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Explorations in the Domestic Space:
How Hollywood Made a Home in Film Melodrama

By

Elana R. Katz

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of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

KATZ, ELANA R. Explorations in the Domestic Space:
How Hollywood Made a Home in Film Melodrama

This thesis utilizes the Hollywood domestic melodramas and sex comedies of the 1950s as a lens to discover the evolution of family and home from Eisenhower's America to modern day. As a mode of expression with roots in nineteenth-century theater, melodrama serves as a primary genre for tracking historical and social shifts in twentieth-century American society. However, as the narrative form has evolved over time, what satisfies melodrama is difficult to define as its boundaries have been redrawn. Historians and film scholars examine melodrama through three overarching schools of thought: melodrama as a genre, a mode, or both.

Film melodrama is best illustrated by the 1950s domestic melodramas such as Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956) as well as Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Each of these films focuses on the family and gives the *mise en scène*, everything that is in front of the camera, tremendous weight, a characteristic indicative of film melodrama.

While drama and excess is integral to these domestic melodramas, melodrama as a mode can be created from any narrative genre, including comedy. Such comedies include the Doris Day and Rock Hudson sex comedies of the late 50s and early 60s, most notably *Pillow Talk* (1959). *Pillow Talk* illustrates the centrality of the couple and utilizes the will-they-or-wont-they narrative to illustrate separate, gendered, and extravagant homes, similar to the domestic melodramas. A necessary comparison arises between the domestic melodramas and sex comedies that contain plots driven by aesthetically potent surroundings. Thus, the architecture of

the home is essential, filling in the gaps left by dialog and actors and serving as the foundation for future films about the home.

Lastly, the dramas and comedies of the late 50s and early 60s laid the foundation for contemporary filmmakers during the independent period to explore the home. Films such as Ryan Murphy's *Running with Scissors* (2006), Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), and Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) focus on the domestic space and the pivotal role a home plays in the creation of a family. These contemporary films illustrate a challenge to heteronormative suburban dwelling that was indicative of 1950s middle-class life. Ultimately, as indicated by these contemporary films, it is clear that as the American family has evolved, so too have the spaces they occupy.

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CHAPTER 1

Melodrama in a Historical Context

"Well, the word 'melodrama' has rather lost its meaning nowadays: people tend to lose the 'melos' in it, the music. I am not an American, indeed I came to this folklore of American melodrama from a world crazily removed from it. But I was always fascinated with the kind of picture which is called melodrama, in America."[1]

Melodrama as a literary tradition emerged during the eighteenth century, as a form to depict the nascent bourgeoisie in a class struggle against the aristocracy in Europe. It wasn't until the bourgeoisie asserted their place in society, through revolution, that a power shift occurred. This unique literary tradition originated in the French Revolution and the period that followed, in which Christendom was challenged, As a result of this class struggle, the myth was shattered and Christianity could no longer prevail.[2] It was a time of crisis in which the foundational "truths" of society were questioned. According to Peter Brooks, "Melodrama does not simply represent a "fall" from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision."[3]The loss of the "tragic vision" in melodrama became a tool to reassess the aesthetics of tragedy, a critical aspect of the literary tradition.

As the drama of morality, melodrama consisted of an entirely new set of morals, ideals, and aesthetics.[4] It was a form that provided a model "for the making of meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence." After utilizing this narrative form in the theater and in literature, melodrama, the drama of morality, was evolving into a critical and legitimate cultural form of expression. Once established, melodrama was used to prove the existence of a moral universe,

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[1] Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972), 93.
[2] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 15.
[3] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 15.
[4] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 13.

which ultimately, had been called into question.[5] Yet At the turn of the nineteenth-century, there was a shift in taste and values. According to Christine Gledhill, sentimental fiction gave way to gothic fiction, which depicted narratives with a villain and hero, clear losers and winners as a form to illustrate the triumph of virtue in society.[6] The recognition of virtue is crucial because melodrama presents this relationship in black and white rather than a shade of gray. This change is indicative of what melodrama as a literary tradition aimed to accomplish, a form that ultimately, gave meaning to existence.

However, the shift in taste is not the only change that occurred during the nineteenth-century, a time in which industrialization was also underway, which led to the separation of work from the home. As a result of this great change, a new emphasis was placed on the family as the latest social and emotional order in society.[7] Industrialization gave rise to a crucial expansion of the work force and an onslaught of new opportunity. Nevertheless, class polarization ensued, which illustrated "…integral ethical conditions" that were "made clear and operative."[8] This shift in society, separating work from the home, placed an even greater importance on the domestic space. The effects of industrialization triggered a reassessment of the construction of society and are reflected in melodrama.

Additionally, Brooks argues that, polarization is also a dramatic principle that relies on a "fundamental bipolar contrast and clash," constructed "on either/or in its extreme form as the all-or-nothing."[9] The either/or nature of melodrama is indicative of the separation between work and home during this period. This "fundamental Manichaeism of melodrama" contributed to the consideration of the home as a "moral touchstone" against the modern and ever expanding

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[5] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 20.
[6] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is,* 20.
[7] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 21.
[8] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 36.
[9] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 36.

capitalists. According to Gledhill, "Through such 'moral touchstones' the contradictions of capitalism are negotiated: the apparently powerless, who by their persevering endurance win through, defeat the logic of capitalism, for reward comes through 'wholly noncompetitive virtues and interest.'"'[10] It was during this clash with capitalism that the family found a home in melodrama, a mode comprised of distinct aesthetics.

Though melodrama could be created out of almost any genre, the family became a theme that was enmeshed in this narrative form, especially because of its social and economic dimensions. Founded in a theatrical tradition, family melodrama utilized a level of exaggerated aesthetics, which was shared among other cultural forms. This included, "techniques for 'cinematic' narration, a 'studio'-type system of generic production; and a model of circuit distribution.[11] These characteristics became central to the melodramatic form and the reshaping of the subject matter it began to feature: the family. Gledhill furthers this point, "Nevertheless melodrama's invariable deployment of familial values across the sub-genres attests to a psychic overdetermination in the conjunction of social and personal, charging the idea of home and family with a symbolic potency."[12] Thus, the symbolism of the family became significant and rooted melodrama as a literary tradition.

Thus, with a focus on the family, melodrama depicted the victims of the bourgeoisie rather than the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy. Melodrama serves to reflect how society should be, not how it actually is. This is a notion described by Linda Williams as "dual recognition," meaning "…how things are and how they should be."[13] As narrative form, melodrama "sides with the powerless," in which evil is synonymous with "social power and

[10] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 21.
[11] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 22.
[12] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 21.
[13] Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. by Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 48.

station."[14] This shift in purpose illustrates how hundreds of years later, film melodrama surfaced in Hollywood in the form of family and domestic melodramas. During its height in popularity, not only did film melodrama come to depict middle class families suffering in Eisenhower's America but also, emerged as a prevalent filmic tradition with rich aesthetics founded in nineteenth-century theater.

Despite melodrama's rich theatric traditions, prior to the 1970s, film melodrama was considered lowbrow and possessed little value. As a result, it was not considered a serious narrative form and type of film for film scholars. Due to the problem that melodrama posed, its definition has floated between a mode, genre, and or depending on the era, both. Due to shifts in Hollywood and film studies in the 1960s, the classification of films into genres and use of a genre system was questioned. However, it was during this period that film melodrama as a genre was slowly beginning to take shape as a result of new traditions and shifting values. The neo-Marxist tradition emphasized stylistic excess and aesthetics. As it began to be included in film melodrama, the tradition ultimately paved the way for a reassessment of domestic melodramas and the woman's film. This is especially true for the films of German director Douglas Sirk. Sirk's filmmaking is significant for two reasons. In his interviews with Sirk, Jon Halliday best describes the first reason in which Sirk's "extraordinary insights in human behaviour-sharpened in extreme adversity," led to the ultimate celebration of his work as the father of modern cinematic melodrama.[15] Secondly, Gledhill argues that Sirk's films gave a particular insight into the "neuralgic centre of Eisenhower's America, which through a range of 'distanciation' devices he exposed in a formal and ironic critique."[16] Thus, Sirk's success was less about the melodramatic tradition and more about how Sirk utilized family melodramas to highlight the

[14] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 21.
[15] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 1.
[16] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 7.

contradictions in post-war bourgeois society, through excess and parody. Similarly, Nicholas Ray's iconic domestic melodrama, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) explores teenage rebellion and the disruption of suburban family life. Ray utilized the melodramatic imagination in order to create stylistic excess and aesthetics in his narrative, which correlates to Sirk's unique aesthetic. Thus, through the rediscovery of Sirk in 1970s and shifting values in Hollywood and film studies, domestic melodrama, as a genre, came to be.

According to several film historians and theorists, film melodrama is a genre that "shares thematic and stylistic features that become known as conventions, such as shoot-outs in westerns, betrayal in film noir, or episodes of song and dance in musicals."[17] Bill Nichols argues that genre films shares these conventions but also, allow for individual films to explore each of them in unique ways. While Nichols argues melodrama is in fact a genre, Gledhill disagrees. Like Nichols, Steve Neale aims to settle on a clear definition for melodrama according to the term's use in the American Trade Press. The article focuses on the term "melodrama" and the way it is used in the American media to describe and to categorize films, utilizing primary sources from the period between 1938-60. Ultimately, Neale argues that "melodrama" most directly utilizes "pathos, romance, domesticity, the familial, and the feminine, and therefore its most persistent generic locations were the family melodrama and the woman's film."[18] Although, Neale discusses a wide array of films labeled "melodrama" he does not fail to mention *All That Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind,* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Neale calls *All That Heaven Allows* a "romantic melodrama," because the *Film Daily* described it as having "all the ups-and-downs."[19] While *Written on the Wind* and *Rebel Without a Cause* are considered "domestic" or "family

[17] Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 137.
[18] Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term "Melodrama," *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television,* 32 (2003), 67.
[19] Neale, "Melo Talk," 73.

melodramas," for their treatment in *Film Daily* and *Variety*. *Film Daily* describes *Written on the Wind* as being "fraught with a variety of sensational themes." While *Variety* describes *Rebel Without a Cause* as "strong action picture…a fairly exciting, suspenseful, and provocative, if also far-fetched melodrama of unhappy youth on another delinquency kick." As a result, it is not necessarily romance that triggers popular use of the word "melodrama" but the element of a "feminine" narrative.[20]

Thus, as a narrative form, melodrama is evolutionary and throughout centuries of reappraisal, it has been considered a mode and most recently a genre as it focuses on the family and home. This is clearly defined by Thomas Schatz, who studied the Hollywood family melodrama from the silent era to 1960.[21] Like Nichols, Schatz argues that the family melodrama has the same generic status of a western or gangster film, which was transformed into a distinct style embodied in Sirk's film such as *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*.[22] "Because '50s melodramas centered upon the nuclear unit, and by extension, upon the home within a familiar (usually small-town) American community, both the constellation of characters and the setting are more highly conventionalized than in other genres of integration," argues Schatz.[23] Though Schatz considers the Hollywood family melodrama a genre, it is still a form of integrated film similar to the "gradual development" of romantic and screwball comedy. According to Schatz, "comedy, the early cinema, was a narrative filmic mode, that evolved into the "romantic comedy" and then as a romantic conflicts began to be treated in terms of sociosexual and familial codes, into the screwball comedy genre."[24] Meaning, it is plausible to

[20] Neale, "Melo Talk," 73.
[21] Thomas Schatz, "The Family Melodrama" in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama* ed. by Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 150.
[22] Schatz, "The Family Melodrama" 151.
[23] Schatz, "The Family Melodrama," 153.
[24] Schatz, "The Family Melodrama," 149.

track the evolution of comedy in a similar way to melodrama, which has been "…applied to popular romances that depicted a virtuous individual (usually a woman) or couple (usually lovers) victimized by repressive and inequitable social circumstances, particularly those involving marriage, occupation, and the nuclear family."[25] Both comedy and melodrama serve as all encompassing terms for a vast array of filmmaking surrounding social milieu the and in many ways are inextricably linked in their roots and new forms.

Through the utilization of Schatz's model of the Hollywood family melodrama, concerning conflicts of the middle-class family, John Mercer and Martin Shingler also break down film melodrama. Unlike Brooks, Mercer and Shingler argue that film melodrama is a term that can be applied to an array of films that spans time and location.[26] As well as focusing on the tensions of the family, Mercer and Shingler note that Schatz also includes victimized heroes, conflict between the generations, superficial plots, and obscured social criticism in his model.[27] Aspects of Schatz's model is evident in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), women's film *Stella Dallas* (1937), and domestic melodrama *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), all of which are explored by Mercer and Shingler. All three of the films are considered melodrama due to the presence of the conflict within the family, a victim/hero/ine at the center of the narrative, and the way the action in the film is a bold climax accompanied by music creating a rise and fall in emotion. Though they are fundamentally different types of stories, each meet the characteristics described in the model and thus, the Hollywood family melodrama serves as a distinctive cinematic genre. In terms of defining melodrama, Mercer and Shingler argue that the elusive nature of the definition is primarily due to the fact that melodrama was created from other narrative forms. There is no singular event, ideology, and or person that brought it about. In recent years, what melodrama

[25] Schatz, "The Family Melodrama," 149.
[26] John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 8.
[27] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama,* 10.

means has become redefined and thus, its "boundaries redrawn," leaving ample room for its application to other genres and films.[28]

According to Gledhill, "Melodrama was at best a fragmented generic category and as a pervasive aesthetic mode broke genre boundaries."[29] Gledhill contends that film melodrama is ultimately a mode because it lacks the coherence of genres such as the western, which typically feature cowboys, Indians, bank robberies, and chase. Also, westerns have garnered wider appeal among diverse audiences, unlike melodrama, which was typically screened to predominantly female audience, and often called "women's film."[30] Similarly to Gledhill, Brooks contends that melodrama is a mode but for a different reason, which relates to emotional excess. Brooks considers melodrama a particularly dramatic and excessive narrative form. As a result, it should be considered a mode for its manipulation of emotions and high-intensity moments. Brooks argues, that because "…of high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict that is neither comic nor tragic in persons, structure, intent, effect," melodrama persists throughout culture as a mode.[31] Ultimately, depending on the era, film melodrama has been considered both a genre and a mode. In the case of the domestic melodramas from the late 1950s and early 1960s, it should be considered a genre, which adheres to specific thematic and stylistic features. However, throughout the evolution of melodrama, it is also possible, to consider it a mode, a form that elicits a mood in order to convey a psychological state through the manipulation of *mise en scène*, "those elements of a movie scene that are put in position before the filming actually begins and are employed in certain ways once it does," according to Timothy Corrigan, and Patricia

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[28] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama,* 4.
[29] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is,* 6.
[30] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 6.
[31] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 12.

White.[32] This process of manipulation resulted in excess, which gave critical importance of the scenic elements over the plot.

Inherent to melodrama as a narrative form is excess, which posits the mode as a "radically hyperbolic," and capable of depicting a "bigger-than-life" realm where the moral imagination is expressed.[33] The creation of a space for the moral imagination is crucial to melodrama as a mode, which utilizes excess as evident in the works of playwright Honoré de Balzac and British writer Henry James. Brooks argues that the "melodramatic imagination needs both document and vision, and it is centrally concerned with the extrapolation from one to another," serving as metaphors rather than reality.[34] This important distinction between representation rather than reality becomes increasingly important in Brooks' definition of melodrama as a mode. Brooks argues that melodrama is the "principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era."[35] Brooks recognizes that melodrama the mode can be created out of any emotion and relies on excess. Yet, he does not include comedy. However, he does note that melodrama excess can be utilized in both high and low forms, as long as it is coherent. The low form takes less of a risk, compared to high form, and in turn is less self-conscious which is critical to melodrama as a narrative form.

Similarly to Brooks' understanding of melodrama as a narrative form, Thomas Elsaesser deemed melodrama a "cinematic mode of expression," in the first comprehensive essay about melodrama, published in 1972, entitled "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama."[36] Elsaesser's seminal essay explores not only the role of melodrama in Hollywood

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[32] Timothy Corrigan, and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 362.
[33] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 54.
[34] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 9.
[35] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.
[36] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43.

but also the "place of cinema in the total field of European melodramatic forms."[37] The 70s was a transformative time in film studies as a discipline, when Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism all focused on melodramas. With the inclusion of new and subversive ideas, melodrama slowly came to be understood as a single cinematic form.[38] Elsaesser ultimately argues that American cinema rests within a melodramatic tradition.[39] Due to the pivotal and detailed nature of Elsaesser's essay, it will serve as the foundation and framework for the question that this paper aims to answer: How does the melodramatic imagination serve both drama and comedies? And how does this specific type of film pave the way for contemporary filmmaking during the independent period?

Thus, as a result of the recent emergence of film studies as a serious discipline and melodrama as a whole that this cinematic tradition and mode also became valued. Until Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury," film melodrama that focused on the family and home, remained indefinable. Though he deemed melodrama a "cinematic mode of expression," his influential essay also gave way to the rise of melodrama as a genre, which focused on the family. Elsaesser argues that, "in its dictionary sense…melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects."[40] Music is especially integral to the *mise en scène* in film melodrama because it marks the emotional climaxes and dramatizes the narrative. Putting *melos*, music, into *drame*, drama, creates an orchestration of emotions in excess and drives certain moods of happiness or sorrow throughout the film. Elsaesser furthers this definition by explaining how "it allows melodramatic elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuations, giving expressive colour, and chromatic contrast to the story-line, by

[37] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 8.
[38] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama,* 4.
[39] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 67.
[40] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 50.

orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue."[41] Thus, as "constituents of a system of punctuations," there are certain characteristics of melodramatic style in cinema including, *mise en scène*, authorship, psychoanalytic plot emphasis, color, and affect, that can be applied and seen in several films, spanning a wide variety of genres. These "constituents" allow for flexibility, overlap, connections, and differences to be drawn, affording ample space to unpack film melodrama and its evolution as both a mode and genre, beginning in the 1950s, according to the historical and social shifts in twentieth and twenty-first-century American society.

Elsaesser further explores melodramatic excess in the "Tales of Sound and Fury," and its relation to the aspects of the *mise en scène* in film melodrama. According to Elsaesser, melodrama can be viewed as "a particular form of dramatic *mise en scène*, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones."[42] Thus, the aspects of the *mise en scène* become critically important over the plot. Like Brooks' treatment of the melodramatic imagination echoes Elsaesser's argument regarding the excess of the *mise en scène* in melodrama film. This characterization allows for the addition of a melodic dimension in every form: lighting, staging, décor, acting, close-ups, montage, and camera movement. These melodramatic elements are utilized in the 1950s domestic melodramas by Douglas Sirk, in which he explores the home, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and family relations, such as *Written on the Wind* (1956). Similar attention is given to the *mise en scène* in Nicholas Ray's commentary on teenage delinquency in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which utilizes aspects of the *mise en scène*, particularly stylized décor to further the narrative. What is especially striking is Ray's overt use of the bold and bright color red throughout the narrative to give the film draw attention to several aspects of the *mise en scène*. The following films allow

[41] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 50.
[42] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 51.

for the exploration of melodrama in the home and the family, asking questions such as, what happens when a member of the family disrupts familial harmony? If restoration occurs, what does it look like, both visually and literally?

Elsaesser provides an additional treatment of Ray, as a manipulator of the *mise en scène*, which explores the heroes in the films of Ray. Elsaesser explores Ray as auteur and the themes of love, solitude, violence, and rebellion that were infused into the *mise en scène* of his films, such as *Rebel Without a Cause*. What is most interesting and important is Elsaesser's treatment of Ray's manipulation of the *mise en scène*, as a trained architect who considered homes as function structures with a purpose to serve its inhabitants. Nevertheless, Elsaesser notes Ray's unique use of doors, partitions, and staircases, much like Sirk in *Written on the Wind*, which contribute to the tense and precarious situations within the narrative of his domestic melodramas.[43] Much like Sirk, Ray is a master of manipulated staircases in high-pressurized and melodramatic scenes such as the clash between Jim Stark and his parents in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Elsaesser argues that Ray was "…expressing emotional tensions by transforming them into physical sensations, and the audience is keyed to a conflict by the way equilibrium is withheld and manipulated to clarify a theme or advance the dynamics of the story."[44] This is an iteration of the same ideas regarding an over-stylized *mise en scène*, which is undoubtedly infused with high-intensity emotions felt by the characters. The imbalance of a family is evident in the closed world that surrounds them and as a result, melodrama film is an ideal tool to illustrate this struggle.

Most significant to this question of the domestic melodrama is the home and its persistence throughout Hollywood film. Roger D. McNiven's analyzes Sirk's *All That Heaven*

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[43] Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49.
[44] Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, 50.

