Dream Houses Gone Wrong: Small Town, Suburbia, and Architectural Narrative in Four Films by Douglas Sirk

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DREAM HOUSES GONE WRONG: SMALL TOWN, SUBURBIA, AND ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVE IN FOUR FILMS BY DOUGLAS SIRK

By

Sara Hayat

A THESIS

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DREAM HOUSES GONE WRONG: SMALL TOWN, SUBURBIA, AND
ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVE IN FOUR FILMS BY DOUGLAS SIRK

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Critics have extensively explored filmmaker Douglas Sirk’s personal involvement in numerous aspects of his cinema, especially in his mise-en-scene. Sirk’s architectural vision however, is quite underrated among his scholars. This thesis is a research-oriented, as well as an analytical study on Douglas Sirk’s architectural semiotics, and the intricate layers of narrative meaning that it adds to his cinematic oeuvre. As case studies, I select four of his 1950s Hollywood films that refer to a contemporaneous disappointment towards the aggressively advertized postwar notion of a suburban dream house, and its small town precedents. Looking at the expressiveness of context, building type, layout, and interior decoration of the dream house in each film, I investigate how Sirk criticizes its materialistic aspects in light of ephemeral cinematic architectures.
For Jahan Hayat
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1  INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

2  NO PLACE LIKE HOME: *HAS ANYBODY SEEN MY GAL?* (1952) ..................... 23

3  FROM STAGE TO SMALL TOWN: *ALL I DESIRE* (1953) ............................... 41

4  PICTURE WINDOWS: *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS* (1955) ....................... 64

5  A DOLL’S HOUSE: *THERE’S ALWAYS TOMORROW* (1956) ...................... 89

3  CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE............................................................................. 124

Works Cited ............................................................................................................. 162
Chapter One- Introduction

Before he became Douglas Sirk, the now renowned master of melodrama, he was Hans Detlef Sierck, born 1897 in Hamburg, Germany to Danish parents, Detlef and Annemarie Sierck. From a very early age, young Detlef showed a great interest in the stage, and officially directed plays emphasizing Shakespeare, Shaw, Brecht, Moliere and Ibsen from 1923 to 1937, leaving his powerful mark on German Expressionist Theater. That was until he left Germany in 1937 for the United States, due to his opposition to the Third Reich.1 During the last three years in Germany, Sirk started a film career, working for UFA studios, partly as a set designer.2 The German melodramas that he made during this era of his life were prequels to Sirk’s Hollywood melodramas, Written on the Wind (1956) and Imitation of Life (1959), being the most celebrated.3

Sirk’s Hollywood films were not always appreciated, but were often criticized as tacky soap opera material. As Barbara Klinger points out in her book Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk (1994), it was initially the cineaste writers of the influential French film magazine, the Cahiers du Cinema, who brought Douglas Sirk’s oeuvre to critical attention. During the first half of the 1950s, Cahiers du Cinema critics established La politique des auteurs as a special approach to looking at film, in which it is understood that the director imprints his creative vision on every aspect of the collaborative process of filmmaking, especially on the mise-en-scene.


Between 1955 and 1959, the Cahiers published a series of essays on Sirk, placing him among a series of other Hollywood auteurs.\(^4\)

There was, nevertheless, a considerable shift in Sirk’s esteem in auteurist criticism from the 1950s to the 1970s, which depended on the critics’ ability to connect Sirk’s particular use of mise-en-scène to the narrative content of his films. The French auteurist critics of the 1950s were mainly fascinated by the interpretation of Sirk’s uniquely vivid visual style as an aesthetics of “excess and artifice”, which they variously praised as expressive of being “devoid of substance”, “self-reflexive”, “modern” or “unconventional”. These critics, however, saw the meaning of the films to exist in a series of specific narrative themes which they viewed completely detached from Sirk’s style and mise-en-scène. Since there was no logic of how Sirk connected form to the content, his creative vision was difficult to comprehend, and he was not yet considered among the “Pantheon” of auteurs.\(^5\)

In the early 1970s on the other hand, a series of interviews by English auteurist critics provided the “missing link” for Sirk’s evaluation as one of the greatest of auteurs. Interviewing critics applied Sirk’s own philosophical and social commentary to bond his personally defined mise-en-scène with recurrent narrative premises of his films. Most revealing of these interviews was Jon Halliday’s duly titled “Sirk on Sirk”.\(^6\) In this influential interview, Sirk stated that the self-reflexiveness of his mise-en-scène was,


\(^5\) Ibid. 4-5. The concept of belonging to the auteurs’ “Pantheon” is an expression that prominent auteur critic Andrew Sarris employed to designate an auteur’s personal vision as cohesive throughout his entire oeuvre.

\(^6\) Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday* (London and Boston: Faber &Faber, 1971)
according to Berthold Brecht and Erwin Panofsky’s theories of representation, related to his films’ constant awareness of their own nature as an artistic medium, as well as expressive of the philosophical dilemmas his characters’ endure due to their social conditionings. Concepts of artifice and imitation, already associated with Sirk’s *mise-en-scene* in the form of unnatural lighting and coloring of objects or the prevalence of imitative objects such as mirrors and statues, were now understood to not only comment on the films’ consciousness of their imitative selves, but also on the artifice and imitation associated with social circumstances that demanded a certain degree of imitation, artificiality and pretense from characters. These characters acted as mirrors to the social value systems inside the miniature world of film which in turn was depicted as an imitative mirror to its contemporaneous counterpart, the larger world outside of film.\(^7\)

This new import of the now meaningful objects resulted in a deluge of novel readings of Sirk’s films, in which Sirk scholars deciphered and analyzed layer upon layer of narrative meaning in objects that surround Sirk’s characters, in order to discover the philosophical and social significance of the films. The less emphasized aspects of this kind of reading are to this day the architectures and *inhabitable* objects in his films and the intricate spatial as well as design related narrative layers they provide for a profound understanding of meaning. I would therefore like to dedicate this thesis to furthering a yet underdeveloped study of Sirk’s spatial and architectural language and its narrative connotations. Since this subject is rather broad and the scope of this thesis is rather limited, I narrow this topic down to those architectural and spatial narratives that provide the films with layers of the most imperative social commentary pertaining to Sirk’s 1950s

Hollywood era, which is the bourgeois family lifestyle in the context of the appearance obsessed Eisenhower era, the most prominent spatial manifestation of which was post war suburbia and its dream houses.

A retrospective look at the proto-suburban small town and a glance at contemporaneous postwar suburbia, as well as at the dream houses both these spaces contain, became the main object of my study. I build on two preceding criticisms, Roger D. McNiven’s 1983 “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’” written for Cinema Journal, and Amy Lawrence’s 1999 “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s The Reckless Moment and Douglas Sirk’s ‘There’s Always Tomorrow’” written for Film Criticism magazine. Both are comparative studies that take a serious look at instances of Sirk’s architectural semiotics in comparison to that of other auteurs. I use this thesis to study Sirk’s small town and suburban architectures in more detail. In analyzing my case studies, I proceed in a linear timeline of Sirk’s work. I start with Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952), which is a Small Town musical comedy, made right at the verge of Sirk’s transition from comedy to melodrama with the second case study, All I Desire (1953), and after a subsequent discussion of his famous All that Heaven Allows (1955), I end with There’s Always Tomorrow (1956), a film that was made right before his powerful masterpiece Written on the Wind (1956). The first three films center on proto-, and semi-suburban small town conditions, whereas the last film explicitly criticizes postwar suburbia.

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I dedicate each of the four following chapters to one film, focusing on space, architecture and town design while aiming to not stray away from the films themselves. I would describe my main methodology for telling architecture’s role in all the films as analytical and descriptive as well as research-, and in a few instances theory- based, mainly referring to Gaston Bachelard’s theories of “The dialectics of inside and outside”, as well as to Alois Riegl’s theory of “The modern cult of monuments”. In each case, moved by the methodology of my film professor Dr. William Rothman, I explain in minute detail how architecture and space tell the story, clarify some points that Sirk did not want to be too explicit about in order to avoid didacticism, and how architectural narrative miraculously represents sentiments and emotions that are absolutely unrepresentable. Usually at the beginning of a chapter, I set aside a few pages for historical, social and philosophical accounts of realities that the films reflect of the world outside themselves. I also quote what other Sirk critics, especially those of his later auteurist criticism period, as well as even more recent Sirk scholars had to say about the meaning of objects in the films.

Since a consistent structure for the whole thesis would take away from the narrative autonomy that I think each chapter deserves, I refer to three main themes that I take into account while analyzing architectural narrative in each film only in the introductory and conclusive chapters. I find the four criteria pertaining to Douglas Sirk’s architectures in the following films to be: 1) Context, 2) Typology, Style and Layout 3) Architectural Elements of Interior Decor 4) Cinematic and Transcendental Architecture. I consider that

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these categories are sequentially interconnected. The context influences the type, which in turn has a close relationship with elements of interior architecture, which are contrasted by ephemeral architectures, which criticize the context.

In the following description of these categories, I distinguish between three types of space in film:

- **Camera Space**: The actual location through which the camera moves. This space can be a real geographical location or a constructed set.

- **The space of characters**: The cinematic space that the camera constructs through a series of manipulations of camera space via different lenses, montage, movement, etc. in order to create a new environment, which is *reality* as perceived by characters.

- **Cinematic frame space**: The cinematic space that the camera constructs from camera space with special attention to the composition of the two dimensional screen frame. This space usually departs from the space that characters perceive as their environment and is directed solely towards the cinematic experience of the audience. Cinematic frame space is a constant reminder of the media of film and in a self reflexive act creates an aesthetic distance between the audience and the characters inside the world of film.

1) **Context**:

By context I mean the design and the perception of spatial milieu, as well as the implied geographical and socio-temporal environment in which the family home of the characters is situated. The previous analyses of Douglas Sirk’s architecture by Roger McNiven and Amy Lawrence give primary attention to the home as an isolated,
imprisoning object, whereas I argue that the context of the home is equally, if not more important, than the home itself in the way it affects its inhabitants. In the first three films, the context is the American small town which itself is an object that spatially contains and shapes the “feel” of the home with its arrangement of residences and emphasis on certain public locales in addition to socio-temporally defining its meaning. In the last film, *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956), however, the context is the ubiquitous time-space compression of a post modern world, in which the outside world reversely becomes an extension of the home’s interior.

In the first three films, the small town’s isolation from the rest of the world, renders it contained by a larger spatial reality, something that results in the notion of an “elsewhere”. The concept of “isolation from an elsewhere” is much more complex than simply “imprisoning”, and can be idyllic and place-defining, such as in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952), an agitating and confusing trap such as in *All I Desire* (1953) and *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), or it can become an intricate prison in that it disappears in the context of a singular post-modern spatiotemporal compression as in the last film, *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956).

Although the location or the space of the camera is for all of the first three films Universal Studio’s *Colonial Street*, the spatial perception and arrangement of buildings as well as the geographical and socio-temporal meaning of the context changes to a considerable amount in each film. Throughout the first three chapters, I investigate the camera’s task in these films in identifying the same filming location as three completely different locales in time and geographical place, in each case rendering the space of
characters as a mirror to socio-temporal realities of the larger world outside of film. More than that, however, I focus on the way the camera perceives its environment differently in each case, therefore manipulates building arrangements and spatial characteristics, and conveys the main concept of each film. In the last film, the space of the camera in regards to the context of the house loses significance due to the vastness of the context. The task of spatial perception of the context therefore becomes even more intricate, noteworthy and effective. In the following paragraphs of this section, dedicated to “context”, I summarize the socio-temporal as well as the spatial concepts that each film conveys, and after analyzing helpful sequences in the framework of the chapters, I will return to the subject of “context” in the conclusive chapter to dissect the mechanics of Sirk’s camera which successfully conveys these meanings.

The first film, Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952), is set in the prosperous 1920s, an era that focused on happiness being found in form of material possessions and in glamorous surfaces, foreboding the contemporaneous consumerism of the Eisenhower era. An attractive residence outside of town became one of the most important trends of this time period, resulting in the unprecedented blanketing of small towns by the early gentry suburbs. In Has Anybody Seen My Gal?’s case, this phenomenon happens to an isolated fictional small town called Hilverton in Vermont.

Since the film is a morality tale, it takes sides with the original small town structure, criticizing the newer suburban arrangement in its virtuous light. The juxtaposition of the

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10 I find the subject of the small town to be in this respect self reflexive of the medium of film, which similarly imitates life in its confines and makes it more palpable for the audience.

11 Here Sirk really makes a statement how film is able to make even the most confusing of spaces palpable.
older small town and the newer villas of the rich therefore, does not really produce a split or a divide in Hilverton for the audience but rather renders the new suburban addition as redundant and disrupting in their eyes. Unlike the other films of this thesis which are far less didactic, this film is explicit about its preference for the small town in dialogue, but Sirk’s camera and the way it subjectively perceives both small town and the newer addition, plays a more subtle role by thoroughly defining for us the idyll of the isolated small town environment but leaving us confused about the specific whereabouts of the suburban villas.

The second film, *All I Desire* (1953), goes back to the Victorian age and its spatially defined gender roles. Influenced by English Protestantism and its cult of domesticity, a series of late nineteenth-century American reformers, most prominent of which were sisters Catherine Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe, urged women to marry at a relatively young age, have as many children as possible, and isolate themselves and their offspring in the safeness of the home. In their seminal book, *The American Woman’s Home* (1869), the Beecher sisters’ description of the spatial context of the home sounded necessarily suburban, in that it completely removed the world of home from the city, yet made the city accessible. Railroads were in their view “special blessings”, in that they allowed for the family to be safely separated from the stress of the city, where the male leader of the house could work and provide his wife and children with a “respectable” single family home in the country; a home surrounded by lawns, which allowed for outdoor activities that would strengthen the relationship of the members of the nuclear family.\(^\text{12}\)

In *All I Desire* the divide between city and the isolated and trite semi-rural Midwestern small town called Riverdale, results in a dichotomy of “here and elsewhere” and a restless yearning for the elsewhere, that whether it be city or country, is only a train ride away, and yet seems to be a mysteriously magical world. The complete disjunction between outsiders’ fantasy and insiders’ reality leads to inevitable disappointments. The dichotomy between inside and outside reality, is nowhere to be found in the dialogue and is a task that Sirk’s camera alone performs by perceiving insiders’ and outsiders’ points of view so differently.

The third film, *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) returns to the gentrified New England village, this time called Stonington, a small town in Connecticut, which in the context of the contemporaneous 1950s has become completely usurped by generations of bourgeois suburbanites. The uninterrupted sequence of subsequent generations residing in Stonington, lends the older families a certain air of arrogant aristocracy in the context of their microcosmic hometown, the right to which primarily is achieved by birth and alternatively by strict adherence to the town’s retrospective rules of “tradition”. Like in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*, however, there is a new addition to the place, the alternative, bohemian bourgeoisie that does not conform to tradition but rather does the opposite by rebelling against it with principles of “natural” and “carefree” living. In *All That Heaven Allows*, this new bourgeoisie aspires to a permanent version of Thoreau’s Walden experience, based on simple living.

By juxtaposing two bourgeois groupings that are either completely devoted to tradition or absolutely negate its validity as the basis of an ideology, Sirk renders Stonington as an allegorical microcosm that reflects the ideological debates of 1950s
America in regards to “traditional” or “modern” country living. On one side, there were the older American families who boasted of their white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ancestry, and the not so old families who took pride simply in a fictitious version of such a past. By gathering in so called “nativist suburbs”, (towns associated with the first English settlers), and by following a set of contrived, traditional rules, these families validated their superiority to the rest of America. On the other side however, as a reaction against the traditional bourgeoisie, another group of bourgeois Americans opted for a simpler way of living. By reacting against traditional ostentation, however, they formed their own set of pretentions. Modernism and its elitist aesthetics and lifestyles of simplicity became a new ideology.

In *All that Heaven Allows*, Sirk criticizes both the older families of Stonington and the new addition. He explicitly condemns the traditional Stonington bourgeoisie’s conformism in the dialogue of the film, but also subtly and even more effectively reveals the contrivance of both groups with the irony of his camera, which delicately and masterfully perceives space as antithetical to each group’s ideologies, mocking their pretentions. Unlike in *Has Anybody Seen my Gal?*, where Sirk both explicitly through dialogue, and implicitly through the spatial perceptions of his camera encourages the audience to criticize the new suburban villas in the light of the old small town, he does not provide us with such unequivocal direction in *All that Heaven Allows*. Unable to choose between the two sides, the audience therefore can empathize with the main character of the film, for whom true happiness seems to be impossible to find in either side of town, and as a result is torn between the two. Like in *All I Desire* then, a constant yearning for an elsewhere becomes an obstacle to happiness.
With *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956), Sirk moves from the construction of the fictional Small Towns of Hilverton, Riverdale and Stonington to the depiction of the real megalopolis of 1950s Los Angeles. In the three previous settings, most of the overall context was rather palpable in its physical compactness; Sirk therefore was able to manufacture these small towns via the cooperation of his camera with a single location, namely Universal Studio’s *Colonial Street*. With *There’s Always Tomorrow*, however, Sirk departs from his previous filming location in order to properly depict both the incomprehensible vastness of postwar Los Angeles’s highway constructed reality, and the paradoxical compressions of its postmodern space. Sirk’s camera successfully does so by depicting the single isolated pods of Los Angeles’s drive-in space as contained in one single reality. He therefore adds to the dialogue, which concentrates on the child-orientation of postwar suburbia, and in addition claims that suburbia’s issue of continuous containment is itself a children’s sphere of existence. Spatial confinements are reminiscent of the intra-uterine state of human existence, more suitable for fetuses than for grownups. The whole world becomes entrapped into this single reality, with not even the hope of an elsewhere to escape to.

2) **Typology, Style and Layout:**

By 1870, the detached single family home had become visibly known in America as the “suburban style”; a building type that unlike the freestanding “country manor” or the “farmhouse” was not economically tied to the land, but was surrounded by lawns and other varieties of contrived nature, mainly for ideologically aesthetic and recreational reasons.13 Since its inception as a building type, the suburban home’s spatial uniqueness

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was associated with both family life and freedom of expression. The latter essentially crystallized in the form of exterior building styles, and the former as the emergence of introvert attributes of floor plan typologies or layouts that functionally focused on bringing the members of the nuclear family closer together.14

This ideological outlook on the single family house was never more evident in the United States than during the Eisenhower era, when unbridled consumerist culture aggressively advertized appearances, especially those of the family oriented suburban dream home. As Robert Beuka points out in his book SuburbiaNation, the language of prominent home magazines such as “House Beautiful” and “Better Homes and Gardens” instilled the general conviction that the display of wealth and social status in the form of architectural style or lawn culture indicated one’s unique characteristics and even became a sign of patriotism as it defined “American democracy as the freedom to contrive (or purchase) a unique identity.”15 In regards to the interior, the focus on family life and parenthood during the baby boom of the postwar era, lead the floor plan layout of the popular 1950s family home in all its varieties to be usually free flowing and open in order for parents to easily supervise their children, and in order to alleviate the chores of the female homemaker.16


Sirk’s dream houses significantly reflect the contemporaneous import of architectural typologies of façade and layout. He draws on historically defined variations of types of facades and floor plans, and on the relationships of floor plan and façade, in order to narrate the story and to represent emotions of his characters. He mainly utilizes camera space, in form of the available architectural sets of Universal Studio’s Colonial Street, but he also manipulates and distorts architecture via his camera to express his characters’ subjective way of feeling about it. Below, I briefly describe Sirk’s variation of use of typology, style and layout of the dream house according to the main concept of each film. After returning from the architectural analyses in the chapters, both verbally and via reconstruction drawings when applicable, I will return to this subject and elaborate on my findings in the conclusion.

