A Star Has Died: Affect and Stardom in a Domestic Melodrama

ANNE MOREY

Until relatively recently, it has been fashionable to read Douglas Sirk as ridiculing popular culture through his manipulation of it. In other words, critics tell us, to be moved by a Sirk film is to have missed the critical boat—because, as Paul Willemen has noted, the director himself offers up a textual performance that is anything but sincere. Christine Gledhill and Walter Metz have attempted to rescue the duped audience from this critical opprobrium. Gledhill argues that Sirk appropriates the conventions of the woman’s film, in which female concerns should be and have been central, to reorder the narrative elements into a story of the absent patriarch. Similarly, Metz recuperates this possibly duped audience of female readers/viewers by reevaluating the (female) authors of the texts that Sirk so obsessively remakes, arguing that many of the signifiers of “auteurship” usually granted to Sirk are already on display in the original works (12).

Like Gledhill and Metz, I seek to demonstrate that Sirk is more than a parodist. This article compares Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) to David O. Selznick and William Wellman’s *A Star Is Born* (1937) in order to explore a characteristically Sirkian narrative strategy: the later film does not amuse itself at its predecessor’s expense so much as it inverts the message. *A Star Is Born* conveys to its audience the idea that envying the glamorous life of the Hollywood star is inappropriate, inasmuch as the glamour has been fully paid for in suffering; arguably, what is lost is more valuable than the beauty, wealth, fame, and indeed audience envy that is won. *Imitation of Life*, in contrast, suggests that envying the glamorous life of the Broadway star is inappropriate because, as Gertrude Stein once quipped of Oakland, “there’s no there there” (Stein 289). Sirk’s protagonist cannot trade suffering for glamour because she is not sufficiently real to suffer; literally, then, there is here nothing to envy. Like other domestic melodramas of the day, *Imitation of Life* explores the possibilities of female rebellion and escape, variously offering its audience validation, socialization, and emotional release through tears—but it accomplishes this task in a way that criticizes female aspirations and audience gullibility considerably less than it criticizes theatricality in general.

Critics typically read *Imitation of Life* as an implied critique of women’s labor outside the home (see, e.g., Heung and Flitterman-Lewis), suitable to a historical moment in which, Betty Friedan commented in 1963, women were being hoodwinked into believing that “they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (15) even while “more married women were leaving home for work than ever before” (Degler 443). But I would refine this argument by suggesting that the problem is not that Lora Meredith works outside the home, but that her work outside the home subsumes her work...
inside the home as well. For *Imitation of Life* is most basically a social-problem film, and specifically a social-problem film about acting; it both comments upon and illustrates important aspects of the molding of various human and textual subjects to the demands of 1950s Hollywood. In doing so, it offers a useful case study in the examination of the interplay of adaptation theory, star studies, reception theory, auteurism, and institutional analysis, here classifiable not only as approaches to be used by the critic but also as themes within the work itself.

Sirk’s film, of course, rewrites John Stahl’s 1934 film of the same title, which is in turn an adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel. Sirk’s reworking of elements from Selznick and Wellman’s *A Star Is Born* (itself remade in 1954 under George Cukor’s direction) is subtler. Yet Sirk’s borrowings from *Star* offer important narrative clues as to how we might best read what his film has to say about women’s work, and particularly women’s work as performers/stars. In 1937, *Star*’s Vicki Lester can succeed as an actress only because she has all the qualities of a good wife; in contrast, Lora cannot succeed as wife (or mother, or human being) because she has only the qualities of an actress. While both films suggest that femininity is something to be performed, *Imitation* is more cynical than *Star* in hinting that in fact, feminine glamour requires a sustained program of betrayal in both public and private spheres.