Allows and Ray's *Bigger than Life*, in which he argues that the home becomes a "mental state" and less of a structure.[45] McNiven draws conclusions about the home and the emergence of the domestic melodrama with the narratives that surround the middle-class American family life. The respective plots of *Bigger than Life* and *All That Heaven Allows* are driven by aesthetically potent surroundings, as "opposite poles" or "coordinates," which serve as a means to explore sets of interpersonal relationships.[46] As McNiven points out, in domestic melodramas, the *mise en scène*, especially the home, informs and bolsters the plot.

According to McNiven both Sirk and Ray manipulate the foreground and background to serve their narratives differently. Sirk "directs our attention away from the specifically architectural identity of objects in the image towards notions which might conceivably have been conveyed through other means or different architectural objects." On the other hand, Ray who studied as an architect, utilizes the space of the home in a conceptual way, "fulfilling basic functions," which are "dictated by the needs of the society which created it."[47] McNiven concludes that the homes acts not only as the architecture within *All That Heaven Allows* and *Bigger Than Life*, either expressionistically or conceptually, but also connects them to each other, across styles and the domestic melodrama genre. Ultimately, McNiven contends that the way in which domestic melodrama utilizes the geography of the home is an important and unique lens for treating, depicting, and understanding family life.

No longer a disputed genre, in the 1970s melodrama use of stylistic excess was welcomed, as were the film's reliance and utilization of the *mise en scène*. Along with Sirk's 1955's *All That Heaven Allows* and 1956's *Written on the Wind*, the film critics came to accept

[45] Roger D. McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties: The Use of Architecture in Nicholas Ray's "Bigger than Life" and Douglas Sirk's "All That Heaven Allows," *Cine Journal,* 22 (Summer, 1983), 39.
[46] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 38.
[47] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 39.

directors who exploited the *mise en scène*, through color, widescreen, and camera movement. This included Nicholas Ray, director of 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*. As directors and masters of *mise en scène*, Sirk and Ray compliment each other in their filmmaking despite their individualized creation of cinematic space.

So too the *mise en scène* is the focal point of 1950s and 60s sex comedies such as *Pillow Talk (1955), Lover Comeback* (1961), and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), which take place in over-stylized spaces. Hunter's sex comedies focus on the union or reunion of lovers, which visually "have a lightness of touch, capturing perhaps the dizziness of love."[48] Thus, drawing examples from the films of Sirk, Ray, Hunter, this paper will illustrate that as a mode of expression with deep roots in nineteenth-century theater, melodrama serves as a primary genre through which to track historical and social shifts in twentieth-century American society. Thus, it paved the way for films in the independent period. The evolutionary and innovative nature of melodrama illustrates how the drama and comedies of the 1950s, which are deeply intertwined, contributed to this genre in American cinema that is "defined by the central presence of a middle-class family, and that typically this family is presented in conjunction with the home, its permanent dwelling place."[49]

The Hollywood family melodrama films are founded in the theatric tradition of the French, which depicted social upheaval and turmoil, in the form of family relationships, love, and arrange marriage. The social upheaval component of melodrama is especially significant. According to Elsaesser, "Historically, one of the interesting facts about this tradition is that its height of popularity seems to coincide with periods of intense social and ideological crisis."[50] Therefore, it is not surprising that during the 1950s in Hollywood, there was an increase in the

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[48] Tanya Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 9.
[49] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 56.
[50] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 45.

creation of family melodramas. While the 1950s seems like a picturesque period in which life only seemed okay on the surface. Many families dealt with Oedipal themes as well as issues regarding emotional and moral identity. Thus, family melodramas "more often records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape the events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling social milieu." As a result of depicting these issues, family melodramas typically depicted failure rather than triumph. "The world is closed, and the characters are acted upon," argues Elsaesser.[51] Sirk and Ray's films most consistently explore these themes and depict their characters in the closed world of family and domestic melodramas.

Sirk is considered a master of melodrama for his family and domestic melodramas such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Written on the Wind* (1956), but also his life and career before filmmaking in Hollywood is significant. Halliday's *Sirk on Sirk*, is a collection of interviews with Sirk discussing his adolescence, education, career in Germany, exile in America and prolific filmmaking from 1950-9, and life after Hollywood. Despite Sirk's age and failing health during these interviews, the insight gained from this book on his filmmaking and career is essential. Sirk speaks openly and clearly about working in Weimar Theater and his transition to film from 1935-37. Being that Sirk was a man of the political left, living in Nazi Germany was problematic. "And then there was a strange system of what I call 'parallelisms.' You could have a very low political rating and a very high artistic rating at the same time, which is what I had," explained Sirk.[52] Sirk's ability to live a parallel life, as a man of the political left who was secretly disgusted by the Nazis, gave him tremendous insight into contradictions in others. Living in Nazi Germany expedited his decision to immigrate to America with his second wife, and purse filmmaking.

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[51] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 55.
[52] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 35.

While working in Hollywood from 1950-59, Sirk partnered with Columbia and Universal to create films about bourgeois society, a subject he found very interesting due to the ability to illustrate failure and a sense of "no exit." Much like the Euripidean plays that Sirk admires, melodrama offers no way out and "an ugly kind of failure" explains Sirk. Melodrama is significant for it allows for the exploration of American society in this hopeless way.[53] Yet, Sirk was forced to include the happy ending because the American people were not comfortable with acknowledging failure, altering Sirk's overall *modus operandi*. It is the discussion of American melodrama that is most important because he shares his interest in depicting antithesis and *échec*, meaning failure, like in *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*. "But *échec* in the sense both of failure and being blocked is indeed one of the few themes which interest me passionately. Success is not interesting to me," argues Sirk.[54] It is significant that Sirk prefers to use the French word for failure rather than outright saying it. Not only would a translation not do the word justice but it also illustrates film melodrama's connection to theatric melodrama. The only way out for Sirk's characters is through a "happy ending," which he believes is ironic. The "*duex ex machine,"* or the "happy end" forces the audience to focus on the *how* instead of *what,* explains Sirk. Ultimately, Sirk understands that the American people of the 1950s did not want to know that they could fail.[55] Their lives were complacent and comfortable in safe institutions. *Sirk on Sirk* informed my initial understanding of such a complex filmmaker and his important mark on American melodramas.

Like Sirk, Nicholas Ray's upbringing and career prior to Hollywood is significant for it influences his subsequent filmmaking. Bernard Eisenschitz's *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey* and Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel's *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of*

[53] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 95.
[54] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 119.
[55] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 119.

Making Rebel Without a Cause were utilized. Eisenschitz's treatment of Ray begins with his upbringing and subsequent foray into theater and filmmaking. The most interesting and useful chapter is the "Rebel Without a Cause," providing an in-depth understanding of the way the film came to be, Ray's ultimate partnership with Warner Bros, and his stance throughout the entire filmmaking process: on the side of the kids.[56] Eisenschitz argues that *Rebel Without a Cause* was "about the nature of loneliness and love," and the teenage delinquency was simply in the background.[57] His treatment of Ray and *Rebel Without a Cause* is concise but it adequately describes the tumultuous process of making this film that ultimately influenced Hollywood and the American family equally. A similar set of themes and ideas are expressed in Frascella and Weisel's work, though it dives deeper into each aspect of the film, even including a whole chapter on the iconic red jacket, Ray's use of red on red, and his interest in the "psychology of color."[58] What's more is that *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without a Cause* supplies important knowledge regarding some of the personal intricacies of the film, especially Ray's close relationship with Dean, whom he trusted and gave full autonomy over his role. Ultimately, Frascella and Weisel contend that *Rebel Without a Cause* made a monumental impact on Hollywood, art, commerce, and more, becoming "a worldwide cult phenomenon."[59]

Both the films of Sirk and Ray illustrate the significant of the family in Hollywood cinema, satisfying the audience need for the visual preservation and conservation of this institution in American society. In Nick Browne's *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, Linda Williams' article, "Melodrama Revised," contends that there is a new theory

[56] Bernard Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2011), 232.
[57] Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray*, 239.
[58] Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without a Cause* (New York: Touchstone, 2005), 119.
[59] Frascella and Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young,* 288.

regarding melodrama as a dramatic mode, "with its own rhetoric and aesthetic," rather than what has been presented thus far.[60] Williams' understanding of film melodrama as "the typical form of American popular narrative in literature, stage, film, and television" is especially pertinent to the question of the family's connection to this type of narrative form.[61] The best approach to melodrama is not to understand it as a "failed tragedy or inadequate realism," but a melodrama as a significant cultural form. Williams argues "that the sexual, racial and gender problems of American history have found their most powerful expression in melodrama."[62] Thus, melodrama film, a form that has a rich history rooted in nineteenth-century theater but has also, been transformed by realism, is a vast and constantly developing form and should be treated as such. "It is the best example of American culture's (often hypocritical) notion of itself as the locus of innocence and virtue," argues Williams. These notions of "innocence and virtue" are the name features made evident in Brook's treatment of nineteenth-century literature legacy from the melodramatic stage. Film melodrama is especially central to America as the most popular narrative and thus, its study is vital.

In Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning*, she explores film melodrama, specifically the work of Sirk, and its ability to serve as a container of ideology from the period. Klinger's arguments concerning family melodrama provide an additional opportunity to understand an additional argument on Sirk's authorship, the family melodrama, and film meaning. Each chapter of the book tackles these discourses, negotiating between textual features and contextual imperatives, all through the lens of Sirk's filmmaking. Klinger's objective is to "specify the particular ideological functions of a film by examining key moments within its historical

[60] Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," 48.
[61] Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," 46, 50.
[62] Williams, "Melodrama Revisited," 82.

transit."[63] This notion of "historical transit" will become increasingly important as melodrama is utilized to track historical and social shifts in America. Klinger begins her work with an explanation of Sirk's revival, his emergence as an auteur, and the phase that followed, which she denotes as "The Boom Period."[64] Following the reappraisal of Sirk's work, Klinger focuses on Hollywood's "construction of melodrama" as a genre and style, a foundation the mode lacked. *Written on the Wind* is especially significant in this chapter because it "dared to treat unconventional themes in a sensitive, realistic fashion," infused into the mise en scène. [65] Klinger concludes that by considering meaning "as a fluid transaction between cinema and culture has certain implications for aesthetics."[66] Ultimately, Klinger contends that there is no one text but a text with varied ideological functions, constantly evolving through history.

Furthermore, both Sirk and Ray utilize the domestic melodrama to highlight various issues of family relations, ultimately illustrating the contradictions, during the conservative 1950s of Eisenhower's America. Stephanie Coontz explores the American family life from 1900 to 1990, tracking the changes, continuities, and overall shifts within the domestic. Coontz begins the analysis with the traditional image of the family with a discussion of "Leave It to Beaver" and "Ozzie and Harriet," which she boldly claims were not documentaries.[67] According to Coontz, the 1950s family was an invention of the period due to the convening of the economic, social, and political of a generous government and conditions for increased stability. However, despite the profamily conditions and increased prosperity, the 1950s was not the "good old days," that so many believe it was. There is a certain level of romanticization within the last 60 years,

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[63] Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xx.
[64] Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 6.
[65] Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 40.
[66] Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 160.
[67] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 29.

hiding the issues that the family faced including, poverty and a lack of diversity. This rendered American suburban communities, homogenous and "happy," as depicted in the domestic melodramas of Sirk and Ray. Coontz even mentions *Rebel Without a Cause* as a film that "explored the underside of family life," which "expressed fears about youths whose parents had failed them." She goes on to explain that during this period there was "almost obsessive concern with the idea that the mass media had broken down parental control, thus provoking an outburst of "delinquency and youthful viciousness."[68]

Coontz's treatment of family dynamics within the home is especially significant as it directly corresponds to the subject matter of the domestic melodrama. Coontz argues, "For many other children, however, growing up in 1950s families was not so much a matter of being protected from the harsh realities of the outside world as preventing the outside world from learning the harsh realities of family life."[69] This way of life is the focus of Sirk's Hadley and Scott families as well as Ray's Stark family, all of which struggle with death, alcoholism, sex, teenage delinquency, violence, and other forms of power struggles. Both Sirk and Ray present these contradictions: the prevalence of these issues within what should be the "happy" white middle-class family, highlighting the struggle between bad and good.

Other serious issues such as incest or sexual abuse are not overtly shared in these films but are alluded to. Coontz contends that we will never truly know how pervasive incest and sexual abuse was in the 1950s but what we do understand is that "when girls or women reported incidents of such abuse to therapists, they were frequently told that they were "fantasizing" their unconscious Oedipal desires."[70] Elsaesser discusses the presence of Oedipal themes and sexual tensions in domestic melodramas the *Tales of Sound and Fury*, explaining that the 1950s was a

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[68] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 34.
[69] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 34.
[70] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 35.

period in which Hollywood began to tackle Freudian themes in a "'romantic' or gothic guise."[71] Such Oedipal themes are especially prominent in Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, between Judy and her father. The Freudian themes that found a home in domestic melodramas, contributed to melodrama as a mode of excess, supplementing sexual anxiety and other symbolic features of the home.

As a mode of excess, the domestic sphere embodied by a couple extends to comedy, with the romantic and sex comedies of the late '50s and early '60s. Comedy has been a generic tradition in Hollywood cinema since the silent feature films of the 1920s. As a generic tradition, comedy serves "as a world in which situation and events lead to comic, humorous results." According to Nichols, comedic films activate specific emotions, similar to melodrama, such as "light-heartedness, amusement, laughter, frivolity, delight, and release of aggressivity that address conflicts such as decorum vs. indignity and predictability vs. unpredictability."[72] However, while comedy has served as a concrete genre in Hollywood, the romantic comedy has typical served as a sub-genre of comedy, much like domestic melodrama is a sub-genre of film melodrama.

According to Tamar Jeffers McDonald "romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion."[73] McDonald makes it clear that she utilizes the word "light-hearted" versus funny intentionally because she wants to underscore the importance and centrality of tears to the romantic comedy. "Crying frequently occupies an important space in the narratives of the romantic comedy: as an index of the pain a lover feels when apart from the

[71] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 58.
[72] Nichols, *Engaging Cinema*, 251.
[73] Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 9.

beloved, when rejected or lonely," argues McDonald.[74] Much like melodrama, comedy also serves a container of a specific ideology of the time in which it was created. "The ideology of a genre can both reflect and contest the anxieties, assumptions and desires of the specific time and specific agencies making the film," she explains. The ideology of the romantic comedy is most prominently the significance and the centrality of the couple. This couple is most likely to inhabit separate spaces or homes but then come together through marriage, to form a singular home, the physical embodiment of matrimonial harmony. This arch, which is especially central to comedy, is also utilized in domestic melodrama, and thus the narrative forms are inextricably linked.

Despite a difference in name, Sirk and Ray's melodrama offer the family and home in a hysterical and hilarious way and so melodrama can also be considered comedic. Ed Sikov argues that Sirk was able to achieve, "a high-pitched emotional state" that hovers between melodrama and comedy. In this filmic space, hysteria takes over which allows for the unearthing of societies' hidden truths.[75] For Sikov, the "Freudian fifties" include Sirk's films which were filled with the "impossibility of fifties social constructs," in which Sirk's characters would fall apart.[76] McNiven agrees that Sirk's films had an affinity for depicting artificiality, yet his characters became real through their abilities to feel, either through crying or laughing.[77]

While Sikov explores other filmmakers during the 50s including Howard Hughes, Billy Wilder, and Alfred Hitchcock, *Laughing Hysterically* provides a strong basis for understanding other comedies during the period. Sikov argues, "In comedies, such fantasies bear the images of a society reflected in a fun-house mirror. The most dangerous elements of the fantasies may

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[74] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 11.
[75] Ed Sikov. *Laughing Hysterically: American Screen Comedy of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21.
[76] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically*, 21.
[77] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 55.

escape official censure by appearing stupid, exaggerated, and artificial."[78] The artificiality found in comedy speaks to the hardened and oversaturated nature of the film melodramas by Sirk and Ray. In many ways, especially through the *mise en scène*, comedy and film melodrama are fundamentally connected. Despite just how deeply enmeshed these two narrative forms remain; drama did not afford audiences of the period to truly laugh while comedies did.

An additional aspect that film melodrama shares with comedy is the perpetual desire to create a couple, a pattern that "organizes, indeed constitutes, the classical American cinema as a whole."[79] Virginia Wright Wexman argues that Hollywood has an obsession with romantic stories and depicting *habitus*, a term utilized by Pierre Bourdieu. "The constraints surrounding every matrimonial choice are so tremendous and appear in such complex combinations that the individuals involved cannot possibly deal with them consciously, even if they have mastered them on a different level," argues Bourdieu. The unconscious level of social patterning that is referenced by Bourdieu is *habitus*. According to Wexman, Hollywood promotes and supports *habitus* through narrative. "Hollywood film, which has traditionally been addresses primarily to young people, can be seen as an institution that aids in the formation of such a *habitus* by modeling appropriate courtship behavior."[80] Wexman describes further the romantic love that is integral to the marriage theory of creating the couple in Hollywood. Though there is no mention of Sirk or Ray, Wexman's work remains applicable for its dissection of patriarchal marriage and understanding male gender in the 1950s. It also significant for its application to romantic comedies, in order to further understand the boy-meets-girl scenario, the most clear depiction of Hollywood's idealized pair, the heterosexual couple.

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[78] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically,* 31.
[79] Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.
[80] Wexman, *Creating the Couple*, 5.

As a result of film melodrama and its connection to comedy, dramatic narrative based comedies became popular during the late 50s and early 60s. Aside from working with Sirk on many of his melodramas, Ross Hunter, a prominent producer during the 50s, produced three films during this period with Rock Hudson and Doris Day. *Pillow Talk* (1955), *Lover Comeback* (1961), and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964) all depict a couple and their inability to stay together. These films are examples of comedies that have melodramatic elements, especially because they are defined by the *mise en scène*. Much of the action within the films, especially *Pillow Talk*, takes place in overtly masculine and feminine surroundings. Furthermore, *Pillow Talk*'s utilization of the new technology such as split screen allowed for Hudson and Day's characters to sleep and take baths together. Such scenes further the "sophisticated sexual comedy" but also are undoubtedly defined by the unique surroundings.[81] Much like domestic melodramas, Hudson and Day films center on a middle-class couple that is situated in humor settings as a result of trickery or a masquerade. This forced audiences to "break up" rather than "break down."[82]

McDonald's exploration of the sex comedy, a sub-genre of romantic comedy, is the most significant for its dissection of the Rock Hudson and Doris Day trilogy. The name of this sub-genre is slightly misleading as it serves two purposes: to illustrate the boy and girl having sex as well as the boy and girl fighting similar to a battle of the sexes. McDonald argues that the Kinsey Report in 1953, the emergence of Playboy later that year, and the release of *The Moon is Blue*, which contained the word "virgin" in a non-demeaning way, led to the development of sex comedies.[83] The last shift in society that reiterated the presence of the sex comedy was the availability of the contraceptive pill, a reliable birth control. The sex comedy was required to reshape and attune the sub-genre to the changing times because it was "…no longer assumed

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[81] Tom Santopierto, *Considering Doris Day* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2007), 117.
[82] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically,* 21.
[83] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 41.

"nice girls" would insist on marriage before sex."[84] This important shift gave rise to this sub-genre, in which Doris Day made her home.

McDonald utilizes *Pillow Talk* as a case study for a sex comedy but also, to illustrate how a film with an antagonistic relationship between Jan, played by Doris Day, and Brad, played by Rock Hudson, could produce romantic tones. Despite the unique nature of the plot, McDonald makes note of the innovativeness of director Michael Gordon, who employed filmic techniques to allow the main character's visually sleep and bathe together.[85] The use of the split-screen technique speaks to Jan and Brad's eventual coupledom, answering the "will they or won't they stay together?" This allowed for *Pillow Talk* to depict and present sexual ideas, which were considered racy during the period. Ultimately, *Pillow Talk* allowed for this subgenre to evolve and deeply influence the production of additional romantic comedies and drama comedies a like.

Film melodrama surrounding the home from the 1950s and 60s, whether drama or comedy, serve as a framework and lay the foundation for films in the independent period. The social and sexual dilemmas of the home, as a narrative concept, persisted in contemporary films because the themes raised by Sirk, Ray, and Hunter films have not disappeared. What is depicted in their film melodramas is universal and is also evident in contemporary films. Contemporary films during the independent period that are consistent with the themes of Sirk, Ray, and Hunter include comedic dramas that explore family and the domestic such as Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) which tackles divorce, Ryan Murphy's *Running With Scissors* (2006) about losing family and home, and Lisa Cholodenko's exploration of non-heteronormative gender roles in *The Kids are Alright* (2010). With the breakdown of the studio system and absence of the codes, these contemporary films are able to explore social issues that

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[84] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 43.
[85] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 52.