In Has Anybody Seen My Gal?, Sirk settles the debate of whether the glamorous mansions of the wealthy or the snug and comfortable modest cottages of the poor can be considered homes. Sirk marks his preference for the cottage by lending it positive human characteristics such as “honesty” and “virtue”. He does so by mainly using the space of the camera i.e. the actual sets. In resolving the problem of how to architecturally represent an honest house, Sirk debates between structural disjunctions of floor plan and facade, and the stylistic compatibility of typology between the two. In order to depict the characters’ own subjective view of their homes, however, he utilizes variations of the camera’s involvement in the spatial perceptions of the sets.

In All I Desire, the home, like all other objects contained in the context of the small town, is rendered with mask-like, exemplar surfaces that conceal a certain negative vibe. The house, similar to other objects in town, becomes a metaphor for the townsfolk, who,
due to the small town’s closed value systems, value honor over freedom and conceal a great amount of energy behind their faces. The pretentious mask is symbolically reified in the house as the decorous facade, which via an ahistorical mismatch of style and typology with the floor plan divorces itself from the layout of the interior. In addition to using appropriate architectural sets, Sirk uses interesting camera angles to distort the exterior appearance of the home as different characters subjectively view it.

With *All that Heaven Allows*, the rift inside the small town becomes visible in the inconsistency of architectural styles. Each of the two groups residing in the town, the aristocratic country club crowd as well as the naturalists, have their own distinctive building typologies that reflect the ideological schism of 1950s bourgeois countryside architecture between American traditional architectures and the modernism of international style glass boxes. In the context of sets, Douglas Sirk uses glass, a prevalent material in both styles, to spatially convey the insecurities of the town’s country clubbers and the contradictions of talk and deed of the modern naturalists.

In *There’s Always Tomorrow*, Sirk focuses on the parent-friendly, open and free flowing, ranch house type floor plan, and he almost brutally points out that it has got nothing to do with freedom or openness once the child grows up. The initial intentions of child supervision of the floor plan, realized through the minimization of walls and the maximization of transparent surfaces, turn against the parent when the child grows into the adolescent stage of life, and becomes a judgmental spy to the parents. In discussing this film, I will make adequate reference to Amy Lawrence’s essay “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s The Reckless Moment and Douglas Sirk’s ‘There’s
Always Tomorrow”’, which starts an interesting conversation about the openness of layout of the house in There’s Always Tomorrow.17

3) Architectural Elements of Interior Decor:

Interior decorative architecture becomes part of an interior mise-en-scene that due to its location inside the home becomes a powerful metaphor for the characters’ own repressed interiors and emotions. The audience has the privilege to decipher visually and spatially the characters’ reserved dilemmas through the mise-en-scene. Sirk uses isolated architectural elements of interior décor both in the space of characters and in cinematic frame space. Whereas the former approach puts the decorative elements in reach of the characters’ perception, the latter constructs a space that often departs from the characters’ reality and in which the symbolic meaning of objects is directed towards the audience. As I mentioned above, this kind of space in film is self-reflexive of the nature of film as an artistic medium. As Roger McNiven points out, Sirk emphasizes the artifice of architectural elements that construct cinematic frame space by stripping them of their inherent functional qualities and lending them unexpected new ones that express the characters’ unconscious and conscious inner dilemmas which they bury under a surface of propriety.18 The emphasis on self-reflexivity through these elements becomes a connection between the entrapment of characters inside the world of film and their imprisonment by architectural features in their own world. Trapped in this limited world, the characters lack some knowledge about these architectural elements that we are

17 Amy Lawrence, “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s The Reckless Moment and Douglas Sirk’s There’s Always Tomorrow,” Film Criticism 23, no.2/3 (1999): 150-166.

privileged to have through a cinematic experience of their world. The application of interior architecture in the characters’ own reality, however, always refers to their inherent functions.

Throughout the analyses of the four films of this thesis, I point out how architectural elements of interior décor such as window mullions, mirror frames, columns etc., take on imprisoning or confining qualities in the frame of cinematic space and how they function in the characters’ own reality. In the conclusive chapter I distinguish between a series of variations of application of interior décor in cinematic frame space and in the space of characters in the context of each film.

4) Cinematic and Transcendental Architecture:

There are moments in which Sirk uses architectural elements that are in one way or another associated with some liminal line between interior and exterior, and combines them with lighting to create patterns of light and shadow as well as reflection and refraction across the screen. Contrasting patterns of light and shadow, as well as the disparate spatial realities these elements create, echo the characters’ most profound instances of inside-outside contradictions. Here, Sirk uses architectural elements primarily in the framework of cinematic space, therefore, similarly to architectural elements of interior décor, puts them to use towards an artistic self-reflexivity that renders the characters entangled in the world of film and troubled by the value systems inside of it.

At times, the fleeting light patterns of these instances primarily reverberate with a sense of tragic knowledge of ephemerality that the characters’ endure as they become aware of the precious time they have wasted in pursuit of an inauthentic imitation of life.
in the context of the socio-temporal demands of their world. As devastating as these moments are, one cannot deny their sublime kind of beauty. The transcendent quality of these moments lies in another type of Sirk’s films’ self-reflexive awareness of themselves, which has applications towards the characters, but more than that speaks to the audience members.

By stressing liminal and ephemeral qualities of an architecture of light, these moments make the audience aware of the breathtaking beauty that can only be found in the medium of film and of what becomes of architecture in films. During the screening of a film, architectural structures, valued outside the world of film for their permanence, can disappear in seconds; it makes no difference whether they are suburban homes, small towns or megalopolises. Inside the miniature world of film, architecture becomes a very powerful reference for reminding the audience of the ephemerality of life itself. Situated in the liminal space of cinematic experience, with the body in one world and the mind soaring in another world beyond the screen, the audience member becomes overwhelmed by this reminder, and by the beauty of film’s artistic ability to imitate life.19

By using the immaterial substance of light to create patterns of architecture across the screen, Sirk’s self-reflexive films make the audience aware of the ephemeral quality of filmic architecture. Sirk contrasts the beauty of the cinematic architectural experience of this kind with the bitter emotions of regret that the characters endure inside the world of film as a result of having wasted valuable time for the futile pursuit of happiness in material things. In the context of the 1950s, Sirk’s imitative world of film reflects in this

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way society’s belief in the consumerist bliss of postwar suburbia, the architectural manifestation of which is the suburban dream house. Sirk criticizes the suburban dream house by contrasting it with the dreamed house in film. He elucidates the frustrations of his characters with the material architectures of the dream houses inside their world, by distinguishing them from the beauty of the immaterial architecture in films.

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I find that by referring to notions of ephemerality and liminal experience that are the very stuff of film, Sirk also refers to the American philosophies of transcendentalism often compared to the filmic experience. I am inspired to think so by an essay of my film professor Dr. William Rothman in which he criticizes postwar suburbia in the light of films via this philosophy. In his “Hollywood and the Rise of Suburbia”, Dr. Rothman provides us with a profound link, or rather antithesis between the experience of films and that of suburbia, by answering the question of why postwar America abandoned the movies in favor of their suburban homes.20

During the 1930s, a series of new genres of Hollywood film emerged that dispensed with the former sidings of movies with either city or country and based on philosophies of American transcendentalism opted for the perfect marriage between the two. A good example was the “The Comedy of Remarriage” which focused on a new kind of marriage between men and women that “without denying their differences” celebrated their equalities.21 The marriage of the couple also involved the marriage of city and country into a single place that similarly to the Shakespearean “Green World” encouraged the


21 Ibid. 171.
couple’s problems to heighten, only in order to magically resolve. This legendary place was an important spatial component in the context of the remarriage comedies, and based on the American transcendental traditions of Emerson and Thoreau, was neither city nor country but a liminal place born out of an urban conception of the country. Located usually “right outside a major city”, this temporarily visited magical world was in these films usually known as “Connecticut”.23

With the birth of postwar suburbia, Connecticut became a real place, where a considerable portion of Americans could afford to buy their dream houses and “live in the here and now” as opposed to awaiting happiness in some “vague future” found in films.24 Apparently this preference for the “here and now” was completely in line with the transcendental concept behind the remarriage comedies, at the same time however at odds with it. In addition to spatially defined gender roles that “locked women away” in the suburbs and thus totally contradicted the notion of equality found in the remarriage comedies, the transformation of the transcendental “mythical Connecticut” into a real one took away from its ephemeral filmic magic that was based on the notion of ephemerality intrinsic to the cinematic experience itself.25

Indeed there are connections between American transcendentalist world views and the filmic experience. Both find beauty in a “here and now” that is inseparable from the


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid. 174.
notion of ephemerality, both perceive the world “poetically” through integrating all its parts into a single dream, and as my film professor Dr. Rothman most beautifully puts it, both celebrate the liminal spaces between “realities of the day and dreams of the night, the realms of public and private” and in the case of the remarriage comedy “the worlds of the city and small town or country.” This last point also links suburbia with transcendentalism and film, with the permanence of its materialistic aspirations, however, being contrasted by the two.

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In the revealing “Sirk on Sirk” interview with Jon Halliday that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Sirk makes a statement about his deep connection to American transcendentalist philosophies to which his father introduced him during his youth:

...you know it was like a sun going up over my youth: this strangely clean language. And then in the wake of Thoreau, I read Emerson, a bit later. I don’t know how they’d look now, probably a bit dated, but then they had a strong effect on me. This kind of philosophy dwells in my mind and had to find an outlet eventually.

When Sirk and his wife Hilde Jary, who was a famous actress in Germany, moved to Hollywood in 1937, they chose a temporary simple life that practically echoed Thoreau’s transcendental Walden experience. They decided to isolate themselves from the rest of the noteworthy German émigré community, which included figures like “Reinhardt, Jessner, Thomas Mann, Lang, Lorre, Werfel and Brecht,” on the grounds that according to Sirk nearly all of them “were living in the past, because they had very little to do, or

26 Ibid. 171.

were completely out of work together.” For the Sirks, however, it was one of the most peaceful times in their lives. They lived in the here and now. Sirk bought a little piece of land in a farm community in southern California and found an old church whose steeple he took off with his own hands and converted it into a home. They raised chickens for a living and once in a while delightfully visited their neighbors in the nearby café, which was the only public place in town. This was Sirk and Hilde’s ephemeral “Connecticut”, and the church was the closest thing to a filmic American dream house outside the world of film.

After returning to making films, Sirk found another outlet for his transcendental philosophies both in film itself and in the subject of a series of films about the antithesis to the Thoreauvian experience; about people who in search of the material dream house in the “real” Connecticut end up in permanent labyrinths, prisons, museums and mausoleums. The four films in this thesis are a reflection on the postwar condition of the materialistic American dream taking over the old transcendental American dream. They are about the burdens of the new suburban dream and its houses. With what I call “cinematic and transcendental architecture”, Sirk’s final ring in the chain of his architectural approach to film, he criticizes the permanence of the postwar suburban experience literally in the light of transcendental qualities of the art of film.

28 Ibid. 67.


30 This is expression is borrowed from Thoreau’s language in the “Economy” chapter of his book “Walden”. “However, if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead”. See Henry David Thoreau, “Economy” in *Walden* (Yale and New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), 163.
Chapter Two- No Place Like Home: Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952)

Sirk scholar Michael Stern points out that in “Has anybody seen my Gal?”, Sirk brings a small sector of society into a specific spatiotemporal context, in order to investigate their “morals”, with the main moral lesson being that “pretention” is detrimental to a person’s happiness.31 I would like to add that the film also contains an architectural moral, which translates the narrative morality lesson into spatial terms; debating the American dilemma of whether the American house is home or monument.

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With the industrial revolution already in full gear, the new economic boom of Ford’s Model T era after 1913 provided opportunity for business ventures on a scale unheard of before the Civil War, and led to a new American class, the “Robber Barons”, who notoriously took advantage of the new prospects, and usurped the ample resources of the land.32 The likes of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Solomon Guggenheim, James Duke and John D. Rockefeller, whose names now have achieved an iconic status, were ridiculed by the older families of Boston, Philadelphia and New York as newcomers. To overcome their insecurities in this regard, the new elite erected palatial “country estates”, which, with their noble architectural styles, Neo-Gothic and Neo-Renaissance being among the most popular, evoked a false, dignified past that extended back to the old world.33

Mansions, however, were not a new fad in America at that time. The attitude towards mansions during the antebellum past was in fact quite negative. The ostentatious display


33 Ibid. 89
of property was labeled as “un-American”, since it indicated a radically uneven allocation of capital and therefore was antithetical to the utopian/egalitarian notion of home-ownership for all.\(^{34}\) The question was whether these types of houses were “fashionable museums” of “foreign follies” or homes.\(^{35}\)

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the new concepts of private space and nuclear family lead to the rise of the domestic ideal and a cult of home ownership. The possession of a detached, single family house was quite central to the pursuit of domestic bliss and was an image for which all respectable members of the middle class strived. The single family home represented the individual self and was “a symbol of having arrived at fixed place in society”.\(^{36}\) The popular series of prints titled “The Seasons of Life”, which Currier and Ives published by the millions, indicate that the collective imagery of “home” and the domestic ideal was in the generic form of a “cottage” in a semi rural setting, to which the suburban gothic cottages of important housing reformers such as Catherine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing contributed during the mid 19\(^{th}\) century.\(^{37}\) The notion of a snug, bucolic cottage was clearly a far cry from the cold, millionaire mansions.

\(^{34}\) Jan Cohn, “Plutocrats and Paupers,” in The Palace or the Poorhouse (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1979), 123.

\(^{35}\) Ibid. 122


\(^{37}\) Ibid. 49
Nevertheless, there was a significant shift in the stance against the mansion after the Civil War. It was now quite acceptable for the mansion not to be a home. Contrary to older beliefs, its pretentious fashions had a patriotic purpose now. These architectural monuments of business success were, to use Alois Riegl’s language, “intentional monuments” that aimed for the collective “commemoration” of a particular moment in American history, when it was established that aristocracy could be purchased. They provided an inspirational image for average Americans and their progeny, and encouraged them to take advantage of the freedom and opportunities that were available in the abundance of the new world and to emulate the robber barons in their financial success, regardless of their social class; something that was not possible for them in the “gentry by birthright” oriented old world.

With New York, Boston, Philadelphia and other big metropolises having turned into notorious whirlpool cities, swallowing up almost forty percent of the nation’s populace, the health-conscious, newly emerged elite became more and more attracted to the bordering farmlands or even existing semi-rural villages, superimposing a suburban fabric onto them; something which the farms and villages at times endured and at times

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38 As illustrated by Currier and Ives, the popular notion of home in America was the cozy, small, unpretentious cottage in the context of nature.


40 Jan Cohn, “Plutocrats and Paupers,” in *The Palace or the Poorhouse* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1979), 131.
could not survive. “Overdressing” already existing small towns had the advantage that these areas already contained “local self sufficiency, political autonomy and adequate external linkage for suburban commuting”. The resulting landscape was one of mansions, cottages and barns. One can only imagine the social tensions of such a disjointed spatial order.

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“Has Anybody Seen My Gal?” (1952), Douglas Sirk’s third Americana comedy, takes place in this kind of spatiotemporal context. The story centers in Hilverton, Vermont, a place where the country club oriented, upper middle class residential villas occupy the hills looking down upon the commercial main street and the cottages of the working class. Hilverton is a good example of a New England small town “overdressed” by wealthy suburbia.

The story is about a former Hilverton boy, Samuel G. Fulton, who, frustrated and restless due to rejection by Millicent, the love of his life, leaves tiny Hilverton and ventures into the world of business. With “no family to tie him down”, he is able to take most advantage of the abundant resources of the land. A typical robber baron, he goes to “Texas for oil and to Alaska for gold”, and eventually becomes the richest man in the world.

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The opening shot of the film announces that we are at a specific point in time as well as at a specific geographical location. It is the late 1920s, the height of America’s optimism that immediately preceded the unexpected stock market crash, which lead to a drastic drop in real estate prices and eventually to the Great Depression and the reversal of many fates. We see a Model T Ford; an explicit icon for that era, driving up to the gates of a Tudor-style gatehouse. The Tudor villa in the background appears to be in an extremely wealthy village park suburb in Tarrytown, one of New York’s wealthiest, leafy enclaves in Westchester County. As the car slowly ascends a winding road accompanied by undulating notes of violins, the camera lingers on the site of millionaire Fulton’s majestic country estate that sits in the midst of acres of lawn. Built in noble, Neo-Gothic style, it is definitely a mansion worthy of the richest man in the world. It is not really a cozy home but an architectural monument to his success as a tycoon. In fact it is more than a home: the rambling expanse of lawn indicates that it is a monument to wealth that has to be viewed from a distance, in other words: it is far from home. The reflection of its image in the nearby lake, doubles its aura of grandeur, and conveys its nature as an iconic image of success. The camera then cuts immediately to the interior of the house and goes into its most private space, Fulton’s bedroom. The reflection of Fulton in the mirror facing the camera provides continuity between the two shots and associates Fulton’s image with that of his house, declaring that his face, like the facades of his mansion is an iconic American monument of wealth. (Figs 2.1 and 2.2)

For more on the mansion as a distant monument see: Jan Cohn, “Plutocrats and Paupers,” in The Palace or the Poorhouse (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1979), 131.
There is an air of morbidity and stuffiness in this dimly lit room. Lavishly decorated with antique, gilded, Egyptian columns, numerous *objects d’art*, and expensive, antique brocades, the bedroom resembles an Egyptian tomb. The conversation that immediately takes place here, echoes the stale taste of the environment. Bookkeeper Edward Norton appears to be quite little in contrast to the high bed and seems to be kneeling in front of an altar while reading out Fulton’s “last will and testament”. 44 It looks as though Fulton is preparing for his death. The doctor’s words, however, assure us that it is only a case of hypochondria, which is a predictable condition for the health-obsessed suburbanites of the early decades of twentieth century, who had fled the congested cities mostly because of fears for their health. 45 Apart from this however, one cannot blame Fulton for feeling this way in this monumental tomb of a house.

His will indicates that Fulton has decided to leave his estate to Harriett Blaisdell, the daughter of the now diseased Millicent, who along with her husband and three children


has remained in Hilverton. Before finalizing things however, Fulton decides to
“investigate before he invests.”46 Assuming an alternate identity as the freelance painter
John Smith, he ventures into Hilverton.47 From the time of his arrival, Sirk’s camera
introduces us to the structure of the town. With its village common surrounded by a
commercial main street and residential side streets radiating out from the center,
Hilverton initially looks like the typical, centrally built, New England Village.48 The row
of Victorian, Italianate, commercial buildings has clearly been there since Fulton’s youth
and brings back memories of more innocent times, untainted by the bustle of the city.
Although these buildings put their best foot forward towards the street, they are not
monuments of success like the skyscrapers in the city. They are more humble than that.
(Fig 2.3)

Fig 2.3

46 A phrase often repeated in the novel Oh Money!, Money!, which the film was based on. See Eleanor H.

47 Stern points out that he actually reverses his identity by posing as a “ne’er do well artist” while in reality
he is such a “successful businessman”. Michael Stern, “The American Scene,” in Douglas Sirk, (Boston:
Twayne Publishers, 1979), 75.

