

## **Modernising Melodrama: From Douglas Sirk to Isabel Coixet**

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Since the death of Franco, Spain has enjoyed a revival of the melodramatic tradition in the cinema, spearheaded by Pedro Almodóvar with films like *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto* (1984) and more recently *Volver* (2006). As Nuria Triana Toribio notes, ‘the most prominent filmmakers of the early 1990s advocated an aesthetic and thematic break with the politically responsible cinema’ (2003: 141) and this idea of ‘looking north but heading west’ (2003: 143-163), allowed for a cinema decidedly arthouse in its aesthetic, while undoubtedly moving away from the traditional social realism common to European national cinemas, embracing the multitude of popular American genre cinema such as melodrama or action, to create a new, hybrid text more difficult to categorise.

Barcelona born writer-director Isabel Coixet (1962) sits comfortably within this new departure as she creates a body of work more akin to American indie films than the work of her predecessors in Spain.<sup>1</sup> Coixet defies or subverts genre expectations by grounding her films in a personal microcosm, with imagery and cinematography that span her oeuvre, such as the laundrette that appears in almost every film and using jump cuts to condense time. She consciously employs some typical tropes and narrative devices of melodrama, gleaning what she needs from the classical conventions, in an attempt to modernise this ailing tradition that has now been assimilated into the catch-all term ‘drama.’ This article will analyse her use of

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<sup>1</sup> Coixet admires and identifies with filmmakers such as John Cassavetes listing *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) amongst her favourite films of all time (<http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/carta-blanca/carta-blanca-isabel-coixet/522366/>) As Belén Vidal notes the ‘low key aesthetic and unconventional narrative patterns’ (2008: 226) that Coixet follows further integrates her into this ‘drab yet stylised vision of urban alienation and small-town eccentricity’ (2008: 225) characterised by films by Cassavetes, Hal Hartley, Jim Jarmusch, etc. All URLs accessed on 27/06/2011.

melodrama as a mode of expression, as she creates hybrid texts that are a patchwork of old and new, utilising close up shots, a mobile camera, quirky mise-en-scène and updated editing methods to punctuate her narratives.

Since her 1989 debut *Demasiado viejo para morir joven*, the tendency towards subtle referencing underscores her work as is explored in her intertextual re-imagining of melodrama in the films *My Life Without Me* (2003), *The Secret Life of Words* (2005) and her contribution to *Paris, Je t'aime* (2006) entitled *Le trench rouge*. In order to define her fresh approach, this facet of her varied cinematic output will be compared to the work of Douglas Sirk (1900-1987), the German émigré director who fled the Nazis in 1937 to become an eminent Hollywood filmmaker, with his beautifully shot and artfully arranged domestic dramas. Nevertheless, these opulent texts fraught with the tensions of 1950s American society were previously overlooked as frivolous 'women's films' or 'tearjerkers,' until reclaimed by *Cahiers du cinema* critics in the late 1960s and deservedly brought back into the public eye during the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> just as political upheavals in Spain were opening doors for alternative filmmaking practices in a new democracy. This discussion will take some of Sirk's American films, in particular *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) as models of classic Hollywood melodrama and compare them with the selection of films by Coixet, in order to explore her stylish subversion of the classical canon.

### **Melodrama as a mode**

In accordance with the views of Linda Williams (1998), melodrama functions as a flexible means of expression that resonates across film history, rather than an umbrella term for emotional movies. As a narrative and dramatic tradition, the melodramatic allows for the utilization of certain upheld conventions (such as swelling music to

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<sup>2</sup> *Cahiers du cinema* (1967) 189. This issue paid particular homage to Sirk in April 1967 with a special focus on his filmography.

complement moments of tension, convenient twists of fate and the stereotypical happy or sad ending) to manipulate the emotions of the audience and explore the psyche of the protagonists on screen.