Sirk and Ray never overtly addressed. From questions regarding divorce to homosexuality, these contemporary melodramas have more room for exploration of the home as a space for melodramatic excess. While these themes are important, they are tangential. What is of upmost importance is the permanence of the American family's residence, which can be retraced to the dramas and comedies of the 50s and early 60s.

CHAPTER 2

A Home in Hollywood Film Melodrama: Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray

"Contrary to popular opinion, "Leave it to Beaver" was not a documentary."[1]

Thomas Elsaesser argues, "In a dictionary sense, melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects."[2] In 1930, Warner Bros. released the first short from the new Looney Tunes series: *Sinkin in the Bathtub*, a cartoon that featured Bosko The Talk-Ink Kid, a "masklike face on a black body."[3] Histories on American cartoons praise *Sinkin in the Bathtub,* among the many synchronized sound cartoons during this period along with Disney's *Steamboat Willie*. Though *Sinkin in the Bathtub* creators Hugh Harman and Rudy Ising, hoped to ride "the talkies' wave of popularity," they struggled with the recordings.[4] Eventually, with the partnership of Leon Schlesinger, Hartmen and Ising created Bosko who was able to speak and have music accompany him on his adventures. Due to the presence of music to mark the emotional ups and downs, *Sinkin in the Bathtub* is more than just "dramatic," it is melodramatic. *Sinkin in the Bathtub* puts "melos" into "drama."

Sinkin in the Bathtub opens with Bosko sitting in a bathtub and from that point the cartoon invites the viewer into an imaginative world in which the *mise en scène* is brought to life. "The tub then comes to life and dances gaily, strewing pieces of toilet paper in its path as if they were flowers. The rest of the cartoon is very much in the same vein."[5] The *mise en scène* of Bosko's closed world becomes more than just his surroundings; it becomes animated structures

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[1] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 29.
[2] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 50.
[3] Michael J. Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155, 158.
[4] Cass Warner Sperling, Cork Millner, and Jack Warner, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: The Warner Brothers Story* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publications, 1994), 187.
[5] Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 158.

that further the narrative of *Sinkin in the Bathtub*. Elsaesser asserts that melodrama can be viewed as “a particular form of dramatic *mise en scène*, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones.”[6] Thus, Bosko’s surroundings become characters in the narration. When streams of water from Bosko’s shower evolve into a harp and then the bathtub stands up on two feet and smiles. The *mise en scène* suddenly changes from objects placed in the scene to characters that are amidst the action.[7] Harman and Ising “make stones weep” in *Sinking in the Bathtub* much like master of *mise en scène* Douglas Sirk accomplished in his domestic melodramas: *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*.[8] Harman and Ising infused meaning into the *mise en scène* of *Sinkin in the Bathtub*. Thus, these notions surrounding melodrama extend far beyond the work of Sirk, an expert of melodrama, who eventually found a home in Hollywood.

Considered the “father” of melodrama, Douglas Sirk, lived and worked in Germany since 1879 as Hans Detlef Sierck, where he thrived in Weimar Theater, studied Avant-grade art, and honed his eye for rich aesthetics. [9] Much of what is considered specific to a Sirkian melodrama in Hollywood stemmed from his personal life in Germany and his initial career in theater before emigrating to America. Sirk worked as a “second-line *dramaturg*” at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, a prominent theater in Hamburg during this period.[10] However, it wasn’t until Sirk received the opportunity to direct on a small, low-budget show that his work was looked at critically. Sirk continued to direct intimate plays, which led to his work with playwright Bertol Brecht, and eventually managed a theater, all while Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in the background. “It was a horrible period, exciting in a nerve-wracking way- and very tough on a

[6] Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 51.
[7] See figure 1.
[8] Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 43.
[9] Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1997), 9.
[10] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 9.

man like me, who was responsible for a theatre, and everyone who worked there."[11] As someone of the political left, Sirk was heavily pressured by the Nazi Party to strictly promote the Fatherland in his theater. Despite such restrictions, Eric Rentschler argues that Sirk had a "…cosmopolitan sensibility" and "liminal status," which had "everything to do with a subversive will that could manifest itself despite the ministrations of Goebbels and his minions."[12] Sirk's experiences in the theater coupled with his filmmaking at Universum Film AG, provided him with a deep understanding of the underlying contradictions of people living under fascist oppression and drama as a narrative form.

Furthermore, Sirk's personal life became more complex due to the domination of the Nazi Party, which shaped his personal philosophies and outlooks, all of which are evident in his art. Sirk's first marriage to Lydia Brincken gave him a son named Claus Detlef. Both Brincken and Claus Detlef became members of the Nazi Party though Sirk remained opposed. A few years later they divorced, which created a tremendous rift between Sirk and Brincken. Their relationship was even more exacerbated by Sirk's second wife, Hilde Jary, a Jew, due to the anti-Semitic fervor in Nazi Germany. Later, Brincken enrolled Claus Detlef in Hitler Youth, which launched his career as a leading child actor for the Nazis. "Once he was working on a set about 150 yards away from me at Ufa but I wasn't allowed to talk to him, explains Sirk."[13] The cinema became the only opportunity for Sirk to see his son, who his wife hid from him. As a prominent Nazi, Claus Detlef was drafted in the army and was later killed on the Russian front in the spring of 1944. Sirk was devastated after losing his son and so he channeled his frustrations into a film, entitled, *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, which ultimately, propelled his decision to escape

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[11] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 24.
[12] Eric Rentschler, "Douglas Sirk Revisited: The Limits and Possibilities of Artistic Agency," *New German Critique* 95 (2005), 151.
[13] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 53.

Nazi Germany. Upon immigrating to America in 1940, Sirk was advised to change his name, marking the beginning of a significant career at Columbia and then Universal Studios in Hollywood.[14] This is where Sirk was able to focus on familiar themes such as breakdown and failure of relationships in his filmmaking. Ultimately, Sirk is the artist of impossible America, which in more ways than one mirrored the impossible Germany he left. As a foreigner who had lived under fascism, Sirk's point of view became significant, as he was able to see through the American dream of the 1950s.

As previously stated, Sirk's work in America was not been celebrated or at the very least understood critically until the 1970s when he was a reappraised in film studies and Hollywood. Yet even in the 1950s, Sirk enjoyed some critical acclaim abroad, notably in France where André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, founded the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and reinvented film criticism and theory. This magazine was an integral part of the La Nouvelle Vague, the French New Wave, due to political, economic, and social shifts in France: "The New Wave cinema was shaped by forces as abstract as the growth of film criticism that stressed *mise en scéne* over thematics and as concrete as technological innovations in motion-picture cameras and sound recorders."[15] Along with the heightened appreciation of *mise en scéne* came the creation of the auteur theory, "the discovery of underlying themes in different genres by the same director" which "became evidence that some studio directors qualified as artists: they pursued personal occupations and developed an individual style."[16] Thus, one could attribute to the auteur, continuity of style, and including characteristics use of *mise en scene*. Ultimately, their goal was to reclaim world cinema through the creation of a critical discourse,

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[14] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 96-97.
[15] Richard John Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2002), 3.
[16] Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 151.

and "to champion a wider brand of film criticism that allowed serious critical attention to Hollywood as well as to all other vibrant modes of film production."[17] The appearance of *Cahiers du Cinéma* brought Sirk initial critical acclaim of Sirk's filmmaking both with Universum Film AG and Universal, which featured German expressionism and theatrical *mise en scéne*.

Sirk's melodramas are rooted in German expressionism; a part of the melodramatic tradition. What is especially significant is how Sirk utilized such a tradition, aesthetically, to highlight the contradictions of his world, through excess and parody. According to Rentschler, Sirk's filmmaking "proved instrumental in constructing and promulgating the influential notion of a formally subversive and politically transgressive text that could emerge within the Hollywood studio system."[18] Sirk's rich career in theater and film paved the way for his subsequent career in Hollywood, in which he focused on the *mise en scene*. According to Robert P. Kolker, "A focus on *mise en scéne* permitted an emphasis upon the elements of film that made it distinct from other narrative forms and was used to explain how images, through composition, camera movement, lighting, focus, and colour, generate narrative event and guide our perception through a film."[19] Much like Warner Bros.'s *Sinkin' in the Bathtub*, Sirk's domestic melodramas of the 1950s are and should be considered "a particular form of dramatic *mise en scene*," in which "Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic patterns…."[20] Such "complex aesthetic patterns" are common and indicative of Sirkian technique and style in his domestic melodramas, such as 1955's *All That Heaven Allows* and 1956's

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[17] Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, 28.
[18] Rentschler, "Douglas Sirk Revisited: The Limits and Possibilities of Artistic Agency," 152.
[19] John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15.
[20] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 51.

Written in the Wind. Both of which have been noted by *Cahiers du Cinéma* for Sirk's "confident *mise en scene* and his studied self-reflexivity…."[21]

Following the success of Sirk's 1954 *Magnificent Obsession,* a romantic melodrama starring Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson, Universal welcomed Sirk, and producer Ross Hunter, back to the big screen to create *All That Heaven Allows* in 1955.[22] Originally a book by Edna and Harry Lee, *All That Heaven Allows* made a seamless transition into a screenplay by Peg Fenwick. The melodrama centers on two distinct worlds inhabited by affluent widow and mother Cary Scott (Wyman) who lives in Stoningham, a wealthy town with a country club, and Hudson as a young yet intelligent landscape designer Ron Kirby (Hudson), who lives in the woods similar to Thoreau's Walden Pond. This romantic melodrama hinges on a narrative of sexual and social re-discovery in a restrictive and class-conscious world. "Because in melodrama it's of advantage to have one immovable character against which you can put your more split ones. Because your audience needs-or likes- to have a character in the movie they can identify themselves with: naturally, the steadfast one, not to be moved," explains Sirk.[23] The dialectical relationship between self-conscious Cary and self-assured Ron, members of distinct and separate classes, serves as the driving force in the narrative and a tool for the discovery of happiness in *All That Heaven Allows*.

According to John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *All That Heaven Allows* is considered the first film in which Sirk was "able to fully realize the potential for social critiques afforded by what some critics have seen as the banal scripts offered to him by Universal."[24] Additional sources of tension in *All That Heaven Allows* stem from Cary's two college aged children and the

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[21] Rentschler, "Douglas Sirk Revisited: The Limits and Possibilities of Artistic Agency," 151.
[22] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 105-107.
[23] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 112.
[24] John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 7.

town's elite. Her children's and the community's disapproval of Cary's relationship with Ron undermines Cary's sense of security, creating an imbalance in her otherwise seemingly picturesque life. This argument is especially apparent during the country club scene in which Cary brings Ron with her. Their presence makes the whole town uncomfortable and a fight over Cary ensues. Sirk explains that the critics questioned this scene, mostly because "America then was feeling safe and sure of herself, a society primly sheltering its comfortable achievements and institutions."[25] Even Sirk comments on this facet of the film and its relation to the film's title: "I just put this title there like a cup of tea, following Brecht's recipe. The studio loved this title, they thought it meant you could have everything you wanted. I meant it exactly the other way around. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy."[26] Claire Johnston argues that Sirk was able to generate a criticism in the dominant ideology of Hollywood film. "This internal criticism facilitates a process of denaturalisation: behind the film's apparent coherence there exists an 'internal tension' so that the ideology no longer has an independent existence but is 'presented' by the film," argues Johnston.[27] *All That Heaven Allows* is infused with a criticism and thus, can make the ideology at work explicit to the audience. His films are able to crack open the surface, forcing the criticism to come to the forefront. Sirk instilled *All That Heaven Allows* with his understanding of the contradictions from his past, living in Nazi Germany, in order to expose the fraught problematic nature of 1950s suburban bourgeois life.

Like other domestic melodramas by Sirk, a deep sense of guilt and responsibility plagues the characters in *All That Heaven Allows*, especially Cary and Ron. Sirk's melodramas "displace," middle class American society, "it into quite different patterns, juxtaposing stereotyped

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[25] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 113.
[26] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 140.
[27] Claire Johnston, "Dorothy Arzner: Critical Strategies," in *Feminism & Film*, ed. by E.Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 142.

situations in strange configurations, provoking clashes and ruptures…."[28] These "clashes and ruptures" are noteworthy because Sirk appreciated "*échec*." In *All That Heaven Allows*, feelings of guilt and responsibility create and depict *échec*. Cary is not satisfied by her dull country club life in Stoningham and as a result, she believes she is failing. Despite this, Cary maintains her place in the community and their family home, for the sake of her children as well as the memory of her husband. She struggles to take control of her home, community, and life until she realizes that there is another way besides they way she as always known. This is the unique role Ron fulfills, as he fills the void in her heart that was created by her class-conscious bourgeois children, home, and community challenge their love and relationship.

The narrative of *All That Heaven Allows* is significant and drives the film forward, forcing the "immovable" character to interact and make decisions against a "split one," yet, much of the film and most melodramas in American cinema, place the emphasis on the "material aspects."[29] In film melodrama, more weight is given to the spatial orchestration, both musical and verbal, to cement the drama and bolster the director's aesthetic, which is often founded in criticism. Thus, the literary aspects of the script are not nearly as important in the creation of a melodramatic world. The story-value of melodrama only becomes useful when it is energized by "discontinuities" that must act "as the release-mechanisms for "switches" between various levels of discourse as well as for different modes of involvement (suspense, empathy, thrill, tears)."[30]

The action of *All That Heaven Allows* is internal, both for the characters and spatially, which creates a feeling of near explosion and combustion, especially evident in the way Sirk makes the space inside the home analogous to psychological space. According to Elsaesser, the melodramas of 40s and 50s, "…is perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of

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[28] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 60.
[29] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 112.
[30] Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 101.

cinematic signification that the American cinema has ever produced, because of the restricted scope for external action determined by the subject, and because everything as Sirk said, happens "inside."[31] Sirk's characters experience feelings of claustrophobia, which is typified by their surroundings, such as Cary's perfectly manicured lawn, immaculate home, and an abundance of material that crushes her. Her stylized home illustrates the power of consumer culture during the 1950s. Elsaesser argues that in melodrama "An acute sense of claustrophobia in décor and locale translates itself into a restless, and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and behavior of the protagonists…."[32] Sirk capitalizes on feelings of claustrophobia and thus, the construction of the home and the way it is inhabited, rather than those who inhabit it, are of extreme importance in understanding how *All That Heaven Allows* depicts family life in Eisenhower's America.

Along with Cary's claustrophobia, Sirk conveys her *échec in All That Heaven Allows*, through color, costumes, and camera angles. Sirk's use of red, a primary color, in his character's costumes, highlights the struggling and "more split character's" emotions.[33] The color red in *All That Heaven Allows* is repeatedly used to heighten the emotional undertones of scenes, complicate the space and world, and lastly to further the emotional curve of a melodramatic narrative. With color Sirk is able to "complicate the realist narrative space, interfere with the emotional trajectory of melodrama, and trouble the attention to the narrative that is important to the conventions of color film practice."[34] One of the most bold and literal uses of the color red is in the characters' costumes, notably Cary's dress, when she feels sexually rediscovered after a conversation with Ron in her front yard. Prior to her conversation with Ron, Cary wears grey and

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[31] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 52.
[32] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 53.
[33] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 112.
[34] Peter Lehman, *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 68.

blue tones but eventually changes into red. Sirk illustrates her sexual rediscovery visually through a shift in color. The color red is associated with her growth as a woman. Even Kay, her daughter, comments on the dress, “It’s about time you wore something else besides that old black velvet.” Cary typically sports structured, dull blue-gray ensembles with oversized coats during the day and black velvet dresses during the evening, all of which makes her seem in permanent mourning of her late husband. The blue-gray color symbolizes being reserved, lonely, and melancholic. On the other hand, the color red is a symbol of her sexual identity and newfound autonomy as a woman, in her home and community.

Sirk repeatedly utilizes filters in order to cast characters in various shades of red and blue in order to highlight their complex emotional trajectories throughout the narrative. In a scene in Cary’s bedroom, Sirk shines red lights through her window during a conversation about Ron with her daughter, Kay. Unfortunately for Cary, Kay rejects her. Along with the color red, Sirk also employs a shade of blue on Cary to illustrate this tension and Cary’s consequent indecision regarding the relationship as a result of all the pressure.[35] The various shades of blue and red also emphasizes the decision Cary believes she needs to make, especially which world she should inhabit: a red, warm life with Ron or a blue and cold existence as a widow in Stoningham. This question is reiterated when Cary is gifted with a brand new television from her children just as they announce that they are both moving out. The children reassure Cary that she shouldn’t worry because she has all the company she could ever need right in the television. Even the salesman says, “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.” Prior to this scene, Cary decided to stop seeing Ron to allow for more time with her children. While she decided to sacrifice her happiness for what she believed to be her family responsibility, her children had

[35] See figure 2.

other ideas. Yet when, Sirk cuts to the brand new television screen, Cary can see her own unhappy and lonely reflection in a clear shade of red, marking her decision to return to Ron. Despite “life’s parade at her fingertips,” Cary’s horrified face in the square shape of the television screen, illustrating just how confined and closed the world is in *All That Heaven Allows*.[36]

The color red ties Cary to Ron, in which his character sustains the color throughout *All That Heaven Allows*, both in his dress and the spaces he inhabits, such as his home and his car. Cary comes across Ron working in her yard wearing a warm red flannel shirt set in front of a red and wood car. The shade of red is deeper yet more subdued than the red Cary was wearing. Initially, Ron’s red reflects his profession as a landscape designer and connection to the outdoors. At the start of the film, Ron gifts Cary with golden flowers, a symbol of his occupation but also the way he leads his life in the secluded woods. Later, Ron invites Cary to a party at the woodland home of his friends, Mick and Alida Anderson. Ron is sporting the same red flannel shirt but is set off by other hints of red such as Alida’s red dress, a bowl of red apples, a set of red leather books that line the fireplace, and warm wooden furniture. It is in this scene that the color red takes on a new and different meaning, one that is rooted in the non-traditional lifestyle that Ron and his friends pursue. The color red in this scene also illustrates that there is a place for love. Alida shares this unique way of life to Cary, “You see, Ron's security comes from inside himself. And nothing can ever take it away from him. Ron absolutely refuses to let unimportant things become important and that's what Mick and I were doing.” Ron’s association with the color red is a manifestation of his non-normative life. Most importantly, he is able to pass it along to those he meets. Thus, Ron transfers the color red to Cary which is then made visible by

[36] See figure 3.

the way she enjoys herself at the Anderson home, singing and dancing alongside people who live less conflicted and claustrophobic lives than those in Stoningham.

Much like *All That Heaven Allows*, Sirk's 1956 *Written on the Wind* is a domestic melodrama, which depicts the family to highlight the presence of power and excess that can lead to addiction and death. The film melodrama is based on Robert Wilder's 1945 novel of the same name, which is loosely based on a true story. George Zuckerman adapted Wilder's novel for the screen and worked with Sirk, Universal's "house director" at the time, in order to make *Written on the Wind* come to life.[37] Another crucial aspect of this filmmaking process was the partnership with Albert Zugsmith, who was considered a rising pioneer.[38] He had just produced Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, providing Sirk with an opportunity to work outside of Universal's studio. According to Laura Mulvey, this allowed for *Written on the Wind* to depict the "adult" scenes, which Universal, still a part of the old ways of the studio system, would have restricted.[39] It was also at a point in which the studios were losing to television and realized the power of depicting sex on screen. It became clear to Universal that sex did sell. This development coupled with loose adherence to the Hays Code or production code, which once restricted the depiction of sex in the movies, allowed for *Written on the Wind* to depict what Zugsmith and Sirk both hoped for.[40]

According to Mercer and Shingler, Sirk explained *Written on the Wind* "…as a piece of social criticism, of the rich and the spoiled and of the American family."[41] Sirk had a different purpose with *Written and the Wind* than he did while creating *All That Heaven Allows*. It is

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[37] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 130.
[38] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 129.
[39] Laura Mulvey, "Written on the Wind," Criterion Collection, accessed December 14, 2013, http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/97-written-on-the-wind.
[40] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 43.
[41] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 45.

mostly apparent in the ways this film takes a critical approach to foundations of upper class American society. "It's a different stratum of society in *All That Heaven Allows*, still untouched by any lengthening shadows of doubt. Here in *Written on the Wind*, a condition of life is being portrayed and, in many respects, anticipated, which is not unlike today's decaying and crumbling American society."[42] Told through a flashback, *Written on the Wind* shares the story of the wealthy Hadley family, who live in Texas. Their family is broken by power, which manifests in addictions such as alcohol, money, sex, and anger. Even the flashback at the start of the film is of extreme importance for Sirk because it serves the emotional curves and fractured nature of melodrama. Consequently, "The audience is forced to turn its attention to the *how* instead of the *what*- to structure instead of plot, to variations of a theme, to deviations from it, instead of the theme itself," explains Sirk.[43] The idea of "no exit" and being confronted with how the story ends at the onset of the film satisfies Sirk's desire to illustrate *échec* in film melodrama

Much like *All That Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind* depicts the decomposition of the American family. The patriarch, Jasper Hadley, played by Robert Keith, is the head of the Hadley oil empire but struggles with his relationships, especially with his son Kyle Hadley, played by Robert Stack. Kyle finds himself in a love triangle with life-long friend Mitch, played by Rock Hudson, and Lucy Moore, played by Lauren Bacall. The tension from the love triangle is exacerbated by Jasper's preference for Mitch, who he feels is a better heir to the oil empire, and Kyle's sister, Marylee Hadley, played by Dorothy Malone, who is in love with Mitch. However, Marylee's feelings are unrequited and so she focuses her attention on other men, and becomes addicted to sex. While her brother Kyle, argues that Marylee has always been overly sexual, their father's addictions to power and wealth created a family who are preoccupied in the

[42] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 130.
[43] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 136.

pursuit of vices. As a result of these vices, Robin Wood argues that the characters in *Written on the Wind* experience a loss of innocence, in which they long for an earlier time in which life was simpler. "The nostalgic yearning for innocence has a markedly pastoral flavor: the characters, among their oil pumps and scarlet sports cars, long to return to "the river," where they were happy (or they think they were)."[44] Sirk draws attention to the ways in which this family experiences *échec* and how it impacts their relationships. Ultimately, the American dream failed the Hadley family.