Marina Heung reads *Imitation* as a more or less conventional family soaper in which “Lora’s punishment, like that of so many mothers in the maternal melodrama, is the loss of her daughter’s love and respect” (304). I take issue with her point not because I would contend that Susie’s respect continues unabated, but because Lora is so excessively poor a mother that the loss appears to be no “punishment” at all. While, as I will argue, *Imitation* is indeed fascinated by the figure of the suffering woman, Lora Meredith is no such icon. Nor is *Imitation* best viewed as a simple maternal melodrama, because Lora has no emotions that can be touched and is therefore beyond the reach of the “law” that drives the maternal melodrama: that wifely or motherly dereliction of duty be punished through some family connection whose value is discovered too late. If Lora is critiqued as a human being, she is critiqued even more severely for being a bad actress.

In other words, by the criteria laid down in *Star*, Lora lacks Esther/Vicki’s performative talent. *Star* suggests that the actress must suffer—that on some level, acting and heartache are one. In 1937, Esther’s grandmother asks her, “Could you [go to Hollywood] even if it broke your heart?”—ultimately mandating that Esther’s heart be broken. In contrast, Sirk takes the equation offered in *A Star Is Born*, namely that a good actress is sincere, and proves that the opposite is also true. Bad actresses only “act” their feelings, although we may never know it because we tend to see talent where there is only attractive packaging. Nevertheless, our generic expectations initially lead us to assume that Lora is at least an adequate actress because we anticipate her suffering—an excess of emotion that never actually occurs. Sirk applies the idea that suffering equals glory rather to Lora’s maid, Annie, who does indeed “go to glory” but only after a life of being upstaged, squelched, denied, and unrecognized.

Sirk’s rewriting of *A Star Is Born*, then, splits the “genuine” actress Vicki Lester into two separate women: Annie the genuine, and Lora the actress. But while Annie shares many more character traits with Vicki than Lora does, ironically it is Lora whose life experiences and even dialogue “imitate” Vicki’s. Take, for example, the crucial scene in *Star* in which Esther Bludgett (soon to be rechristened Vicki Lester) must come to terms with the sexual threat that a producer might represent. Oliver Niles says, perhaps seductively, “You look like a nice girl—I think I’m going to like you.” But when Esther reacts with mild alarm, the sexual undercurrent is immediately displaced into the “safe” arena of performance; Niles goes on, “That’s not important—I think the public will like
you—that is important.” In *Imitation*, Lora likewise finds herself alone with a possible wolf in agent’s clothing when she goes to Alan Loomis’s office at night, ostensibly to accompany him to a party. Loomis, who already knows that Lora is a liar (she has been attempting to pass herself off as a Hollywood starlet), decks her out in a mink and says, “We should spend a little time talking about our future. You can act—well, that’s of no importance at the moment. The main thing is, you’re a beaut.” When Lora resists his advances, Loomis adds, “Oh, and you’re decent, too.”

This dialogue almost perfectly inverts Niles’s comments to Esther, in which he applauds her presumed morals, downplays any sexual attraction she may have for him, and suggests that her real future lies less with him personally than with the American public. Loomis, in contrast, begins with the career, brushes aside her possible talent rather than their potential relationship, highlights her attractiveness, and remarks only as an afterthought on her morals—a comment undercut by Lora’s reluctance to return the mink. In each case, the trajectories of the men’s trains of thought reflect the differing priorities of the women: “niceness” in Esther’s case, career in Lora’s.

Another important scene common to *Imitation* and to *Star* is that in which the man ostensibly responsible for the actress’s rise hands her the keys to her new kingdom, as preview cards in Vicki’s case and newspaper reviews in Lora’s are rapturously examined. Significantly, *Imitation* uses the phrase “a new star was born” of Lora’s performance. Just as Norman Maine in 1954 leads Vicki out onto the penthouse balcony to show her what’s “all yours from now on.... I hope it will make you happy,” David Edwards says to Lora, “Well, lady, there’s your new empire... it’s the heart of the world. You happy?”