48 Contrary to popular belief, the centrally built New England Village is a product of the 19th century. Refer
to: Joseph S. Wood “‘Build, Therefore, Your Own World’: The New England Village as Settlement Ideal,”
Main Street Revisited: Time, Space and Image Building in Small-town America (Iowa City: University of
Iowa Press, 1996), 140-141.
The library is an especially nostalgic site; for it was there that Millicent’s dearly preserved picture was taken forty years ago. With its white clapboard tower and steeple it seems to be the oldest building in town, probably a former church having resided over the village common, which later on, after being attached to an Italianate façade was converted into a library. (Fig 2.4)

Sirk insinuates the nostalgia for the older Victorian buildings by shots taken through the drugstore window, as if the memory of them, like Millicent’s picture were preserved all these years behind a pane of glass. (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6)

Despite all these familiar facades however, Fulton seems quite lost as if he had seen the place for the first time. The look on his face appears to be especially bewildered when
he notices the conjunction of Fourth Street and Main Street. With the Main Street commercial buildings around Fourth Street and Fifth Street belonging to the more modern Chicago School style dating back from the 1880s and 1890s, one can assume that around these dates the area around the new Fourth and Fifth streets was reconstructed in order to connect the new suburban villas to Main Street. (Figs. 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9)

![Fig. 2.7](image1.jpg)

![Fig. 2.8](image2.jpg)

![Fig. 2.9](image3.jpg)

The memory of Millicent as an innocent looking, Victorian, demure, young lady pulls Fulton back into his small town past. He is disappointed, however, to find out that there are no women like Millicent anymore, only modern “flappers” who talk in promiscuous slangs, wear short skirts and like to dance and be more mobile than the traditional Victorian woman. (Figs. 2.10 and 2.11)
Hilverton after all has not been immune to the advances of urban culture. Like the women, the town has become more progressive and more urban with its many Model T Fords circulating around the village green, as if it were a traffic controlling device instead of a community node. As time goes by, Fulton realizes that things are not so bad however; with the camera many times being placed inside the green looking straight onto the older buildings such as the library, the film tells us that Hilverton still is a community center. It is a balanced place between modernity and tradition. The singing and dancing of youth in the drugstore, is not a bad thing after all; it makes the town center something that even the easily bored youth enjoys and is able to share with the older and younger generations. (Fig 2.12)
The positive traits of the town, balance and humbleness, are reflected in the Blaisdells’ cottage. Fulton manages to penetrate it after he tricks the family to accept him as a boarder, renting the room next to the attic, the same room Millicent lived in before she died. In this pleasant simple, little, airy room, open to a porch that has looks on to farmlands, with Millicent’s picture watching over him, he is able to sleep much better than in his own mausoleum-like bedroom.

Located close to the town center, yet secluded on the intersection of residential Third Street and Maple Street, the house looks like a cross between a bungalow and a Victorian, Gothic cottage. The façade echoes the town’s balance between modernity and tradition. With its simple lines and its low structure, it resembles the fashionably modern bungalow, while the gingerbread detailing around the roof and the porch, as well as the cozy bay window add familiarity, warmth and tradition. It is impossible for the floor plan to correspond to the facade since the right hand side fenestrations, (the dining room window and a small window on the stairwell), render it to be about half as large as the façade indicates. However, this does not mean that it is a “dishonest” house; in fact, smallness is one of the virtues of this house, corresponding to the harmony of practicality, comfort and traditional virtues of family.

The compactness of the plan allows for its openness in that the entry hall gives individual access to dining room and living room, eliminating the need for an extra hallway between the two, hence allowing them to be open to each other. The practical compactness of the house makes its inhabitants more interconnected and also reduces the housework. Modern compactness, openness and simplicity are balanced off by the warm, delicate Victorian oak paneling of the rooms that provides a continuity of space sets the
tone of the house in the entry hall and, in the case of the dining room and study, provides semi-secluded inglenooks for more privacy. (Figs. 2.13, 2.14, 2.15 and 2.16)
After Fulton anonymously grants the Blaisdells a sample amount of one hundred thousand dollars in order to test how wisely they spend his money, before handing over his millions, things change for the Blaisdells, but not for the better. After they become rich, the Blaisdells, lead by mother Harriet, endure all sorts of entanglements in order to catch up with the always desired glamorous image of their upper middle class neighbors, the wealthy suburbanites of Hilverton, who in turn look up to such robber barons as Fulton. They exchange the loyal mongrel, Penny, for two, ostentatiously clipped, French poodles and similarly break off their daughter Millicent’s engagement with the amiable soda jerker Dan in order for her to start dating finer young men of the country club circle.
Father Charles Blaisdell is forced to sell his beloved store, the ownership of which would not be respectable among the better families, and they dismiss Mr. “John Smith”, the boarder, for the same kind of reason.

Always having aspired to the monumental villas of the rich, mother Harriett Blaisdell is finally able to buy one of her own. She forces the family to trade in their pleasant, little cottage for the biggest house in town; an ostentatious neo-Renaissance Styled mansion, whose mask-like façade hides an unpleasantly cold interior. The garish modern furnishings with which Mrs. Blaisdell decorates her new house are at odds with the baroque architecture of the mansion and are a sign of the out-of-placeness of the Blaisdells there. Being used to their small cottage, they seem to be occupying only the front parlor as a substitute for their much more pleasant living room, which had more subdued coloring compared to the bright colors of the new parlor which indicate an “unused environment”, which is only for display. 49 (Figs. 2.17 and 2.18)

In contrast to the soft focus with which Sirk shot the interior space of the cottage, resulting in a familiar three dimensionality of space, the bright colored rooms of the

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mansion are shot with sharp focus. By situating objects in the background in the center of the frame and pushing foreground objects to the sides, Sirk brings background objects into the foreground making the moments inside the new Dreamhouse appear as flat surfaces.\(^5\) This aspect conveys the impenetrability of the image of sophistication for the Blaisdells and a sense of claustrophobia that points out their entrapment in a house that imposes this image on them. (Figs. 2.19 and 2.20)

The gravest images of unhappiness in the mansion takes place in Millicent’s room. We see her looking out the French window as if through a cage. The camera immediately follows her as she throws herself on the bed and loses herself in tears. Coupled with the

deadness of the doll next to her on the bed, this sequence of images conveys to us that she feels lifeless and imprisoned. (Figs. 2.21 and 2.22)

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After spending all their money on keeping up with the image of the country-club-oriented crowd, gambling and investing the rest in a stock market that disastrously crashes and leaves them totally bankrupt, millionaire Fulton does not offer to help them out of their predicament. He realizes that the Blaisdells are ensnared by the sample amount of wealth, and he estimates that they would be all the more miserable with the rest of his money. The Blaisdells eventually sell the house and buy back the store. After recovering from the shock of losing their suddenly acquired wealth, they realize that happiness is not related to fragile images imposed by society; it is relative to more substantial things such as love and family.

But have they really learned this lesson or are they just pretending? The shots of the final moments of the film in the cottage’s entrance hall certainly convey a sense of claustrophobia. On the occasion of moving back in, space is unusually cluttered by furniture, and by people most prominent of which is Fulton who occupies a considerable amount of the frame with his massive, somewhat many, raccoon coat. The slightly high-angled position of the camera along with the entrapping snow and frost outside certainly makes space shrink for us, also assumingly for the Blaisdells. (Figs. 2.23 and 2.24)

Fulton on the other hand realizes that his longer stay in Hilverton would require him to live permanently behind a mask. Similar to the Blaisdells, who tried to live an identity which was not really theirs, Fulton would have to live a life of pretense, requiring him to invest a lot of effort to constantly hide behind the fictitious identity of painter John Smith.
Since revealing his real identity would only disrupt the Blaisdells’ new found domestic peace, he leaves town, and leaves us with an inevitable Sirkian unhappy happy ending. Like Millicent’s picture, and the image of Hilverton, the warmth of family is for him forever fused into the cold surface glass. (Fig. 2.25)

*In the dilemma between the truly American house being home or monument, Has Anybody Seen My Gal? decidedly sides with the former. This might be at complete odds with the argument of Sirk scholar Roger McNiven, who claims that in Sirk’s iconography the middleclass family home is portrayed as imprisoning and inimical to the happiness of
characters.\textsuperscript{51} On second thought, however, it is not. The Blaisdell cottage might look like the malevolent middleclass houses in the rest of Sirk’s films, but it certainly does not \textit{feel} like them. It functions well in regards to the Blaisdell family in that it provides them with comfort and connects them, while still giving them room for privacy. The most important distinction between the Blaisdell house and the other houses discussed in this study, however, is that the Blaisdell house is not a monument or an image to which society should aspire.

Chapter Three- From Stage to Small Town: *All I Desire* (1953)

Nowhere is the middle class home exposed as much as it is *All I Desire*.\(^{52}\)

The family home in Sirk’s melodramas often becomes a metaphor for some sort of performance that its inhabitants put up. The home in *All I Desire*, Sirk’s first family melodrama, for instance delicately uses the concept of “intended” monumentality from *Has Anybody Seen My Gal*, to convey the dichotomy of interior and exterior. As a monument to middle class respectability, the idyllic façade divorces itself from the not so exemplar interior and becomes a pretentious mask that hides what lies behind, resulting in a sharp split between inside and outside that reflects the dichotomy of appearances and emotions.

The didactic split is revealed, however, to be the product of strict, community laws and stringent mores in the context of a microcosmic Riverdale, a small, Victorian town situated in a semi-rural Midwest, which via a notion of a dichotomy between “here and elsewhere”, is disconnected from the chaos and immorality of the rest of the world.\(^{53}\) Due to its qualities of separateness, Riverdale is like the objects it contains, itself an isolated object composed of an “inside” and an “outside”. What follows is an account of the components that make up the inside of the town and an analysis of how the buildings associated with each component reflect the situation of the characters they house. In this context I also investigate the discrepancies between “inside” and the heroine’s subjective “outside” points of view of Riverdale as expressed through buildings and other objects.

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The story revolves around the vivacious Naomi. Born into the shanties behind the railroads of Riverdale, Wisconsin, she gets married at a very young age to the respectable schoolteacher Henry Murdoch. As it was the respectable thing to do according to Victorian customs, the couple starts to have a big family. After three children, however, the full-blooded Naomi feels trapped in her role as a mother to the children of the didactic and ambitious schoolteacher. In desperation, she strikes up an illicit affair with the animalistic Dutch Heineman, the owner of the fishing and hunting supplies store. Before a potential scandal that such a situation would cause in a conservative small town like Riverdale, Naomi leaves the town and ventures to the city to become an actress. It is a question, however, whether she thinks of her departure as abandonment or rather as liberation, or both.

It seems to me, that the larger than life person who she is, was waiting for an excuse to escape the small space of the town altogether in order to pursue the freedoms of the world outside, via a new kind of relationship with the inner self she had been repressing for so long. The outside world, however, turns out to be as confining as the hometown. The façade of the small town Vaudeville theatre in which Naomi ends up performing embodies the new mask that this place has imposed on her. Mirrors and other shadow catching objects contained in the building expressively echo her state.

The screen of the opening shot is mainly occupied by the false front of the somewhat sleazy saloon. The continental name “Bijou” on the rather large sign, crowned by a chain of electric lamps, like a fake diamond tiara, announces the building’s falsity and out-of-placeness in the context of a typical American small town commercial district. (Fig. 3.1)
Accompanied by the saloon music, the screen fades into a theatre bill, while the camera slowly zooms in on the name: “Naomi Murdoch”. Naomi’s voice announces herself to be the person behind the name. Juxtaposition of voice and words, ironically reveals the reduction of the person who Naomi is, to the written word and its hierarchical placement on the bill. The theater bill eerily resembles the tombstone of a communal grave for “Belle Stanton”, “Naomi Murdoch” and “Davey Hughes” honoring them with obituary-like praises and reducing them to dead words and phrases. We read that Naomi used to be a Broadway actress, but has now sunken almost to the bottom of the small town Vaudeville theatre bill, which nevertheless brags about her direct import from the big city. (Fig 3.2)
As the camera takes us inside the saloon, we see Naomi emerging onto the screen. Her falsely bejeweled exterior oddly resembles the exterior of the saloon, and similar to its tacked-on façade, acts as a mask or monument to femininity, hiding vulnerable emotions that she expresses to us in a narrative voice. Despite its emphasis on feminine sexuality, her appearance seems due to its disconnectedness from her feelings, devoid of her real corporeal existence. Her exterior is, to borrow from Sirk scholar Fred Camper’s theoretical language, “a platonic shadow” that is “mocked” by the dancing shadow of what according to the bill probably is “Davey Hughes, the dancing comic” caught by the translucent surface of the partition on the right side of the screen. (Fig. 3.3)

As the camera accompanies Naomi climbing down the stairs to get to the basement, it is as if we have followed her to the subconscious level of the building, into a more private world where mysterious shadow puppets’ real lives are revealed. As Naomi closes the door behind her in the dressing room downstairs, the saloon music fades and an establishing bird’s eye shot renders her and her fellow performer Belle rather vulnerable.

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and small, but more humanlike and real as compared to the statue of womanhood that Naomi seemed to be in the previous sequence. (Fig. 3.4)

Nevertheless, “Belle Stanton”, like “Naomi Murdoch”, is an unexplained shadow, a mere written word on the theatre bill, buried with her in the dark, claustrophobic undergrounds of the saloon where even electric lights do not manage to overcome oddly elongated shadows. The mystery of the interior selves of these women is the subject of a following mirror sequence.

As Belle starts to daydream aloud about a career in a real theater in some big city, the camera cuts to a side view of her. The mirror in front of Belle, however, does not reflect her profile but that of Naomi who is absorbed in opening her letter. While listening to Belle, Naomi’s face has taken on a similar daydreaming facial expression. Naomi’s mirror image hauntingly resembles Belle; the feathers in the background towering over Naomi’s head make it seem as if she was even wearing a hat like Belle’s. What makes this shot even more disturbing is that deep in the mirror space, Naomi’s mirror image loses the illusionary hat, and does not look anything like Belle, but looks distinctively
like Naomi. The result is an endless echo of interchangeable shadows that “mock” the disguise of these women’s’ true selves behind contrived masks of femininity.\textsuperscript{55} (Fig. 3.5)

The mirror space also reveals something about the surreal qualities of a letter that Naomi has received from her “frozen past”. It turns out to be an invitation from Naomi’s second child Lily, to attend her high school play. Naomi hands the letter to Belle who reads it out loud while facing her mirror. The camera has now slightly lifted and Belle’s torso has slightly twisted, so that the letter in her hands extends onto the bottom of the mirror surface, hitting the lower half of Naomi’s reflected torso, who with her head slightly bent down seems to be directly reading from it, as if the letter had practically extended \textit{into} the mirror space. Naomi then lifts her head a little, looking into the direction of the letter’s \textit{reflection} which is covering up her reflection in her own mirror, reflected back to her in Belle’s mirror. It is as if she now is reading from the letter’s reflection. Like in the preceding mirror sequence, Naomi’s reflected image has again taken on the illusory hat and has replaced Belle’s reflection, rendering the shadows of

these women as interchangeable and the mirror space as utterly confusing and surreal. The letter therefore is revealed to mysteriously exist somewhere between reality and unreality, seducing both women with its magical qualities. For Naomi, it becomes an excuse; in her own words there is “not much to look forward to in the stale air of this run down theatre”, so she looks back.56 (Figs. 3.6 and 3.7)

As Naomi starts to daydream about Riverdale, she seems to take special comfort in the fact that certain objects and segments of the town have probably not changed since she left ten years ago. Being surrounded by familiar objects she imagines, evokes the sense of containment in a place, a sense of certainty to have arrived inside a place, as if safely ensconced in a shell, cut off from the evils of rest of the world. As she starts her account of these place-defining objects, such as the town square that has doubtlessly not gained a single new building and the residential street with all its white, solid, frame houses confronted by well-kept lawns and the carriage steps that announce the family names of the homeowners, the camera slowly tracks the direction of a travelling carriage accompanied by a little uplifting yet tranquil tune, that evokes the feeling of

peacefulness. It seems very much like a shot from Naomi’s day-dreaming point of view, looking into the town from the outside as into an idyllic snow globe. (Fig. 3.8)

![Fig. 3.8](image)

She seems to ignore that the fact that the sameness of the objects that so very much define the place for her, is due to this “fishbowl existence” of the town. In its closed environment, people and objects alike have no room for change or evolution. Thomas Elsaesser in his influential essay “Tales of Sound and Fury”, states that since the melodrama is located “always in the inside” (i.e. closed environments), contained objects do not have room to release a certain energy, therefore, like the repressed characters, gather some sort of violent force beneath their surfaces. The objects, therefore, are expressive of the living death that the townsmen live and of the sacrifice of individuality and livelihood for the sake of dignity and assimilation into place.

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As Naomi ends her account of the never changing objects of the town, the screen fades into a street view, still tracking the initially followed carriage, now visibly

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57 Ibid.

containing Naomi’s oldest daughter Joyce and her fiancé Ross Underwood. While the diegetic music fades with a somewhat grave note, the camera gradually stops by zooming in on the “Murdoch” carriage step. As fantasy fades into reality and the lighting changes to an obvious studio setting, throwing exaggerated shadows and conveying a sense of claustrophobic containment, the violence beneath surfaces becomes visible. While the camera looks down on the stepping stone as feet step onto it, the condescended stone seems to want to shout out its anger with its petrified bold capital letters spelling MURDOCH; its silent screams, however, end up dying in the stale air of the town. The stepping stone seems to revenge itself on the Murdochs however by similarly to the theatre bill, resembling a tombstone for their collective grave.59 (Fig. 3.9)

Fig. 3.9

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The façade of the family home echoes this gesture. As the couple stand in front of it, a low angle shot makes it look as if the house’s eye-like round window in the gable resentfully looks down on them. The porch is not unlike the open mouth of a predator

59 Lucy Fischer, “Sirk and the Figure of the Actress: All I Desire,” Film Criticism 23, no. 2-3 (Winter/Spring 1999): 5.
that is just about to swallow its prey, the embittered Joyce, who in the absence of her disreputable mother sacrifices precious youth to keep up the figurative façade of dignity in the context of community. But the older Joyce is not the only one who is imprisoned behind community walls. Behind the façade, Lily reveals her desperation by crying out: “No one’s going to bury me in this provincial burgh!” (Fig. 3.10)

After this brief introduction to the Murdoch home, the camera cuts to Riverdale High School, the workplace of Henry Murdoch, the father of the family. The monumental, Greek-revival structure in the midst of acres of lawn probably used to be an exurban mansion like the ones one sees in the “green worlds” of “remarriage comedies”. Sirk, however, reverses the utopian quality of the classical architecture that in the “remarriage comedies” is symbolic of perfect society. Looking at the school from a slightly low angle, the camera sarcastically caricaturizes the monumental, front facade of the building. With its cerebral, theoretical aesthetics, the Greek revival architecture appropriately radiates academics and rules. After lingering on the façade for a few moments, the camera takes

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60 Ibid.
us into the building, to reveal just how imprisoning the rules of the “ideal” academic world are for its supposedly privileged members. (Fig. 3.11)

The camera transitions into the building via a dissolve that superimposes the monumental pediment and Ionic columns of the exterior shot to the cover of an English drama history book, carried by Sara Harper, the school’s drama teacher. As Sara is walking through the hallway, the camera glides from the book to her face, implying that the book is sort of a façade for Sara. Unlike Naomi, the more conservative Sara has found a socially acceptable way of pursuing the dramatic arts. The embodiment of the idiom “Those who can’t’ do, teach”, she replaces life with theory, metaphorically represented by the book and the academic, architectural style of the school façade. In other words, the book is a mask that resembles the building’s mask or façade. (Figs. 3.12 and 3.13)

Her hallway destination is Henry Murdoch’s office, who has been appointed school principal as the prominent sign on the door indicates. As Sara enters, the sign repeats itself on the corner of Henry’s desk that is closest to the entering camera, as if the title was there to guard him from her. She is in love with Henry but has to keep a distance, since any romantic involvement would put his career in jeopardy. The conservative
Colonel Underwood, who is also in the room, is responsible for Henry’s promotion and has strict rules. With Henry positioned in the center of the frame, three curtain panels divide the background, emphasizing Henry’s plight in that he has to choose between Underwood on the left or Sara on the right. Vacillating from one side to the other, he seems to be imprisoned in the intermediate space between the two and not quite ready to decide. (Fig. 3.14) In an interview with Michael Stern for *Bright Lights* magazine, Sirk comments on Henry’s imprisonment:

In *All I Desire*, it is the academic society which is another prison. The drama teacher is in love with the guy, but he can't make a move. He wants his goddamned promotion. 61

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Sara and Henry’s academic titles are not the only obstacles to their relationship. The sound of Naomi’s approaching train symbolically separates the nearly embracing couple as Henry in reaction to the sound pulls back from Sara and walks to the window as if he was waiting for an excuse. The camera then cuts to a shot of the approaching train, almost voyeuristically viewed through a frame of tree branches and shrubs. (Fig. 3.15)

Unlike in Has Anybody Seen My Gal?, where the location of the train station was not addressed, the train and its depot station are important components of Riverdale. John Stilgoe defines the small town depot station as a portal to the world of cities and the receiver of novelties.\(^6^2\) Since the contained world of Riverdale is not affected by the mail order magazines and modern products of the city, however, the only novelty that arrives there is news and gossipy trivia, which apparently is quite appreciated as the only source of entertainment and as sort of an immune system for the local value systems. The porch of the depot station seems to be the hub of such idlers as Clem, the mean-minded town gossip, who is the first to spread the news about Naomi’s return. (Fig. 3.16)

After Naomi’s arrival, the “inside” point of view of the town appears somewhat different from the way it did in the “outside” bird’s eye view of her day dream. As she

hires a carriage to get her to the hotel, the space between the depot and the opposite side of the square looks fairly vast, abstract and not invested with any special familiarities that would distinguish it from the security of a well-known place. The freedom and openness of space feels intimidating, frightening and devoid of a “sense of place” in the sense geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines it as a series of familiar objects that provide restful stops in the context of freedom of movement in the infinity of space, transforming it into place. Although filmed on the same location as *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*, the buildings themselves are less defined, since the camera lens here blurs their textures so that their styles and types are less distinct. It is ironic that the square which initially defined the place for Naomi, is now “placeless” and without meaning. (Figs. 3.17 and 3.18)

As the carriage passes through a street that radiates out from the square, it is seen travelling through the glass, corner window of Dutch Heinemann’s fishing and hunting supply store. Located on a prominent corner of the square at the intersection of Main Street and the prominent side street towards the town’s only hotel, the store is a most

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volatile object in that the energy of the shooting guns threatens its fragile glass surface. Aside from the frightening doctor’s office, it is the only Main Street facing building that Sirk’s camera explores in the context of this film. The community drugstore from *Has Anybody Seen my Gal?* seems practically to have disappeared from the town center. With the only public hangout in town being exclusively male oriented, it is implied that the woman’s sphere is restricted to the domestic interiors. (Figs. 3.19 and 3.20)

![Fig. 3.19](image1.png) ![Fig. 3.20](image2.png)

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As Naomi gradually nears her former home, the camera glides on the surface of the sidewalk, tracking her shadow, and then gradually zooms out to include her whole body, before panning to a full view of the house’s façade. Filmed from a slightly low angle, her figure, clad in formal elegance, resembles a monument to the decorous Victorian woman. With the help of a few new garments, she has metamorphosed, but as her preceding shadow implies, she just has switched masks. As her falsely bejeweled Vaudeville outfit had matched the phony glamour of the saloon’s façade, now her properly formal attire resembles the facade of the family home. (Figs 3.21, 3.22 and 3.23)
The exterior shot of the home is followed by the close up of her face. One cannot describe the performance of the great Barbara Stanwyck who portrays Naomi, better than Jeanine Basinger does: “Adorned with expensive clothes, jewels, and furs, she looks tough and capable. However, her soft and almost pleading eyes offer a different clue to her inner state”.64 Indeed, the shot of the façade seems to be a subjective image projecting out from her teary eyes. Since the home appears quite different in character here than when we were introduced to it at the time of Joyce’s entrance to the film, it seems to be seen from the romanticized point of view of an “outsider”, a projection of selective memory. As she opens the gate of the picket fence and slowly traverses the lawn, the camera stays on her face to let us know about the intensity of this moment for her. From the semi-public lawn to the semi-private porch, she gradually nears the more and more private layers of the house. Hiding in the darkness of the porch, however, she apprehensively hesitates and peaks into the house through the screen door. The image of her family around the round dinner table, framed by the screen door opening with “a circle of lamplight on the tablecloth rebuffing back at their faces”, seems to be enmeshed in the screen as if it were a tableau of happiness.65 One almost confuses the façade of the

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65 This sentence is literally taken from the novel Stopover on which this film is based. See: Carol Brink, Stopover (New York: The MacMillan company, 1951), 47.
house with Naomi’s own face; it is difficult to tell whether the image is projecting out of the house or the woman. I personally think that it is her daydreaming memory “literally resurfacing”. “Texturing” the surface of the façade, as the tears in her eyes texture her own face, the “invisibility” of her emotions becomes “visible”. Appropriately, this event takes place on the dark porch with a transparent door; thresholds between “inside” and “outside” that ignore these geometric binaries and become the metaphor for a meditatively “half open” woman. (Fig. 3.24)

Initially ignored, a hanging, potted plant in the foreground catches Naomi’s attention. It turns out to be an especially familiar object that defines the place, hiding the most meaningful of objects; the house key that has kept its secret location all these years. As V.F. Perkins nicely points out, the physical distance which Naomi keeps with the key, implies a sort of guilt that she feels towards touching it. The location of the key after all is only known to the members of the family, and, therefore, taking it means belonging to

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66 Quoted terms are borrowed from Giuliana Bruno’s interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko regarding his work. See Giuliana Bruno, “In the Open: Art in Public Spaces,” Bomb!Live (October 29, 2007).

its community. Naomi is an outsider. She takes comfort, however, by “repeating an old, old gesture”.\textsuperscript{68} (Fig. 3.25)

![Image](image.png)

\textbf{Fig. 3.25}

The peaceful moments are short-lived. As Naomi enters the house, the flabbergasted family is quite uncomfortable with Naomi’s re-emergence; only Lily and Lena are pleasantly surprised. Lily thinks of her mother as the only way to escape the town. The camera lets us know about discomfited emotions in that it cinematographically shatters frame space into little pieces as Naomi sets foot into the house, conveying a cold disparity of spheres of existence among the Murdoch family, something contrary to what one would expect from its warm and cheerful facade. Contrary to Victorian architectural fashions, the plan of the house is surprisingly open, and one would think that this would bring the characters closer together. Yet as the below drawings and images demonstrate, a panoply of vertical architectural features such as columns, banisters, doorways and window curtains compartmentalize frame space into uncomfortable fragments that isolate Naomi from the house members, expressing the awkward situation of the coexistence of

their incompatible spheres, despite their situation in one and the same room. (Figs. 3.26, 3.27, 3.28 and 3.29)

The staircase that leads up to the private quarters, unexpectedly branches out and connects the open dining, living and study area of the house with the secluded kitchen area, providing one of several unexpected entries to that part of the house. Alone with Lena in the scullery section of the kitchen, Naomi feels protected and resumes her romantic daydreaming of home. Lena’s cakes, the rocking chair and the matchbox, which Naomi used to kick with her foot, are all well-known objects that assure her arrival at a familiar place and to safe enclosure inside its shell. As Naomi again repeats “an old, old gesture” and challenges herself to kick the matchbox, however, the camera tracks the eruption of matches up onto the flight of an unexpected staircase landing, onto which
Joyce has emerged practically out of nowhere. Filmed from the kitchen floor level below, with unexplained almost expressionistic shadows of banisters radiating out on the ceiling behind her, she looks like a frightening prison guard. Naomi’s dream of enclosure turns out to be an illusion; it seems that in this voyeuristic house her every single move is observed and judged. (Figs. 3.30 and 3.31)

In this house, Sirk takes architectural elements that usually function as “enclosure” and displaces them to work as “partition” in order to express the claustrophobic effect of the house. Two examples include: First, a whole wall of French doors connects the kitchen to what looks to be an enclosed porch that functions as a formal dining room. The transition between these rooms utterly confuses interior and exterior space. (Fig. 3.32)

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69 Ibid.
Second, is the shot where Joyce is standing on a staircase landing, jealously observing Naomi and Russ’s dancing. If her figure along with the staircase railing on the bottom of the screen and the arch segment on the upper right side of the screen were separated from the rest of the shot, it would seem as if she were standing on an outside balcony of a Mediterranean-styled building looking down on the landscape. She is inside the enclosed
space of the house, however, and what she is looking at is an unpleasant scene taking place in the living area of the home. (Fig. 3.34)

Fig. 3.34

The combination of the interior architectural elements of the Murdoch home as expressionistic visual trap and real in frame space or illusionary enclosing or opening devise in the character’s own three dimensionality of existence, all work together to expose the interior of the family home as voyeuristic, imprisoning and alienating, and the simple, familiar and defined façade, symbolic of the notion of “home”, as a monumental mask.

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Naomi continues until the end of the film to see her old home from an outsider’s view; as an ideal image. When at the end Naomi tries to end things with Dutch, she ventures to the lake where they used to have their romantic meetings and due to his persistence in pursuing her, she accidentally shoots him. In order to avoid another scandal, she follows the town physician’s advice and decides to leave. Before she leaves, however, she goes back to the house in order to gather her things and to take a last look at the house. As the camera pans over the empty living area and the first flight of stairs, it is
as if Naomi was looking at her whole universe. None of the alienating functions of architecture are present in this sequence; it is an outsider’s view of a home. (Fig. 3.35)

At the porch Naomi stops and wishfully holds the house key again. Henry comes rushing home and tries to stop her. He confesses that he never knew the woman who she was inside and as a symbol of love puts the house key in the palm of her hand. In what looks like a somewhat ambiguous happy ending, the couple goes inside the house, closes the door and leaves us out with our thoughts about their eventual fate. I find that the key in Naomi’s hand is a sign of doom. The possession of the key means integration into the community of home. Up until now, Naomi had been a guest in the home, and did not really see the real picture that we had been privileged to observe from the insider’s point of view. Now, however, she is part of the family and will gradually perceive the brusque reality behind the façade.
Chapter Four- Picture Windows: *All that Heaven Allows* (1955)

*I just put the 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 round. As far as I am concerned heaven is stingy.*

Following Berthold Brecht’s “alienation effect”, Sirk takes the edenic image of the New England village in the context of the contemporaneous Eisenhower era and he exposes it as a place that is divided into two different ideological worlds. It is home to both the elite WASPs and the bohemian naturalists, two worlds that are irreconcilable sides of the same coin. The possible need to be in the “other” world is always there, albeit it occurs inside the larger structure of the New England village itself.

In this context, architectural monumentalization of ideals expresses identity. The ideological differences that make these worlds incompatible, are architecturally symbolized by the way glass is used in the houses of each world. In both cases, glass is a means to perpetuate a monumentalized image of New England’s past. In the case of the WASP community, the image pertains to the colonial iconography that carries special significance as it legitimizes them as an ethnically defined group that takes pride in its identity as the descendants of the first English settlers. Along with the country club and their Ivy League backgrounds, this iconography provides them with a continuing tradition from the past that legitimizes them as a class as close to aristocracy as possible. Glass is not part of the aesthetics of this traditional world, but serves as an aid for surveillance to protect the class value system. The naturalists on the other hand celebrate glass aesthetics. It brings nature into their homes and connects them to the transcendental ideal which Thoreau had proposed in 1854 with his seminal book *Walden*.

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The heroine of the story is Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), a wealthy widow who resides in the affluent Connecticut hamlet called “Stonington”. Due to her husband’s death and her children’s constant absence from home, she feels lonely but has not find a cure for her loneliness in the context of Stonington. The men in town are capable of offering her either pure companionship or impersonal sex. It is no wonder then that she falls for her charming gardener, Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), who apparently is ready to give her both.

Overhearing a conversation in which Cary explains to her friend Sara (Agnes Moorhead), that she is not “a club woman” like her, so that she could fill her days with organizing events and parties, the Thoreauvian Ron becomes equally attracted to this woman, who despite her contrived community has managed to retain some degree of originality. As a sign for his appreciation for her uniqueness, he cuts her a few branches from “a golden rain tree” which he explains is associated with the love that grows inside the house of its owner.

Cary obviously is enchanted by the way he talks to her in the language of plants. She takes the tree cuttings to the private space of her boudoir to daydream about them. The sequence that follows, spatially ascertains the irreconcilability of Cary’s two consequent worlds; the familiar world of family and the enchanting world of romance.

The establishing shot of her bedroom is the close up of the tree cutting that gradually pans out to include Cary’s mirror image and finally her body as she is seated in front of the mirror. At the last moment of this shot, the screen is divided in half. The right side of the screen includes images that pertain to her dreams; there is the mirror, reflecting her
indirectly viewed contemplating face, the tree cutting in a vase, and the moonlit window beyond which the twigs of the golden rain tree in her garden are vaguely visible and form parallel contours with the cutting inside the room. The space on the left however holds her physical body that in our unmitigated view of it seems somehow exposed in comparison to her reflected mirror image.

The oppositions of either side of the frame are enhanced by complimentary colors of blue and yellow. The blue light in the window on the right side of the screen counters the warm yellow of the lamp shade inside the room on the left side of the screen. The perfume bottle on the right contains an amber yellow liquid, similar in color to the tree cutting, whereas on the left side an exact same perfume bottle containing a rich royal blue liquid increases the contrast between the two halves of the frame.71

The spheres of dream/reality and mirror space/ architectural space seem to be incompatible. Both Cary and her reflection are looking at the tree cutting that slightly extends into the mirror as though this mysterious object extends into both realities, connecting to both women; inside and outside the mirror.72 As if by magic, the tree cutting acts as an anchor connecting these two spheres of existence.73

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71 Haralovich talks about the color contrast as a sign of future problems that Cary and Ron’s relationship will have. See Mary Beth Haralovich, “All That Heaven Allows: Color, narrative Space, and Melodrama,” in *Close Viewings*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990), 64-68.

72 This moment I find, parallels the moment where Naomi in *All I Desire* receives Lily’s letter in her dressing room at the theatre.

73 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’,” *Cinema Journal* 22, no.4 (Summer 1983): 43. Ray also talks about the mirror space in opposition of the architectural space, enhanced by color, but he interprets the colors and spaces differently and does not comment on the specificity of this moment, in regards to the emotional impact of the tree cutting.
The magic however lasts only for an instant, as at that moment, Cary’s children’s entry into the room disrupts the left side of the frame by making Cary get up and leave it in order to walk to the door that is situated behind the mirror and welcome them. The camera then zooms in on the mirror showing Cary moving deeper and deeper into the mirror reality, the dream quality of which has been interrupted by her children, with whom she is now stuck in the tightness of the mirror space.  

Again, the opposing colors implicate separate realities that are incompatible. Inside the mirror, Cary is cast in an unnatural blue, whereas her children are situated in the warm glow that emerges from the hallway, implicating their existence in two separate zones of existence. Interestingly the colors in the mirror space oppose the colors of the outside space that contains the magical tree cutting which is now brought to the foreground, in order to imply that the magical object cannot coexist in the same reality as Cary’s children.

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Stonington’s White World:

*In ‘All That Heaven Allows’ the town is shown as being arranged around the church steeple. You don't see them going to church, because that would be too much on the nose. But even that church is a prison, just like the homes, which are their cages.*

The film opens with a bird’s eye view is a reminder of Naomi’s “snow globe” point of view of Riverdale. Here, however, the camera starts from a much higher point and is placed more to the right, so that the first thing that we see is a white, clapboarded, church tower, a monument to New England’s White, Anglo Saxon Protestant traditions. The following descending dolly shot is unlike its referenced sequence in *All I Desire* not the point of view of a person who dreams it from some outside; it conveys rather a voyeuristic type of looking. It starts moving in a straight horizontal line, then suddenly plunges down to the extent that it can follow its object of interest moving on the street, which is a woman pushing a baby stroller. The camera tries to stay as slow as it can, to pace itself with the mother and to follow her every move. It is as if this shot is a point of view shot of the round clock on the tower that acts as an eye; the gaze of tradition that seems to be the axis around which all things revolve in this place. (Figs. 4.3 and 4.4)

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The fall foliage, the modern cars, and the baby carriage imply the place to be a suburbanized wealthy New England hamlet that petrified by the gaze is appropriately known as “Stonington”. The town is arranged as if it were a prison. In a panopticon like manner, the eye of the church tower is unnoticed from its prominent position in the air, but its gaze seems to be subconsciously felt and is in fact so contagious that it petrifies humans into monuments of tradition that seem to take on a similar gaze and perpetuate that of the tower. This condition is reflected by the objects around them. After the camera for instance cuts to the scene where Sara gets out of the blue car, she looks back into the direction of the tower’s gaze, as if she felt someone watching her. Her head lining up with the rest of the round objects of the shot which are the half circle gable window of Mona Plush, the town’s gossip’s attic, the white globe of the street lamp and the piercing red backlight of the car, implies that she too is petrified by the gaze and continues its voyeurism. Like those eye-like objects, the all pervading stare of tradition has turned her into an object that defines the town. (Figs. 4.5 and 4.6)

More than other objects in town however, the houses reflect the condition of their inhabitants. In contrast to Naomi’s house in *All I Desire* that embodied a split between inside and outside, reflecting the splits of its inhabitants, Stonington’s houses are
pervaded by the eye of the town and are unified as “whole” monument to tradition.

Cary’s house is the most prominently explored example.

German filmmaker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder makes some valuable points about her house:

In Sirk, people are always placed in rooms heavily marked by their social situation. The rooms are incredibly exact. In Jane’s [Jane Wyman] House, there is only one way in which one could possibly move. Only certain kinds of sentences could come to mind when wanting to say something, certain gestures when wanting to express something...

Indeed, there is only one way to live in Cary’s house, and that is by the way of traditional formality. The house conforms to a cult of the past; petrified by the all pervading eye of tradition that legitimizes the town and its inhabitant’s identity as the elite. Although the house itself is quite large, its interior is compartmentalized according to tradition and is cluttered in a Victorian fashion with objects of all shapes and sizes, that there is not much space left for the living. Rather than the home enhancing the life of its inhabitants, it is the inhabitants who are there to enhance the home as if they were one among other decorative objects. (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8)

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Cary’s house truly resembles the Egyptian tomb which explicitly came up in a dialogue between Cary and her daughter Kay. It really is as if “the “whole community” sought after it that she was “walled up alive in the funeral chamber of her husband along with all of his other possessions”, the most prominent representatives of the community being her children, Kay and Ned, and her friend Sara.\textsuperscript{77}

The altar to her husband’s “funeral chamber” is the house’s the fireplace. Supposed to be the warmth of the house, the golden flecked mirror surrounding it reflects back the cold silver of Cary’s dead husband’s trophy.\textsuperscript{78} With the name “Martin Scott” embossed on its surface, it truly resembles an urn of his dead ashes. The implication of the fireplace as a tomb is most prominent in a sequence where Harvey, an elderly hypochondriac, who Sara has chosen as Cary’s date for the evening at the club, is talking to her son Ned about his deceased father’s memories. As Harvey recounts his memories of drinking champagne out of the trophy, Ned’s reflection trapped in the marbleized mirror is overlapped by the statue on the mantle, implying his lifelessness and petrifaction. Both men are shown as fossilized by the connection to the dead and by a religious continuation of past traditions.\textsuperscript{79} (Figs. 4.9 and 4.10)

\textsuperscript{77} Reference to Kay’s words in the dialogue of the film.