Furthermore, the presence of several addictions contributes to the tumultuous and violent feelings in *Written on the Wind*, in which Sirk infuses into the *mise en scène*, especially with color, décor, and locale. As in *All That Heaven Allows*, hard colors set off the struggles of key characters, their vices, and addictions. According to Mulvey, Sirk utilizes the *mise en scène* as a response or a solution to the failures of its core characters. "The film responds to these failures and frustrations by crowding the screen with answering images from the overtly Freudian to flamboyantly cinematic lighting, color and décor."[45] These aspects are typical of Sirkian melodramas but come to the forefront in this film, rendering the actors almost insignificant.

Much like Mulvey, Elsaesser notes the Freudian tensions in *Written on the Wind*, and the place his theories had in Hollywood filmmaking during the post-war period in which Sirk is working. In a Florida hotel suite, where Kyle hopes to court Lucy with a series of unwanted gifts, Sirk creates a visually claustrophobic space with highly saturated color and excess in material, indicative of melodramatic excess. Elsaesser argues that "He is making a direct comment on the Hollywood stylistic technique that 'creates' a character out of the elements of the décor, and that prefers actors who can provide as blank a facial surface and as little of a personality as

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[44] Robin Wood, "Written on the Wind," in *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* ed. by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 22.
[45] Mulvey, "Written on the Wind,"://www.criterion.com/current/posts/97-written-on-the-wind.

possible."[46] This is what Elsaesser considers a "conscious use of style as meaning" as part of a condition of a "modernist sensibility working in popular culture." Due to Kyle and Lucy's lack of external action, Sirk manipulates the *mise en scène* to create "an environment of ready-made symbolism."[47] This trap in a symbolic and stylized room is indicative of the Sirk aesthetic.

As visualized in the hotel suite, Sirk utilizes Kyle as a tool for overinvestment in the *mise en scène* but also, changing views of sex during this period. According to Barbara Klinger, notions regarding sex during the 1950s shifted and are reflected in *Written on the Wind*. "Middle-class couples headed toward marriage, conversant with Freud and aware of the availability of contraception, placed a great deal of emphasis on sex as a marker of well-being at the same time as they separated its pleasurable from its procreative dimension."[48] The emphasis on sex is especially apparent in the love triangle. Both Kyle and Mitch have their chance to win Lucy. However, Kyle is infertile and thus, he overwhelms her with unwanted luxurious gifts to compensate for his lacking. Also, he believes his relationship with Lucy is a failure because he cannot continue the Hadley line. Kyle satisfies what Klinger contends is a concern for American society during this period as the "homosexual" while Mitch is depicted as the "breadwinner." Due to Mitch's close relationship with Jasper and strong work ethic, he is Kyle's foil and threatens Kyle's manhood. Klinger argues that both types were under social pressure after the war, "the definition of gender roles attained paramount importance, particularly because of their implicit affiliation with social stability."[49]

Elsaesser furthers Klinger's argument about strained gender roles, especially in domestic melodramas in which Freudian themes were challenged through what seemed like a "romantic

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[46] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 54.
[47] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 54.
[48] Barbara, Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 52.
[49] Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, 112.

guise."[50] Rather than overtly including Freud in the narrative, melodrama does in surreptitiously, weaving it into the strained relationships of the characters. "However, there is a certain refinement in the melodrama-it becomes part of the composition of the frame, more subliminally and unobtrusively transmitted to the spectator," argues Elsaesser.[51] He then points to the scene in which Lucy tells Kyle she is pregnant, though he thinks it is Mitch's baby. Sirk creates a visually claustrophobic scene in which he "squeezes himself into the frame of the half-open window, every word his wife say to him bringing torment to his lacerated soul and racked body."[52] Rather than an overt reference to Freud, Sirk infuses his theories into Kyle's character and it becomes a part of the frame.

As well as Freudian themes, cinematic lighting, color, and décor is of extreme importance in order to convey the hardened and tense feeling Sirk wished to create in *Written on the Wind*. As in *All That Heaven Allows*, Sirk color-codes his characters, especially Lucy who alternates the color of her clothes depending on the man she loves. While she is being courted and then in a relationship with Kyle, she sports blue-grey suits, similar to those of Cary, as she falls in love with Mitch, her clothes start to resemble the brown shades that he wears. This is especially apparent when Mitch takes Lucy to the doctor's office and she is sporting a brown clutch and fur coat, which mirrors Mitch's brown suit.[53] This shift is synonymous with the emotional ups-and-downs of melodrama but functions exceptionally well in the context of *Written on the Wind* due to the presence of the love triangle. In many ways, Lucy is "awoken" not to her sexuality but to the reality of who Kyle and the rest of the Hadley family are: broken and addicted people, struggling to function as a unit.

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[50] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 58.
[51] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 59.
[52] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 59.
[53] See figure 4.

Unlike Lucy, *Written on the Wind*'s most provocative character, Marylee, is depicted in bold colors, such as bright pink, as evident in the dress she wears at the bar and especially the red nightgown and robe she wears during the dance scene.[54] Mulvey argues that Marylee is "explosive" and so her costumes reflect her behavior. This notion comes to the forefront when Sirk utilizes dark lighting, crosscutting, and long camera angles to suggest that Marylee indirectly kills her father as she dances to the 1930s hit *Temptation*. Jasper is seen slowly walking up the grand stairs in the Hadley Mansion as Marylee dances away in her diaphanous red negligee, and with one blast from the music that fills the empty home, Jasper collapses and falls to his death. This scene serves a culmination of emotions drawn upon as well as the unhealthy excess, which haunts their house. There is no escape for the Hadley family as indicated in their relationships, which are stricken with addictions to sex, power, heart attack, and guns, all evoked and symbolized by the color red.

Lastly, the Hadley Mansion is of extreme importance as the architectural embodiment of success, which depicts *échec*, in *Written on the Wind.* It serves as the space for which the internal action manifests in the melodramatic narrative. Wood argues that Sirk has a certain level of "extremeness" and that some of his effects are a result of "a desire to break the audience's absorption in the narrative and force it to conscious awareness."[55] This argument is connected to Sirk's experience in the theater and familiarity with melodrama, in which this process of awareness is heightened, as the performance is live. Melodramatic excess is critical to the construction of the *mise en scène* in the narrative form.

Elsaesser also draws on examples from the *mise en scène* in *Written on the Wind*, illustrating the importance of Sirk's "visual metaphors," which include all aspects of the Hadley

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[54] See figure 5.
[55] Wood, "Written on the Wind," 22.

estate. Most notably, Elsaesser notes Kyle's yellow sports car, which starkly contrasts from the graveled driveway in front of the Hadley mansion with its gleaming white Doric columns. This image creates such

> "…a powerful piece of American iconography, especially when taken in a plunging high-angle shot, but the contrary associations of imperial splendour and vulgar materials create a tension of correspondences and dissimilarities in the same image, which perfectly crytallises the decadent affluence and melancholic energy that give the film its uncanny fascination."[56]

Sirk creates a scene that clashes both literally and visually. This is the recipe for the particular échec of the wealthy. The Hadley mansion, in all its white, almost sterile, beauty, is filled with emotional cripples and a broken family. Sirk utilizes such a grandiose structure, which on the surface stands tall and proud, when it is really a symbol of emptiness, The Hadley mansion serves as a beautiful metaphor for the demise of the American dream through Sirk's manipulation of the *mise en scène* in *Written on the Wind*.

The same years Sirk was working on his family melodramas, Nicholas Ray directed a domestic melodrama about teenage rebellion, *Rebel Without a Cause*, which in many ways reflected Ray's adolescence and personal experiences. Ray was born Raymond Nicholas Kienzle in Galesville, Wisconsin and grew up in La Crosse Wisconsin. His family was constantly on the verge of eruption. "The household was filled with tension. Ray's parents slept in separate bedrooms, and after dinner Raymond Sr. often disappeared, prowling in a city that despite Prohibition was flush with speakeasies and saloons," explains Patrick McGilligan.[57] Eventually, Ray lost his father to alcoholism and hated him for dying too soon.[58] Ray's mother, Lena Kienzle, deeply influenced his upbringing especially after Raymond Sr. had died. As a child, Ray adopted his mother's calm and gentle being and in turn it made him a nice boy. Even

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[56] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 53.
[57]Patrick McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director* (New York: It Books, 2011), 7.
[58] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 8.

in Hollywood, Ray was known for being nice and as well as a hard worker.[59] Nevertheless, Ray sought the balance of an intact family and struggled throughout his childhood with ideas about hate and love and most of all loss and need. These experiences are folded into his work, shaping his perception of the American family and can easily be seen in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Additionally, living amongst such polarized figures within his home, his father who was hard and stricken with addiction and his mother with her gentle and soft demeanor, primed Ray to be a very unique person. He shared qualities with both parents but ultimately his father's addiction to alcohol took over. In 1928, Lena sent Ray to live with her sister, Ruth and her husband in Chicago where she hoped Ray would find security, even though it became the background for further mischief. "I got kicked out of high school seventeen times," the director liked to brag. "I'd been a member of a youth gang," he boasted on another occasion, and "the president of an illegal fraternity in high school."[60] Ray's life soon began to resemble one of his most beloved characters, Jim Stark of *Rebel Without a Cause*. Despite getting into trouble and his mediocre grades, Ray continued pursuing his hobbies, which included theater, radio, and debate. He dreamed of studying at the University of Chicago and eventually it came to fruition after two years at La Crosse State Teachers College. Ray's time at the University of Chicago was pivotal; he pursued the arts under the guidance of Thornton Wilder. However, he soon left and set out for other artistic pursuits.

Eventually, Ray had the opportunity to study under prominent architect Frank Lloyd Wright who had began a "communal living, learning, and arts appreciation" at his Taliesin home in Spring Green Wisconsin.[61] During this period, Taliesin was a "budding temple of the arts, where writers, poets, dancers, and artists would mingle and cross-fertilize their ideas and

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[59] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 10.
[60] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 11.
[61] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 31.

talents."[62] Taliesen proved to the exact space Ray needed to cultivate his artistic leanings especially in their playhouse where they screened films and staged shows. Ultimately, the Fellowship was "the kind of surrogate family he sought to find and replicate in various ways throughout his life. The whirlwind of action in Spring Green was the type that would always absorb him in years to come, distracting him from his inner fears and doubts," argues McGilligan.[63] In many ways Ray sought communities whether in his rebellion or in the arts to create a "pseudo-family" in which "their unity corroded by the individual needs of multiple members."[64] Ray left his community in Taliesin after he experienced creative differences with Wright and soon after found another group of artists living in New York City.

From 1935 to 1940, Ray lived and worked in the East Village of New York City alongside other artists who were working in the Federal Works Progress Administration Theatre of Action, as part of the radical theater movement in America during this period.[65] During the late 1920s, many theaters and troupes began to promote left-wing drama, of them included the New Playwrights Theatre, the Theatre Union, and the Group Theatre. By 1935, Theater of Action was formed after a group of Theatre Collective and Workers Laboratory Theater Loyalists came together. They were just one of many troupes that created "agitprop," agitation and propaganda drama, and sought the "advancing with true Marxist fervor toward the establishment of a Theater of Left."[66] Ray had grown accustomed to artistic communal living and McGilligan argues that "If Taliesin was Ray's true college, the Theatre of Action was his graduate program. Everything the members did was for the betterment of art, society, and

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[62] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 32.
[63] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 40.
[64] Roger D. McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties: The Use of Architecture in Nicholas Ray's "Bigger than Life" and Douglas Sirk's "All That Heaven Allows," *Cine Journal,* 22 (Summer, 1983), 40.
[65] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 49.
[66] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 49.

themselves."[67] Furthermore, it was the relationships formed through this community, which continued to sharpen and render Ray the director he became in Hollywood, including budding actor, director, and friend, Elia Kazan. Kazan served as a great resource to Ray and the Theater of Action. As a member of the Group Theatre, Kazan would often treat the Theater of Action as his "personal acting company."[68] The latter proved to be of extreme importance for Ray, in which Kazan asked his actors to find parts of themselves in their characters, and to "channel their personal traumatic backgrounds into a characterization in order to heighten the emotionalism of a performance."[69] Leading up to his career in Hollywood, it is increasingly clear how Ray created and embodied his art, through high-intensity emotions, isolation, and deviance.

After an invitation from Kazan to join him on his first film *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in 1945, Ray found himself working and living in Hollywood, alongside colleagues from the East Coast. Among them was John Houseman who gave Ray work as an assistant director and ultimately helped him establish a career in Hollywood. His debut film *They Live By Night*, premiered in 1948. It was followed by years of successful films: *In a Lonely Place* in 1950, *Johnny Guitar* in 1954, *Rebel Without a Cause* in 1955, *Bigger Than Life* in 1956, and *Party Girl* in 1958. Most significant is Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, a domestic melodrama revered by Jean-Luc Godard of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Godard explains that, "After seeing *Johnny Guitar* or *Rebel Without a Cause*, one cannot but feel that here is something which exists only in the cinema, which would be nothing in a novel, the stage or anywhere else, but which becomes fantastically beautiful on the screen."[70] Godard's words so aptly describe the psychological

[67] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 52.
[68] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 53.
[69] McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 54.
[70] Jean-Luc Godard, 'Nothing but Cinema' in 'Rien que la cinema, *Cahiers du Cinéma 68,* (1957) in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the 1950s: Neo-realism, Hollywood, New Wave ed. by Jim Hillier (New York: British Film Institute, 1985), 13.

domestic melodrama that is *Rebel Without a Cause*, wrought with familial and homoerotic tensions, many of which Ray borrowed from his own personal experience, which found a home in film.

Much like Sirk's filmmaking, Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* contained an embedded criticism about Eisenhower's comfortable and safe America. Historian William Chafe argues "[James] Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* highlighted the defiant alienation of a generation that found middle-class prosperity and upward mobility both sterile and destructive."[71] Ray acknowledged that flaws of the American suburban dream that had failed him and depicted it on screen with this story of teenage rebellion, in which he was staunchly on the side of the kids.[72] Though Ray had intended *Rebel Without a Cause* as a cautionary tale about teenage rebellion and the role of family, the film inadvertently strengthened rebellious teenagers for years to come.[73] *Rebel* starred Hollywood hunk James Dean as rebellious teen Jim Stark who moves to a new town, defies his parents, tries to fit in with the crowd, and falls in love. Alongside Jim is Judy, played by Natalie Wood, and John 'Plato' Crawford, played by Sal Mineo, who come together and formed their own intimate group while the camera was on and off. On screen Jim, Judy, and Plato form what a "pseudo-family," bound together in their struggle with the social and moral issues of suburban American life. Characterized as "the doomed trinity," Dean, Wood, and Mineo all died before their time.[74] This "pseudo-family" became the focus of *Rebel Without a Cause* and what makes this domestic melodrama about teenage rebellion so significant. *Rebel*

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[71] William Henry Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 136.
[72] Bernard Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2011), 232.
[73] Jon Lewis, "Movies and Growing Up…Absurd," in *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 145.
[74] Sam Kashner and Jennifer MacNair, *The Bad & the Beautiful: Hollywood in the Fifties* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 101.

Without a Cause tackled the social problem of America's troubled youth and catapulted it onto the big screen in a brilliant and fast paced fashion, making it an iconic and bold tale in 1955.

The title sequence and opening scene of *Rebel Without a Cause* are full of emotional intensity, beautiful colors, and set the tone for the rest of the film. Before Ray formally introduces any characters, the title sequence flashes on the screen in big, bold, and red font.[75] This introduction serves as a visual signifier of *Rebel Without a Cause* as a melodrama with the way "melos" is given to "drama" through the manipulation of the "lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music…."[76] As the credits fade Jim is then picked up by the police for public intoxication and brought to the station for questioning. In his conversation with the police, Jim explains that he "just wants to hit someone," and that he doesn't know what to do "except maybe die." He adds, "If I only had one day when I didn't have to be all confused-if I felt like I belonged someplace." Such dramatic dialogue is an example of melodramatic excess. From the onset, Ray sets the stage for Jim to be one of what Elsaesser considers Ray's lonely heroes and rebels. "Their violence is the violence of frustration and inner discord. Thus, their experience of society is negative, their response revolt," argues Elsaesser. Jim does not have a sense of community and feels like society as an institution as failed him. As a result, he reacts angrily and turns to crime. Elsaesser furthers this point, "In the face of an imperfect life and difficult choices, they tend to run and precipitate themselves into far-flung places of violence and crime rather than confront their own inner selves."[77]

Though Jim Stark serves as Ray's lonely hero, he forms a makeshift family at the police station with Judy and Plato, both of whom are in trouble for various crimes. Judy is waiting to be questioned for streetwalking. She is covered in red (red dress, jacket, and lipstick), which is a

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[75] See figure 6.
[76] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 55.
[77] Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, 42.

symbol of her wildness, anger, and burgeoning sexual identity.[78] "He grabbed my face and started rubbing off all the lipstick. I thought he'd rub off my lips and I ran out of that house," cries Judy to the police officer. Judy is struggling with a terrible Oedipal complex and it manifests in her over-wrought red ensemble. Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel argue:

> "In *Rebel*, Ray used color coding both to define and to evoke the emotional life of his main characters, pointing out the emergence of Natalie from the gauche red of the lipstick and coat she wore as a 15-year-old tramp on the streets into the soft fluffy pink-sentimental, but a graduation, and important in the development of the personality of the girl."[79]

Along with Jim and Judy, Plato is at the station for killing at puppies, a symptom of an inability to share his feelings for Jim and Judy. "Thus, the stances the protagonists display in their isolation are intense, but at the same time the postures are false ones, for they often manifest the inverse of what they actually feel: Plato in *Rebel Without a Cause* kills his animals because he is unable to express his love for Jim and Judy." Furthermore, Plato suffers from a broken home and has been raised by a nanny in the absence of his biological parents. Plato satisfies an important role in *Rebel Without a Cause* as the young boy with homosexual tendencies. This includes the picture of Alan Ladd in his locker, his mismatched blue and red socks, and most importantly his feelings for Jim. While the original screenplay called for a kiss between Jim and Plato it was replaced with loving touches and long gazes.[80] Nevertheless, Ray utilizes Plato, along with Jim and Judy, as cautionary figures to American families.

These themes of rebellion, isolation, sexual tension, and familial dysfunction come to the forefront during the climax of the film in which Jim tests his manhood at a game of "chickie run." Having fought with the cool kids, particularly Buzz, earlier that day Jim asks his emasculated

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[78] See figure 7.
[79] Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without a Cause* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 119.
[80] Frascella and Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young*, 172.

and apron wearing father, “What do you do when you have to be a man?” His father is unable to answer him and Jim runs out of the house, without his parents knowing, to play a game of chicken against Buzz. In this scene, Jim wears his iconic ensemble comprised of a clean white shirt, indigo blue jeans, and most importantly the red leather jacket. Not only does this ensemble starkly contrast with the drab brown suit he wore to the first day of school, but it also highlights the emotional fervor in the scene.[81] “When you first see Jimmy in his red jacket against his black Merc, it’s not just a pose, it’s a warning. It’s a sign,” said Ray of Jim Stark in this legendary scene.[82] The jacket as well as the scene, has a rich meaning rooted in the major themes *Rebel* aims to tackle.