Vicki’s ultimate unhappiness, of course, derives from the clash between work and life. Arguably, she is paid to be unhappy, because what her fans want is to view the intensity of her emotions, emotions that ideally will be tragic because tragedy has traditionally been defined as grander than comedy. Lora’s unhappiness has a different source: because she has an “empire” rather than a more private kind of “heart,” she has no genuine emotions herself, a circumstance that gives rise to the feeling that is usually uppermost in her, namely an actress’s competitive spirit and jealousy. If *Star* argues that the actress exists to live and feel for her fans, *Imitation* suggests that the truest emotions are situated in those who are never allowed to take center stage; the actress steals the glory that belongs to the fans.

Lora, then, is merely an “imitation of life”—but one jealously protecting her own (un)reality. Thus she insists that she be the only figure with emotions, that no one else ever be permitted to upstage her either within the theater, or outside of it in the theater that constitutes the home. Susie eventually exclaims, “Oh, Mama! Stop acting! Stop trying to shift people around as if they were pawns on a stage! ... please don’t play the martyr.” In other words, Lora reconfigures everyone else’s pain as her own; thus Steve’s romantic interest in her modulates into Lora’s passion for the theater under siege, and Susie’s interest in Steve becomes an opportunity for Lora to enact a self-sacrifice she is incapable of feeling. Lora even transmogrifies Alan Loomis’s lust into her own rather overdone outrage, and meets Sarah Jane’s hysterical mea culpa over Annie’s bier by folding her into the Meredith limousine (where she will attract no attention) and transforming herself into a new “mother” for Annie’s daughter, the better to relocate to herself this suddenly intense devotion.

Unlike Lora, *A Star Is Born* suggests that Esther/Vicki exists in a world where emotions are shared and there are more than enough to go around. In contrast, Vicki welcomes other actors into her home life and even forgives Norman for showing up drunk for the Academy Awards, upstaging her at her moment of greatest professional
triumph. Similarly, Vicki’s grandmother helps her because she perceives a commonality between herself and her granddaughter. When Norman’s career is on the skids, Vicki attempts to secure him work through her producer, Oliver Niles. Niles himself feels genuine friendship for his stars. Vicki does not insist that only she feel, even if the narrative suggests that only Vicki feels as deeply as she does. That emotion is so widely distributed demonstrates the essential benevolence and kindliness of the system that brings actresses such as Vicki to the attention of the public. If for Lora Meredith everyone else’s emotional moments are moments of glory stolen from her, emotion in *A Star Is Born* is not a zero-sum game. Rather, one person’s emotions feed the cravings of everyone around.

At the same time, of course, *Star* warns us that one cannot safely read from film to life and back again. In other words, that Vicki’s fans are hungry for her emotion is the product of a fundamental misunderstanding fostered by the studio—that the actress is the woman and vice versa. When Vicki attempts to retreat from the public, or withhold her grief because it is private, her grandmother reminds her that suffering equals glory (although at this moment we might better say that glory equals suffering). A kindly family member works in tandem with the benevolent aims of the corporation, and Vicki’s grandmother ultimately levies the tax in tears that most woman’s pictures ask their heroines to pay by obliging her to return to the public enactment of her grief.

When, in contrast, we understand that Lora’s selfishness consists of her monopoly on emotion, we understand how serious a rival Sarah Jane becomes. Like Lora, Sarah Jane acts in order to escape misery. But Lora’s misery is merely temporary poverty, while Sarah Jane was “born to be hurt,” in Annie’s words, because of her race. Indeed, Lora disapproves of Sarah Jane’s emotional outbursts as much as she disapproves of her “passing.” Both activities constitute performances, and both performances threaten Lora’s hegemony. Like Lora and unlike Annie, Sarah Jane has an enormous desire to be other than what she is; like Annie and unlike Lora, Sarah Jane is capable of feeling, as her performance at her mother’s funeral attests. Sarah Jane, then, has all the equipment to be the “genuine” actress Lora is not, and indeed throughout the film her performance of whiteness is perfect—one perceives Sarah Jane as “not-white” only if one knows that she is Annie’s daughter. The narrative logic of *Imitation of Life* demonstrates that feeling is what drives one to do the thing that will not advance one’s ambitions: Sarah Jane, by publicly claiming kinship with her mother at the funeral, is forced into the very avowal that she has gone to great lengths to avoid throughout the diegesis. Judged by this standard (and indeed by most others), Lora never feels.