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
Aside from the statues that pervade the house and “mock” the inhabitants’
petrifaction and the ubiquitous shiny surfaces that, as McNiven points out, entrap them,
the ever present flowers also lend the house a morbid quality. In contrast to the tree
climbing, however, these flowers do not have any magical qualities and are simply there
as arranged cadavers of plants to emphasize death. Sirk explains the reason behind his
repetitive use of flowers: (Fig. 4.11)

People ask me why there are so many flowers in my films. Because these
homes are tombs, mausoleums filled with the corpses of plants. The
flowers have been sheared and are dead, and they fill the homes with a
funereal air.  

The houses are not only are affected by the petrifying gaze of the church tower, but
perpetuate it, with the picture windows acting as eyes. With each of the houses’ picture

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windows facing the street, Stonington’s residential district resembles that of Concord, according to Thoreau’s analogy of comparing it to a “gantlet”, that allows “every man, woman and child” to “get a lick” at every passersby.  

In Stonington glass is valued for its voyeuristic transparency. The traditional principles of architecture in Stonington do not overtly celebrate glass. Covered thickly from the inside with curtains, the voyeurism is hypocritically hidden; the picture window is the shameful secret of the building that nevertheless is essential to the town’s survival of value system, in that it acts as sort of a defense mechanism for tradition. Concentrating on every unconsciously viewed passerby, the panopticon-like windows keep watch of any kind of transgression to the laws of tradition in order to diffuse it by way of idle gossip. (Fig. 4.12)

Fig. 4.12

Ron’s Green World:

...If you try to grasp happiness itself, your fingers only meet a surface of glass, because happiness has no existence of its own, and probably exists only inside yourself... I certainly believe happiness exists, if only by the simple fact that it can be destroyed.  

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82 Sirk qtd. in Fred Camper, “The Films of Douglas Sirk,” Screen 12, no.2 (Summer 1971): 44. Sirk here uses the word glass symbolically, but in Ron’s world the word glass in this quote applies literally. Ron and his society are blind; they use glass as a means for seeing the world poetically, but are still used to experiencing the world as separate entities and with their separate senses. Glass will not make them
The opening shot to Ron’s world is a picture-postcard image of a mill structure in the context of nature. Ron’s greenhouse-residence is visible in the lower left corner of the screen, his station wagon moves into that image, adding a bit of animation to the landscape. Sirk scholar Paul Willemen has attributed this stylized kind of imagery to “cliché” and “parody” that “distances” the films from “bourgeois ideology”.83 In the case of *All that Heaven Allows*, others have attributed it to a negation of the Thoreauvian ideal.84 I find that the fusion of the landscape into a single surface does not delegitimize the ideal, but refers to it by a distinctly transcendental view of nature, in order to depict the remoteness of the ideal from our bourgeois sensibilities.

“Flat” images are a repeated theme in Sirk’s oeuvre. Although he does not explain why, Sirk himself asserts that this kind of recurring imagery is as not accidental in his films.85 A good example of a moment that parallels with the described picture/postcard view is the flashback sequence in *Summer Storm* (1944): As Fedor, the protagonist of the story remembers his happy past with Nadina, the screen fades into a similarly flattened landscape of a meadow with some trees and a rainbow in the background. Like

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in *All That Heaven Allows*, the image in *Summer Storm* is slightly animated by the horse riding couple who slowly disappear from our view. In his influential essay “The Films of Douglas Sirk”, Fred Camper describes this beautiful moment as “unreal”, since it does not resemble the way we usually perceive the world. (Figs 4.13 and 4.14)

Working against our traditional sense of perspective, the parts of the frame are never truly independent from one another. While there is a feel to the whole shot, we do not feel that the trees, for instance, have any reality as trees, or in terms of our conception of trees. They have no specific function or sign, either as symbols or as representatives of ‘actual’ trees; rather they are inextricably fused into the entire context of the shot …for an instance these elements (the trees and the rainbow) are seen as fused into a single surface which allows none of them any independent reality. Thus they suggest happiness not in a primary way (by way of adding up the meaning of separate elements of the shot) but only in the context of that fusion: and so any happiness they suggest is simultaneously realized to be unreal and impossible…And thus the shot is not much an expression of even an instance of happiness but rather of the impossibility of happiness. We can see only the ‘surface of glass’ of which Sirk speaks.86

With reference to Camper’s analysis, the similarities between the two moments are undeniable. Similarly to the described sequence, the picture-postcard image in *All That Heaven Allows* fuses all elements into a single surface.

As Emerson, the father of transcendentalist philosophy explains in his famous essay “Nature”, nature is nothing, if not viewed “poetically”; that is as received by the human soul. This perception of nature, in other words, renders it as an internalized landscape that as such exists as an integrated whole. The following excerpt from this essay, in which Emerson describes the landscape of his native Concord as he experiences it, gives

a clear picture of how the two above described images can be read as viewed through a transcendental lens:

…When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of the timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their land-deeds give them no title.87

The distance that one initially feels from such imagery, however, cannot be denied. Any kind of happiness here seems impossible due to the unfamiliarity of the way the camera picks up the landscape. I agree with Salome Aguilera Skvirsky in that in its remoteness from our senses the postcard view acts as a Brechtian “alienation effect” waking up Sirk’s contemporaneous bourgeois audience to the fact that the alternative

Thoreau had proposed long time ago has been lost.\(^8\) Like the petrified members of Stonington, we realize that we too cannot relate to this natural world; we are not used to seeing the world this way. Like the image in *Summer Storm*, this too is a nostalgic image from the past.

It is even not clear whether the mythical Thoreauvian figure of the film, Ron Kirby, is able to be “the transparent eyeball”, that is able to perceive the landscape as Emerson would.\(^9\) (Fig. 4.15) The postcard view of the mill is not *Ron’s* point of view shot, but is directly addressed to *us*. It is, however, not the only flattened imagery in the film; we keep seeing them, but always through a pane of glass. There are no character point of view shots of this kind without the intervention of glass. It is as if in the context of Ron’s world, glass acts as an essential corrector of vision in order for the characters to be able to see the world more poetically, as Thoreau and Emerson described it. Glass becomes an important symbolic architectural feature in Ron’s world that replaces an un-intermediated transcendental vision which only occurs on the inside.

Ron and Cary’s dialogue about the greenhouse in which he also lives contains references that compare his abode to the International Style country retreats that during the 1950s served as a rival to the traditional suburban homes. When Ron for the first time introduces Cary to his greenhouse, the first object beyond the entrance is a clock that with its eye like roundness seems to observe her. Upon noticing her concerns about


\(^9\) That is for the microcosm of his soul to be in union of the macrocosm of nature. A famous quote from Emerson on this subject: “Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,-all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all”. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Nature- Origin, Growth, Meaning*, eds., Merton M. Seals and Alfred R. Ferguson (New York and Toronto: Dodd, Mead & Company Inc, 1969), 8.
him living in a glasshouse, Ron himself admits that “a woman might not like it”.90

(Figs. 4.16 and 4.17)

Ron’s remark reminds of the issues of female sexuality in the context of the glass box home, which were all the more problematic during the voyeuristic 1950s.91 A prominent example of this issue during that era was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s

90 Reference to Ron’s dialogue inside the greenhouse.

Farnsworth house (1945-1951). Originally commissioned by his lover Edith Farnsworth, the project ended up in court, since Farnsworth sued Mies for designing her home in a way that she felt constantly watched.\(^92\) (Figs. 4.18 and 4.19)

The transparency of the house Mies thought, would not be a privacy issue since in its placement in the midst of nature, the house was out of any neighborly sight. He thought it would be a pity to obscure nature with opaque walls. Like Ron, he also attached a transcendental meaning to the glass that opens to nature but at the same time reduces the inner vision to an aesthetics associated with glass and nature. In a 1958 interview with Christian Norbert- Schulz he explained:

> Nature, too, shall have its own life. We must beware not to disrupt it with the color of our houses and interior fittings. Yet, we should attempt to bring nature, houses and human beings into a higher unity. If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth house, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from the outside. This way more is said about nature—it becomes part of the larger whole.\(^93\)

\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 325.
In order to impress Cary, Ron eventually moves his home to the nearby old mill that used to belong to his grandfather. In remodeling the old mill, Ron is especially inspired by the home of his friends and followers Mick and his wife Alida. A former Madison Avenue VIP, Mick, apparently inspired by Ron’s outlook on life, has decided to trade the fast-paced, rat race of the city for a more simple life in the country and faced Alida with two choices: either to be with him in his new outlook or to leave him. In both homes, warm colors, pronounced textures, free-flowing versatility of space, and most importantly, expansive glass enclosures define a certain style that is based on transcendental philosophy but like the international style is an architectural trend that obscures the actual idea behind aesthetics and appearances. The transcendental ideal is reduced to an ideological image, celebrated and monumentalized via its crystallization through the corrective vision of glass.

Flowers and statues provide parallels between Cary’s and Alida’s home, predicting that by marrying Ron, Cary will end up in a similar kind of ideological trap which she tried to escape. Before the camera cuts to Mick and Alida’s home, there is a sequence in which Cary and Sara have a conversation about her purchasing a television set. As the two women are talking, their heads form a diagonal line with the statue on the mantle. The mantle itself seems on the other hand to cut through Cary’s neck, rendering her head as one among other lifeless mantelpieces; another tribute to the altar of her dead husband. As the camera takes us to Mick and Alida’s home, a similar imagery occurs in the shot where Alida and Cary’s heads form a diagonal line with a mantelpiece that is actually the statue of a woman’s head, implying their petrifaction as blind followers of the ideologies of their men. (Figs. 4.20 and 4.21)
As Cary discovers the *Walden* book, placed open on a side table, her head forms a line with another statue of a head and a vase with flowers, which as mentioned earlier are besides statues another Sirk iconography for death and stillness. As Alida joins Cary while she is reading aloud from the book, Cary’s head and the vase are interchangeably lined up with the statue of the woman’s head on the mantelpiece and with Alida’s head, conveying that although the women seem touched by the words of independence, they are just theory to them since their actions and choices in conforming to an outside ideology, specifically imposed on them by their men indicate otherwise. (Figs. 4.22 and 4.23)

A prominent feature in Mick’s home is the large skylight in the roof. A shot from the outside, depicts the dancing crowd as caged inside the house; although they seem quite genuine, this shot implies that the people beyond the glass, in Thoreau’s words, “are
prisoners of their own opinion of themselves.” A monument to their ideology, the glass surface hovers above the crowd in a very similar way as the eye church tower looms over Stonington. (Figs. 4.24 and 4.25)

Moments of Conflict:

As Roger McNiven explains, Cary’s two worlds parallel each other in that moments of conflict between them are portrayed in similar ways in each of them. Since the incompatibility of these worlds is represented architecturally by their different use of glass in building structures, the three major moments of conflict between the worlds are appropriately pictured via exaggerated lights and shadows that penetrate interior space through windows.

In the green world of Ron there is a prominent moment in which Cary and Ron both vacillate between their inner worlds. It takes place in Ron’s Mill in front of a floor to ceiling picture window that he has incorporated into the wall towards the lake. The window turns out to be a manipulative gift to Cary, to confront her with either the choice


to marry Ron or to leave him. While the frost on its glass both disrupts the idealistic vision and gives the room an air of entrapment, Cary and Ron move in and out of the exaggerated dark and light tones that it casts into the interior the camera reveals the inside conflicts that this window has brought about in each of them.\textsuperscript{97} The individualistic Ron has ironically become an imitation of Mick, as symbolized in his simulation of the architectural features of his house and adopting his paternalistic traditions, and Cary is faced with a difficult decision of choosing between the world of family and community and loneliness or the world of romance and passion.\textsuperscript{98} (Figs. 4.26, 4.27 and 4.28)

The other two moments of conflict occur in Cary’s family home. One of them takes place in her daughter Kay’s room that is lit by a multicolored rose window. Similar to

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. 54.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
the previous sequence, Kay and Cary move in and out of differently colored light zones cast by the rose window, alluding to their emotional turmoil. Cary is always situated in warm colors whereas Kay is mostly bathed in green; a sign for the jealousy she feels towards her mother’s relationship with the attractive Ron. At the end of their conversation, when Cary reminds her that as a social worker she should be more understanding of the complicated nature of relationships, Kay confesses that she does not understand and in fact has never understood the theories she repeatedly stated. At this moment her face immerses in a deeply shameful red. (Figs. 4.29, 4.30, 4.31 and 4.32)

The other sequence is the confrontational scene Cary has with her son Ned. Shot from the outside of the home, Ned, awaiting his mother’s return from the country club, is shown pacing back and forth beyond the window “like a caged animal”. As she

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
enters, he corners her in the head-high fire screen that repeats the cage like evocation of the window.\textsuperscript{101} (Figs. 4.33 and 4.34)

Similar to the argument scene at the picture window in Ron’s Mill, Ned and Cary reciprocally move in and out of the strange blue light and the dark shadows that the picture window casts into the room as signs of their deep inner conflicts. Like Ron, Ned leaves her mother with two choices, either to leave Ron or to leave her children for good. In a chilling scene at the end of the sequence, Ned is shown trapped behind the fire screen. McNiven continues to elucidate how this sequence conveys “the interconnected traps” that the house and its traditions have created for both Cary and Ned.\textsuperscript{102} (Figs. 4.35, 4.36, 4.37 and 4.38)

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
Faced with her children’s dilemmas, Cary decides for the world of family. During a Christmas scene we see her entrapped behind the picture window of her living room looking at the caroling children in the street. She finally has been incorporated into the picture window, perpetuating the eye of tradition. I find that the tear in her eye at this moment, implicates her sympathy for the unknowingly viewed innocent children and animals. (Figs. 4.39 and 4.40)

The television set that her children gift her on Christmas Eve, mocks her new assimilation into the voyeuristic system of Stonington. As the camera gradually zooms in onto the television screen, we see her reflected image caught in it, implying her petrifaction into an object, “a window to the world”, that similarly to the picture window perpetuates the eye of conformism to traditional roles of women.\(^{103}\) (Fig 4.41)

\(^{103}\) This is a long discussion and would require a chapter of its own. I find the best place to look for more on this to be Lynn Spiegel. A good example is her essay on how the television series of the 1950s emphasized the paternalistic system and the Victorian cult of domesticity in the context of postwar
In the end, the deus ex machina of Ron falling off a cliff, practically forces her to stay with him. From the voyeuristic picture window that incorporates her into a system that perpetuates tradition, she moves to another kind of picture window that incorporates her into its own monumentalized ideologies.

Similar to the contrived image of the mill, the nostalgic postcard view image in the window contains a minimal amount of animation, this time in the shape of a deer that during the film has repetitively eaten out of Ron’s hands. Since on the other side of the window Ron is as motionless as the landscape and the only animation comes from Cary, there is a parallelism between her and the domesticated animal, implying her own subordination to the orders of the world that Ron has imitated from his circle of friends. It is a truly empty happy ending, since as we have seen, Ron’s world is only one part of her world, and is incompatible with the rest of her world. She looks awfully small in comparison to Ron’s imposing body in the foreground that along with the curtains entraps her in the window, as if she, like the deer, was part of the ideological image, enmeshed into the surface of glass. (Figs. 4.42 and 4.43)

The picture is about the antithesis of Thoreau’s qualified Rousseauism and established American Society.104

The difference in architectural manifestation of ideals in the white world and the green world of Stonington is reminiscent of the architectural schisms of the 1950s. In the light of what he calls “Thoreau’s qualified Rousseauism”, Sirk reveals both the traditionalist colonial architecture of the ethnically defined elite, and the reactionary glass architectures of the alternative, bourgeois, international style, country retreats as monumental signs of conformism, antithetical to the spirit of American transcendentalism that calls for subjectivity of the individual self.

104 Sirk qtd. in Jon Halliday, Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Hallida (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1971), 113.
Chapter Five- A Doll’s House: There’s Always Tomorrow (1956)

With There’s Always Tomorrow, Sirk takes us from the idyllic image of the New England Village to a more modern form of city-country marriage, and faces us all over again with the fact that it is an impossible trap that urges the wish to escape to an elsewhere.

During the postwar years of the 1950s, the new highway system and the automobile were seen as the proponents of a perfect union between the male dominated world of mass production in the city and the female oriented world of mass consumption in modern suburbia. The architectures of each world monumentalized the perfect match. The male world of the city was characterized by the rational glass architecture of the international style that with its modular structures characterized production efficiency and scientific discipline, whereas the female world of suburbia was homogenously dressed in the more familiar garb of traditional architecture, suitable to the traditionally gendered roles of women as homemakers.¹⁰⁵ Unlike in the case of the suburbanized New England village of Stonington in All that Heaven Allows, the architectural differences were not seen as a sign of division, but indicated just how these utterly male and female worlds complimented each other. One would expect that such a flawless combination would leave no room for temptations for anything outside the world of marriage. There’s Always Tomorrow, however, proves otherwise. Sirk reveals in this film how the perfect city-suburbia match is based on the wrong reasons: children and, therefore, is contrived and doomed.

The advent of postwar suburbia and its counterpart, the technocratic city, was for a great part based on the baby boom that came about due to the new stability after the men returned from war and took shape according to a new, child-centered American family ideal advocated by “doctors, social workers, sociologists, psychologists and writers of TV series”. Most influential among these figures was Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose seminal *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, first published in 1946, sold more than twenty million copies. Spock dispensed with the disciplined system of child raising of the 1920s and emphasized that children’s education should be based on “fun morality” according to which children should be indulged in their happy playfulness. The concept of children’s play which used to be viewed as harmful during the 1920s was now viewed as “healthy and productive”.

The ideal of parenthood resulted in ample business opportunities for producers of goods that allegedly promoted childhood happiness, the most prominent of which was modern suburbia. It was here up to the architects and planners to design the perfect physical environment based on the new principles of childrearing. The world of industry, essential to manufacturing products of childhood happiness, was separated

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107 Ibid. 206.

108 Ibid.

from the antiseptic motherly environment of suburbia. The truth was then, that it was the incompatibility, yet the essential need for both in regards to childrearing, that separated city from suburbia. City and the suburbs were perfect parents but far from perfect partners.

The relationship of city and suburbia directly paralleled the situation of human marriages. The whole concept of marriage was based on appearances. The relationship of city and suburbia directly paralleled the situation of human marriages. The whole concept of marriage was based on appearances. The male breadwinner, associated with the world of work and the city, was (similarly to the international style) meant to be an emblem of efficiency and production, the so called “organization man” and ultimate family provider. The female homemaker however, was responsible in both her attire and the decoration of the house for creating the perfect motherly environment. Like the architectural styles of these worlds, man and woman calcified as monuments to motherhood and fatherhood. The most disturbing part of it all was that city and suburbia, work and home, seemed to make up the whole of postwar existence. The acceptance of traditional gender roles therefore was not due to the fact that the situation left no room for a desired elsewhere; it was rather because there was really no alternative, no elsewhere to be desired.

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Douglas Sirk intensifies this condition in the sad story of Clifford Groves (Fred MacMurray)’s life. His suburban home is situated in what Robert Fishman calls “the

suburban metropolis” of Los Angeles. Due to its abundance in land, its Mediterranean climate, and most importantly its new, elaborate, highway system, postwar Los Angeles became the epitome of the suburban nation. Its countless subdivisions “became the central element of the whole city” and lead to the gradual demise of its downtown core. Day in and day out, successful toy manufacturer Cliff drives back and forth to his toy factory in the dilapidated core, in order to maintain the expensive image of the “happy” home in the prestigious hills; the realm of his wife Marion (Joan Bennett) and his spoiled children Vinnie, Ellen and Frankie (William Reynolds, Gigi Perreau and Judy Nugent). In other words, he produces toys to provide his children with the ultimate toy of all; their suburban home.