The game of chicken ends with Buzz dead and the rest of the teens scrambling to leave the scene. Jim finally returns home and takes a long swig of milk, a symbol of childhood in which he was not faced with such terrible situations. The point of view of the camera is upside down, a visual clue from Ray that Jim’s world has literally been turned upside down. He then turns to his parents for advice about calling the police but it turns into an extremely impassioned fight, with Jim caught between his mother and father on the stairs.[83] As both of his parents argue with Jim, he explains to his father, “Dad...I said it was a matter of honor. Remember? They called me chicken.” Jim is making this apparent to his father because he feels his father has become emasculated in his own home. Ray created “an intensified symbolization of everyday actions, the heightening of the ordinary gesture and use of setting and décor so as to reflect the characters’ fetishist fixations.”[84] Jim’s anger and aggression towards his father is visible and orchestrated in the surrounding *mise en scène*. This includes his red jacket, red couch, steps, and

[81] See figure 8.
[82] Frascella and Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young*, 120.
[83] See figure 9.
[84] Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 56.

the portrait of his paternal grandmother, which he kicks, as he storms out of the home. According to Elsaesser, "One of the stylistic marks of a Ray movie, for example, is the subtle but nonetheless highly effective use of spatial relations to set out the dramatic import of a scene, or to give thematic accents to a situation."[85] The high-pressurized situation coupled with the presence of the iconic color red aided in the orchestration of the fight and consequent outburst, which ejects him

Following the fight and struggle between his parents, Jim sets off to rectify the situation with Buzz and rejoin his "pseudo-family," who will understand and support him. Realizing that they both cannot stay with their respective families, Jim and Judy decide to retreat to a deserted mansion near the planetarium they visited on a school field trip. Plato finds them there and hopes to protect his "pseudo-family" from Buzz's friends.[86] According to McNiven, "Ray draws attention to the ways that architecture fulfills the basic functions it performs for the characters who inhabit it, functions dictated by the needs of the society which created it."[87] Both in the Stark family home and the deserted mansion, Jim is seeking refuge since a traditional home is known to provide such comforts. However, the presence of his parent's unsatisfactory marriage disrupts familial harmony, creating a disjunction between parent and child. This rupture in familiar relations renders the home uninhabitable. Much like Johnston makes note of Sirk, this is Ray's internal criticism of the middle-class family home.[88] "In almost all his films, architecture is juxtaposed with harsh natural surroundings which threaten human survival and hence highlight

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[85] Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, 49.
[86] See figure 10.
[87] McNiven,"The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 39.
[88] Johnston, "Dorothy Arzner," 142.

the basic protective function of man-made structures."[89] The mansion contains no material comforts of the Stark home however; it serves as a limited refuge for the "pseudo-family."

At the end of the film, the seemingly secure "pseudo-family" soon comes under attack from Buzz's friends and the police, all while Jim and Judy encounter internal dissention stemming from Plato's unreconciled feelings towards Jim. Throughout *Rebel Without a Cause* the primary mode for all the characters are antagonism and rebellion yet, Jim resolves his emotions and strives to protect Plato, the very protector of their "pseudo-family." It becomes increasingly clear to Jim that Plato's anger is a threat to their "pseudo-family." Unfortunately, Plato falls prey to these highly intense emotions and is killed outside the planetarium, the very place Plato and Jim saw the world come to an end just days before. On that day in the planetarium, Plato asked Jim, "Do you think the apocalypse will come at night time?" Jim responds, "No, at dawn." Having lost Plato at dawn, Jim ultimately reunites with his biological family. According to Mercer and Shlinger, "…Jim is reconciled with his family (particularly his father) having forsaken his rebellious ways in favour of family life, not only as a dutiful son to his parents but also as the prospective husband of Judy."[90] Ray creates a visual and literal restoration of the family during the final scene of *Rebel*, providing the "happy ending" that Elsaesser explains is crucial to tragedy in melodrama.[91]

According to Roger D. McNiven, in 1940s and 50s Hollywood, a genre was created from both comedies and melodramas, which were "defined by its being set in and around the middle-class American family home."[92] Both Sirk's films, especially *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*, as well as Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* satisfy this genre and thus, their

[89] McNiven,"The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 39.
[90] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 18.
[91] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 67.
[92] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 38.

filmmaking contribute to this grouping of films which give “a generic subject of ideological significance.”[93] However, Sirk and Ray utilize the home and the space of melodrama in dramatically different ways, providing an interesting point of comparison. McNiven argues that other filmmakers who contributed to this drama fill in this gap created by Sirk, the impressionist, and Ray, the architect. According to McNiven, Sirk gives the architecture of his films, meaning beyond the literal use for it, and therefore, it is expressive. The impressionist leanings of Sirk starkly contrasts to Ray who “draws attention to the ways in which architecture fulfills basic functions for the characters who inhabit it, dictated by the needs of the society who created it.”[94] This is not to say that Ray’s architecture isn’t ideological, the conflicts of the characters are however, they are “always worked out and resolved in terms of more fundamental, architectural needs.”[95]

Additionally, McNiven draws upon the crucial role of the spaces in domestic melodrama that the family must occupy. This includes the deserted mansion in *Rebel Without a Cause.* Rather than the teenagers taking refuge in their stifling and exploding homes, they look elsewhere for resolution. The difference is central to the McNiven’s argument, that Ray understood the significance of the architecture but did not infuse it with the same internal conflicts as Sirk. In *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind*, each of the central characters feel the need to “pursue personal fulfillment outside of the family’s ritual codes,” which then contribute to the creation of “pseudo-families.”[96] This is clear in *All That Heaven Allows* in which Cary flees suburbia for Ron’s recluse cabin in the woods. This notion is not as explicit in *Written on the Wind* but is alluded to when Mitch and Lucy leave the Hadley mansion

[93] McNiven,“The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties,” 38.
[94] McNiven,“The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties,” 39.
[95] McNiven,“The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties,” 39.
[96] McNiven,“The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties,” 40.

together. Due to Sirk's varying use of the *mise en scène*, the space has a different purpose and therefore, also unique consequences in the melodramatic narrative.

Both McNiven and Elsaesser agree, there is a genre in American cinema in which the family is the focal point and thus, melodrama utilizes the family in middle-class American society as ideal vehicles through which to track historical shifts during this period and beyond. [97] Though Sirk and Ray utilize the domestic melodrama differently, both still draw concrete connections between their respective narratives surrounding the American middle-class family. Each director contributed to their work a piece of their own history, mostly comprised of broken homes and "pseudo-families." Despite the creation of seemingly secure and comforting "pseudo-families," the characters are forced to return to their "closed worlds." Each of the "closed worlds" depicted speak to the internal combustion that is indicative of the safe and comfortable middle-class life in Eisenhower's America.

Domestic melodramas such as *All That Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind,* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, illustrate a "…living out the impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare. Thus, the best American melodramas of the 50s are not only critical social documents but also, genuine tragedies, despite, or rather because of the "happy ending."[98] That is why Sirk urged Halliday to "historicize the American melodrama," because it gives incredible insight into the period in which it was created, including the conditions of the filmmaking as well as the embedded criticism of Eisenhower's America, which was complacent and comfortable.[99] The political and cultural consensus that prevailed was not only temporary but also a façade which Sirk and Ray aimed to make apparent. Ultimately, the works of Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray present an internal decomposition of 1950s American

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[97] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 59; McNiven,"The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 56.
[98] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 67.
[99] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey,* 135.

middle-class living in their domestic melodramas, forcing the ideology of the period to become explicit as singular pieces of history.

CHAPTER 3

Hollywood Lets Loose: *Pillow Talk* and the Rise of the Sex Comedy

“Sirk and his peers aimed art, and achieved, a high-pitched emotional sate that hovers between melodrama and comedy-a space occupied by hysteria, the halfway acknowledgement of a repressed and disturbing truth.”[1]

Despite the utilization of different core emotions, both domestic melodramas and romantic comedies are born out of the theatric tradition of melodrama, an expressive mode. According to Peter Brooks, “…melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and raison d’être the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths.” As the drama of morality, melodrama is invested in the uncovering of truths. This process of discovery allows for societies virtues to become visible. “We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era,” explains Brooks.[2] However, this is not exclusive to domestic melodramas, especially those of Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray but also, to other narrative forms such as romantic comedies, which is tied to melodrama as a mode.

Like Brooks, similar the claims about virtues and truths are presented by Ed Sikov. The very nature of comedy as genre affords the audience with an opportunity to “break up” rather than “break down.”[3] Sirk and Ray utilized the domestic melodrama as a means to highlight the tensions in bourgeois American life and illustrate the impossibility of it all. Sirk explains this predicament upon viewing his films, especially in the final scene of his ultimate film in Hollywood, *Imitation of Life* (1959). “Everything seems to be OK but you well know it isn’t. By

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[1] Ed Sikov. *Laughing Hysterically: American Screen Comedy of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21.
[2] Peter, Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 15.
[3] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically*, 21.

just drawing out the characters you certainly could get a story-along the lines of hopelessness, of course," explains Sirk.[4] Now, half a century later, it is possible to comfortably laugh at aspects of the narratives that the Scott, Hadley, and Stark families found themselves in. Sikov argues, "But in comedies of the period, such safety was afforded by the narrative mode itself. After all, who takes comedy seriously?"[5] Thus, there is a certain safety or license in comedy that allow for an even deeper identification to reflect the contradictions of the times.

Consequently, melodrama and comedy as narrative forms are inextricably linked, especially in their ability to exemplify cultural norms and practices of a particular society through emotional excess. Brooks argues that melodrama as mode is derived from the literary tradition of theater. One of the most significant aspects of comedy is the creation of a "blockage and a victory over blockage," and eventually the "drive toward erotic union." Brooks turns to the centrality of the couple as being especially significant which serve as the moral cornerstone of society. In comedy there is an "emergence of a new society formed around the united young couple, ridded of the impediment represented by the blocking figure from the older generation," argues Brooks.[6] Similarly, Virginia Wright Wexman comments on the need to continuously create a couple in Hollywood films. As a result, a pattern has formed in which stars are situated as romantic ideals for which "they can be understood as part of Hollywood's project of defining the myriad of possible relationships encompassed in the category that cinema scholars have labeled "the couple."[7]

Like the home they inhabit, the creation of the couple is of extreme importance in relation to the domestic melodrama and romantic comedies for they contribute to the pattern that

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[4] Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1997), 152.
[5] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically*, 21.
[6] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 32.
[7] Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), ix.

"organizes, indeed constitutes, the classical American cinema as a whole."[8] The concern in most films regarding a plot centering on a single male and female character, is whether or not the relationship will culminate in marriage. This formula is most commonly understood as: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. It leads to the creation of a couple in the subgenre of romantic comedies, the sex comedy. Since Hollywood film is a cultural practice that relates to the way we live in America, stories about creating couples lend themselves to understanding our social history. Wexman argues that Hollywood as an institution desires to produce films with romantic stories, in order to depict *habitus*. It is created through a social process in which "society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinant ways, which then guide them," argues Pierre Bourdieu, who coined this term.[9] *Habitus*, and it functions as a level of social patterning. "The constraints surrounding every matrimonial choice are so tremendous and appear in such complex combinations that the individuals involved cannot possibly deal with them consciously, even if they have mastered them on a different level," argues Bourdieu. According to Wexman, Hollywood promotes and supports *habitus* by depicting the boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl narratives, illustrating "appropriate courtship behavior," for all to mimic.[10]

The "appropriate courtship behavior" that is depicted in romantic comedies is especially important in historicizing and locating romantic comedies as a genre and narrative form that exists alongside domestic melodramas. According to Bill Nichols, comedy is a genre that creates a world in which situations and events lead to comic, humorous results. Comedy activates light-

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[8] Wexman, *Creating the Couple,* 5.
[9] Loic Wacquant, "Habitus," in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology* ed. by J. Becket and Z. Milan (London: Routledge, 2005), 316.
[10] Wexman, *Creating the Couple,* 5.

heartedness, amusement, laughter, frivolity, delight, and release of aggressivity. Typically, the conflicts that are addressed in this genre are decorum vs. indignity and predictability vs. unpredictability.[11] Nichols differentiates two different types of genre films: those which discuss social order and the law of the state such as the western or science fiction film, and those which unpack domestic order and the law of patriarchy by exploring "the world of interpersonal relationships and family ties.[12] Those films, which explore domestic order and the law of patriarchy, include comedy and melodrama. Both comedy and melodrama focus on the private space, which in many cases is in crisis, or some form of danger. Most often, the hero is often the couple or the nuclear family. The conflicts that typically threaten the private space occupied by the couple or family are issues relating to trust, paranoia, fear, and suspicion. Resolution takes the form of a "social harmony with absorption of the individual into a couple or family unite" illustrating security and safety and affirming love and creativity.[13] Ultimately, there is a resolution in which romantic love secures the domestic sphere and traditional family values are reiterated as cornerstone of American identity.

Like melodrama, visual characteristics are especially vital to romantic comedy, as there is a certain level of iconography in American film comedies. The iconography of the romantic comedy includes locations and spaces, props most typically utilized by central characters, costumes that are of central importance for propelling the narrative, and even stock characters. Setting is crucial for it almost always takes place in an urban location and even more intimately, apartments. In terms of props, chocolates, flowers, and most importantly beds are utilized to

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[11] Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 251.
[12] Nichols, *Engaging Cinema*, 258.
[13] Nichols, *Engaging Cinema*, 263.

sharpen the focus on a couple.[14] The bed also foreshadows eventual marriage bed, which is often alluded to if not outright established during the final scenes of the film. Costumes are significant as well in terms of a change due to a relationship or the possibility of the first encounter or date. The stock characters include a group of friends that take part in the relationship to support the protagonists as well as the unsuitable partner as a contrast to the suitable partner.

The couple is central to the overarching ideology of romantic comedies. Both Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Nichols agree that this couple is most likely to inhabit separate spaces or homes but then come together through marriage, to form home, the physical embodiment of matrimonial harmony. However, according to David Shumway, the film must end before married life because romance and marriage have opposing goals.[15] Romantic comedies remain committed to the possibility of these old fantasies of coupledom despite "…divorce, biological clocks, myths about the shortages of single men and other simultaneous impulses towards and reasons against coupling…."[16] McDonald argues that the commitment to coupledom in romantic comedies "illustrates the strength of the ideological mandate towards coupling and the industries which depend on romance to make money."[17] Ultimately, as a genre of comedy, romantic comedies serve an established narrative form, which speaks to the perfect love ideal, appealing to anyone and willing to make sacrifices for it.

Additionally, McDonald historicizes and unpacks the screwball comedy and its successor, the sex comedy.[18] A screwball comedy is a "synthesis of themes and elements" from two films created in 1934, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* and Howard Hawks' *20th Century*.[19] In *It*

[14] Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 11.
[15] David R. Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and The Marriage Crisis*, (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 23.
[16] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 14.
[17] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 14.
[18] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 18.
[19] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 18.

Happened One Night, the protagonists' relationship evolves from hatred and insults to true love. In *20th Century,* the protagonists actually act on their negative feelings and impulses, illustrating that couples in love in screwball comedies will do almost anything to irritate each other. Unlike traditional romantic comedies, "The screwball comedy…sustains the discord, using the energy of the couple's friction and mutual frustration to drive the narrative forward."[20] Ultimately, screwball comedies end with a final image of neither side ending victorious but rather, a "benevolent draw in which both parties are reconciled."[21] According to Shumway, screwball comedies function as a genre that mystifies marriage "…by portraying it as the goal-but not the end-of romance." Like McDonald, Shumway underscores the importance of the real possibility of marriage in the screwball and sex comedy. "The specific illusion that the screwball comedy constructs is that one can have both complete desire and complete satisfaction, and that the name for this state of affairs is marriage," argues Shumway.[22] It is significant to underscore that love must be illustrated before the couple marries, because marriage must be the death of romance, and that is why the film ends. The ideology at work in screwball comedies is that centrality of a couple and the hope that they can achieve marital bliss. Consequently, screwball comedies and sex comedies as part of the romantic comedy narrative form will not shed light on marriage but rather, the stage that immediately precedes it.[23]

The clash between the protagonists is one of the most central aspects of screwball comedies that sex comedy utilizes to propel the narrative. However, the key distinction in sex comedies is that it the clash is accepted as an inevitable truth due to nature. McDonald's definition of a sex comedy includes both the antagonistic and innate sexual desire of the

[20] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 20.
[21] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 23.
[22] David R. Shumway, "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage," Cinema Journal, 3 (1991), 11.
[23] Shumway, "Screwball Comedies," 11.

screwball comedy, with an emphasis on romance. "The sex comedy pits woman against man in an elemental battle of wits, in which the goal of both is sex. Only the timing and legitimacy of this differs from gender to gender, with women wanting sex after, and men before or without marriage."[24] The period from which this genre existed resulted in it being eventually absorbed by the host genre, romantic comedies. The turbulent 1960s were a period of immense change and the sex comedies allude to sex seemed outdated and slightly outrageous. McDonald draws strict attention to its "visual and thematic elements," as they are significant in understanding what it offered to romantic comedies as an all-encompassing genre. Narrative structures and tropes reoccur throughout the romantic comedy genre and constantly evolving to meet the demands of the period and Hollywood audiences.

The sex comedy experienced a decade long foothold in Hollywood from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, as a subgenre born out of period in which "sex, sexuality and desire were hot topics and, for the first time since the 1930 adoption of the Production Code was applied, some discussion of these topics could be openly attempted."[25] It was an unstable period in which there was a deep shift in the thinking and overall sensibilities of the American people. "For the profound changes of this particular decade brought the United States closer to social revolution than any time in the twentieth century," argues Barry Keith Grant.[26] Also, America became occupied with the inevitable Cold War due to instability in post World War II Europe and building tensions with the Soviet Union. The future seemed bleak the "iron curtain" falling across Europe.[27] The threat of attack was tangible and Americans continued to prepare by buying

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[24] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 38.
[25] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 39.
[26] Barry Keith Grant, *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1.
[27] William Henry Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67.

and building fallout shelters in order to protect themselves and their families. Also, in December of 1956, the war with Vietnam began which many Americans opposed, creating tension throughout the country. On the domestic front the Civil Rights Movement made consistent gains with the leadership of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the 60s, culminating in legislative successes such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.[28] It was a tumultuous period in which the American people were grappling with new ideas and notions about the world that they had constructed.

The most significant change during this period for the production of sex comedies was the second sexual revolution. The first sexual revolution took place in the early 1900s when "…a series of economic, political, and cultural factors further weakened the institutions and ideologies reinforcing sexual restraint."[29] Within 20 years the gap between self-expression and normative actions began to widen but not nearly as much as it did in the 1960s and 70s. Due to World War II, women in the workplace were far more common than in the period prior but the work remained segregated and underscored their femininity. They participated in "women's work," which set the women apart from the men and offered little room for advancement.[30] "The fact that women were thought to be only helping out made it possible for their efforts to receive social sanction as a fulfillment of the traditional family role," argues William H. Chafe.[31] Nevertheless, "women's work" eroded fundamental values of American gender and social identity, especially as it focused on the home. These are the same values Sirk aimed to highlight and expose in *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind* but in the context of class. An

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[28] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 317.
[29] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 193.
[30] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 315.
[31] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 316.

alternative set of values took shape as women across America realized that their grievances were shared.

Betty Friedan, a champion of women's liberation during the second wave feminist movement, illustrated the communal suffering of women in her 1963's revolutionary, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan described the trap of domesticity and the suffering as the "the problem that has no name." One of *The Feminine Mystique*'s many intentions was to create a dialogue among women who "gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."[32] Friedan urged women to challenge the foundational values that created "chains that are made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices."[33] Eventually, her work galvanized a strong constituency of domestics that desired freedom from their homes and families. What Friedan accomplished so eloquently was, highlight what women assumed to be a singular, individual issue on a personal level, "…was in fact a *woman* problem, shared by others and rooted in a set of social attitudes that required change if a better life was to be achieved."[34]

Along with Friedan's seminal work, a "technological revolution in reproduction" took place with the introduction of the first birth control pill, envoid, in 1960 providing women the opportunity for sexual freedom and self-expression.[35] The G.D. Searle pharmaceutical company produced "the pill," and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved it.[36] By 1962, 1.2 million American women were taking the pill every day and by 1964 the pill was the most widely known and used form of contraceptive in America.[37] As a result, many tendencies that

[32] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 61.
[33] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 77.
[34] Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 316.
[35] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* 191.
[36] Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill: a History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2010),1.
[37]May, *America and the Pill*, 2.

prevailed throughout the 1950s, such as regulation of household work and private sex lives, were challenged and began to slowly change as part of the second sexual revolution. "The 1960s saw a dramatic acceleration of sexual liberalization and a reversal of most opposing trends of the 1950s," argues Coontz. She establishes two parts of the sexual revolution that contributed to this gap between 1950s and 1960s sexual experiences. The first was the expansion of single living and culture, which accepted pre-martial sex between male and female partners. The second shift was a change in demands by women, in which sex began to meet their needs, wants, and desires. The pill made this stage of the sexual revolution easier. It was also significant that a third change was underway in the 1970s, when the gay movement challenged heteronormativity and began to defy the American idealized vision of exclusively heterosexual couples.[38] Along with the introduction of the pill, McDonald argues that the release of the Kinsey Report in 1953 and the emergence of Playboy later that year, promoted a "range of sensual pleasure." Such revelations contributed to ongoing changes during the period.[39] However, it was not simply the availability of birth control that created a space for the sexual revolution to take place but rather a cocktail of social and demographic changes in America. Coontz explains that it was:

> "The rising age for marriage; educational convergence of men and women; women's growing autonomy; invention of birth-control methods that were independent of coitus; the sheer rise in the absolute number of singles as the baby-boo, generation reached sexual maturity; and revulsion of a politically active generation against what they saw as the hypocrisy of their elders."[40]

As a result of these changing sensibilities, the cornerstones of America began to take a different shape in relation to sex and sexual expression. Ultimately, Americans became progressively more aware and accepting of sexual activity.

