

Films and Society

Imitation of Life

Douglas Sirk (1959)

U.S. in the 1950s

- Memories of World War II (1941/45)
 - Trauma and community
 - War effort must call on the entire society
 - Blacks fight alongside whites on the front
 - Women are called to take jobs left behind the men fighting far away



Two million black enlisted and one million fought
mostly in segregated units



Michelangelo, Prophet Isiah (Sistine Chapel)



Norman Rockwell, Rosie the Riveter 1943 (Evening Standard)



J. Howard Miller, Rosie the Riveter (Westinghouse campaign)

Imitation of Life (1959)

- Fanny Hurst's 1933 novel
 - Hurst (1885-1968) a progressive writer engaged in causes of gender and racial inequality
- First movie version 1935 by John M. Stahl
- Second version 1959 by Douglas Sirk
 - Sirk (1897-1987) German film director who moved to the US in 1937
 - Very successful director of melodramas
 - Imitation of Life was his biggest success and last movie
 - Lana Turner
 - Scandal filled life (8 marriages, alcoholism, the Johnny Stompanato murder)
 - The film is her comeback vehicle

Melodrama

- Human tragedy tamed through emotions
- “Musical drama” – melos Greek for music
 - Pathos
 - Constant overwrought emotions
 - Moral polarization
 - Non-classical narrative structure (extreme coincidence, deus ex machina)
 - Sensationalism (action, violence, thrills)
- Victorian theater genre focusing on love and murder
- Hollywood melodramas (“weepies”)
 - Human tragedies (failed romance and friendship, family drama, sickness, misfortune, death etc.) treated in a sentimental form – often with an emotionally satisfying ending
 - Appeal to female audiences
 - Appears with the talkies in the 1930s, Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* is its pinnacle -- racial and gender inequality as human tragedy

Imitation of Life 1959

- Identity and the American Dream
 - Identity
 - Identity and the driving force of an individual's action
 - Who are we? What aspects of our multiple characteristics is emphasized.
 - Where is identity located? In our blood? Feelings? History? Possessions? Actions? Choices?
 - Can we choose our identity? Do we have a choice? Who chooses?

A Better Life

- Watching this movie we feel an uncomfortable tension of impending doom. Carlos's life is full of anxiety. What are the sources of this feeling?
- Carlos believes in the American Dream and wants a better life for Luis. What is his version of the American Dream and why are his efforts face very long odds?
- Luis is ambivalent about his Mexican heritage but he is also uneasy about his father's American Dream. What does Luis want?
- What are the similarities and differences between the mafia in the Godfather and the gang in this movie?
- How is the Chinese immigrant experience different from the Mexican one?