**Work and Home:**

From the beginning of the film, the many parallels between architectural and spatial depictions of Cliff’s work space and those of the environment of his family home, establish the monotony of Cliff’s everyday existence of work and home. The film opens with an idyllic title card reading “Once upon a time in sunny California”, and abruptly cuts to a rain soaked, crowded street in the midst of a dilapidated Los Angeles downtown district, announcing that the predictability of image is about to be undermined. From a rainy image of “sunny” California, we move to the eerie depiction of the toy factory before shifting to a rather sarcastic take of the “happy” family home. (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2)

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112 Ibid. 167.  
From the rainy street, the camera follows a flower girl into Cliff’s factory office quarters. It is a two-storied spatial realm. In the more public lower level, the better dolls are placed on display and the secretary keeps watch on the comings and goings of clientele and service staff. Looking at the display of dolls, the flower girl exclaims: “What a dreamy place to work in!” But from what we can see, the place is nothing but dreamy. As if it were directed by the displayed toys, the camera moves in a way in order to always keep them in the shadowy foreground. The toys dominate the humans in the background and loom over them rather ominously with their indifferent glass-eyed stares.\footnote{Michael Stern, “The American Scene,” in \textit{Douglas Sirk}, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 129.} Although the space is rather open, the clutter of displays gives it a claustrophobic effect. (Figs. 5.3 and 5.4)

The semi-private space, where toys are assembled and evaluated before they go on official display is situated on the second floor of the office. The situation in the
workshop floor is even more alienating. The high and open expanse of space meant for supervisory purposes paradoxically leads to confinement; our view is divided vertically and horizontally by numerous rafters and beams, on which toys are placed for a less formal display than downstairs. The structural elements compartmentalize the screen and separate toys and humans alike. For the characters themselves, the flow of space is interrupted by a series of long, tightly spaced working counters that block spatial movement and channel the direction of movement. Seen from behind the waist-high counters, the constantly moving workers seem to slide on them as if they were wound up toys, similar to Rex, “the walkie-talkie Robot man”, who is the latest product and the pride and joy of the whole factory. The large windows that open onto the inner courtyard of the factory cast long, frightening shadows across the space. The noirish shadows dominate natural light, rendering space as dangerous and frightening. The shadows are formed and caused by the factories own structure and the light of its interior courtyard environment. All in all, the toy factory is rendered as a daunting place, appropriate to its function of mass producing human looking dolls and robots. (Figs. 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7)
As Cliff descends the stairs in order to go home and celebrate his wife Marion’s birthday, the view of the factory fades into the view of the interior of the home as older daughter Ellen runs down the stairs to get to the telephone. In the context of the dissolve, the two staircases seem to intersect, as if factory and home were housed in one and the same structure. It also looks as if Ellen was hurriedly following her father, which implicates her to be a haunting presence in Cliff’s world. In the shot where she is on the phone, she replicates a blown up version of the doll that was placed in the foreground of the preceding sequence. There is an eerie resemblance to the doll in the way her roundish face reflects the light, in the glassy look in her eyes and to an extent in her dress and hairdo. (Figs. 5.8, 5.9 and 5.10)
The moment Cliff enters the home, son Vinnie similar to his sister Ellen dubiously resembles the toys in Cliff’s factory. Like the toys, he is a foreground object that dominates the shot by occupying a large section of the screen. Also similar to the toys, his menacing qualities are emphasized by the shadows on his body and by his complete indifference to his father, who in the background looks rather small and imprisoned behind the banisters of the staircase. (Figs. 5.11 and 5.12)
Unlike in the colonial villa where picture windows always face the street, as depicted in the Scott’s residence in *All That Heaven Allows*, the picture windows in the Groves’ house face the house’s backyard according to the California ranch house custom, proving the colonial exterior elements of the house as cheap in their fake monumentality. ¹¹⁵ Similarly to the factory then, the odd shadows in the house are created by light that is produced by the house’s own outdoor section. ¹¹⁶ (Fig. 5.13 and 5.14)

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¹¹⁶ And Amy Lawrence, “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s *The Reckless Moment* and Douglas Sirk’s *There’s Always Tomorrow,*” *Film Criticism* 23, no.2/3 (1999): 160.
The open flow of the first floor conforms to the contemporaneous architectural fashions based on the California ranch house. The philosophy behind the postwar
openness of floor plan was rooted in the principles of childrearing. It was believed that an open floor plan would allow for a discreet supervision of children and together with the inward facing picture windows and the television set would bring the nuclear family closer together.\textsuperscript{117} Like in the factory however, the open flow of space is revealed as illusionary. Reminiscent of the beams and rafters and decorative display structures that separated the toys from the rest of the frame in the factory; ornamental and structural architectural elements of the home’s interior often compartmentalize the frame confining characters in separate spheres, and isolating them from each other and from their environment.

On the first floor, we often see Frankie, the youngest, who in her ballerina custom and her awfully flat and shrill voice resembles a vicious doll, push Cliff and Mrs. Rogers (Jane Darwell), the cook, to the corners of the frame, with repetitive architectural elements such as louvers and banisters, imprisoning them into tight spaces. (Figs. 5.15 and 5.16)

Like it was the case in the toy factory, the situation on the second floor of the home is even more menacing. Despite being a privacy related luxury in comparison to the mass produced postwar houses, which were reduced to single story structures (for cost

related reasons), the second story of the Groves’ residence as it is portrayed at this moment of the film, is ironically less private than the first floor.\footnote{Later we will find out more about the voyeuristic attributes of the first floor.} Cliff desperately tries to connect with Marion and to make romantic plans with her for her birthday evening, but the constant interruptions of their children give them no space. The claustrophobic, prison-like confinement of the second floor is architecturally established by the immensity of banisters with which Cliff is faced the moment he gets there. (Fig. 5.17)

![Fig. 5.17](image)

When he tries to give Marion a passionate kiss, it looks as if they are squeezed into the doorway in the background. Marion seems a bit hesitant and finally pulls her head out of the doorway frame when daughter Ellen’s voice disrupts their intimate moment. As they move towards the right side of the frame, the banisters that we had seen earlier imprison them. The cord of the suspended hallway chandelier spatially implicates the emotional rift between Cliff and Marion. The sequence ends with Cliff giving Marion a rather platonic peck on the cheek, the reflection of which is trapped in the mirror space in the background and squeezed between their bodies in the foreground. The reflection of the kiss implies that it is not a “real” kiss, but a pretentious “image” of a kiss that physically disconnects them. (Figs. 5.18, 5.19, 5.20 and 5.21)
In his anthology of American homes, Clifford Edward Clark points out that some magazine designers of the 1950s were concerned about the lack of privacy due to “a minimum of walls” and a “maximum of windows” in the context of the typical postwar Ranch house. They suggested additional bathrooms and emphasized master bedroom suites as a solution to the problem of privacy.\(^{119}\) Marion and Clifford Groves, however, do not have space to themselves in their luxurious master bedroom suite, complete with bathroom and boudoir.

As Clifford and Marion move to the bedroom suite, and Ellen who was looking for a scarf finally leaves them in the seeming privacy of their space, Cliff starts to recite romantic words and push Marion into the left side of the frame, occupied by the intimate space of the boudoir. Suddenly however Frankie’s high pitched voice interrupts them. As Frankie spins around the left side of the ornamental border that frames the bed like

the casing of a voyeuristic window, Marion bypasses Cliff and places herself into the bordered frame alongside her daughter. The painting on the wall with a mother and child seems to stare at Cliff and mock the fact that his daughter has excluded him from that the bordered bed area of the frame. (Figs. 5.22, 5.23 and 5.24)

Fig. 5.22                                          Fig. 5.23                                         Fig. 5.24

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Thanks to the speed of the automobile and the efficiency of the Los Angeles highway system, Clifford Groves’s work and home space are located in one and the same contained realm. The many spatial similarities of work and home space and the same way the camera picks up the two spaces emphasizes the monotony of his sad life; the difference in the momentarily depicted exterior elements of factory and home mock their widely explored similarities. The above described scenes, however, only describe the beginning of a moment. The film essentially deals with that devastating moment of disillusionment in which Cliff comes to realize his own petrifaction as a toy for his children, which they so much take for granted. Like Nora in Ibsen’s famous play, “A Doll’s House”, he realizes that he and Marion are robots; perfect parents to robot children. They are programmed dolls who live in a mass produced doll’s house; a monument to parenthood.120

120 Reference to Nora’s famous words at the moment of disillusionment to her family: “... but our house has never been anything but a playroom. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy’s doll child. And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them. That’s been our marriage
Norma Miller (Barbara Stanwyck), a woman Cliff used to love when he was young, unexpectedly arrives at his doorstep while his family has left him alone on Marion’s birthday evening with “more important” arrangements. As she enters, the hallway looks different. As Sirk explains, “his youth comes back. Knocks right on his door”. With the help of a straight angle camera, the ceiling seems to be higher and the light that appears to emanate from Norma’s face eliminates the shadows of the house around her. (Figs. 5.25 and 5.26)

As Cliff shows Norma around the house, the cluttered living space looks especially claustrophobic due to Barbara Stanwyck’s larger than life presence on screen. At a particular moment in the dining room, she looks around and tells Cliff: “Oh the house is

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122 Stern points the same thing out about Fred Mac Murray in the claustrophobic mise-en-scene of the film in general. I agree with him on Mac Murray’s graceful presence, but at this particular moment I feel that Stanwyck literally lights up the screen. There is something genuine about her that alleviates the staleness of the home, and the light seems to always come from her direction. For more on Mac Murrey’s effect on space see Michael Stern “All that Heaven Allows and There’s Always Tomorrow-The Social Vision,” in *Douglas Sirk* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 124.
beautiful…warm, cheerful, just as I had imagined it. The kind you always wanted.”

The irony of these words are that at the moment she speaks them, the light that comes from her direction makes the home look extra ugly in that it builds dreadfully jagged shadows around the china cabinet in the background. In this shot, which is clearly Cliff’s point of view shot, the only thing that is beautiful and cheerful is Norma, who stands out from her shadowy surroundings like a bright, mysterious entity; a glimmer of hope that something is “out there” besides work and home. (Figs. 5.27 and 5.28)

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Fig. 5.27

Fig. 5.28
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“Outside”:

With this “outsider”, Cliff ventures to a series of escapist places outside his insipid everyday work-home reality, such as the theatre and a number of hotels. Most prominent of these places is a roadside motel in the desert, called “Palm Valley Inn” where they accidentally meet and spend their time literally “outside” i.e. outdoors. We will find however, that there really is no such thing in Cliff’s world as an outside to his everyday existence.

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123 Reference to Norma’s part in the dialogue.

124 Amy Lawrence, “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s The Reckless Moment and Douglas Sirk’s There’s Always Tomorrow,” Film Criticism 23, no.2/3 (Winter 1999): 159.

125 Ibid.
The word “motel” was originally coined in 1926 by a San Luis Obispo, California proprietor “to describe an establishment that allowed a guest to park his car just outside his room.”\(^{126}\) It was not until the 1950s, due to the advent of elaborate highway systems, that the motel became a popular escape for couples. Kenneth T. Jackson describes the roadside motel as an important element of American “drive-in culture” that due to “convenience and privacy” was especially associated with romantic getaway during the postwar era.\(^{127}\)

Palm Valley Inn contains all the features of an idealistic motel hideaway. Located more than eighty miles away from the city and surrounded by enclosing hills, it appears to be an ideal escapist microcosm for secret lovers. The convenient, vast, parking lot can be directly accessed from the glass-enclosed, one story, guest room “bungalows”, eliminating the need of passing through the lobby in order to get to one’s room. The whole concept seems to be informality, carefree enjoyment and outdoor leisure, with its emblem being the large swimming pool around which the whole motel complex is organized; it seems to be a great departure from Cliff’s formal and confining everyday world. In the romantic anonymity of the desert, far away from Los Angeles, Norma and Cliff ride horses, swim in the outdoor pool, and “dance under the stars”.\(^{128}\)

All these amenities however are infested spatially and haptically with some sinister undertones. As Amy Lawrence points out, the outdoor scenes inside the motel complex


\(^{127}\) Ibid.

\(^{128}\) Amy Lawrence, “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s The Reckless Moment and Douglas Sirk’s There’s Always Tomorrow,” Film Criticism 23, no.2/3 (Winter 1999): 159.
are almost always “framed by the spikiest, darkest, and most threatening vegetation Sirk could arrange.”\textsuperscript{129} Dominating the foreground and lurking from the background, the thorny plants reflect and intensify through their injurious surfaces, the confining spatial definition of toys in the factory and of children in the home, cruelly foreboding that the delightful environment of the Palm Valley Inn is part of the spatial whole that for Cliff encompasses home and work. (Figs. 5.29, 5.30, 5.31, 5.32, 5.33 and 5.34)

The scenes around the pool area, the “jewel” of the motel complex, recall voyeuristic spatial conditions that even supersede the menacing circumstances of home and work.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
The pool’s intrinsic attributes of transparency and enclosure are highlighted by the backdrop of the motel bar’s glass walls which similar to the inward facing picture windows of the home and the observation windows of the factory, direct the view towards the center, which in this case is the pool. High-angle shots of the swimming couple are taken from the voyeuristic point of view of the ominous desert plants in the foreground. The couple seems especially vulnerable to their sting because of their bare skin. (Figs. 5.35, 5.36 and 5.37)

Vinnie’s arrival at the motel explains the mysterious connotations of the mise-en-scene. Old enough to drive, there is literally no location far enough to escape his physical presence, as is implicated by the cut from his car to the road sign that indicates the number of miles by which Palm Valley is removed from Los Angeles. Since his

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father is just there to provide him with money, he will go as many a mile as it takes to get it from him. Amy Lawrence is right when she points out: “If for Sartre hell is other people, for Sirk it is teenagers, and houses where they thrive”. The automobile, however, has extended the space in which Cliff is trapped with his dominating son from the house into the infinity of the desert. (Figs. 5.38 and 5.39)

Inside the motel, it does not take long for Vinnie to find out of his father’s whereabouts. The nosy receptionists, who similar to the small town gossips in *All I Desire*, do not have anything better to do in their isolation in the motel than to snoop around strangers, do not hesitate to provide him with all the information he needs. The backdrop of a compartmentalized partition displaying a series of wooden figurines, together with the reliefs of petrified musicians in the wood panels behind the receptionist’s desk, echo the display in the toy factory and the isolating architectural framing elements of the shots inside the house, connecting these three locales and asserting that despite its apparent escapism, the motel is contained in the same space as work and home. The all pervading, petrifying gaze of children is always there; mentally, and even physically. (Figs. 5.40 and 5.41)

131 Amy Lawrence, “Trapped in a Tomb of Their Own Making: Max Ophuls’s *The Reckless Moment* and Douglas Sirk’s *There’s Always Tomorrow,*” *Film Criticism* 23, no.2/3 (Winter 1999): 162.
Similar to the road sign, the numbered directions to the “bungalows” and the transparency of their picture windows make it easy for Vinnie to find Cliff. (Figs. 5.42 and 5.43)

The most disturbing part of it all is that Norma and Cliff do not suspect being watched. In the last sequence inside the “Palm Valley Inn”, Norma cuts a rose for Cliff’s button hole. Like in the rest of the outdoor scenes of the inn, neither of them understands the meaning of the thorny plant in the foreground, nor do they see Vinnie lurking in the background. Stuck in the miniature world of film, they are not capable of seeing the foreground or the background. They live in their own inner worlds and truly believe in the magical qualities of the inn that sets it apart from the rest of the world. The bitter irony of this idealism is overwhelming; by now we know that this “outside” bit of the world is in reality the “inside” of the same highway constructed reality. In the devastating last third of the film, Cliff and Norma will know too. (Fig. 5.44)
Disenchantments

After having experienced the apparent spatial freedom of the outdoors, confining interior spaces of their everyday lives become intolerable to Norma and Cliff.\textsuperscript{132} The two-dimensional, visual, architectural elements that divided Cliff’s family home during the first third of the film, have now literally and figuratively gained another dimension, as Sirk begins to comment on the L-shaped open space of floor plan. Sirk explores how the discreet supervisory attributes of the floor plan in regards to small children, become voyeuristic as the grown up teenager becomes the constant spy of his/her parent.

In the living/dining wing of the L-shaped first floor, trapped behind a layered clutter of rail back chairs, Vinnie who has rushed back home with his friends earlier, impatiently awaits his father’s return. His sister Ellen, similar to the spying, country club women in \textit{All That Heaven Allows}, peeks into the street from behind a thickly curtained window in the entry hall area. When they hear Cliff’s footsteps, both Vinnie and Ellen hide themselves behind the decorative railed divider that visually separates the two wings. (Figs. 5.45 and 5.46)

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
As Cliff returns to his everyday entry spot behind the banisters of the staircase, however, Vinnie’s girlfriend, the genial Ann (Pat Crowley), positions herself at the end of the hallway, directly on axis with the entrance as to direct Cliff’s view towards his hiding children with the gesture of her head. With the exception of Ann, all the eyes of the house are on Cliff. The clock beside the entrance reflects the voyeuristic gaze of the children, entrapping him in the middle. (Fig. 5.47)

The children are somewhat baffled at Cliff’s transparency when he reports all the details of the trip and that he has invited Marion to dinner; they think that he must be hiding something. The claustrophobic effect of their suspecting looks, while they listen to Cliff’s recount is emphasized by the background architectural elements. The decorative boarder of the window that leads toward the exterior part of the home (the backyard), and the boarder that frames the opening that leads to the interior dining area are identical. The resulting sense of equation between exterior and interior space evokes the feeling of entrapment in the interior. (Fig. 5.48)
Upstairs, Marion practically forces Cliff to take a hot bath. The oppressiveness of her benevolence is illustrated via the cage-like screen from behind which the hot bath that she is preparing is visible. It is as she is manipulating him back into his cage like existence. (Fig. 5.49)

As she suggests that Cliff should invite Marion to dinner for tomorrow, Cliff runs downstairs to call her. The children again hear his footsteps and this time drag Ann along with them behind the screen that separates the two wings of the L-shaped floor plan. This time, Cliff does not know about them spying on his telephone conversation. On the other end of the line, we see Norma who filmed from behind a strange screen partition seems to be even more entrapped in the confinement of her hotel room, than Cliff. (Figs. 5.50 and 5.51)
The situation becomes worse for Cliff however after the dinner party, the ritualistic tension of which is visually depicted through a series of long candlesticks that along with the eye leveled finials of the chairs, separate the characters in the frame. The candles and the funerary flower arrangement of the centerpiece lend the whole dinner ambience an unbearable staleness. At the same time however the immaculate decorations of the dinner table and the attire of poor Mrs. Rogers, who is made up as a French maid, contain some kind of visual perfection that is reminiscent of home magazine images. The rude and uncivilized behavior of the children however proves this flawlessness to be merely superficial.  