Michael Stern remarks on “the falseness one senses at the center of [Lora],” linking it to Sirk’s own statement that “This character is supposed to be a lousy actress. She got to where she was by luck, or bullshit, or what-do-I-know, by dumb audiences” (282). If Vicki’s genuineness is her talent (Norman sells her to Niles by saying that she has the “sincerity and honestness that makes great actresses”), Lora’s falsity produces both professional success and artistic failure. Her real performances occur on the stage of her private life, as there is never a moment when she is not acting. But the only professional acting Lora manages is her disastrous tryout for Edwards’s comedy, in which she excuses her own flat performance by convincing him to rewrite his play. Lora’s stage work is displaced or completely elided, first via a “success montage” containing plaudits from magazines such as *Newsweek*, and subsequently through her dialogue; the effort inherent in her rise to power leaves no traces in this narrative. Lora never receives a bad review and moves from genteel poverty to stardom in less than a year. Yet she moans to Annie about “struggling and heartache.” The “heartache” must actually be located in the people Lora has neglected in order to pursue her muse—Susie and Steven, Annie and Sarah Jane.
In it Star, suffering and glory are equated. In *Imitation*, Sirk suggests more subtly that the (female) star’s glory will come at the expense of someone else’s suffering.

This displacement is another crucial inversion of *Star*, inasmuch as there is no doubt that Vicki suffers. That *Imitation* suggests that the heartbreak associated with stardom is actually felt by every character except the star tends, in retrospect, to establish Norman’s innocence. Indeed, if *Imitation* splits the female protagonist into separate elements as Annie and Lora, it also seems to unite Vicki and Norman in Annie. Like Norman, Annie must die if the other characters are to get on with their lives—Annie will always be a brake on Sarah Jane’s freedom and a threat to Lora’s monopoly of emotion. Like Norman, Annie sets in train the success of all the other characters through her interest in them. But ironically, if Norman must die because he is too weak to be a genuine colleague to Vicki, Annie must die because she is too strong to allow Lora to steal all the best scenes. This point is highlighted by the different views of service in the two films: while her work as Lora’s maid represents the pinnacle of Annie’s success, *Star* dramatizes Norman’s collapse by presenting him as looking after the house, making meals and being mistaken for the butler. If Norman humiliates Vicki by his alcoholism, Annie involuntarily disgraces Sarah Jane by establishing a racial identity that her daughter rejects, trials redeemed in each instance through the final apotheosis of the funeral, at which, one might add, the beloved presents her most “sincere” performance.

Both Annie and Norman feel a love that cannot be expressed or even acknowledged in full. Each says to the woman he/she loves, “I just want to look at you” (in Norman’s case, the phrase is “Mind if I take just one more look?”). In both cases this request to gaze at the loved one suggests the unequal relationship that the “star” creates with those who care for her—they are no longer intimates but fans. Despite the fact that Annie and Norman have both created the daughter or wife they love, they must approach her through the same gate as the merest fan, by asking permission to gaze or paying for it in some way.

This point brings us to the nature of the fan’s pleasure in Esther/Vicki, which is essentially the pleasure of identification. *Star* points out again and again that Esther is the representative of America’s heartland: potentially “too bland” to succeed, she is the “one in a hundred thousand” bit players who makes it to stardom. And her stardom is ultimately of the kind available to any “real” woman; her final line, spoken with great emphasis, is “Hello, everybody. This is—Mrs. Norman Maine.” Vicki’s stardom, then, depends on her “blandness”—in Richard Dyer’s theorization of stardom in general, on her ability to evoke “democracy, the open society, the value of the common/ordinary person” (*Stars* 50). Entertainment, as we know and as Sirk knows we know, demands audience identification. But with whom are we to identify? Convention would dictate that our loyalties lie with the star—that is, with Lora Meredith/Lana Turner, “all aglitter” (as a contemporary review had it) “in what Universal claims to be a $78,000 wardrobe and $1 million worth of jewelry” (“Wringing Wet” 118). But the ordinariness, the sincerity, and the emotional rather than merely monetary value of this drama are all disconnected from Laura and resituated in Annie.