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[38] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* 197.
[39] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 41.
[40] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* 197.

Thus, with this brief summary of the second sexual revolution in mind, it is possible to place the sex comedies of Doris Day and Rock Hudson in historical context. The sexual revolution is critical in understanding the burden of virginity that is typically assigned to Day's characters. "Examination of the film in its historical context relieves Day's character of the burden of an oppressive allegiance to her maintained chastity which subsequent writers have tried to fasten on her," argues McDonald.[41] Similarly, Coontz describes that the 1960s was a period of immense change and the result was "an increase in the acceptability, prevalence, and early initiation of sexual activity."[42] This is what the sex comedy reflects, a space and time in which sex is highlighted and expressed through America's most celebrated medium, the Hollywood film.

Among the sex comedies that were produced during the sexual revolution, three of them starred the romantic comedy powerhouse duo, Rock Hudson and Doris Day. These three films, 1959's *Pillow Talk*, 1961's *Lover Come Back*, and 1963's *Send Me No Flowers*, cemented the narrative form in a sophisticated way, highlighting the antagonism between the protagonists until love overcomes it.[43] However, it is not so much the plot that bears comparisons to domestic melodramas of the same era but also, how the narrative is advanced by the *mise en scène*. In all three sex comedies, especially *Pillow Talk*, Hudson and Day interact in highly stylized and gender-specific spaces. The masculine and feminine surroundings are boldly colored and decorated, in a manner reminiscent of the domestic melodramas of Sirk and Ray. The domestic melodramas of the 1950s infused the spaces with the contradictions of middle-class living, and a similar process is in effect in the Hudson-Day sex comedies. The spaces are bright and daring much like the tense and sexually driven narratives. This makes the *mise en scène* of sex

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[41] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 40.
[42] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* 198.
[43] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 51.

comedies equally as important as the spaces of the domestic melodramas, especially in *Pillow Talk*. As part of the *mise en scène* there is a great deal of technology at work, including the use of split-screen shots made possible by new wide-screen technologies. This innovative technology allowed Hudson and Day's characters to be visually depicted side-by-side while in separate spaces. Their characters seem to throw pillows to each other, speak on the phone, bathe in the tub, and sleep in the same bed. Best of all, according to McDonald, "The split-screen device also works to forecast their eventual coupledom…."[44] Such scenes further the "sophisticated sexual comedy" but also are shaped by the subgenre's construction of unique surroundings.[45]

An additional aspect of *Pillow Talk* that makes it an ideal sex comedy to analyze in conjunction with domestic melodrama, is that producer Ross Hunter, also worked with Sirk on *All That Heaven Allows* in 1955. In *Sirk on Sirk*, Sirk explains his relationship with the actor turned producer.

> "Well, at Universal [Hunter] was thought to be someone who had his finger on a certain pulse in America- and maybe they were right…He was always coming to me and saying, 'Doug, Doug, make them weep! Please make them weep!' And every scene where I was trying to do something, he'd say, 'I want 500 handkerchiefs to come out at this point.'"[46]

Hunter understood that in Hollywood cinema there is a special place for tears, especially film melodrama and romantic comedy, giving audiences for both genres the opportunity to break down or break up. Additionally, Hunter was advocating for Hudson as an actor and pushed for his casting in various films of different genres and modes. During his Hollywood career, Hudson remained a closeted homosexual but his effect on men and women was great. "But you know, a strange thing, Rock, although homosexual exerted a powerful influence on women. I don't mean

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[44] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 51.
[45] Tom Santopierto, *Considering Doris Day* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2007), 117.
[46] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 93.

on the screen where you can create an illusion, where he became a huge star…But in real life, Rock appealed to women….”[47] It was part of Hunter's genius that he saw Hudson's potential.

The same is true for Hunter's relationship with Day in which Hunter offered her a solution to her failing career in musicals. Hunter asked Day to make a sophisticated sex comedy and Day asked "why?" "Let everyone see that "under that dirndl lurked one of the wildest asses in Hollywood," explained Hunter. According to Hunter's reasoning, men would want to see the body, and women would want to be like her.[48] Not only was Hunter correct in his predictions but also in creating a team out of Hudson and Day, whose work in *Pillow Talk* garnered them the number one spot at the box office. It also awarded Day her only Academy Award nomination for her portrayal of Jan Morrow, a career girl who is forced to use the same telephone line as playboy Brad Allen, played by Hudson. This role was pivotal for Day as it fostered a new identity for her as an actress. Day's character had an even bigger impact on the female audience members who could emulate a businesswoman, unmarried with no children and didn't cook. "It provided an entirely new image, not just of Doris Day but of women in general, and in the words of Molly Haskell, "Doris Day really in a sense led the way."[49] Director Michael Gordon had a smash hit in *Pillow Talk*, which ushered a bevy of sex comedies into Hollywood. *Pillow Talk* "...permanently changed the star personae of its two main actors, Doris Day and Rock Hudson."[50]

An additional and important aspect of this sex comedy is the emphasis on the *mise en scène*, especially its boldly colored and heavily stylized spaces. Such characteristics resemble the spatial and decorative excesses of melodrama and it is possible to draw such connections by

[47] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 93.
[48] Santopierto, *Considering Doris Day*, 117.
[49] Santopierto, *Considering Doris Day*, 119.
[50] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 51.

comparing the way in which Sirk and Michael Gordon, *Pillow Talk*'s director, treat cinematic space. Elsaesser considers melodrama a mode, a narrative form that elicits a feeling through the construction of the spatial and musical categories.[51] "If it is true that speech in the American cinema loses some of its semantic importance in favour of its material aspects as sound, then conversely, lighting, composition, décor increase their semantic and syntactic contribution to the aesthetic effect," argues Elsaesser. Thus, the importance of the material aspects and the creation of the space in which the couple inhabits drive the comedic narrative.

One of the most unique aspects of *Pillow Talk* is that the entire plot pivots on the presence of a 'party-line' due to a shortage of phone lines during the late 50s and 60s, generating tension spatially and intellectually. The antagonistic relationship between Jan and Brad is driven by the fact that as a handsome playboy and songwriter he is consistently on the phone with various women, impeding Jan from using her phone line. The 'party-line' speaks to *Pillow Talk*'s attachment to "a precise and short-lived historical moment." It is the tool Gordon utilizes to create friction between Jan and Brad, dictating the unique thematic and visual elements such as a split-screen technology and locating the film's action in overtly gendered apartments. Also, since Jan and Brad has yet to meet in person, the sex comedy creates a situation for using a trope that is typical of the comedy: disguise and masquerade. Brad and Jan eventually meet in a nightclub however; Brad poses as Texan "Rex Stevens," a shy and passive Southern boy. As Rex, he falls in love with Jan, and gives rise to an additional sex comedy trope, the concept of reaching the "truth through lies." Through Brad's deceit and posing as Rex, the audience is able to build a "hierarchy of knowledge, by knowing his true identity. Brad's masquerade adds to the film's humor when he interacts with Jan who is unaware of his true identity. Throughout the film, the

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[51] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 51.

"hierarchy of knowledge" creates irony and suspense as the viewer watches the narrative unfold.[52] Such themes are not only present in sex comedies but also in domestic melodrama as "constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the story-line, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue."[53] Thus, as a "constituents of s system of punctuation" like film melodrama, the thematic, visual, and most of all spatial elements of *Pillow Talk* are emphasized and ultimately inform the plot.

The setting in *Pillow Talk* is significant for it is infused with the antagonistic and subsequent romantic relationship between Brad and Jan, satisfying basic notions of scenic excess through lighting, composition, and color in highly stylized spaces. Both Jan and Brad live in overtly gendered apartments, as evident in the color scheme and choices in décor. The apartment's decor contributes to a romanticization of the home. "Thus we are given a vision of a world elsewhere, but not the actual experience of such a locale, since the purpose of the vision is to make us see the everyday in rose-colored hue," argues Shumway.[54] While the apartments seem to be typical for the period, both depict a certain level of luxury only possible of being achieved by the romanticized wealthy who inhabit it. Shumway furthers this argument, explaining, "Luxury and the appeal of upper-class privilege are yet another means by which desire is heightened."[55] As a result, there is a desire to recreate the coupling as well as the locale, upon watching *Pillow Talk*.

The interior of Jan and Brad's apartments are a source energy, which contributes to the creation of desire and the construction romance in *Pillow Talk*. Their gendered and aesthetically rich homes serve as key examples of how the *mise en scène* informs the standard tropes of sex

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[52] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 53.
[53] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 50.
[54] Shumway, "Screwball Comedies," 13.
[55] Shumway, "Screwball Comedies," 13.

comedies. The rose-colored hues that Shumway describes are especially apparent in the film's the title sequence. *Pillow Talk* opens with an image of three panels, which begin in the rose-colored hues, as one slowly alternates to a baby blue.[56] Gordon creates a color palette in order to denote Brad and Jan's respective spaces. The baby blue panel signifies Brad, while the rose panel represents Jan, as they lay in their respective beds, throwing pillows to each other. The rose-colored hue also, represents Jan and is reiterated in her apartment that is covered in shades of reds and purples. The walls are colored rose as well as the counter top in her kitchen. This shade of rose is reiterated in the throw pillows on the white couch, providing garnet, violet, and fusicia accents as well.[57] Such red-based colors are specific to Jan, which she is able to transfer to Brad when he asks her to redecorate his apartment, providing a males' space with a female touch. Jan takes it upon herself to create a chaotic space filled with gaudy accessories like a moose head, hanging beads, and floral lamps in an act of revenge for his deceit.

Aside from the color palette, Jan's apartment is fairly simple in its construction. Her apartment is essentially one large space divided up into a living room, kitchen, office, bedroom and bathroom. Her overall aesthetic is significant because it speaks to her businesswoman like living space: minimal with slight feminine embellishment and attention to detail. This is evident in her bathroom in which her monogrammed shower curtains and towels are displayed neatly. Also in the bathroom is a telephone so her animosity with Brad can persist into the bathroom. The presence of the phone and split-screen technology allow for Jan and Brad to bathe together, foreshadowing their coupledom.[58]

In addition to Jan's feminine and well-decorated apartment, Brad's bachelor pad is especially significant as a trope of sex comedies and its function in furthering the narrative of

[56] See figure 1.
[57] See figure 2.
[58] See figure 3.

Pillow Talk. Rather than rose-colored hues, Brad's bachelor pad is covered in warm browns and reds, as illustrated by the brick and brown walls, fireplace, and the centrality of the space around the brown piano. As a songwriter, Brad utilizes the piano and his musical abilities to his advantage, singing to all the women he engages with on the 'party line.' "You're my inspiration," sings Brad. Jan is privy to these conversations and it makes her angry but nevertheless, her presence on the 'party line' is a clear example of how she eventually drives a wedge into Brad's love life, though she may not know it.[59] According to Steven Cohan, Brad's apartment is "a fantasy playpen where domestic technology serves a single purpose-seduction. Flip a switch and the front door locks, the light goes out, and a record player starts to play mood music. Flip a second switch and the sleeper sofa opens out into a double bed made with baby blue sheets."[60] As a playboy and someone who is deeply invested in this role, Brad created a home around his public persona. His home is a stage and he is a player. When Brad as Rex asks Jan to redecorate the apartment she sarcastically responds, "Why redecorate? It's so functional for your purposes." Thus, it is not only Brad's creation of the bachelor pad that supplies sexual connotations but also the way Jan reinforces it as a "den of seduction."[61]

Furthermore, the bachelor pad is more than just a "den of seduction," but also a "multi-coded space," representing Hollywood's crippling fears about "the stability, coherence, and normality of American maleness, underscoring the homophobia that structured the cultural meaning of masculinity as the opposite of 'femininity.'"[62] This notion speaks to the over-stylized color palettes that are evident in the respective homes of Jan and Brad. For if, the opposite of homosexuality is femininity, a deep contrast needs to exist between the spaces inhabited by a

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[59] See figure 4.
[60] See figure 5; Steven Cohan, "So Functional For its Purposes: The Bachelor Apartment in Pillow Talk," in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* ed. by Joel Sanders et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural, 1996), 28.
[61] Cohan, "So Functional For its Purposes: The Bachelor Apartment in Pillow Talk," 28-29.
[62] Cohan, "So Functional For its Purposes: The Bachelor Apartment in Pillow Talk," 28.

man and a woman. Much like the criticism of consumer culture in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* and overconsumption in *Written on the Wind*, Brad's apartment is a site of consumerism. The bachelor pad marks "the single man's marginal position in relation to the domestic ideology of the period, while at the same time allowing for his recuperation as a consumer whose masculinity could be redeemed-even glamorized-by the things he brought to accessorize his virility," argues Cohan.[63] The bachelor pad offers any male, including Brad, a legitimate and socially acceptable alternative to married life as embodied by the flight to the suburbs. Such a normative existence is undercut but the prevalence of bachelor apartments, which "served as the primary setting for a playboy lifestyle in which the single man's supposedly undomesticated sexuality was absorbed into the more important activity of consumption."[64] Consumption is an important aspect in the construction of the space as it speaks to the *how* of the *mise en scène* but also, the *why*. This characterization of the bachelor pad speaks to how the color palette and décor came to be and why they are significant in the narrative of the film.

Brad's bachelor pad takes on several meanings, that of the den of seduction and the stage to perform heterosexuality, however, Christopher Reed argues that "…extravagant interior décor signifies gay space in Hollywood movies…," including *Pillow Talk*. Like Sirk described, Hudson was a homosexual in Hollywood who paraded as a heterosexual. This performance in his personal life is mirrored in his filmmaking, though it was unintentional. Like McDonald and Cohan, Reed argues that Brad's bachelor pad is a queer domestic space because of its "…fantastic interiors created by that quintessentially gay figure, the interior decorator, no less than the equally extravagant architecture of feminist utopias."[65] What Brad's apartment

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[63] Cohan, "So Functional For its Purposes: The Bachelor Apartment in Pillow Talk," 28.
[64] Cohan, "So Functional For its Purposes: The Bachelor Apartment in Pillow Talk," 30.
[65] Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," in *Art Journal*, 55, We're Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History (Winter, 1966), 69.

represents is the intersection of sexual identity with spatial and visual aspects in art and culture. Reed argues that, "whether in the landscape or at home, these arguments run, queerness is constituted, not in space, but in the body of the queer: in his/her inhabitation, in his/her gaze."[66] Brad constructed his bachelor pad around his needs, making it functional. His presence, inhabitation, and gaze are what craft the imminent space, making his home in *Pillow Talk* a truly queer space. Reed utilizes the word imminent to describe this space because the word's Latin roots, *imminere*, meaning "to loom over or threaten, it means ready to take place."[67] Thus, imminent means that the queer space is a space that is in the process of being taken, it is the process of claiming territory over it by the queerness. Reed describes that an "invisible queerness" is invented as means to keep homosexuality out of sight. This sheds light on the bachelor pad that becomes a place of performance, trying to keep homosexuality out of sight. Though Hudson is "playing it straight," he remains closeted, withdrawing from the contested space."[68] As a result, what is depicted on screen as the queer space is created from images of Brad's apartment, shaping queer domesticity for years to come. Thus, whether in the domestic melodrama or sex comedy, heterosexual or homosexual spaces, the home is significant as the permanent dwelling place of the American family on screen.

Additionally, it is especially interesting that in *Pillow Talk*, Hudson, a homosexual actor, played the role of Brad, taking on a role in which he performs heterosexual masculinity, bolstered by the space he inhabits. Hudson as Brad played not just one but two heterosexual males, as reiterated and symbolized by his bachelor pad. As a result, the bachelor pad becomes a stage or a platform in which Hudson as Brad and Rex can perform his heterosexual masculinity. Brad's performed heterosexuality and inability to commit to a woman was especially threatening

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[66] Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," 64.
[67] Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," 64.
[68] Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," 64.

to the established American culture of marriage, necessitating the creation of the couple and subsequent marriage at the end of the film. However, Brad speaks out against marriage:

> "Before marriage, a man is like a tree in the forest, he stands there, independent, an entity unto himself. Then he's cut down, his branches are cut off, he's stripped off his bark and thrown into the river with the rest of the logs. Then this tree is taken to the mill. And when it comes out, it's no longer a tree. It's the vanity table, the breakfast nook, the baby crib and the newspaper that lines the family garbage can."

This declaration against marriage is known as the "anti-marriage speech," in romantic comedies but not necessarily in sex comedies. McDonald argues that is why *Pillow Talk* is noteworthy because it is a sex comedy that rests very heavily on romance.[69] Despite Brad's fear of emasculation due to married life, it became his destiny once he realized he had true feelings for Jan.

While away from the city, Jan and Rex cohabitate in a country home in Connecticut, which belongs to Brad's friend Jonathon. Their presence in the country home foreshadows their future together and becomes the place where Brad realizes he has feelings for Jan. This recognition is visually represented when Brad grabs an armful of logs for the fire that he and Jan were enjoying.[70] The logs represent Brad's desire to finally become monogamous, recalling his anti-marriage speech in which chopping down the tree results in marriage.[71] "Here the anti-marriage speech and its antidote are both rendered wittily and symbolically, and pertain to Brad's anxieties about commitment, rather than being dictated against marriage and women themselves," argues McDonald.[72] Though Jan uncovers the mystery regarding Brad's impersonation, the couple eventually ends up together, as Brad mimics bringing Jan into his apartment like a new bride after their wedding. "Why did I spend a fortune? Why did I cut

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[69] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 54.
[70] See figure 6.
[71] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 54.
[72] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 54.

myself off from every girl? Why does any man destroy himself? Because he thinks he's going to marry," explains Brad. Jan too recognizes her feelings for Brad and *Pillow Talk* ends just as the couple decides to marry.

Riding the wave of success of *Pillow Talk* in 1959, Hudson and Day were paired together again for two more sex comedies, *Lover Come Back* (1961) and again in *Send Me No Flowers* (1963). However, neither of the latter two films provides the same treatment of sex, the creation of the couple, and the construction of the urban home as successfully as *Pillow Talk*. *Lover Come Back* and *Send Me No Flowers* were individually popular, due to the pairing of Hudson and Day yet; *Pillow Talk* remains the best example of the changing tides in America with the second sexual revolution and swinging sixties. Due to the new awareness about sex, the sex comedy, which became synonymous with the female guarding her virginity, became no longer necessary in terms of a subgenre.[73] The Woman's Movement criticized the institutions that are central to the narrative form such as marriage and the home and with a new awareness and increased societal pressure, the subgenre declined. The comedies in the 1960s shifted their focus to an emphasis on the male rather than the female, reconstituting many of the tropes that made this subgenre unique. Women were no longer conning men into falling in love with them but rather, there became an overabundance in women willing to cohabitate with them.[74]

Ultimately, what is of upmost importance in the sex comedy is the creation of the couple and the domestic space in which they eventually inhabit together. The sex comedy, a subgenre of the romantic comedy, allows for a romantic play but as Sirk explains, "I think often of the connection between 'play' and 'please.' They are the same thing: a play must please. And in a way, the American melodrama allowed me to do this." The sex comedy is restricted in terms

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[73] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 55.
[74] McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 55.

of what it can accomplish due to the limited scope of the genre. Thus, films such as *Pillow Talk* gave way to the serious importance of the domestic melodrama, which could play and please in depicting marriage and the home, and that is why it prevailed into the contemporary period.[75]

[75] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, 95.