Cliff’s complete disillusionment with his family is manifest in the sequence where Norma leaves him behind the door of his house. We see him at his regular spot behind the banisters. The following close up of his feet, filmed from behind the entrapping

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banisters, heavily ascending the staircase to his bedroom, conveys to us his feelings of disillusionment. It is the moment where Cliff realizes his petrifaction in the hands of his children. (Figs. 5.54 and 5.55)

As if he could not stand to be inside the house, he tries to find refuge in the balcony of seemingly private master suite, which is faced by a floor-to-ceiling window to the girls’ bedroom. Marion approaches Cliff, while he is watching the nocturnal landscape of city lights. It looks as flat and distant from sensual reality as the postcard image of the old mill in *All That Heaven Allows*. From the conversation Cliff has with Marion, it can be inferred that the landscape to him is a desired “outside” or “elsewhere”. It is ironic that like the Palm Valley Inn, it is contained in the same highway-constructed reality as home and work. (Fig. 5.56)

When Marion asks Cliff about his problem, he practically breaks down. He exclaims:
I’m tired of the children taking over, I’m tired of being pushed in the corner, and I’m tired of being taken for granted. I am becoming one of my own toys, ‘Clifford Groves, the walkie talkie robot’. Wind me up in the morning and I walk and talk, I go to work all day. Wind me up again and I go home, have dinner at night and go to bed. Wind me up again and I go to the office and pay the bills…I’m sick and tired of the sameness of the day in and day out. Don’t you ever wanna go out of this house? Go some place, move around?¹³⁴

In her strange, monotonous robot-like voice Marion protests calmly that she is constantly moving around the house, after all that is how she keeps her figure. As the camera moves alongside her into the interior, the view in front of Cliff is blocked by a mountainous roof of a neighboring homes, as if any kind of hope for an “elsewhere” was eliminated. Pressed against the lace partition of the boudoir in which she seems to blend with her lace and ribbon bedecked nightgown, Marion calls for Cliff to come inside and reminds him of the dangers of the outside cold. On the lace backdrop, she looks like sort of a chameleon- spider waiting for her prey. (Figs. 5.57 and 5.58)

While being inside the bedroom suite becomes unbearable, Cliff, accompanied by a stealthy, high- angle camera, moves to the first floor and transports the telephone behind the partition that joins the two wings of the L-shaped floor plan, in order to be in an apparently more private enclosure of space while he calls Norma. Privacy of space turns

¹³⁴ Reference to Cliff’s part in the dialogue.
out to be merely visual. Cliff does not notice that all the while Vinnie, who happened to enter when he was talking on the telephone, was hiding in the hallway section of the floor, furtively listening to the most portion of his private conversation. Vinnie’s all pervading presence is implicated by a voyeuristically high-angled gaze of the camera at Cliff, who watched from behind the rails of the partition seems to be stuck in a prison cell and supervised by some invisible eye. (Figs. 5.59 and 5.60)

Cliff’s workplace is shown to have equally gained a voyeuristic dimension. A parallel sequence depicts the secretary’s visual voyeurism of Cliff through the transparent walls of his office, while he has a telephone conversation with Norma. (Fig. 5.61)
As Norma cancels their rendezvous for that day, Cliff becomes restless and ventures to the window, which dissolves into the wall between the two picture windows of his backyard, alluding to the fact that the parallelism between work and home has become more apparent to Cliff at this point. (Figs. 5.62 and 5.63)

Fig. 5.62                                                                        Fig. 5.63

From Ann and Vinnie’s point of view, who are in the backyard at this moment, we see Cliff enter the house door that is right on axis with the right-hand picture window. As he sits down at his desk that is placed right on axis with the door, the gaze of his wife and children in the form of a picture on his desk, even follows him into the personal space of reading. As he tries to escape the gaze by covering the picture up with his newspaper, he does not suspect Vinnie’s gaze through the picture window from behind this desk. (Figs. 5.64 and 5.65)

Fig. 5.64                                                                     Fig. 5.65

As Cliff impatiently leaves the house in order to meet Norma, Vinnie’s point of view through the mullions of the picture window renders him as his father as a restless animal. (Fig. 5.66)
Cliff finds Norma at the upper level loggia of her hotel, against the backdrop of a city that looks brighter and more alluring than he has ever seen from the balcony of his house. As Norma is telling an interviewing couple that she is married to her work address in Madison Avenue, Cliff interrupts with these words:

After I called you I went home. It’s the same house I’ve lived in for years. I’d always felt comfortable there. All of a sudden I felt desperate sitting in my own living room. I felt though I was trapped in a tomb of my own making. I had to escape because I was still alive, alive and wanting you.\(^{135}\)

They kiss, and set up an appointment for the next day. As Cliff exits, the glass door to the loggia dissolves into an exterior view of Cliff’s home, implying the highway speed with which Cliff exits one place to enter another. Contained in the same contrived highway reality, the divider between house and the place of romance seems to be a thin layer of glass, alluding to the inter-voyeuristic situation that exists between these two nodes of Cliff’s life. (Figs. 5.67, 5.68 and 5.69)

\(^{135}\) Reference to Cliff’s part in the dialogue.
The inter-voyeurism between hotel and home proves right when Vinnie and Ellen venture to Norma’s hotel, slyly pass through the reception and again via the room number system easily locate her room. As Vinnie confesses that he has been spying on both of them even when they were at the magical Palm Valley Inn, and both of the children plead her to leave their father alone, Norma scolds them for their ingratitude towards their father. “Why would he go on the “outside” if he were happy at home?” she insists. Norma, however, comes to a realization at this moment. She realizes that the all pervading physical presence of Cliff’s children even in such departures from their everyday lives as the desert motel is nothing compared to their constant mental manipulations. Looking out from the window, her overwhelming moment of disillusionment is illustrated via the reflection of rain endlessly pouring down her face that seems to be a tough mask for her inner sadness. (Fig 5.70)
Immediately after, the camera cuts to Cliff’s factory workshop where Norma, next to the rain soaked window, interrupts Cliff’s voice while he is making plans for them to immediately venture to a “place near the ocean”. She urges Cliff to “face reality” that no such thing exists as an elsewhere, whether it be in the desert or next to the ocean. “Face it Clifford, I had to face it!..The only reality that exists is twenty years of Clifford Groves as a married man and a father” she exclaims. It is difficult to watch Cliff’s face while she violently disillusions him with the reality that all the outsides are inside one and the same reality. It is also difficult to see him not protest against her words. This second disillusionment has cancelled out his first. As Amy Lawrence argues, both Cliff and Norma have accepted the traditional standpoint of society, because there really is no alternative, no elsewhere to desire. All elsewheres have at this desperate moment turned out to be the bitter reality of a here and now, of a twenty- year-old marriage in the context of a child-oriented world, where city, suburbia and all elsewheres are married and through the highway powerfully tied into a single powerful all consuming union to produce children. It is a machine like his own toy factory that mass produces robots. As Cliff follows Norma to the street, the cars that allude to this machine reality, literally and figuratively bar him from catching up with her. (Figs. 5.71 and 5.72)

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136 Reference to Norma’s part in the dialogue.
He returns rain-soaked to his workshop, leaning over Rex, the walkie talkie robot man, his pride and joy that has turned out to be the image of his doom. As he leans against the window of his factory, another “tomb of his own making”, Rex walks towards the camera. (Figs. 5.73 and 5.74) In an interview with Michael Stern, Sirk explains that he originally wanted to end the film by letting Rex fall off the counter:

I had it keep walking, walking, then fall off the table. The camera pans down, whoom! And there's the robot, on the floor, spinning, rmmm, rhmm, rhhmm ... rhhmmm, slowly spinning to a halt. The End. That is complete hopelessness. This toy is all the poor man has invented in his life. It is a symbol of himself, an automaton, broken.137

I find the alternate ending equally devastating. As the factory window again fades into the picture window of the backyard, we are back at the Groves residence. As Cliff lights his cigar he walks to the picture window and spots an airplane in the sky, “the goddamn plane” as Sirk puts it, is the symbol of “his youth, his happiness” that as it unexpectedly came right to his doorstep is now flying away from him across the sky, gradually disappearing from the screen.138 (Figs. 5.75 and 5.76)


138 Ibid.
As Clifford Groves closes the window, it is as if it even had never been there! (Fig. 5.77)

Together with wife Marion, they exchange a few compliments and walk past the children. As Frankie exclaims: “They make such a handsome couple!” all the children turn around, “peering at mom and dad through the bars of the staircase, like animals in the zoo” as Stern puts it. 139 Sirk explains the irony of this ending as follows:

It's an impossible situation. Very sad. The children there are looking at strange animals. The parents have become monuments, sculpted by society and their children. Of course, these children don't realize they'll become the same kind of fools. They are already more orthodox than the parents. These children are very different from the American ideal of children as little angels. 140


Cliff’s occupation with toys has also another connotation. It shows his regression into a childhood. As Lewis Mumford argues, “Suburbia is not merely a child centered environment, but based on a childish view of the world”.141 If he were a grown man, then Norma probably would have stayed. As Sirk points out: “He is the American man remaining a child. He is a producer of toys; still playing with toys.”142 In the constant state of containment, as if one would be still in mother’s womb, Sirk shows suburbia to be a children’s or rather fetus way of life. The Dreamhouse has irreversibly gone wrong in that it has lost its object status and has become the whole world.


Chapter Six-Conclusion and Epilogue

In the previous four chapters, I departed from the initial structure of my approach to Sirk’s architectural semiotics set in the Introduction, and instead focused on the detailed specifics of each film. My aim was to guide the reader through the stories and emotions of the characters as well as through the social, historical and philosophical aspects of each of the films via parallels of the films’ architectural elements and narrative structures. In this way I aimed to disclose the many layers of meaning that are imbedded in Sirk’s architectures. Now that this task is done, I will summarize my findings by returning to the architectural themes that I posited in the introduction.

1) Context:

The main framework for *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?*, *All I Desire* and *All that Heaven Allows* is the American Small town and the filming location for all of these films is Universal Studio’s *Colonial Street*. The socio-temporal and conceptual context changes in each case, however. By adding and subtracting certain locations from the space of the camera (i.e. filming location) and more significantly via the manipulation of spatial arrangements and characteristics with his lens, Sirk in each case builds different realities of context for his characters.

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952):*

Hilverton, Vermont consists of two neighboring contexts; one is the original town and the other the affluent suburban addition that looks down upon the town from the top of surrounding hills. As I mentioned in the introduction, Sirk explicitly and implicitly favors the small town over the suburban addition. He does so explicitly via the dialogue but also parallels his overt statements with the subtle implications of his camera, which
gives the small town a pleasant, familiar and defined feel but renders the suburbs as placeless.

Sirk tailors Colonial Street’s camera space in order to construct a suitable reality for the story. Sirk lends the town of Hilverton, Vermont the familiar look of a New England village by frequently referring to the visual presence of the tall, white steeple of a former church building in his outdoor shots. (Fig. 6.1)

![Fig. 6.1](image1)

Sirk’s camera perceives the immensity of space of the filming location as rather compact and cozily defined by familiar looking building types, shrouding the space of characters or what they perceive as reality in an almost utopian idyll. He does so by placing the camera tangential to the curve of Main Street, depicting buildings as spaced closely together, and by emphasizing the building types’ definition through a warm Technicolor glow. Sirk also highlights the variety of small town commercial building types in this way, implying the town’s humble prosperity throughout various eras. (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3)

![Fig. 6.2](image2) ![Fig. 6.3](image3)
He also emphasizes the community oriented quality of the town by providing it with four public locales which men and women of all ages share; the park in the place of the village green, the drugstore, the library and the movie palace. Sirk takes straight angle shots of the surrounding buildings from the park’s point of view to emphasize the town’s nuclear arrangement around it. (Figs. 6.4 and 6.5)

Downtown Hilvertont is healthily composed of a mixture of tradition and modernity. The park-like village green, the overall nuclear structure of the small town commercial district, as well as the constant visual reference to the church steeple are very traditional,
whereas, places such as the movie palace and the drugstore with its many urban pleasures most popular of which seem to be the ice cream sodas are quite modern additions for the 1920s New England village. Modern sensibility has also been taken into account in regards to the old church in that it has been converted into a more needed library with the help of the addition of an Italianate façade. This blend of old and new strengthens community life, in that it gathers townsfolk of all ages and sexes closer together.

Unlike the structure of the old part of town in Hilverton, which is palpable to both the characters and the audience thanks to the walkability of the community and the camera’s occasional following of pedestrians around town, the suburban section of Hilverton is left unexplored and ambiguous to the audience. The wealthy suburbanites commute from downtown to their homes with the help of the car, exiting one interior into another, foreboding the postwar suburban drive-in culture of the 1950s. The new dream villa of the Blaisdells seems to be practically floating in space. In the only exterior shot we see from it, the gigantic, flat Italianate façade occupies almost the whole frame, leaving no space for any information regarding the mansion’s surroundings. (Fig. 6.6)
All I Desire (1953):

Sirk departs from the New England village by de-emphasizing the church steeple via the camera’s constant distance from it. Semi-rural Riverdale, Wisconsin is completely divorced from the metropolitan context of the film that is never shown but has a strong presence in the dialogue. The train is an object that powerfully implies the city as an “elsewhere”. The bored townsfolk either romanticize the train as a means to escape to a better world such as Naomi and her younger daughter Lily, or they see the train as a means of entertainment that brings news and opportunities for more gossip, such as the porch mongers at the depot of the train station. Hills surrounding the set of Colonial Street are in this film highlighted by the camera to emphasize the town’s walled-in isolation from the rest of the world. (Figs. 6.7 and 6.8)

The “here and elsewhere” dialectics are the result of the town’s isolation and also apply to outsiders’ romanticized notion of the town, resulting in a dichotomy of insiders’ and outsiders’ points of view. Naomi’s dream point of view for example greatly differs from the view of the town the moment she arrives in it. Contrary to the way Sirk sharpens the detailed outlines of the downtown commercial district buildings through Technicolor glow and sharp focus, here he downplays their distinctiveness via a soft and
blurry focus on the buildings, which his camera picks up from the most possibly far
distance inside Colonial Street’s Main Street. In a distant, dusty haze they do not look
like the assuring familiar objects they were in the previous film. As Naomi daydreams of
Riverdale, however, the camera takes a sharper look at the details of buildings and pans
across the town via an oblique bird’s eye view shot that makes foreground buildings’
and trees’ heights and their shadows cover up parts of the vast space that separates them
from the more distant buildings, making Riverdale’s spatial milieu much more defined
and idyllic. (Figs. 6.9 and 6.10)

Sirk also accentuates Naomi’s isolation through the selection and arrangement of
buildings. The prominence of the community oriented drugstore in Has Anybody Seen
My Gal? is replaced by an emphasis on the glass enfolded, strictly male oriented gun
shop, significantly placed on Main Street facing intersection of Fifth Street and Fourth
Street. The only other Main Street building explored in the film is the anxiety ridden,
similarly glass enfolded doctor’s office. With no public locales in which women can
participate, Sirk implies that in Riverdale the proper place for a woman is her family
home, which in case of Naomi Murdock is secluded in a more private place at the end of
Colonial Street’s Maple Drive. (Fig. 6.11)
Fig. 6.11

*All that Heaven Allows* (1955):

In Stonington, Connecticut, Sirk stresses the town’s situation in New England by both giving emphasis to the New England fall foliage and the white steeple of the New England church structure. The film opens onto a close shot of the church tower’s clock, and moves into a descending bird’s eye survey of the town. Sirk depicts the town’s transformation from previously discussed films into suburbia via the inclusion of a series of cars circulating the village green and by a baby carriage, both prominent symbols of the postwar suburbs. He depicts the church steeple as an observation tower by moving its location to a prominent spot in the middle of the longer axis of the set and through the camera’s creation of a voyeuristic gaze from the direction of the steeple, which seems to spy on the woman with the baby carriage and the cars on street level. With this implication at the beginning of the film, Sirk psychologically encourages the audience to think that the whole town is arranged as a panopticon, in which residents watch each others’ every move but forget that they themselves are being watched. The town’s inward facing arrangement of buildings, both in the circular commercial district and in
the linear residential area fits well into this concept of supervision that really alludes to the insecurities of the WASP as a superior class.

The commercial district does not include recreational locales that would make the town an appealing place as a community. With the exception of the church and the doctor’s office, the rest of the buildings are all small shops that unlike the drugstore in *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* do not offer opportunities to be used as public gathering places.

The heroine, Cary Scott’s residence’s placement in the residential district is significant in that respect, since it is crammed in the corner of the curving street along with the biggest town gossip, Mona Plush’s house. Envious of Cary’s love life, Mona watches for every opportunity to spread news about her relationship. (Figs. 6.12 and 6.13)
Cary’s bohemian lover Ron is allegedly a Thoreauvian character, who has consciously chosen to separate himself from the country club crowd and live in the peripheral natural part of Stonington. Unlike Thoreau, however, who during his Walden experiences occasional ventures into Concord undertook arduous walks, sometimes finding his way home at night by relying on his sense of touch, Ron conveniently drives back and forth between Stonington and its periphery. We never really see him exploring the woods. Since Sirk uses jump cuts to depict Ron’s transportations, the audience is never aware of the whereabouts of his residence in the woods. Like the mansions of Hilvertom in Has Anybody Seen My Gal?, Ron’s natural context, unlike the constantly explored woods that surrounded Thoreau’s cabin, is impalpable. Sirk therefore uses space to reveal Ron as a fake Thoreau.

*There’s Always Tomorrow (1956):*

With Los Angeles, California, Sirk departs from the fictional small towns that he filmed in *Colonial Street*. Unlike Hilvertom, Riverdale and Stonington, the details of the structure of Los Angeles do not fit on screen. The megalopolis is inconceivable. The incomprehensibleness of space is exactly what Sirk conveys with his camera. With cinematic techniques, he reconstructs real Los Angeles and its conundrums into the character’s world.
There are two main postmodern spatial characteristics which Sirk points out:

A) Vastness: Sirk conveys the vastness of the post world war II highway-reality as a space of networking via jump cuts between isolated pods which include: toy factory, home, theater, restaurants, high end downtown hotels, a desert resort motel complex and the highway itself.

B) Containment: Sirk expresses that all locations of postmodern Los Angeles are contained in one and the same highway constructed space through shot dissolves from one locale to another, and by intersecting the architectural elements of the consecutive dissolving shots.

2) Typology, Style and Layout:

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952):

With the help of a fusion of architectural types, Sirk echoes the mixture of tradition and modernity that work together towards the improvement of Hilvertton’s community, in the cottage of the Blaisdell family. With help of reconstruction drawings, I have shown that it is impossible for the exterior of the home to structurally correspond with its interior layout. This disjunction does not render the house as “dishonest”, since the functional and stylistic aspects of the floor plan layout type correspond to the cozy image of the façade.

Both interior and exterior have traditional and modern aspects that work in favor of family life and comfort. From the exterior, the simple outlines of the Bungalow-like facades are balanced by a series of traditional additions such as Victorian woodwork ornamentation and protruding bay windows. From the inside, the public ground floor is traditionally arranged around a fireplace center, but at the same time, its minimization of
hallways allows for a modern semi-openness as a result of direct connections of rooms via wide doorways. Occasional nooks and crannies provide semi-private spaces in the context of an almost open plan. This arrangement of rooms results in the healthy concept of gathering the small community of the house together, yet leaving them with enough possibilities for seclusion and privacy. (Figs. 6.14, 6.15 and 6.16)
*All I Desire* (1953):

Appropriate to Victorian customs, the exterior of the Murdock house contains layers of privacy that lead from the public realm of the street to its private interior. From the street to the interior of the house, there is first the fenced, semi-public lawn, followed by the stairs leading to the semi-private wrap-around porch, which itself contains layers such as protruding bay windows. The interior layout of the house is surprisingly open and does not have an entry hall, which was an essential component of even the most modest of houses of the Victorian era. The ground floor plan could easily be classified as a modern ranch house type. Because of this divergence, the proper façade detaches itself from the historically odd floor plan and becomes a metaphor for the symbolic mask of Victorian propriety that Naomi has to wear in order to be accepted by her family.

The only place that seems to be contained between four walls is the kitchen, where Naomi at one point tries to find the comforts of seclusion and containment in the privacy of a room. This containment, however, turns out to be illusory, as the children emerge from the multilayered openings to the kitchen. (Figs. 6.17, 6.18 and 6.19)
Front Elevation

Fig. 6.18

First Floor

Fig. 6.19
Nevertheless, the façade is not a fixed entity; Sirk’s camera angles make it change according to the subjective view the character’s have of their home. While Joyce for example pretends to be completely devoted to the house, the camera betrays the oppressiveness of the façade in her life.