Williams probes deeper into this idea, defining this medium as 'a broad mode, not a genre. It describes a perpetually modernizing form that is neither opposed to the norms of the "classical" nor to the norms of "realism" but which adapts both. It emerges from primal sentiments of love and loss' (2004: 273-4). Isabel Coixet utilises this 'perpetually modernizing form' to connect with an audience generally weary of chick flicks and suspicious of tearjerkers, creating a type of film that is harder to pin down than the classic Hollywood examples, like *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Stella Dallas* (1937) or British examples such as *Brief Encounter* (1945). Although she undermines the time-honoured concepts of maternal sacrifice and the dying woman in her melodramas, Coixet negates the idea of *cine de mujer*, and does not strive to create female characters according to any feminist philosophy; rather she attempts to portray humanised protagonists of both sexes. She is eager to present herself as an auteur, although she feels pigeonholed into categories of women's cinema, Spanish cinema or even Catalan cinema. Through her online presence within FNAC's *Club Cultura* webpage, Coixet locates herself in a world of cool music, highbrow literature and above all, cinephilia, once again subverting the categorisation she is subjected to by audiences and media alike.<sup>3</sup>

Núria Triana Toribio discusses this aspect in her article on *directores mediáticos* and dissects some of the texts from the site, concluding that 'she refuses to be a spokesperson for her gender and her nation' (2008: 274), although the director herself is quick to admit that 'no one leaves their gender or nationality in the changing room when they go to work.' Belén Vidal calls this facet of Coixet's public persona her 'double passport', allowing her to enjoy the identity of 'idiosyncratic director at home' and a genre filmmaker abroad (2008: 220). Within her filmography nationality is discarded in favour of universality, and gender depoliticised, and while her films present a particularly feminine world, replete with the trappings of the women's

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/isabelcoixet/index.htm>

film, the actors employ a more naturalistic style of performance than their 1950s counterparts. The veracity of their mannerisms, conversations and habits allow a contemporary spectator to identify with their dramas and recognise the banal surroundings as part of daily life.

On the other hand, as Steve Neale remarks, Sirk portrays a defined sketch of Eisenhower's America, when an almost Victorian outlook on social status was the norm, prioritising position in society rather than individual desires or needs. Thus, during Sirk's tenure in Hollywood, the mere articulation of desire was enough to constitute a melodramatic narrative, rather than the achievement of personal wishes (1986: 20). The exiled German director utilised *mise-en-scène* as a means to express his characters' interior crises in a time of greater censorship and repression of emotions, necessitating this heightened theatricality and intentional staging. Meanwhile, Coixet's protagonists live in a postmodern world where this social pecking order remains active but they can choose to pursue their personal goals outside of the hierarchical structure. This existentialist perspective adds to the universality of the characters as they transcend nationality, social class and family background. Her cinematography reflects this outlook, with character-dominated framing and frequent close-ups, personalising the experience for the audience and maximising the process of identification for the spectator. Sirk's more distant camera allows us to observe his protagonists within the social space, as the world they inhabit remains the dominant factor in their lives, rather than their individual desire.



A close up of Ann (Sarah Polley) from *My Life Without Me*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Realism, morals and identification: defying expectations**

Coixet's films are not hard examples of realism. However, she employs a predominantly realist mode as a framework upon which to weave a melodramatic story as she portrays a world where the emotional and the emotive are acceptable. Shades of kitchen-sink realism colour the exposition of her 2003 film and second major international success, *My Life Without Me*. Ann, played by Sarah Polley, goes about the daily grind; working nights as a cleaner in a university she never got to attend, having strained conversations with her mother, coming home to her small children; she lives a life that much of the audience can identify with. Her sudden terminal cancer diagnosis functions as the catalyst that brings Coixet's melodramatic microcosm into play. The parameters of realism shift dramatically, as twenty-three year old Ann fulfils a list of things to do before she dies, from the mundane ('do something with my hair') to the future

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<sup>4</sup> By kind permission of El Deseo S.A. Images from *My Life Without Me* and *The Secret Life of Words* were kindly provided by El Deseo. Images from *Paris, Je t'aime* courtesy of Emmanuel Benbihy/Cities of Love. The author would like to re-iterate her gratitude to both production companies.

happiness of her young family ('find a wife for Don that the girls like'). Most importantly, she embarks upon an extra-marital affair with a man she has just met (as part of 'sleep with other men, just to see what it is like') knowingly breaking his heart ('make someone fall in love with me'), despite having a loving husband waiting in the trailer they call home. At this juncture another director might have depicted such a protagonist as unsympathetic and self-destructive. Conversely, within Sirk's melodramatic tradition - and the majority of Hollywood output of the period - protagonists who refuse to conform to moral standards are punished, especially if they are female. With her bucket list, Ann superficially wants to be like man-eating Marylee Hadley (Dorothy Malone), the reckless and selfish female protagonist of Sirk's *Written On the Wind* (1956), but her heart of gold and sheer ordinariness prevent her being depicted as morally reprehensible in this desire for pleasure.