Universal’s promotional material suggests why this situation must be. Maternity is clearly the emotional engine of *Imitation*, particularly in concert with the racial discourse. Yet Universal’s production notes indicate that maternity is inimical to glamour: “‘Imitation of Life’ affords another mother role for Lana Turner, whose first departure from glamour portrayals to a mother role in ‘Peyton Place’ brought her her first Academy Award nomination.... In this case, however, the glamour is present in quantities surpassing many of her earlier screen triumphs” (rpt. Fischer 183). Should there be any doubt, that glamour is defined explicitly as “the most expensive wardrobe ever.”
There are several levels of contradiction here—on the one hand, maternal roles don’t warrant expensive wardrobes and shouldn’t result in “glamour.” On the other hand, maternity (or being a good wife) results in another sort of glamour, that associated with Academy Award nominations. Consider also that glamour is here said to be detachable from the star, as one may “depart” from it. And if it is detachable, then conversely it can also be added, particularly at the pleasure of the studio, which is responsible for Turner’s expensive wardrobe. *Time* magazine, indeed, noted in 1958 that Turner-the-star was really Turner-the-product: “As a high-priced commodity, Lana found herself surrounded by people whose paychecks depended on how sincerely they could convince her that she was talented, beautiful and successful... Lana scarcely needed to make a decision of her own; the studio did it for her” (rpt. Fischer 216).

Glamour, of course, is also an important element in *Star*; a key scene in the 1954 version, for instance, is that in which the studio makeup men approach the problem of the unglamorous Esther, turning her into a heavily made-up strawberry blonde with a new nose. Norman, shrewdly understanding that Esther’s appeal is in her sincerity, literally detaches the glamour, peeling away the putty from her face and removing wig and makeup. Like the 1950s production notes for *Imitation* and like this scene in *Star*, the starmaking discourse of the 1930s also suggests that glamour is produced upon women by the men who shape them. As Mary Peace put it in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1936, a producer might say of a would-be starlet, “She needs glamour. Go and give her glamour. That’s all” (16). Peace continues,

That’s all—just glamour. Every day in the big studios of Hollywood, some producer enacts this little scene with his publicity man... [Glamour] means the ability to wear clothes that make the next woman shudder, but immediately copy them. It means being clothed in a mantle of mystery, of hushed gossip, of envy, of jealousy. It means being something that just isn’t, until the press agents get to work. (16)

Interestingly, a lack of glamour is the seal of the “good” girl. Even before Lora is symbolically clothed in mink by Loomis, she knows what it takes to succeed on Broadway and has begun to shape herself, as when her manner and dress overawe Loomis’s secretary, who avers that she is “quite lovely.”

In directing her own performance in this fashion, Lora has lost some of the moral high ground, partly because she has usurped a role that more properly belongs to men. After all, the purpose of glamour is to turn women into the male ideal, which men best understand. Moreover, it represents, at least in its opening stages, a pretty feminine submission to male demands, a lack of forwardness. But most importantly, this view of glamour demonstrates exactly where the agency in stardom lies, which is not with the (female) star. As Eric Ergenbright and Jack Smalley commented in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1937 (three months after the premiere of *Star*), glamour is “A miracle? No—merely a manufacturing process. The Mary Doe you knew was the raw material; Mary Doe the screen star is the finished product, a masterpiece created and sold by Hollywood’s master craftsmen” (14).

