



DREAM PALACE

Magnificent Obsession + Fear Eats the Soul

Introduction by Heather Stewart, BFI Creative Director (Sunday 23 May only).

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Both John M. Stahl's 1935 version and Douglas Sirk's later 1954 film of **Magnificent Obsession** were based on a popular 1929 novel by former pastor Lloyd C. Douglas (who later penned *The Robe*). In this story, Bob Merrick, a self-absorbed millionaire playboy, is saved after a drunken boating accident by a resuscitation device that is therefore not available when needed by Bridgetown's most beloved family doctor at the moment of his fatal coronary. After recovering, Merrick falls in love with the doctor's widow, Helen, who resents him hatefully for the damage he's done to her life. A mutual acquaintance, a successful artist named Randolph, introduces Merrick to the late doctor's secretly philanthropic ways – a 'magnificent obsession' with doing good in exchange for purely karmic dividends, an approach to living that he credits as originating with Christ. Merrick's persistent attempts to bed the widow result in an accident that blinds her, and he dedicates himself to becoming a doctor so that he may restore her vision and hit the jackpot of her love in a weepy homestretch. Understandably, when Universal-International contract director Douglas Sirk was presented with a copy by producer Ross Hunter, he found the novel not only badly written but 'the most confused book you can imagine.' Nevertheless, filming it would change his life and ensure his continued cult recognition for generations to come.

Sirk – a former UFA director whose most recent Universal-International assignment had been *Taza, Son of Cochise* (with Rock Hudson in redface as the Apache chief's heir) – worked from a script only marginally adjusted from that of an earlier version directed for Universal in 1935 by John M. Stahl and starring an almost matronly Irene Dunne opposite a 12-years-younger Robert Taylor, who wore conspicuously more eye makeup than she. (As farfetched as Merrick's career change to save his beloved might sound, Taylor had good reason to believe it – his own father had done the same in a successful bid to restore his invalid wife's ability to walk.) Stahl's earlier version works better in some ways (its presentation of the blinding accident is more shocking) but it makes the fatal mistake of leavening the solemn story with too much incidental jocularly – setting off especial bad-taste sirens when Merrick continues to chase Helen's skirt even after discovering that she's the woman whose husband died so he might live.

In Sirk's soapier hands, the story reclaims its solemnity and gains in religious mystery, with Otto Kruger's Randolph (played as sincerely but less subtly by Ralph Morgan in the original) evoking suspicions that God Himself may walk among this cast of characters with interventionist intent. The director, contempt in cheek, presents the story as a church of chintz, redolent in sickly cream colours and violet reds – while relocating it to a fir-lined lakeside spot (California's Lake Arrowhead, posing as Bridgetown) which recalls the setting of Stahl's great 1945 melodrama *Leave Her to Heaven*. This time the principals are played by a prim and palpably talcumed Jane Wyman, and Rock Hudson in a masculine, clean-cut, redemptive role that defined his romantic yet wholesome screen persona. Sirk's remake proved a major hit and became the first of his trademark melodramas for Universal-International, followed by the superior *All That Heaven Allows*, *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life*.

Tim Lucas, *Sight & Sound*, March 2009

Fear Eats the Soul

Like Rainer Werner Fassbinder's other recent imitations of life, *Fear Eats the Soul* achieves a remarkable balance between stylisation and realism. The movie is an expansion/revision of a story told by a minor character in Fassbinder's own *Der amerikanische Soldat* (1970) and also a revision/remake of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Its plot is an extraordinary mesh of low-key melodrama and social criticism. Emmi meets Ali when she takes shelter in a bar frequented by Moroccans, Germany's most despised immigrants. To her surprise, her friendly overtures lead to a seduction and, soon after, to marriage; to her dismay, she is immediately ostracised by her neighbours, her three grown-up children, local tradesmen and her fellow-charwomen at work.

Sirk's movies proposed aesthetically viable solutions to the problem of commenting radically on society without alienating audiences; the use of melodrama as a device for preserving a distance from the action – a distance conducive to analysis; the stylistic use of bold artifice (colour expressionism and other formal contrivances) as a means of reducing possible areas of ambiguity. In other words, Sirk offered a variety of subversion that proceeded through a measured, clear-cut seduction of the audience's susceptibilities. *Fear Eats the Soul* begins like a fairy-tale: as in a dream, Emmi is lured into the Moroccan bar by the Arab music on its juke-box, and invited to dance for what is evidently the first time in many years. Stage by stage, everything that follows is hilariously – and agonisingly – predictable; Fassbinder plays on audience expectations so thoroughly that his exposition astonishes by its very exhaustiveness. The types of racial fear and prejudice are catalogued

succinctly: the woman neighbour's jealousy, the shopkeeper's self-deluding one-upmanship, the children's resentment, white workers' contempt (Fassbinder himself contributes a sharp sketch of Emmi's layabout son-in-law). The ambience is such that even the one sane response to Emmi's marriage, from the landlord's son, is faintly sinister in its inscrutable courtesy.