In contrast, Marylee is condemned to solitude, as the men in her life disappear from her side. First her father dies, then her brother, and finally her beloved Mitch (Rock Hudson) leaves with the long-suffering Lucy (Lauren Bacall). Marylee is left with the family oil business but denied her desire for men that she so blatantly displays throughout, as she flirts outrageously with Mitch and every other man on screen. The closing sequence depicts her holding a phallic miniature oil well, as she contemplates the life she must now lead. Sirk allows the audience to empathize with Marylee and her unsteady future; but she has been forcefully polarized throughout the film and remains the villain of the piece. Like many archetypal melodrama characters she is demonised and dehumanised, whereas Coixet uses a more balanced characterization to tone down the Manichaeism of these stock protagonists, creating more human and humble personages.

Ann from *My Life Without Me* is an adulterer; but Coixet diverts our attention from this fact and implicates the spectator in Ann's point of view, providing firsthand experience of her situation. In order to intensify our identification with the character, she frames her tightly and allows Polley's face to be the main focus; the close range provides the audience with a greater understanding of her motives and emotions. With Ann's predominant control over the point

of view of the narrative, Coixet ensures that her cancer is not the sole source of pathos that allows us to forgive her philandering: rather we empathise with her desire to experience a different life. The director refuses to victimise or punish her female characters for this urge, nor does she ‘spectacularise female suffering or fall back on clichéd class images,’ as Belén Vidal notes (2008: 227). Contrastingly, Sirk’s characters are often further from the camera, as if on stage in the theatre, with close-ups and push-ins reserved for pivotal moments; and with much emphasis on their composition within the space. Coixet claims to be uninterested creating a rigid composition (2005: 38-39),<sup>5</sup> although in spite of the naturalistic movements and blocking of the actors, it remains obvious that some effort is involved in setting up each shot. Yet Sirk’s compositions are visibly more staged whilst Coixet aims for a *cinema vérité* approach, in a move away from the typical cinematography employed by classical melodrama.



Coixet’s homage to Truffaut from *Paris, je t’aime*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Talking about the analysis of composition in art and films, Coixet says: ‘I get the feeling that all these terms are little more than smokescreens to hide the absence of real emotion or the capacity to experience real emotion, maybe I’m wrong, after all there are great artists who also possess the vocabulary to talk about what they do.’ (Coixet 2005: 39 my translation.)

<sup>6</sup> By kind permission of Emmanuel Benbihy/Cities of Love.

### **Classic melodrama: modernisation through intertextuality**

Coixet playfully explores the limits of archetypal melodrama in *Le trench rouge*, her contribution to the 2006 collaborative film *Paris, Je t'aime*. Her short film functions as a semi-parody of melodrama set in Paris, the official world headquarters of romance. The Catalan director chooses to embrace some obvious melodramatic clichés, for example the main protagonist (played by Sergio Castellito) dancing with his mistress on the banks of the Seine, or her subsequent collapse on receipt of his text message ending their relationship, in a knowing nod to Truffaut's *The Woman Next Door* (1981). This conscious intertextuality and unashamed engagement with the tradition of romantic cinema invites a cine-literate audience to enjoy the references to Truffaut as Miranda Richardson's character hums the music from *Jules et Jim* (1962); we can relish these forbidden melodramatic clichés as Coixet depicts them with a wry smile.

This provocative approach also allows Ann from *My Life Without Me* to dismiss *Mildred Pierce* (1945) as a 'stupid story', ignoring or perhaps rejecting the parallels with her own life and the obvious significance it holds for her mother, who cries watching the film.<sup>7</sup> Her mother enjoys the narrative, distilling her version into a story for her young granddaughters, but Ann dismisses the ideology involved, of 'mothers making dumb-ass sacrifices.' In this way, Coixet can be a part of the melodramatic past by addressing its history and traditional narrative trajectory, but can simultaneously distance herself from it through subversion.