That Vicki is not fundamentally changed by her experience of the studio speaks ultimately to her moral worth. While there is an element of insincerity in the construction of the star that insincerity is laid at the studio’s door. Female stars are recouped from double-dealing as long as they themselves are not fooled by what is done to them or said about them. As one Hollywood producer of the ’30s put it, “When a star begins to believe her own publicity, she’s licked” (qtd. Peace 61).
This split between public and private, manufactured and genuine, is both freely noted in the press and covered over, because every star is at some level playing herself. Consider Ergenbright and Smalley’s helpful summary of this point: Hollywood, being publicity conscious, believes that it is good salesmanship for its actresses to play their roles off screen as well as before the camera. Its Gaynors should be homespun, girlish, and wistful; its Crawfords should be glamorous; its Dietrichs should be exotic; its Lombards should be happy-go-lucky. And nothing enhances the illusion more than clothes that are in character (55). I would argue that the effect of this attitude is finally to deliver on the promise of stardom. To put it another way, stardom heightens what is always already latent by permitting the unexpected revelation of character. Turner herself serves as an excellent example of this phenomenon. While early studio publicity suggested that Turner was an ideal mother who always had enough time for her daughter (see Fischer 23), scandal finally revealed that that was not the case. The Johnny Stompanato affair (in which Turner’s daughter fatally stabbed her mother’s lover) becomes the script that Turner lives in both *Peyton Place* and *Imitation of Life*. The crisis of maternity that erupts in actual scandal is incorporated into narrative—when the offscreen role changes, the onscreen role accommodates the alteration. Disjunctions between screen persona and “actual” person are never permitted to last.

As Lora Meredith lives Lana Turner’s life, so Esther Blodgett lives Janet Gaynor’s. Gaynor felt the role of Esther was perfect for her because it was about “a little nobody without any great talent who suddenly finds herself a star” (qtd. Billips 32). This attitude glosses over Gaynor’s extensive career as an actress in westerns and comedies before she won the first Best Actress Oscar for her role in F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise*, but at some level Gaynor reads this role as true to her own experience—perhaps because she understands that the role and the star are “supposed” to be identical. What is, apparently, the case is that like Vicki, Gaynor underwent a name change under the benevolent eye of her stepfather (the role that Niles occupies, more or less) and went to Hollywood with the encouragement of several family members (shades of Esther’s grandmother). And not so incidentally, Gaynor’s reading herself as “a little nobody” demonstrates that she has not internalized her publicity, that she remains the same unspoiled girl from America’s heartland.

For Janet Gaynor/Esther Blodgett, public and private coalesce through the suggestion that the private is public. This process is not quite the same as the flattening that takes place for Lana Turner/Lora Meredith, wherein the public becomes private. When private becomes public, what is highlighted is the star’s “genuine” quality; when public becomes private, the focus is on the star as glamorous and artificial product, as in *Time*’s description of Turner as “a high-priced commodity.” This attachment of public to private has not escaped commentators on melodrama as a form. For Thomas Elsaesser, for instance, melodrama is socially retrograde because of its failure “to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms” (qtd. Heung 314); here what should be public is misidentified as private in order to contain social disruption. In contrast, Ann Cvetkovich suggests that female melodrama is potentially radical because it at least provides its (female) audience with “the satisfaction of being able to locate a remedy for suffering. Readers can thus displace feelings that might be the product of a more systemic and nameless oppression onto a situation in which pain can be expressed because the conditions that produce it are so clear” (104).

In terms of *A Star Is Born*, Cvetkovich’s paradigm might seem inappropriate because if Vicki is a victim, she also gets what she wants; it is Norman Maine who loses everything and thus plays out the demands of the maternal melodrama as a male Stella Dallas. The conditions that we think are embedded in maternity, it would seem, are detachable
from it. But in terms of *Imitation*, we might argue that like other “women’s pictures” it decants the female viewer’s resentment at her own powerlessness into resentment at the flawed familial situation within this particular drama by encouraging her to feel anger at Sarah Jane the bad daughter or Lora the bad mother. Nevertheless, again the situation in Sirk’s film is more complex than that argument would suggest, because *Imitation* is simultaneously a woman’s picture and a social-problem film, so that viewer resentment on Annie’s behalf must be directed not only at the personal (the snubs she receives from the other women in her “family”) but also at the political (the racism inherent in 1950s society, which is of course the ultimate cause of all these snubs). Just as Sirk asks us to identify with and then to reject Lora-as-star, then, he asks us to live in both the private and the public sphere simultaneously.