CHAPTER FOUR
Bringing Down the House: Deconstructing Contemporary Domestic Melodramas

"Seeing the larger picture won't make family dilemmas go away, but it can reduce the insecurity, personal bitterness, or sense of betrayal that all of us at one time or another, bring to these issues."[1]

As generic films with unique visual and thematic elements, domestic melodramas and sex comedies paved the way for independent films from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which also focus on the home and the family as moral cornerstones of society. In addition to the centrality of the family, the scenic excess persisted to contemporary films such as domestic melodrama, *Running with Scissors* (2006). Directed by Ryan Murphy, *Running with Scissors* features a story about divorce and the creation of a "pseudo-family" amidst alcoholism and emotional abuse. The film also employs humor similar to that of the romantic comedy, in order to create situations that offer the audience opportunities to either crack up and break down.[2] In the domestic melodramas and sex comedies such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Pillow Talk* (1959), the narrative forms operate according to specific emotions, which belong to their respective and distinct genres. However, in *Running with Scissors* it is less clear which set of emotions to play on and generic code to adhere to.

Much of the comedic aspects of *Running with Scissors* can be attributed to what Ed Sikov understands, borrowing from Freud, as "tendentious jokes," or jokes with a purpose, which he claims, are therapeutic. According to Freud, "tendentious jokes" are:

> "The repressive activity of a civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have not, however, been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost to us. But to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that

[1] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) 12.
[2] Ed Sikov. *Laughing Hysterically: American Screen Comedy of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21.

> tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost."[3]

Jokes with a purpose allow for a confrontation with what has been repressed. Through this process of joking, both tears of joy and sadness are welcomed. This is the case in watching the life of young Augusten Burroughs, played by Joseph Cross, unfold in *Running with Scissors*. Though his story is often melancholic, the humor is employed intentionally to make light of it. Through humor Augusten is able to confront his own past, "retrieving what was lost."[4] A.O Scott describes *Running with Scissors* as "hilarious and appalling," illustrating the film's ability to create and accomplish emotional climaxes through grotesque humor that is also terribly heart wrenching and epitomized by melodramatic moments.[5]

The film is adapted from Burroughs' best-selling memoir of the same name, chronicling his childhood and eventual departure from the suburban nightmare that he was forced to call home. What *Running with Scissors* accomplishes so eloquently is the depiction of two equally detrimental and damaging families in which Augusten is forced to live with. Interestingly, Augusten resembles Jim Stark, living amongst quarrelling parents who fail to recognize that their son is a product of their actions.[6] As a child and developed teen, Augusten consistently looks inward, to himself and his struggling biological parents as members of a restricted world. Thomas Elsaesser argues that in the domestic melodrama, the world is confined and as a result, the characters are bound to each other. "The dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves,"

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[3] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically,* 32.
[4] Sikov, *Laughing Hysterically,* 32.
[5] A.O. Scott, "Running with Scissors: Mom's Wacky, Dad's Distracted, Son Survives," *New York Times*, October 20, 2006, E1.
[6] Roger D. McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties: The Use of Architecture in Nicholas Ray's "Bigger than Life" and Douglas Sirk's "All That Heaven Allows," *Cine Journal,* 22 (Summer, 1983), 40.

argues Elsaesser.[7] While Elsaesser refers to the domestic melodramas of the 1950s in his analysis, there is almost no deviation from this type of plot structure in contemporary domestic melodramas like *Running with Scissors*.

Along with Augusten, one of the most central characters to *Running with Scissors* is Deirdre Burroughs, played by Annette Bening, Augusten's mentally ill mother who struggles with dreams of being a famous poet. Her delusional dreams and inflated sense of self cloud any possibility of a healthy relationship with her son. The film even opens with narration in which Augusten says, "Where do I begin to tell the story of how my mother left me? And then I left my mother?" From the onset of the film, Augusten establishes that this narrative is about his relationship with his mother, illustrating *échec*. Consequently, his estranged father, Norman Burroughs, played by Alec Baldwin, is forced away early on in the film. Norman struggles with alcoholism, a symptom of being in an unsatisfying marriage, and as a result they divorce. According to Stephanie Coontz, marriage "…was the main vehicle for redistributing resources to old and young, and it served as the most important marker of adulthood and respectable status."[8] *Running with Scissors* depicts a world in which marriage is no longer a necessity for men. This results in the "deinstitutionalization of marriage" due to changing social values.[9] The disintegration of the Burroughs family reflects this change, especially Deirdre as the monstrous mother.

With Norman away and the "deinstitutionalization of marriage," Deirdre focuses very heavily on her career and forces Augusten to live with her therapist, Dr. Finch, played by Brian Cox. The Finch family is far from normal and their unique relationships are what create

[7] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 56.
[8] Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 79.
[9] Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 80.

Augusten's "pseudo-family." Dr. Finch is an unusual psychiatrist and adheres very strictly to the studies of Sigmund Freud, which impact the wisdom and guidance he can pass on to his patients. This blind adherence to Freud is especially telling in his meetings with Deirdre, explaining that she has a failed as wife and mother. Scott describes him as someone who "hovers somewhere on the spectrum between utter charlatan and complete lunatic."[10] Dr. Finch is especially unorthodox and this extends to the rest of the members of his family including his wife, Agnes, two daughters, Hope and Natalie, and adopted son Neil Brockman. Agnes is just as damaged as Deirdre but in a different way and enables the chaos that ensues in her own home. Her husband and two daughters hardly respect her and as part of her coping, she has taken to eating kibble. Hope and Natalie are extremely different women, each satisfying distinct roles in the family as the religious and devout daughter versus the rebellious and salacious teen. Neil is an example of the Finch family taking in his patients and as a result, he understands Augusten's frustrations. He quickly becomes obsessed with Augusten, though he is verbally abusive. This is the first relationship in which Augusten can explore his sexuality. The Finch family is cemented in their enclosed world, giving way to the heightening of everyday situations like chaotic family dinners at the large dinning room table. As a result, like Sirk, Ray, and others, Murphy intentionally uses the *mise en scène* to illustrate what the plot cannot.[11]

Running with Scissors is set in 1972 and the Burroughs home is typical of the period. Yet it also, uses color and décor in a distinct way. In the 1970s, American suburban décor followed the "mod" style in which sunshine yellow is featured prominently throughout the living room.[12] The yellow functions as a bold and bright color in the *mise en scène*, it is attention-getting and underscores Deirdre's desire to become a successful poet. Deirdre is also dressed in a dramatic

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[10] Scott, "Running with Scissors: Mom's Wacky, Dad's Distracted, Son Survives," E1.
[11] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 56.
[12] See figure 1.

yellow ensemble, which includes a yellow and brown headscarf and gaudy accessories. It is a comical amount of yellow that is squeezed into a singular space and frame. Such statement making costume design, coupled with the over-stylized yellow living room, creates a sense of claustrophobia in the domestic space, informing the tenuous relationship between Augusten and his mother. As a child, Augusten indulges his mother's overbearing personality and even allows her to wake him up from sleeping to listen to her perform in the living room. He sits patiently in a throne-like chair eagerly awaiting his mother's ingenious poetry. The image that Murphy creates is humorous-a poor little boy eating his morning cereal, patiently awaiting a performance by his psychotic mother-but it also quite disturbing. As in Sirk's films, the audience knows that something is not quite right here. It is clear from the way Deirdre performs her poem that she truly feels held back and strives to unchain herself from the domestic space. The bold and overly decorated living room in this fashion speaks to the domestic melodrama, utilizing color in an expressive way to create contrasts, mimicking the storyline. These aspects of the *mise en scène* are consistent with a melodramatic mode of filmmaking, raising questions of style that are unattainable to other narrative forms and cinematic modes. It is the very process that makes the use of colors such as yellow in the living room significant, creating "complex aesthetic patterns" throughout the film.[13]

As in *Pillow Talk*, the living room in *Running with Scissors* becomes a space for performance, both literally and symbolically. The living room serves as Deirdre's stage where Augusten can watch her perform. But, the living room is also a space for sexual orientation performativity. Christopher Reed argues that Brad's bachelor pad in *Pillow Talk* is space claimed

[13] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 51.

by the character's homosexuality, a manifestation of "playing it straight."[14] It would be impossible to depict Brad in a homosexual relationship and so, his "imminent space" speaks for itself, much like Deirde's living room.[15] Both spaces are claimed by characters, which are forced to play it straight. Though Deirdre is married to Norman, a heteronormative relationship, they divorce and her domineering personality manifests itself in an overinvestment in her domestic space. This occurred even prior to the divorce but it is especially clear after it takes place when Deirdre moves into a new home that is decorated differently. Eventually, Augusten walks in on her with another woman named Fern, who is married to a minister. The style of Deirdre's new home speaks to her transition from a performance as heteronormative suburban housewife to a free-spirited homosexual woman. "It's taken me all my life to claim myself as an artist and to claim myself as a woman; I have struggled against the oppression of my mother and the oppression of your father and for the first time in my life I feel I am truly able to claim myself," explains Deirdre to Augusten. Her overtly colored, highly saturated, and extremely decorated living room works in the film like Brad's bachelor pad does in *Pillow Talk* and that is why she can no longer live in it. Even Deirdre reinforces the idea of claiming herself and her space, much like Reed describes of Brad.[16] In *Pillow Talk*, a new space for Brad is not necessarily depicted but it is clear that his "imminent space" would be forced to give way to the marital space. Deirdre's emotional and personal journey works in a backwards fashion, from matrimony to singlehood but nevertheless, the same notions regarding space hold true and are reiterated in the homes in which she inhabits.

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[14] Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," in *Art Journal*, 55, We're Here: Gay and Lesbian Presence in Art and Art History (Winter, 1966), 64.
[15] Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," 64.
[16] Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," 64.

The other significant domestic space in *Running with Scissors* is the Finch home, where Deirdre forces Augusten to live amongst more psychotic figures. Murphy employs humor and suspense leading up to Augusten laying his eyes upon his new home. Deirdre and Augusten ride into a wealthy area of Amherst, Massachusetts and the camera pans the beautifully manicured lawns and picturesque Victorian mini-mansions as Elton John's "Bennie and the Jets" plays in the background.[17] The overall feeling is upbeat as the song gives *melos* to the *drama* depicted (as Elsaesser points out.)[18] Augusten is in awe of his new neighborhood and even says, "This is nice! Maybe I'll become a doctor!" Upon pulling up to his new home Augusten is disturbed, "That's not it. Is it? It can't be." After a succession of close-up shots of Deirdre's red car door, Murphy utilizes a close up shot of Augusten's confused face as he slowly walks to the door of the Finch home. The Finch home is unlike every other one in the neighborhood. It is Pepto-Bismol pink and the front lawn is completely covered in indecipherable garbage. After a well-crafted montage of picturesque homes, Murphy creates a visual contrast similar to Sirk's. In the context of *Written on the Wind,* Elsaesser argues that Sirk evokes emotions visually. "…But the contrary associations of imperial splendor and vulgar materials, create a tension of correspondences and dissimilarities in the same image, which perfectly crytallises the decadent affluence and melancholic energy that the film its uncanny fascination," explains Elsaesser.[19] Murphy creates similar visual contradictions by juxtaposing the two different types of homes in the neighborhood. Such picturesque homes are literal embodiments of the suburban dream that so many like Augusten sought and continue to seek. Yet, he is forced to live with in the Finch family's nightmare.

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[17] See figure 2.
[18] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 50.
[19] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 53.

The aesthetics, setting, and decor of the Finch family home are especially significant for its deconstruction of the heteronormative suburban home. The inside of the Finch home is unbelievably cluttered on the inside and out. The foundations are breaking down and overall it seems perfectly uninhabitable. Nevertheless, the Finch family occupies this jungle of a domestic space, which is littered and lacks a cohesive aesthetic aside from the collection of garbage. What is especially interesting is the way in which the Finch home is also claustrophobic, much like the Burroughs's original home, yet it is a different type of oppression. The Burrough home is infused with the contradictions of their life, a heteronormative family who are collectively parading and performing. These imitations and fictions that Deirdre, Norman, and Augusten play out are infused into the *mise en scène* that surround them.

Thus, the Finch home is entirely different from the suburban dream home, especially in the way that it is decorated and accessorized by its inhabitants. Augusten notices the Christmas tree in the living room while watching television with Agnes, Dr. Finch's wife. "Isn't it a little early for Christmas? asks Augusten. "You mean late…it's been up for two years," replies Agnes. This exchange is indicative of the entire Finch home in which the same code of being that applies to the picturesque Victorian homes in the neighborhood or even the Burroughs home do not apply. The Finch home operates on a different plane because it is the home of the "pseudo-family," similar to the mansion occupied by Jim, Judy, and Plato and *Rebel Without a Cause*.[20] It is the space of a different world in which Christmas trees stay up for years and miscellaneous belongings line every inch of the home. Even externally, the home is noticeably different; it is painted a bold shade of pink, a clear distinction from the rest of the homes in the neighborhood. For this reason, the Finch home seems to be a mythic space, where its inhabitants eat kibble and gather to dissect the shape of Dr. Finch's truth-telling feces in the toilet. This domestic space and

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[20] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 40.

its inhabitants are perverse and psychotic. The Finch home in *Running with Scissors* is especially unique for this reason and as a result, it forged a new and cemented a supplementary domestic space in this humorous domestic melodrama.

An additional example of a comedic domestic melodrama is Noah Baumbach's semi-autobiographical story, *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), a comic narrative of *échec* that centers on the disintegration of the Berkman family living in brownstone Brooklyn during the 1980s, as told from the perspective of the children. Much like *Running with Scissors*, *The Squid and the Whale* employs a dark humor throughout the melodramatic narrative, in which the audience is unsure whether to laugh or cry. Richard Corliss wrote, "*The Squid and the Whale* is domestic tragedy recollected as comedy: a film whose catalog of deceits and embarrassments, and of love pratfalling over itself, makes it as (excruciatingly) painful as it is (exhilaratingly) funny."[21] In its comedic aspect *The Squid and the Whale* taps into American's unconscious fears and desires. There is a social critique as humor manifests what is ordinarily repressed in domestic melodramas. "Melodramas, like comedies, also criticize the foundations of society, as do crime films and many westerns, but these films' sources of pleasure are not as easily pinpointed as they are in comedies, where one can cite comic moments as being pleasurable to that extent that they cause or at least invite laughter and elation," argues Sikov. Corliss and Sikov agree in that *The Squid and the Whale* presents a world that is at one point light-hearted and then altogether sad and dramatic. The duality of the comedic domestic melodrama is central to Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale.* It is a film that invites laughter but it also, evokes sadness about family life and the domestic space.

While *Running with Scissors* depicts the monstrous mother, *The Squid and the Whale* focuses on the "the very bad dad," Bernard Berkman, portrayed by multi-faceted actor Jeff

[21] Richard Corliss, "Movies The Very Bad Dad," *Time*, October 2, 2005.

Daniels.[22] The film opens with a family tennis match, in which family politics and power plays take over, providing ample space to witness the internal tension at work in the Berkman family. The youngest Berkman, Frank, played by Owen Kline, says to his family members, “Mom and me versus you and Dad.” The family pairs off according to their loyalties. It is in this scene that Baumbach sets the tone for the entire film, in which sides are taken, members plot against each other, and essentially visually marks the demise of the Berkman family. “If you can, hit it on your mother’s back side, it is pretty weak,” explains Bernard to his son, Walt, played by Jesse Eisenberg. After a shot in each direction, Bernard finally soars an aggressive serve across the court and hits his wife Joan’s, played by Laura Linney, arm as he intended. She gives Bernard a stern look and storms off, leaving the children to watch as their parents quarrel, which is only amplified by the indoor arena. “This is martial relations reduced to bitter point-scoring, where the children are spectators to a contest whose rules they don’t understand,” argues Edward Lawrenson.[23] It becomes clear in the scene that follows. This type of interaction is not uncommon for the Berkman family as they often fight and take sides. As Coontz points out, “More than half of divorced couples in one national survey reported frequent fighting prior to separation. More than a third of those who fought said that the fights sometimes became physical. And children were often present during these incidents.”[24] The Berkman children are at the mercy of their parents’ terrible marriage and this fight at the tennis court is just one of many instances in which a simple tennis match became a violent part of “an intensified symbolization of everyday actions” and “the heightening of the ordinary gesture.”[25] Thus, as a domestic

[22] Corliss, “Movies The Very Bad Dad.”
[23] Edward Lawrenson, “The Squid and the Whale,” *Sight and Sound,* 16.3, (2006), 46.
[24] Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 104.
[25] Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury,” 56.

melodrama, *The Squid and the Whale* utilizes every day spaces and interactions and infuses them with melodramatic excess.

In almost every situation, there is no shortage of a holier-than-though attitude and it suffocates the rest of his family, setting up a narrative of *échec*, focusing on disintegration and divorce in *The Squid and the Whale*. Daniels' thoughtful portrayal of Bernard takes on this grotesque fatherly role, growing a beard, sporting old tweed and corduroy blazers, and dirty t-shirts. Despite a difference in gender, Deirdre Burroughs and Bernard Berkman are quite alike, as artists and parents. Much like Deirdre, Bernard, a writer, is the biggest advocate for his own work. Bernard claims that Franz Kafa is one of his predecessors, explains that one of his novels is Norman Mailer's favorite, and incessantly promotes himself. He forces his children to listen to him pontificate about his writing and holds his own opinion in the highest regard. When Walt asks about Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities," Bernard replies, "its minor Dickens…What is it about high school that you read all the worst books by good writers?" Bernard exudes pretension as he speaks to his impressionable children. This conversation occurs plainly but it is obvious that Joan and Frank are not a part of their insular world. Joan, who encourages her children to be different and form their own opinions about art and life, is Bernard's foil. Bernard is at the center of this conflict and he molds Walt to act and think in a similar way, creating a clear division between Joan and Frank. Despite being impeccably cultured and worldly, both Bernard and Joan are especially out of touch with their emotions. As a result, the tension palpably builds between them, dominating every space they occupy. The presence of emotional excess indicative of the domestic melodrama and is carried throughout the film. That is why tennis matches become fraught with tension and family dinners turn into battles about high culture. Nothing the family shares is sacred.

Many of the landscapes used in prior domestic melodramas are conventional suburban towns such as Stoningham in *All That Heaven Allows*. However, with films like *The Squid and the Whale* one sees an evolution in setting, as 1980's families such as the Berkman's have returned to urban landscapes like Park Slope. Nevertheless, the *mise en scène* in the Berkman's domestic space is still loaded with family politics and tension, similar to the claustrophobic homes of suburban life. According to Lawrenson there is an "artful chaos" in their brownstone living room, but it is a different chaos from that of the Finch home.[26] The Berkman brownstone it is bohemian dressed in warm tones such as brown, yellow, and orange. The living room is slightly cluttered with two large couches in separate areas, plenty of natural light coming in through the windows coupled with a few lamps, and other tchotchkes throughout the space. The living room and the rest of the home is especially bourgeois and visually illustrates the pretension that haunted many homes in 1980s America.

It is in the living room where the fateful family meeting takes place in which Bernard announces that he and Joan have decided to separate. The orientation of the furniture is significant in this scene for it cements a family politics thus far, where taking sides is mandatory. Bernard is situated in a dark leather armchair directly across from his children who sit in a pale yellow couch. The *mise en scène* reads in a "me vs. you" fashion, while Joan is in the background, rather than alongside Bernard.[27] The construction of this living room dictates the nature, tone, and outcome of the conversation. This scene raises questions of power with Bernard in a visually rich chair, set right in front of a daunting and tall bookshelf filled with books, and juxtaposed with the lighter colors in the room. In a position of power, Bernard ultimately guides the children through this tough conversation about the disintegration of their failing family.

[26] Lawrenson, "The Squid and the Whale," 46.
[27] Figure 5.

Coontz calls this the creation of a "binuclear family" in which parents are forced to "separate their ongoing parenting commitments from any leftover martial disagreements."[28] While this is the hope of the divorce, the Berkman family fails to maintain peace in this new "binuclear family." In response to his parent's divorce, Frank, unsurprisingly, cries and asks why? On the other hand, Walt is guarded and asks legitimate and practical questions, "So, Dad what will happen with the cat?" For a typically dramatic conversation, this scene reassures the viewer that Baumbach wants humor here. Both sons react according to their vastly different personalities and as a result, this scene is a "funny portrait of the boys' reaction to their parents' break-up."[29]

From this point on the boys shuffle back and forth between their two homes, riding the subway in long montages of passing subway station signs, feeling the weight and exhaustion of divorce in Brooklyn. Baumbach employs a similar technique in these scenes as he did in the tennis match during the opening sequence. Lawrenson comments on this, "The film is astute about the mounting emotional demands placed on the boys as they bounce from one house to the other in a weekly ritual that resembles a grand-scale version of the opening tennis match." Yet again, the film is centered on taking sides. The Berkman boys are similar to Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* in this way, torn between parents, especially when Jim faces them on the staircase. It would seem fitting for either Walt or Frank to scream Jim's famous line "You're tearing me apart!" to their parents. Both Bernard and Joan are guilty of priding themselves on who is getting the children, treating them as prizes and objects, rather than humans. Essentially, the Berkman children become the ball, bouncing between their parents in a tennis match. "Don't your friends have divorced parents?" asks Joan and Walt quickly responds, "Yeah, but I don't." Both children soon show their struggles with this swift and traumatic change in their lives. The

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[28] Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 106.
[29] Lawrenson, "The Squid and the Whale," 46

question that persists throughout *The Squid and the Whale* is: who will win? And Baumbach provides very few answers. Instead, he offers a clear and cathartic depiction of what divorce looks and feels like visually and narratively.