The second half of the movie reverses the coin, and explores the equally rigid patterns of social exploitation that reassert themselves once everyone involved has adjusted to the broken taboo. Family and friends renew their old demands on Emmi's kindness and tolerance; Emmi joins her fellow chars in turning a blind eye to wage discrimination against a Yugoslav colleague, and begins treating Ali like a pet. Much, of course, hinges on sex. Ali is a terrific stud (Fassbinder twice shows him 'magnificently' naked) who provokes male envy and female lust, responses that the movie discovers behind nearly all the social façades. Throughout, the themes covert in the Jane Wyman-Rock Hudson relationship in *All That Heaven Allows* are made explicit, and ferociously convincing.

Fassbinder circumscribes the movie's area of interest by fading out on anything irrelevant to his direct concerns (the first night that the couple share; their turning-point holiday). He films his active characters in neutral mid-shots, never lending disproportionate weight to one or another in the compositions, and the legions of anonymous onlookers who provide the movie's moral 'context' in static, posed tableaux. The acting style he demands is just as artificial, using the hyper-realist, slow-paced diction familiar from his earlier work; Brigitte Mira and El Hedi ben Salem draw from it performances of unerring psychological acuity. The overall approach invites comparison with other European critiques of American genres (Melville's gangster movies, Leone's Westerns); but Fassbinder is clearly as interested in vindicating Sirk as he is in using a rhetorical style to make his unequivocal statements on film. This 'politicised weepie' realises both aims with an assurance of a kind almost vanished from narrative cinema.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, September 1974

MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

Director: Douglas Sirk
Production Companies:
Universal Pictures Company,
Universal-International
Producer: Ross Hunter
2nd Unit Director: James C. Havens *
Assistant Director: William Holland
2nd Assistant Director: Gordon McLean *
Screenplay: Robert Blees
Adaptation: Wells Root
Adapted from the screenplay by: Sarah Y. Mason, Victor Heerman
Based on the novel by: Lloyd C. Douglas
Director of Photography: Russell Metty
Technicolor Colour Consultant: William Fritzsche
Special Photography: David S. Horsley
Editor: Milton Carruth
Art Directors: Bernard Herzbrun, Emrich Nicholson
Set Decorators: Russell A. Gausman, Ruby R. Levitt
Gowns: Bill Thomas
Make-up: Bud Westmore
Hairstyles: Joan St. Oegger
Music: Frank Skinner
Music Director: Joseph Gershenson
Sound: Leslie I. Carey, Corson Jowett

Cast:

Jane Wyman (Helen Phillips)
Rock Hudson (Bob Merrick)
Agnes Moorehead (Nancy Ashford)
Otto Kruger (Edward Randolph)

Barbara Rush (Joyce Phillips)
Gregg Palmer (Tom Masterson)
Paul Cavanagh (Dr Henry Giraud)
Sara Shane (Valerie Daniels)
Richard H. Cutting (Dr Derwin Dodge)
Judy Nugent (Judy)
Helen KleeB (Mrs Eden)
Rudolph Anders (Dr Albert Fuss)
Fred Nurney (Dr Laradetti)
John Mylong (Dr Emil Hofer)
Alexander Campbell (Dr Allan)
Mae Clarke (Mrs Miller)
Harvey Grant (Chris Miller)
Joe Mell (Dan)
George Lynn (Williams, the butler) *
Robert B. Williams (Sergeant Burnham) *
Will White (Sergeant Ames) *
Jack Kelly, Lee Roberts (mechanics) *
Lisa Gaye, Kathleen O’Malley (switchboard girls) *
William Leslie, Lance Fuller, Brad Jackson,
Myrna Hansen (customer) *
Harold Dyrenforth (Mr Jouvett) *
Norbert Schiller (Julian Lang) *
Joy Hallward (maid) *
Gail Bonney (Phyllis) *
Lucille La Marr (nurse) *

USA 1954
108 mins

* Uncredited

FEAR EATS THE SOUL (ANGST ESSEN SEELE AUF)

A film by: Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Production Company: Tango-Film (Munich)
Producers: Michael Fengler, Rainer Werner Fassbinder *
Unit Manager: Christian Hohoff
Assistant Director: Rainer Langhans
Screenplay: Rainer Werner Fassbinder *
Director of Photography: Jürgen Jürges
Lighting: Ekkehard Heinrich
Camera Assistant: Thomas Schwan
Stills Photography: Peter Gauhe
Editor: Thea Eymész *
Art Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder *
Make-up: Helga Kempke
Sound: Fritz-Müller Scherz

Cast:

Brigitte Mira (Emmi Kurowski)
El Hedi ben Salem (Ali)
Irm Hermann (Krista)
Elma Karlowa (Mrs Kargus)
Anita Bucher (Mrs Ellis)
Gusti Kreissl (Paula)

Doris Mathes (grocer’s wife)
Margit Symo (Hedwig)
Katharina Herberg (girl in the bar)
Peter Gauhe (Bruno)
Marquard Böhm (Gruber, landlord’s son)
Walter Sedlmayr (Angermayer, grocer)
Hannes Gromball (Osteria head waiter)
Hark Bohm (doctor)
Rudolf Waldemar Brem (bar patron)
Karl Scheydt (Albert)
Peter Moland (chief garage mechanic)
Barbara Valentin (Barbara, landlady)
Lilo Pempeit (Mrs Münchmeyer) *
Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Eugen, Krista’s husband) *
Helga Ballhaus (Yolanda) *
Kurt Raab (foreman) *
Elisabeth Bertram (Frieda) *

West Germany 1974
94 mins

* Uncredited

In partnership with:



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view. See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.