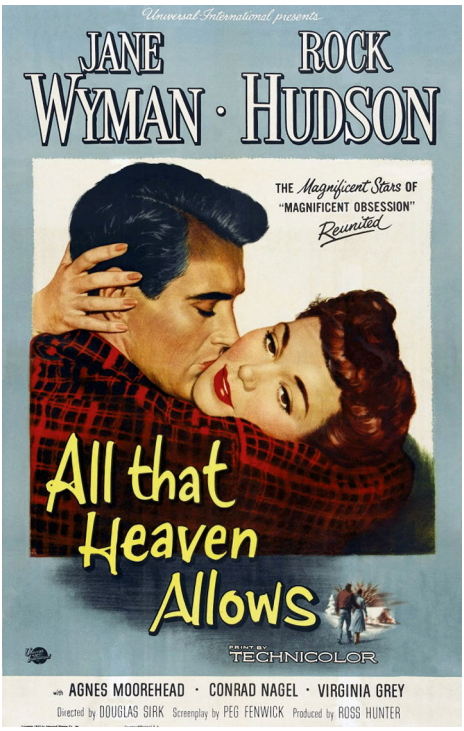
All that Heaven Allows (1955)

Elisabeth Bronfen

dir. Douglas Sirk; prod. Ross Hunter; screenplay Peg Fenwick; photography Russell Metty; music Frank Skinner. 35 mm, color, 89 mins. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

If, in the opening shot of *All That Heaven Allows*, the bell tower of Stoningham informs us that it is 12 o'clock noon, then it does so to signal that we are entering the story at a moment when Cary Scott's life is about to change. At first, the young man pruning the heroine's trees on this bright autumn day looks like an extra. Only when her friend Sara turns down an invitation for lunch does Cary ask her gardener, Ron Kirby, to join her instead. Although he has been working for her every spring and autumn for three years, this is the first time she takes note of him. She is newly widowed; her children Kay and Ned visit only on the weekend. When Ron presents her with a twig from her golden rain tree, telling her that it only thrives in a home where there is love, he awakens feelings in her that have been dormant. This sudden attraction to him forces her to notice the emotional void in her life. The visual transition to the next scene makes use of the twig he gave her. Cary has now placed it in a vase on the vanity table where she is powdering her face. In the mirror we see her gaze longingly at it until the voices of her children interrupt her reverie. The subsequent *mise-en-scène*, visualizing the affective conundrum at the heart of melodramatic imagination, is quintessentially Douglas Sirk. As Cary gets up, the camera moves toward the mirror, capturing a reflection of her embracing Kay on the threshold to her bedroom, with Ned standing just behind her. As the camera pans toward the mirror, the vase falls out of our frame of vision. The sentimental bond between Cary and her children is not only presented as a framed mirror image. It also wipes out any non-maternal desire.

The plot line follows the structure of a heterosexual feminine daydream. During the evening, Cary finds herself pursued by several suitors. Harvey, a long-standing friend of the family, who has accompanied her to the country club, proposes to her after escorting her home. Although he offers companionship, she turns him down. In a previous scene, the womanizer Howard had assaulted her on the terrace of the club, proposing a clandestine affair. Firmly rebuking him, Cary had immediately disengaged herself from his unsolicited kiss. Implicitly, she has already chosen the man who gave her the love twig, yet she will require a long period of deliberation before she can make this decision public. When soon thereafter she visits the forlorn mill next to Ron's nursery, she imagines how it could be transformed into a home and, although she is drawn to his radical independence, she hesitates. It is not just her children and friends who pose an obstacle. She is herself uncertain whether she has the courage to follow her own desire. Finding a copy of *Walden* in the home of Alida, one of Ron's friends, Cary softly reads aloud that »the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,« as though this were a message explicitly to herself.

As Sirk has explained, Thoreau's manifesto of nonconformism »is ultimately what the film was about« (Halliday 113). His melodramatic version of what it means for his heroine to no longer keep pace with her neighbors' investment in the notion of bourgeois prosperity, and, instead, to march to the beat of a different drummer, is, in turn, negotiated in relation to the two homes available to her: encapsulating, as they do, two incompatible worldviews. To mark the next narrative turning point, the camera returns to the bell tower of Stoningham. Now it is 6 p.m. on a wintry Saturday and Ron has asked Cary to hurry over to the mill. He has completely refurbished it, including a cozy fireplace and an enormous window looking out over the pond at the edge of the woods. The snowstorm which we see through the wooden boxed panes serves as the backdrop for her initial refusal of his proposal. She is afraid that because of class-based social conventions, this marriage will put her into an impossible situation. When, that same evening, realizing the overwhelming power of her desire, she decides to accept Ron after all, the couple once more stands in front of the window. As though it were a movie screen, what we now see behind it is a snow-covered landscape illuminated by the pink light of dusk. Their prospective happiness is perhaps only a Technicolor fantasy.