Thus, the *mise en scène* of Bernard's new home becomes especially significant, as it serves as the post-domestic space and a bachelor pad. Upon hearing that Bernard picked a new hope in Prospect Park, Frank naively responds, "Across the park? Is that even Brooklyn?" This comical statement expresses Frank's feelings about his new home as well as the divorce in general. It is unnecessary. Even Walt is coming to terms with the fact that like his friend advised, "joint custody blows." As Bernard pulls up to the new home with Walt, Frank, and the cat in the car, similarly to Deirdre and Augusten *Running with Scissors*, one sees nice houses in the neighborhood. However, Baumbach then pivots the camera around to a very different house and it is clear from the expression on the boys faces that it isn't so nice. The house original color was white but it has become a dirt-washed gray with noticeable damage to the structure. As the Berkman boys walk in, Bernard even adjusts one of the hanging pieces of the roof.[30] It is clear that this home is not what the boys expected to see. Bernard doesn't notice: "It was important for me to have a place like your mother's. I'm going to cook and run the household like you're used to," he explains. This comment is laughable because like Frank responds, "this is nothing like our house," Bernard challenges him. "You mean your mother's house? This is nothing like your mother's house?" "No, this is your house," says Frank. But Bernard gets to have the last word, "This is our house," he asserts.

Bernard did very little to make sure the same type of quality of living is maintained across both homes. The Berkman boys went from a bourgeois and cozy environment to a dilapidated and barren space that they are forced to call home. The trajectory of living spaces is

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[30] See figure 6.

remarkably similar to that of Augusten's who was forced to live in the Finch's squalor. Nothing about Bernard's new home is similar to the primary domestic space and as a result, he meets further resistance from the children, especially Frank. Lawrenson makes note of this transition, "Baumbach's eye for detail is evident in the contrast between the lived-in, bourgeois comfort of Joan's home - all stripped wood and book-lined walls - and Bernard's sparsely furnished place, where even the posters pinned up to hide the cracks in the plaster look wrong."[31] There is no "artful chaos" in this new home; it is falling apart as evident in the hanging pieces of structure, cracks in the walls, haphazardly chosen furniture, and overall clutter.[32] To further complicate their new home, Bernard rents out one of the extra rooms to one of his students and she eventually becomes his lover. What Baumbach presents is the possibility of a new family, which on the surface poses as heteronormative. As in Sirk's domestic melodramas, what all looked fine on the surface in the film's beginning has given way to *échec*.

One of the film's most poignant scenes takes place on the staircase leading up to the Brownstone, once shared by Bernard and Joan.[33] It is significant that it is a scene in which neither Walt or Frank are present and the parents can have an honest conversation about the great change in their lives. "As the camera hovers around the doorway - as if expressing the hesitancy both former partners feel about the changed boundaries of their domestic space - their conversation reveals that a melancholic affection still lingers," argues Lawrensen. Bernard mentions a conversation in which his father told him that Bernard could still save his marriage but Bernard responded, "I don't think there was anything else I could do. I did try everything."[34] As Bernard turns and walks away, it is clear there are residual feelings that needed to be worked

[31] Lawrenson, "The Squid and the Whale," 46
[32] See figure 7.
[33] See figure 8.
[34] Lawrenson, "The Squid and the Whale," 47.

out which would have only been possible in a conversation on the steps leading to his former home. The steps serves as a bridge to a place Bernard once was with Joan and as a result, they are tender with each other and able to discuss these issues, peeking into a world, just briefly, that once was the space of happier times together as the Berkman family, living the Brooklyn dream.

Like *The Squid and the Whale,* Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) challenges the heteronormative American family on screen. *The Kids Are All Right* is a comedic domestic melodrama, which depicts a married lesbian couple living in Southern California with their two children. The film "…centers on same-sex marriage, but the film is much more about the universality of marriage and committed relationships than it is about same-sex coupling."[35] *The Kids Are All Right* explores the family ties of Nic, played by Annette Bening, and Jules, played by Julianne Moore, as their children set off to meet their anonymous sperm donor father. Nic has a hard surface, is regimented and working countless hours as an obstetrician, and serves as the breadwinner. On the other hand, Jules is a free spirit, sends good vibes to all, and serves as the housewife who has tried several career paths before finally picking landscape design. Her inability to settle on a career unfolds throughout the film as a point of contention in her relationship with Nic. In addition to their professions, this homosexual couple satisfies normative gender roles. Their relationship satisfies "the breadwinner-homemaker model," with Nic working nine to five while Jules remained at home as the housewife.[36] Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* offers an alternative to pervading norms and depictions of family on screen; Nic and Jules undoubtedly represent a new kind of American family.

At the opening of the film, Nic and Jule's dynamic is established when Nic comes home late from work to see her family all ready eating dinner at the table. This scenario seems typical

[35] Wayne M. Bryant, "The Kids Are All Right," *Journal of Bisexuality*, 10 (December 2010), 486.
[36] Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 159.

for this family and something they've come to accept in their lives. "Despite having two moms, they are a stable middle-class family, with typical middle-class issues," argues Wayne M. Bryant.[37] Nic coming home late and seeing her family eating dinner is just one of the many middle-class issues they experience as a family. Nic serves as the authoritative breadwinner who is late to family time while Jules prepares the meal and is home to sit with the children for dinner. The children, Joni and Laser, played by Mia Wasikowska and Josh Hutcherson respectively, share many similarities with their mothers. Both Nic and Jules are biologically responsible for one of their children, Nic created Joni and Jules created Laser, each experiencing pregnancy and subsequent motherhood. Overall, their lives are quite normal in that Nic, Jules, Joni, and Laser experiences the highs and lows of normal family life. It is not until Laser watches his best friend Clay wrestling with his father that he wishes to meet his own. Joni gives in to his insistent questioning and they set off to find him, a local farmer and restaurant owner named Paul, played by Mark Ruffalo. The movie's tag line is: "Nic and Jules had the perfect family, until they met the man who made it all possible." All of a sudden, nothing is more disruptive to their family life than the heterosexual man who helped create it. It is clear that Cholodenko is working through the norms of married life. Upon hearing from Joni that his sperm was used for a homosexual family he responds, "Cool. I love lesbians." For Paul, it's okay and he wants to meet them; he is curious about the family he could have had.

Much like the other domestic melodramas during the independent period, *The Kids Are All Right* utilizes comedy to navigate the complex and dramatic emotions that further the plot. Cholodenko wrote the film with Stuart Blumberg and together they created a modern depiction of family in which laughing and crying are mandatory, utilizing both comedy and melodrama. According to Scott, *The Kids Are All Right* "…is outrageously funny without ever exaggerating

[37] Bryant, "The Kids Are All Right," 487.

for comic effect, and heartbreaking with only minimal melodramatic embellishment."[38] The utilization of comedy and melodrama in the film is critical to historicizing the film and understanding any hostility against a homosexual family living a bourgeois suburban lifestyle. The film coincidentally coincided with the long Proposition 8, right to marry, court fight in California. While Cholodenko explained that she did not intend to have the film take sides in this monumental political decision it nevertheless did and the timing is significant. Scott makes note of this, "*The Kids Are All Right"* starts from the premise that gay marriage is thought of, as an issue of ideological contention and cultural strife, is an established social fact. Nic and Jules, a couple with two children, a Volvo and a tidy, spacious house in a pleasant suburban stretch of Southern California, are a picture of normalcy."[39] Ultimately, *The Kids Are All Right* does a tremendous job "…of showing potential votes that 'our' family issues are not so different from 'yours.'[40] As much as gay marriage seems to threaten American values of heteronormativity, it is no longer the exception in 2010.

Nic and Jules' family is "a picture of normalcy" in the same ways that Cary Scott is in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*. On the surface, Cary's picturesque life in Stoningham satisfies the American dream from the manicured lawn, the elegantly decorated home, and two children. However, her relationship with Ron forces her to deviate from it, accepting a different life with him, in which she is no longer oppressed by the domestic and suburban world she created. Like Sirk, Cholodenko challenges a complacent society, similar to the one depicted in *All That Heaven Allows*. This is the America that felt "safe and sure of herself," as Sirk explained in relation to *All That Heaven Allows*.[41] The America Sirk described is the same one depicted in

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[38] A.O. Scott, "Meet the Sperm Donor: Modern Family Ties," *New York Times*, July 8, 2010, C1.
[39] Scott, "Meet the Sperm Donor: Modern Family Ties," 2010
[40] Bryant, "The Kids Are All Right," 488.
[41] Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1997), 113.

The Kids Are All Right, one that is struggling to hold as tightly to "its comfortable achievements and institutions" in a rapidly and steadily evolving society. The family is "…comfortable with each other, more or less content, but also frustrated, confused a bit out of sorts. As I said: normal,"[42] argues Scott. Thus, though the film depicts gay marriage, *The Kids Are All Right* is actually about marriage per se, a domestic melodrama about the new and normal American family.

As in other examples of domestic melodramas, *The Kids Are All Right* illustrates a particular attention to the *mise en scène,* especially in Nic and Jules' chic home in the suburban Venice, Los Angeles. Like Stoningham, Venice satisfies the bourgeois lifestyle that is indicative of domestic melodramas. Their town is small, quaint, and looks like every other suburban landscape. Their home is an even further depiction of their normative existence in which the interiors of the domestic space are as sophisticated and homey as the exteriors. Throughout, the film confirms McNiven's argument that the depiction of the American middle-class family is always "…presented in conjunction with the home, its permanent dwelling place."[43] Nic and Jules' home is spacious, thoughtfully decorated, and dominated by Jules' unique and bohemian taste. Jules' taste is immediately established by her lack of makeup, long flowing hair, and bohemian dress. Unlike Nic, her foil, Jules wears an armful of new-wave artistic jewelry, stacked necklaces, oversized t-shirts and peasant tops, loose fitting pants, and undone hair. Her overall aesthetic is earthy and free flowing, which is reiterated in the interior of their home as well as their backyard.

The home in *The Kids Are All Right* resonates as an artistic space where nature is valued as well as contemporary symbols of bourgeois living. One of the most utilized sections of the

[42] Scott, "Meet the Sperm Donor: Modern Family Ties," 2010
[43] McNiven, "The Middle-Class American Home of the Fifties," 56.

home is the dining rooms, both indoor and outdoors. The indoor dining room is part of the open concept kitchen, simply extending from the backend of it. The dining room table and matching chairs are a warm wood, reiterating the use of earthy décor. "The dining table and chairs are Indonesian teak, and Jules had run a Moroccan furniture import business, so there are leftover woven chairs and lanterns and pillows made from embroidered fabrics," explains production designer Julie Berghoff.[44] The Venice home is described as being decorated "with pages-from-a-catalog furniture and just a touch of earth-loving bohemianism."[45] Along with its unique style, the home's construction speaks to the nature of the family, especially the spacing and placement of the dining room. Nic sits proudly at the head of the table, a spot that was reserved for her the rest of her family.[46] Her placement at the head of the table is consistent with her role as the breadwinner. This type of construction recalls the seating arrangement in the Berkman home living room; especially when the family sat down to discuss the impending separation. Nic's role in her family is similar to Bernard's in that both are looked to as the domestic authority. Jules' overwhelming mark and investment on the décor of the home speaks to her relationship with Nic. Thus, the *mise en scène* in their Venice home is infused with family politics and tension.

Additionally, their backyard mimics the indoor décor with a bohemian touch on a typical heteronormative home. The centerpiece of the backyard is a large deck with a wooden picnic table alongside a large BBQ grill. This is where family meals take place and where Nic and Jules get to know Paul for the first time.[47] "We wanted an Americana feeling. But also, to suggest that they were trying to create as normal a family environment as possible," explains Berghoff.[48] The determination to have the backyard look like a "normal family environment" is significant as it

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[44] David A. Keeps, "Set Pieces: The L.A. look in 'The Kids Are All Right,'" July 22, 2010.
[45] Keeps, "Set Pieces," 2010.
[46] See figure 9.
[47] See figure 10.
[48] Keeps, "Set Pieces," 2010.

raises important questions about the depiction of this family and what that means for American notions of family. The two moms sitting across from Paul, and the two children they all created together, provide a new image for the American family. This image of Nic, Jules, and Paul's family speaks to how ideas about family have evolved but also remained the same. Nic and Jules may represent a gay marriage with a sperm donor father, but their family is still complicit in the trappings of the American dream.

The suburban family home of Nic and Jules starkly contrasts with Paul's hipster bachelor pad, a house in Echo Park, Los Angeles. Paul's house is rustic and laid-back, like his personality and demeanor. Much like Jules, Paul wears loose fitting clothing and manly jewelry. His overall look is bohemian and rustic, which trickles into the décor of his home. According to Berghoff, the home is decorated with a touch of "vintage mish-mash" which resulted in "…unmatched chairs, an old-school hi-fi and found objects. It's like he did a lot of shopping at the Rose Bowl Flea Market, which is exactly what we did."[49] Paul's home seems to be untended in a way that creates an eclectic space. He, like Jules, is soulful and cares about the earth as much as he does other people.

As a result, his profession isn't surprising: a restaurateur. Paul's business as a farmer and restaurant owner is the occupational embodiment of providing for others and being hospitable. His house dictates the same value system in which he invited Jules to take on his backyard as her first project for her developing landscape design business. As a result of their business deal, she spends time at his house and especially in his kitchen, the space that is most indicative of his character. Liz Arnold describes his kitchen as being "ramshackle" and "teetering with piles of clutter."[50] Paul is an unorganized mess in his kitchen but it makes for a welcoming space.[51] Also,

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[49] Keeps, "Set Pieces," 2010.
[50] Liz Arnold, "My Home, their Film Set," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2011.

the warm wooden paneling is reminiscent of Jules' style, one of the many ways they connect. Due to a similar earthy aesthetic and free-spirited philosophy, Paul and Jules' respective spaces inform the plot of *The Kids Are All Right*, speaking to their short-lived coupledom. As part of a middle-life malaise and slightly antagonistic relationship with Nic, Jules gravitates toward Paul. Not only is he the sperm donor for her children, but also they have similar worldviews and enjoy each other in a way that Nic and Jules seemingly cannot. Paul listens to Jules' feedback about what she thinks is best for his backyard and he respects her decisions. The *mise en scène* of Paul's home makes this relationship possible.

As a result, Jules disrupts familiar harmony and the subsequent part of the film tracks her journey to mend it. The question that persists remains: will Nic and Jules be able to make their marriage work? This question is far from extraordinary and plagues other couples as well. In the Volvo on the way back from dropping off Joni at college, Laser finally confronts his moms after everything has been revealed. "I don't think you guys should break up," says Laser. "No? Why's that?" asks Nic. "Because you're too old," he responds. Nic and Jules, look at each other, then laugh and smile. Ultimately, the family is restored and Cholodenko offers a visual reiteration of their love as Jules reaches out for Nic's hand. Nic returns her grasp and recognizes her wife.[52] Not only are the kids all right, so too are the adults.

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[51] See figure 11.
[52] See figure 12.

CONCLUSION

A fluid yet fixed genre and mode, film melodrama serves as an ideal vehicle to track history, as it is consistently evolving as part American popular culture and acting as a mirror of ordinary American people. Despite the debate that surrounds film melodrama, it is possible to historicize it as a genre, as a mode, or both. Film theorists like Bill Nichols, John Mercer, Martin Shingler, and Thomas Schatz argue that film melodrama is in fact a genre with distinct generic characteristics relating to theme and style. As a result of shifts in Hollywood and film studies as a discipline in which Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism became central to the generic form, melodrama as a genre eventually played a significant role in American cinema.

Nevertheless, film melodrama is also considered a distinct mode of experience, rather than a genre, for its unique dramatic configurations mirrored in distinct aesthetics and stylistic excess. Film historians Christine Gledhill and Thomas Elsaesser argue that film melodrama is at best a fragmented genre and is ultimately a mode. As a mode, melodrama is a dramatic form of *mise en scène*, giving what is placed in front of the camera symbolic potency. This argument is furthered by Peter Brook's study of melodrama as a literary form, rooted in literature and theater. Brooks contends that melodrama is a dramatization of every day actions coupled by a distinct aesthetic code, requiring the manipulation of the *mise en scène*. Also, the *mise en scène* serves as an aspect of the film, which works out ideological contradictions. This process allows for the embedded criticism of the period in the film to come to the forefront.

As a result of this secondary literature, film melodrama can be considered both a genre and a mode. Yet film melodrama can only be considered a genre when it is situated around the family and the home such as in domestic melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray. Thus, domestic melodramas serve as a genre in Hollywood, as evident in the films of Douglas Sirk,

Nicholas Ray, and countless other filmmakers before, during, and after the 1950s. Yet, film melodrama is also a mode in which the *melos* is given *drame*, as part of the *mise en scène*. Despite arguing that melodrama is in fact a genre, Schatz states that, "In a certain sense every Hollywood movie might be described as "melodramatic."[1] In a way, this argument is the foundation of the issues that this thesis explores. In the films that have been analyzed here, each contains melodramatic elements, utilizing melodramatic excess and manipulating the *mise en scène* with expressive color and stylized décor. This is especially evident in the sex comedies of the later 1950s and early 1960s in which the gendered apartments were a focal point in the films. *Pillow Talk*, like domestic melodramas, is depicted through a rose-colored lens and provides the *mise en scène* with a certain level of flair and excess. Thus, it is possible to understand and historicize film melodrama as both a genre, as evidenced in domestic melodramas, and as a mode, indicative of sex comedies, both of which illustrate the social and cultural changes from Eisenhower to modern day America.

Consequently, as an aesthetic form, domestic melodramas and sex comedies are central to understanding American history and one's identity as an American. As the drama of morality, melodrama offers the best way to measure moral and values in a world, which has been ridded of an epistemology.[2] Melodrama as a narrative and aesthetic form offers a great deal of insight into the period from which it was created. Peter Brooks argues that, "…the study of aesthetic form-modes of expression and representation-can be useful in situating ourselves." Both domestic melodramas and sex comedies serve as ideal channel through which American history is reflected. As Americans, Hollywood viewership can gain a sense of who they are from watching

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[1] Thomas Schatz, "The Family Melodrama" in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama* ed. by Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 148.
[2] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 205.

Lucy Moore's emotional struggle in *Written on the Wind* or Deirdre Burroughs's failing relationships in *Running with Scissors*, both of which are tied to the family and are evident in the domestic space, the permanent moral touchstone of society.

It is clear that some significant aspect of the domestic melodramas of the 1950s have continued into the independent period of contemporary filmmaking. Ryan Murphy, Noah Baumbach, and Lisa Cholodenko are no different from Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray in the way they reconstruct the domestic space, which challenges a comfortable and complacent America. Rather than domestic melodramas disappearing after Sirk, they evolve and remain the best example of how the family is a focus in Hollywood film. Sirk's films were created with bold color, over-stylized *mise en scène* and other aspects of beautiful melodramatic excess, which has been incorporated into the films of his successors. The same is true of the sex comedies of the late 1950s, especially *Pillow Talk,* which capitalized on new technology to reiterate the centrality of the couple, and subsequently, the family. The over-stylized *mise en scène* and melodramatic excess guide the narrative of *habitus*. Hollywood unfailingly promotes *habitus* in a middle-class environment, which is informed by the *mise en scène* of the domestic space. Thus, what is significant is the permanence of the American family's residence, which can be retraced to the domestic dramas and sex comedies of the late 50s and early 60s.

Furthermore, as a tool to understand the social and cultural changes in American history, Thomas Elsaesser argues that a central aspect of film melodrama is the presence of pathos, "…the response to the recognition of different levels of awareness."[3] For Elsaesser, pathos is embodied in "the very mediocrity of the human beings involved, putting such high demands upon themselves trying to life up to an exalted vision of man, but instead living out the

[3] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 67.

impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare." This "nightmare" is not gone, but rather has persisted in the narratives of contemporary films. Consequently, aesthetic forms such as film become especially critical "…for interpreting and making sense of experience."[4] As an aesthetic form with pathos at work, melodrama is vital, for it offers an opportunity for confrontation with our own history as a means to understand the evolution of the American family through film.

[4] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 206.

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