*All that Heaven Allows (1955):*

In Stonington, the disparity of architectural styles not only indicates the rift between traditionalists and naturalists, but also becomes a tool to show the insecurities and pretensions of each group. Douglas Sirk coveys this by referring to glass; an important material used in both architectural styles. In the country club side of town, glass is an important surveying tool that in the form of picture windows allows for the panopticon structure of the town to work as a defense mechanism to protect the contrived value systems of tradition. The traditionalists’ homes are all built according to established American vernacular architectural styles, and therefore, do not celebrate the modern aesthetics of glass and hide it behind thick layers of curtain. The naturalists’ taste for the material however, is obvious in form of large expanses of it that open up to nature. The beautiful transcendental picture-postcard kind of imagery, which Sirk initially introduced by a distant view from the old Mill, is only visible from the bohemian characters’ point of view via the intervention of glass panels, betrays their superficial aesthetization of nature. (Figs. 6.20 and 6.21)
There’s Always Tomorrow (1956):

As the child becomes a teenager, the open floor plan of the modern postwar suburban family home type, initially advertized as the perfect design for child supervision, turns against the parent. Douglas Sirk makes this statement in the framework of L-shaped layouts of the Groves residence.

On the ground floor, one axis of the L consists of the entryway containing staircase and telephone apparatus, whereas the other axis is composed of living and dining areas. The two axes converge on Clifford Groves’ study area. This composition is overviewed by a series of windows that according to the indoor-outdoor porosity of suburban California culture open to the backyard via a series of windows. This space becomes the perfect ground for the judgmental and spoiled teenagers to spy on their father, of whom they have become suspicious. Hiding in the living area without being seen, they spy on his telephone conversations in the entry hall. They also lurk into his study area, even supervising what he reads there, through the windows of the backyard. (Figs. 6.22 and 6.23)

The upper floor becomes even more problematic. The master bedroom suite and the girls’ bedroom also form an L shaped layout that converges onto the balcony area. On both sides faced by floor to ceiling glass, the parents’ bed situated almost on axis with
the balcony is exposed to the children’s’ voyeurism, leaving them with no privacy even in the most intimate of places. (Figs. 6.24 and 6.25)
3) **Architectural Elements of Interior Decor:**

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952):*

Sirk contrasts the way the characters feel inside their old and new homes through the different application of architectural interior decorations. In each case, he resorts to a different space of film. Adding to the cozy feel of the home, the elements of interior décor inside the old cottage consist of gothic woodworks in warm colored oak, which are accessible to the characters in their own space of reality as well as to the audience through the characters.

One way the camera depicts the feel inside the new dream mansion with the help of interior elements of décor corresponds to the mask-like flatness of the Italianate façade. By pushing foreground objects to the sides of the frame and by situating background objects in the center, the camera conveys some flat impenetrability of space that reflects the Blaisdells’ out-of-placeness as they try to imitate a life that is alien to them. (Figs. 6.26 and 6.27)

Sirk also uses a series of elements of interior design to depict the Blaisdells’ unuttered misery inside the new dream house that have symbolic connotations. These elements mainly consist of statues that mock their petrified imitative life, sheared
flowers that render their new ways ripped of life, and window mullions that give the house a prison like quality. (Figs. 6.28 and 6.29)

Unlike in the cottage, the various uses of interior decorative elements in the mansion are not perceptible by the characters. Whereas the interior decorations of the cottage are first and foremost grounded in the characters’ reality, both the flattening of the screen and the symbolism of elements inside the mansion are directed solely towards the audience members of “cinematic frame space”. The characters’ entrapment in film becomes a metaphor for their entrapment in another reality that they do not understand; the dream house and its associated ways of life.

*All I Desire* (1953):

In addition to the floor plan being so open, modern and unusual for its time period in the film, Sirk also uses interior architectural elements to express the interior’s disparity with the façade’s promises of a Victorian family home. He does so in two ways, both directed to the audience and *cinematic frame space*, expressing Naomi’s constrained feelings about the house and becoming the metaphor for her own pent up, complicated, interior emotions.
He compartmentalizes the frame with a series of vertical interior architectural elements such as columns, banisters, door and window frames, curtains, etc. which, as Roger McNiven points out, lose their real functional qualities in order to become expressive tools that communicate characters’ emotional states. Here, they confine characters in separate parts of the frame, conveying their existence in separate worlds despite residing under the same roof. (Figs. 6.30, 6.31, 6.32, 6.33 and 6.34)
Sirk also uses architecture’s inherent qualities to suggest the characters’ entrapment in the house. He frames interior partitioning devices in a way that they look like exterior architectural elements. By bringing associations of exterior architecture into the interior, Sirk conveys to the audience a sense of claustrophobia. The artifice of architectural functions stresses the film’s self-reflexivity, and similar to the dream house in *Has Anybody Seen my Gal?*, alludes to both cinematic and architectural entrapments of characters. (Figs. 6.35 and 6.36)
All that Heaven Allows (1955):

Again, architectural elements become meaningful only in frame space, putting analogous connotations on the characters’ condition in the house with its socio-temporal as well as cultural and geographical context. Vertical decorative elements such as banisters, window mullions and fire screens are translated into cinematic frame space as symbols of imprisonment. (Figs. 6.37, 6.38, 6.39 and 6.40)

Imitative objects such as statues and reflective surfaces allude to the characters’ petrification into a lifestyle that is devoid of life; their living death being also indicated by the ubiquity of shared flowers in the home. The parallels between these elements in Cary’s and Alida’s homes, indicates that both women, despite of having such different lifestyles are similarly entrapped in the home’s interior. (Figs. 6.41, 6.42, 6.43 and 6.44)
There’s Always Tomorrow (1956):

Like in All I Desire, vertical elements compartmentalize the frame, revealing that despite the openness of floor plan, inhabitants of the house each live in their own self-centered worlds. This compartmentalization sometimes coincides with the voyeuristic aspect of architectural typology. (Figs. 6.45 and 6.46)

In addition, vertical, as well as horizontal repetitive elements, as in All that Heaven Allows, become across the screen symbols of imprisonment. (Figs. 6.47 and 6.48)
4) Cinematic and Transcendental Architecture:

*Has Anybody Seen My Gal? (1952):*

Despite being the richest man in the world, millionaire Fulton is not happy because he has failed in his private life. As a result of his rejection by his first love Millicent, he spent the rest of his life accumulating money and remains single in the winter of his life. He mostly lives in a past with Millicent. Sirk renders images of the past as inaccessible by filming them as a series of asensual and cold refractions seen from behind panes of glass. (Figs. 6.49, 6.50 and 6.51)
The highpoint of his predicament occurs at the moment when out of fear of discovery of his fake identity, he hastily leaves the lives of Millicent’s descendents, the Blaisdell family, which after a series of adventures had become the new love of his life. As he hurries down the street, the Blaisdells gather behind the stained glass of their family home’s entrance door to watch him. At this moment, the glass of the entrance door seems to transcendentally fuse all their faces into its surface that becomes a metaphor for Fulton’s memory, in which all experiences with the Blaisdells are fused into a single dream. The etching, together with the frost on the glass symbolically troubles the old man’s recollective vision, implying the gradual fading of this experience, as memory steadily grows cold in his age.

The application of a window that lies right at the liminal line between the inside and outside realms as a metaphor for the ephemeral immaterial substance of memory profoundly refers to the dematerialization of the liminal cinematic screen as it turns into a window to ephemeral dreams. As sad as this moment is, its ability to use this liminal architectural element as an imitation of the transitory in life, contains a profound beauty that pertains to artistic representation. This beauty of architecture as immaterialized in film contrasts with the many architectural failures of the characters, who sought happiness in its permanent materiality. (Fig. 6.52)
**All I Desire (1953):**

As Naomi gradually approaches the entrance to her old family home, she hesitates at the liminal space of the porch to watch her family from behind the screen door. The shot of the camera’s view of Naomi as she observes the perfect transcendental image of the family gathering, is self-reflexive of cinematic projection. It is difficult to tell whether the image is projected from Naomi’s eyes or from inside the house. This confusion pertains to the cinematic projection of light onto a screen that seems to project out the light of another world beyond itself. At this cinematic instance, the contrived mask-like façade becomes beautiful, which only highlights its material unpleasantness during the rest of the film. (Fig. 6.53)

![Image](image.jpg)

**All that Heaven Allows (1955):**

As Cary, alone in the moonlit space of her boudoir, contemplates the possibility of finding love again, Sirk powerfully draws the audience’s attention to cinematic frame space by splitting the frame into a gorgeous transcendental yin-yang composition of complementary colors, in which reality and dream conjoin onto the magical object of the tree cutting that Ron gave to her that day. The ephemerality of the cinematic space is
pointed out by this moment’s extremely short duration. Cary’s children disrupt our
filmic dream space with their voices and pull Cary back from her dream-space into
materialistic reality. The short-lived beauty of the frame and the artistic imitation of an
anticipating hope for love, are set off and contrasted by the image of Cary moving
deeper and deeper into mirror space to greet her children. The uncannily deep
architectural space inside the mirror indicates that the elegant home, which for any
woman in the 1950s would be truly a dream house, is a morbid and lifeless imitation of
happiness, something that is contrasted by the beauty of film’s ability to imitate
immaterial things in life. (Figs. 6.54 and 6.55)

![Fig. 6.54](image1.jpg) ![Fig. 6.55](image2.jpg)

**There’s Always Tomorrow (1956):**

Clifford Groves’s view of his dream home changes forever when his long lost love
Norma arrives at his doorstep. At two prominent moments inside the house, one in the
entrance way and the other next to the picture window open to the backyard, light seems
to pour out from Naomi throwing a series of shadows around her that by themselves are
rather grotesque and unseemly, but in the transcendental fusion of elements into the
screen surface compose a breathtakingly beautiful image that depict the epiphany that
Clifford undergoes. In a moment of cinematic space that really is his point of view shot,
Clifford Groves’s home becomes so beautiful that one clearly sees its ugliness for the rest of the film. (Figs. 6.56 and 6.57)

In previous analyses of Sirk’s architecture, the house became an isolated, entrapping object. Whereas Roger McNiven focused merely on cinematic frame space, Amy Lawrence only talked about typology. Through interconnected architectural themes, I argued that all these aspects are inter-dependable layers of meaning embedded in Sirk’s architectural semiotics that eventually lead to concepts of ephemeral and liminal architecture only found in the transcendental medium of film. The moments in which Sirk conveys these aspects, are usually associated with the characters’ misery, yet they become beautiful in the films’ awareness of their cinematic selves.

I hope that my arguments will lead to further conversations about Sirk’s architecture and to new ways of discovering meaning in his films. Especially pressing is a discussion of his last masterpieces Written on the Wind (1956) and Imitation of Life (1959). Before closing the thesis, I will briefly go over a few points about each of the discussed architectural theme of these films.

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Written on the Wind (1956):

Context:

The story is about a very particular case of small town entrapment and boredom. Children of oil millionaire Jasper Hadley, who has renamed and redesigned the town of Hadley around his oil company, deal with the extraordinary pressures of the image that especially their father expects them to live. Their story is about a strong nostalgic yearning for times before their father hit oil.

In the space of the camera (i.e. filming location), Sirk depicts from the remaining older architectural styles in downtown Hadley, that old Hadley did not build the town from scratch but rather reorganized it around his company. In the camera reconstructed space of characters, the fragmented sequences of the Hadley children’s cars, driving back and forth between downtown and the mansion, shows the town to be reorganized as a classic, Industrial suburb with the business district in the center, surrounded by the oil refineries in which the workers live beneath a forest of oil derricks and the periphery which is the seat of the villas of the more wealthy. The low camera angles and the dishwater blue light in which the industrial landscape is bathed, make the place look utterly alienating. There is much more to the context than the town of Hadley, however. Like in There’s Always Tomorrow, characters pass from one interior to another, resulting in a constant state of containment in one and the same reality, which here, thanks to private jets, literally expands to the whole world. A normal day for Kyle Hadley for example is to travel from Texas to Miami, to New York, to Acapulco.

Their constant travel is the result of the Hadley children’s restlessness due to desperately trying to escape their expected images. There is no way to escape, however,
so they resort to alcohol and sex. They cannot even hide behind the mask-like façade of
the colonial mansion; on the contrary, the image of their father’s dream house itself
consumes them. All other locations become an extension to the house. (Figs. 6.58, 6.59,
6.60 and 6.61

Typology, Style and Layout:

The interior of the house is divided into two incompatible layers of existence. The
public first floor is the realm of old Hadley’s all pervading presence which conforms to
the colonial floor plan typology and the symmetrical propriety of the façade. But there is
also the more private second floor which is disjointed and full of hiding places. The
second floor consists of mismatched pieces and fragments, which for the observer are at
times impossible to connect as a unified whole. It is as if throughout the years of
occupying the second floor, the Hadley children managed to convert it into an
impenetrable labyrinth. The mismatched quality of the second floor is more a construct
of the camera than actual set location. The fragmented movements of the camera
frustrate the audience in putting the layout of the second floor together as a whole. (Figs. 6.62 and 6.63)

**Fig. 6.62**

**Architectural Elements of Interior Décor:**

The most prominent interior architectural element is the monumental staircase, proudly displayed in its visibility through the entrance door that connects the two floors, leading from public to private. Filmed from above, it becomes a vertiginous site of emotional crisis, the summit of which is old Hadley’s death, as if the transition from his world to that of his children were too much for him to bear. (Figs. 6.64 and 6.65)
Cinematic and Transcendental Architecture:

Transcendental and cinematic moments of architecture completely disappear from this picture but find a powerful equivalent in the river, the childhood haunt for the Hadley children. The river, a symbol of the momentary, accidental and transcendental in film, becomes figurative of the irretrievable youth and innocence of the Hadley children. Although we see the daughter, Marylee Hadley, visit this site regularly, the lighting of the river shots, that even in the context of Sirk’s films is utterly artificial, renders it as an inaccessible place for her as well as for her brother Kyle and her childhood object of romance Mitch. Sirk criticizes the decadent Hadley society in light of a lost innocence that the filmic river of time has taken away from them, something that they have missed due to being preoccupied with material things. (Fig. 6.66)
*Imitation of Life (1959):*

**Context:**

Annie and Laura are both widowed, single mothers, the former black and the other white, who happen to meet in the socio-temporal context of the racial 1950s, when life for a white person was much easier than for a black person. The geographic context of the film moves from city to country. The place of Annie and Laura’s initial meeting is a Coney Island beach, suitably a place where people of the city go to change the color of their skin.\(^{144}\) Coney Island is also a geographical location where during the 1950s, people of all ages, races and sexes intermingled to attend its affordable entertainments. Annie and Laura and their daughters meet under the sheltering structure of the board walk, and Laura agrees to let Annie and her daughter Sarah Jane stay at her place for a short while. (Figs. 6.67 and 6.68)

![Fig. 6.67](image1.png) ![Fig. 6.68](image2.png)

Together, they move to Laura’s drab looking apartment building in the city where Annie, in order to help out Laura pretends to be Laura’s maid and ends up furthering her acting carrier in this way as a sort of public relations manager. One thing leads to another, and as Laura becomes the successful actress that she always wanted to be, Annie ends up being a permanent maid inside Laura’s new dream house in a secluded,

\(^{144}\) From Film Historian Foster Hirsch’s commentary for the copy of the Universal Legacy Series of the DVD of *Imitation of Life.*
semi-rural small town in Connecticut. As they move to this new place in the country, mother-daughter relationships start to deteriorate. The self absorbed Laura loses touch with her daughter Suzie and Annie’s daughter Sarah Jane, who in a powerful violent scene in the empty downtown district of the small town gets brutally beaten up by her white boyfriend as he finds out that she is black, escapes the place and her mother’s black skin by fleeing into the world of vaudeville in Hollywood, Los Angeles. (Fig. 6.69)

All characters live in their own self-centered spheres in the context of the secluded country except for Annie; it is only she who has a community, as Sirk depicts with the large crowd that gathers at the church of the downtown district for her funeral, where we get to see a great cross section of American society composed of people of all ages, sexes and races. (Figs. 6.70 and 6.71)
Typology, Style and Layout:

The house’s free flowing floor plan, its emphasized natural interior textures, and large glass enclosures give it a rather contemporary 1950s modern feel. From both exterior and interior depictions, it fits into the ranch house type. Initially Sirk emphasizes the house’s openness of floor plan, by making its interior space seem to extend into the surrounding views provided by large horizontal windows. (Figs. 6.72 and 6.73)

As the film progresses, we find out that there is also a secluded area in the first floor of the house; the kitchen, which is Annie’s realm. This contradiction of floor plan type is quite relevant and expressive, since it depicts Annie’s role as a sort of “behind the scenes” person in Laura’s acting career, and that her role as a servant, is in reality only an imitation.145

Architectural Elements of Interior Decor:

Sirk uses his signature panoply of imitative objects, such as statuettes, flowers and mirrors to convey the petrified lifelessness of an imitation of life that the characters’ are leading inside the dream home. Most powerful, however, are the many rafters that throw

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bizarre shadows around the house, giving it a prison-like feel, and the multi-leveled walkways that Sirk uses primarily in cinematic frame space to express the obliviousness of the wealthy mother and daughter to the many black servants, who move around the house and are yet so invisible to them as if they existed in separate realm of existence. Also very powerful are the railings of these walkways that composed of black and white colors, are expressive of the blacks’ imprisonment behind society’s racism.  

(Figs. 6.74 and 6.75)

**Cinematic and Transcendental Architecture:**

In the powerful magnum opus of Annie’s funeral sequence, Sirk criticizes the racism and materialism of America, his second home, in the light of his beloved transcendental philosophies for which he found an outlet in Hollywood film. Annie dies, apparently from a heart that was broken by Sara Jane, the only thing she had in life, as she leaves her for good in favor of a “better” life as a white woman. On her death bed, Annie gives careful instructions to Laura in regards to the funeral of her dreams; an event she had carefully planned for all her life.

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146 From Film Historian Foster Hirsch’s commentary for the copy of the Universal Legacy Series of the DVD of *Imitation of Life*. 

Sirk contrasts between the uncanniness of the material structures of Laura’s dream house, and the ephemeral flower structures of Annie’s glorious ephemeral final home, which she herself had meticulously designed. Laura’s expensive furniture is nothing compared to this transcendent and transcendental splendor. Accompanied by Mahalia Jackson’s overwhelmingly striking voice, as she sings of the beauties of death, the camera twice descends from the light patterns of glass stained windows into an architecture of flowers. Flowers, a symbol of living death inside the bourgeois home in Sirk’s films, have here found such different connotations! In the world of characters, they materialize an ephemeral architecture that can only be found in the world of film. It is as if Sirk has entered this world through Annie’s remains, and tries to say something to his characters about the real beauties of life. In these scenes, Sirk finally comes to celebrate the surfaces of his characters’ world. (Figs. 6.76 and 6.77)
The final descending shot ends on axis with Annie’s coffin, which she had instructed at her deathbed to be covered with white oleanders, as if to finally be able to be white, in order to not disgrace her daughter on this special day. Sarah Jane, in a devastating gesture, apologizes to this object that does not answer back. (Fig. 6.78, 6.79 and 6.80)
As Sirk steps back and watches the funeral procession with an unprecedented direct shot through the mullions of a shop window, it is not clear whether the grotesque statuettes, we and he are imprisoned in cinematic space or the marching people beyond the window. It is at this final moment that he, in a complex act of self-reflexivity, confuses his audience, and seems to transcend the screen, as if it magically had evaporated, and enters into the American small town world of his films. The most private yet most public of moments of his oeuvre, is this moment in which Sirk watches the red, white and blue procession pass him by, as if he where both a member of his audience and one of his characters and the same time. It truly feels as if it is his loving and glorious farewell to America, its small towns, and its films. (Fig. 6.81)
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