Similarly, stardom—perhaps especially female stardom—depends in some measure on the proposition that the private “other” is publicly knowable: the real appeal of stardom is that public adulation gives us leverage over the star’s private life. That we have adored the star means that we can probe the most private recesses of her personal tragedy. *A Star Is Born* handles that issue neatly in its depiction of Vicki’s relationship with her public. Arguably, the moment when “a star is born” is not at the time of the success of Vicki’s first film but rather at the end of the narrative, when she once more faces her public after having lived the maximum amount of private tragedy for their delectation.

In a sense, then, the “social problem” that Sirk exploits in *Imitation of Life* is not only the obvious one of racism, but the one that the audience might be reluctant to identify as a “problem” at all: that of female stardom. The studio system, he suggests, rests on a fundamental, willful confusion between the roles the star enacts in public and the star’s private life, a confusion fostered by films such as *A Star Is Born*, in which Vicki’s most transcendent role is that of wife. Because Lora is a star, we wish to believe her complaints about the anguish required in rising to the top of her profession; we “need” to believe that she can feel anguish, which in fact is not true. This need is something Sirk frustrates: Lora in fact has no familial role, or indeed any intimate relationship with anything but stardom (as Annie cogently remarks at one point, “You need show business as much as it needs you”). What Sirk seems to be saying here is that fandom rests on a Hollywood-fostered misunderstanding about stardom, namely that stars are also real people who not only consume to excess but also feel to excess. Actually, the actresses here (Lora and Sarah Jane) act in order to avoid pain, not—like Vicki—to enact it.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Sirk is proposing these messages about stardom within the context of a studio system that reiterates precisely the opposite. Universal, indeed, appears to have joined unusually wholeheartedly in the 1950s tendency to sell star vehicles by using the star’s private life. Fan magazines of the era, Barbara Klinger observes, depended on “‘authentic revelation’ [about stars] tinged with highly emotional problem oriented scenarios, often sexual in nature” (54). Thus some of the pleasure for viewers of *Imitation of Life*, according to Dyer, arose from the “overtones of the Stompanato affair in the relationship between Steve and Susie” (“Lana” 425).

If the Hollywood of the 1950s privileged the notion that stars were “larger than life and twice as natural” offscreen as well as on, critics deplored this excess within *Imitation*—even though Sirk arguably invokes the melodrama inherent in stardom in order to critique it. Reviews damned the 1959 *Imitation* as “slick” (*Commonweal*), “overwhelmingly sentimental . . . lacking in imagination and restraint” (*Newsweek*), and “tear-swept” (*New Yorker*), among other disapproving adjectives. On the other hand, the 1937 critics of *Star* praised it for its realism, for instance by terming it “the most accurate
mirror ever held before the glittering, tinseled, trivial, generous, cruel and ecstatic world that is Hollywood” (as Frank Nugent wrote in the New York Times). The Literary Digest remarks that Janet Gaynor and Fredric March play their parts “quietly and convincingly” (“Star” 20). Finally, Time called the picture “brilliant, honest and unfailingly exciting” (“New Pictures” 28).

One might conclude from the discrepancies between the two sets of reviews that what passed for acceptable drama in one era will not do for a later moment. Indeed, more than one review of Imitation noted that exactly 25 years had elapsed between first and second versions and decried Sirk for reviving bad practices that the reviewers saw as artifacts of a dead past. The Cue reviewer, for example, wrote, “It was probably inevitable that Miss Turner . . . should revert to the glossily artificial school of acting— which had, I thought, been decently interred years ago” (qtd. Fischer 237). Likewise, Bosley Crowther excoriated the cast in the New York Times as “giv[ing] an imitation of movie acting at its less graceful level twenty-five years ago” (qtd. Fischer 242).

