potential for emotional feeling than anything that mimics what we think of as reality. In other words, people talk about this film in relation to 'sincerity versus irony.' And I think it's different. I think it's about the intense feelings that only come from synthetic film language, that only come from artificial experiences that we know from film, but we nevertheless invest with intense feeling.

iW: *The lighting of the film, of course, is so incredibly vivid. How much were you relying on gels versus getting those lights right in post-production?*

Haynes: It was all in production. We didn't have any money to do any fancy stuff in post. If we had any money, I would have struck one Technicolor print of the movie. I had meticulous conversations with [cinematographer] Ed Lachman and Ed's team. I made color charts for every scene in the movie. There was a spectrum of about 20 different colors for each scene to describe the mood that I was looking for. And then all the departments would gather around my swatches, and then we had tons of stills from Sirk's films to discuss, in regard to framing, color, angles, clothes, sets. We'd sit and talk about colors for days, literally.

iW: *How do you feel that the color creates emotion?*

Haynes: In the Sirk films, you realize how extreme the color palettes were, and how complex they were, in terms of warm and cool spectrums. Many movies today are dumbed down in terms of color – a whole movie will be honeycomb gold colors if it's set in the past or all icy blue if it's a suspense thriller. But these films use complex interactions of warm and cool in every single scene. And emotions are multi-colored. Color, lighting, costume, all the visual elements are supplementing what can't be said in these films.