Her children's plans for their mother's future, in turn, involve a diametrically opposite notion of domesticity. Ned formulates his vehement disapproval of this marriage in terms of her obligation to remain in the family house to honor the memory of their father. During their altercation, he is standing behind the screen of the fireplace which, throughout the film, is never once lit. The iron-wrought partition not only stands for what has come between them but also indicates that the sacrifice he demands of her screens off her passion, effectively locking in all she desires. In line with the dramaturgic code of the women's weepies, we remain almost exclusively with Cary in her attempt to think through her conflicted emotional state. Yet specific to Sirk is that these self-reflections are presented in relation to the bourgeois home, with all its constricting furniture, which Cary inhabits,—the framed windows through which she looks out at the world, the mirrors that reflect the dilemmas she must solve. In the most cruelly ironic scene of the film, Cary's decision to put an end to her love affair out of maternal duty is debunked as a self-delusion. When her children arrive on Christmas morning, both bring with them news that will radically change her domestic situation. Kay has become engaged and Ned is about to go abroad on a scholarship. The very

house which, weeks earlier, stood for their father's legacy, has become an unnecessary luxury that Ned suggests they sell. Cary's desperate recognition that »the whole thing has been so pointless« is underscored by the gift of a TV set that is meant to substitute for the loss of the very family in the name of which she had been persuaded to give up Ron. While the salesman explains that by simply turning the dial she will have all the company she needs at her fingertips, the camera pans toward the TV screen until all we see is her reflection, framed by a red ribbon to the left and a Christmas card to the right. Cary's look of bemusement is devastating.

Though it was hugely successful at the box office, *All That Heaven Allows* garnered no critical attention when it came out. Instead, it was feminist film criticism in the 1980s that rediscovered it as a particularly salient example for the way the melodramatic heroine acts out the painful contradictions between social conventions and personal desires. As Laura Mulvey has noted, the film's heightened sentimentality is not only predicated on the way the story is told strictly from Cary's perspective, so that she emerges as the privileged point of identification. Her irreconcilable dilemma is never fully resolved, as if having »a female point of view dominating the narrative produces an excess which precludes satisfaction« (Mulvey 79). If the impossibility of a fulfilment of the heroine's fantasies serves to challenge women's restricted position in postwar American society, this critique is not intended to radically change society. The feminine corrective to the constraints of domesticity is conceived in traditional terms of caring maternal compassion. Yet if the focus on the heroine's point of view through the *mise-en-scène* privileges feminine attributes like intuition and emotion, the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder discovers in this a utopic touch. As he notes, on screen »women are always reacting, doing what women are supposed to do, but in Sirk they think.« He adds: »It's great to see women think. It gives one hope.« For him, Sirk had discovered in the melodrama a cinematic form of feminine philosophy.

Any critical reevaluation of Sirk's film hinges on how one chooses to read the ambivalent resolution, predicated as this is on the logic of a second chance. After Cary, in the course of her deliberations, has succeeded in removing all mental obstacles to her reunion with Ron, she drives to his mill. The sunlit winter landscape we see through the window of her car in a rear projection anticipates a happy ending. Yet as Sirk has noted, while the studio loved the title because they thought it meant you could indeed have everything you wanted, »I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy« (Halliday 140). When Cary finds the door to the mill closed, she again hesitates and, rather than waiting, drives away again. Ron, coming home from a hunting trip sees this. In his excitement, he loses his step and falls down a ridge. A shot of his unconscious body, lying in the snow, segues to that of the bell tower, so as to signal a final narrative turning point. It is midnight and Cary is home alone, pacing up and down next to the unlit fireplace, when Ron's friend Alida arrives to tell her about the accident. At the mill, Cary finds Ron fast asleep on the couch. If, when she initially consented to their marriage, she was still uncertain whether it could work out, her decision to stay is now deliberate. With Thoreau one might say, she needed to lose Ron in order to *refind* him. She needed to realize the self-estrangement ingrained in her notion of maternal duty. As she explains to Alida, she had let so many people come between them »and the strangest one of all, myself.« Though her chance of happiness is now slimmer, given that it is unclear whether Ron will fully recover, this anagnorisis does not come too late—but rather just in time.

Ron wakes up the next morning. The brightly lit snow-decked landscape opening out toward the pond serves as the backdrop for an exchange of vows. Still half asleep, he mutters, »you've come home,« and Cary responds by reiterating his interpellation. »Yes, darling, I've come home.« The window, once again, functions as a screen within the screen, offering up a framed image of the anticipation of happiness: a potentiality of happiness within limits. The fact that Cary's return to Ron requires his injured body reinstalls her as the heroine in a narrative of care. Her romantic desire and her maternal duty have now converged. The contradiction is such that she is empowered by this seemingly selfless gesture. Leaning over his wounded body she asserts herself. It is up to us whether we break out in tears, or in nervous laughter, or whether we begin to think.

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