But while critics of Imitation complained that its outlook was old-fashioned, audiences clearly found it exactly suited to its historical moment. Sirk commented in an interview with Jon Halliday in 1970 that the film was “a very big success, certainly the biggest one Universal had ever had—its biggest money-maker of all time” (133). (It grossed over $6 million [Schatz 480].) And in fact, it would seem that what critics were really reacting to was not presentational style but content, since the negativity characterizing the reviews of Sirk’s Imitation also dogged its predecessor. For instance, the Times decried the first version as a “shameless tearjerker” (Sennwald 19:1) and accorded the second a similar label as a “lachrymose tale” (qtd. Fischer 235). Likewise, the reviews of the 1954 Star were as rapturous as the reviews of the original version—and for precisely the traits that were condemned in Imitation. Crowther called Cukor’s Star “one of the grandest heartbeat dramas that has drenched the screen in years,” noting that the power of Selznick’s Star was also situated in its ability to “star[t] floods of tears.” We might conclude, then, that the problem for the critics was not melodrama as such, or “excessive” acting, but the point(s) that the emotion was being used to convey.

Hollywood, too, might have felt some rancor at the content of Sirk’s film as compared to the content of Star. In 1954 as in 1937, Esther is constructed as a figure of perfect obedience to the producer and implicitly to the studio. Not only does she bow to the system’s greater knowledge of how she should look and what she should be called, she and Norman even ask its blessing before they marry; so paramount is the studio’s welfare that the private considerations of an “Esther Blodgett” and an “Ernest Gubbins” (“Alfred Henke” in 1937) are as nothing compared to the potential publicity value of a merger between two stars, Vicki Lester and Norman Maine.

But Lora Meredith feels no such loyalty to an employer; one point implicitly made in Sirk’s film—a product, of course, of the studio system—is that the studio system is moribund. By moving the scene of the struggle to stardom from Hollywood to Broadway, Sirk’s Imitation obliquely acknowledges the newly diminished status of the producer. Whereas both versions of Star describe Hollywood as a well-oiled machine in which no element can exist unsupervised by the studio (and elements who insist upon inconvenient individual desires, as Norman does, are simply expelled), Imitation depicts the world of acting as at most a loose confederation of largely autonomous figures. The figure of the producer, so important in Star, is essentially nonexistent here. Loomis, the theatrical agent, is the man who takes the largest part in propelling Lora to stardom (and the only man who never disappears from her life), while Edwards, the playwright, apparently produces his own play. And if Vicki is in professional terms just a cog in the wheel of the studio that manufactures her as a star, Lora “produces” herself.
The discourse of the studio in Sirk’s *Imitation*, the discourse of stardom, even Universal’s sales practices and their reliance on conventions derived from “true confessions”-style magazines, all add further layers of irony to a cultural production already frequently read as piling irony atop irony. The significance of this research to the present argument lies in the figure of Lora and the critique of stardom she represents. If the audience is being punished (through an irony it evidently did not perceive in the 1950s) for its identification with stardom, as Sirk-as-master-ironist critics would have it, what does this say about the film’s manipulation of codes of fan identification? My reading of the film suggests that while many ironies are at work here, the film does not really operate primarily to ridicule its audience’s taste for “weepies” as much as it serves to explore a truth that the studio system has typically hidden from view—namely that success has its price, but not necessarily where we expect to find it. By disconnecting the emoluments of stardom from its costs, *Imitation* does not ridicule its audience. It both acknowledges the authority of tears as a form of coming to terms with oppression, and suggests why the lot of women and blacks cannot be improved as long as they assume the responsibility of paying for other people’s success.

**Works Cited**


“Wringing Wet.” *Newsweek* 13 April 1959: 118.