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<sup>7</sup> Ann's mother is played by Deborah Harry, formerly of Blondie fame. Here we see another facet of Coixet's revamped melodrama as she explores a new type of star persona by having a rock and roll icon play the downtrodden matriarch in *My Life Without Me*.





Ann's mother  
(Deborah Harry)  
cries watching  
*Mildred Pierce* on  
TV in *My Life  
Without Me*.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the somewhat macabre portrayal of Ann handpicking the new surrogate mother seems like a classic *deus ex machina* resolution for *My Life Without Me*, but in fact this device comes from the source text, *Pretending the Bed is a Raft* by Nanci Kincaid (1997). However, choosing to also call the new mother Ann (Leonor Watling) reflects the convenient twists of fate common to melodramatic narratives of the past. Our Ann succeeds in pairing off her soon to be widowed husband to another of her choice, however credible or incredible this may be, echoing King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937). Barbara Stanwyck's Stella (although somewhat more flamboyant than Polley's Ann) also manages to engineer much of her family's happiness, allowing her estranged husband Steven (John Boles) to marry the more respectable and ladylike Mrs. Morrison (Barbara O'Neil), while also priming her darling daughter Laurel (Ann Shirley) for more distinguished company. Stella sacrifices her self-image for the sake of her family, forcing herself out into the cold, as she watches Laurel's wedding through the window from the street in the emotive final scene. Coixet mimics the end of *Stella Dallas* as Ann watches her family from bed, separated from them by a beaded curtain not dissimilar to the diamond shaped teardrops that appear in the opening credits of *Imitation of Life* (1959) in what Vidal calls 'a non-ironic take on the tears of melodrama motif' (2008: 232). The film recounts the rags to riches story of aspiring actress Lora (Lana Turner) and the parallel tragedy of her black maid, Annie (Juanita

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<sup>8</sup> By kind permission of El Deseo S. A.

Moore), rejected by her light-skinned daughter Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner). Coixet pays tribute to Sirk and Vidor but then chooses to pull back from her homage in refusing to portray Ann dying or her funeral. The voice-over keeps her in a liminal space between life and death for the entirety of the film, omnipresent through her voice after this invisible death, signalled only by a white screen.

In contrast, *Imitation of Life* depicts one of the most lavish cinema funerals ever, with all white pomp for Annie, and the emotional return of Sarah Jane, who has arrived 'too late' to save her relationship with her mother.<sup>9</sup> In *My Life Without Me* Coixet does away with the manipulative tear-filled ending, where the characters grieve on screen, as we watch the future unfold without Ann, yet directed by her voice over, lending a poignancy that an opulent funeral scene could not have given.

#### **Postmodern psychoanalysis: *mise-en-scène***

Paul Willemen (1971) argues that Sirk utilises Brechtian techniques of distanciation in his films, with his thesis underlining the hypocrisy of the social structure. Whether this is true or not, this portrayal of an absurd reality with its hyper-excessive staging and polarised characters sharply contrasts Coixet's fetishisation of the mundane as she makes the banal worthy of cinematic attention. She plays with audience expectations and genre conventions by placing the melodrama in a 'real' world with laundrettes, dirty clothes, family meals and overlapping dialogue, rather than the distant, controlled 'reality' of Sirk and his contemporaries. The ordinary trumps the alien worlds of racing pilots, oil tycoons, and millionaire playboys who never do laundry, clean their kitchen or eat on screen. As Peter Brooks recounts, the films of Sirk 'have become a touchstone of popular domestic melodrama because they consistently offer a stylish refusal of the dailiness of the everyday' (1995: ix). In this way, Sirk

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<sup>9</sup> Steve Neale discusses the idea of things happening 'too late' or 'in the nick of time' within the melodramatic tradition in his article 'Melodrama and Tears' (1986)

highlights the out of the ordinary, for example the medical jargon of *Magnificent Obsession* with its Hudson Burrs and haematomas, a device that reaches its visual saturation point as the doctors ‘scrub in’ for the big operation. This unfamiliar rhetoric lends an exotica to his characters’ speech, as the audience desires to be part of their seemingly glamorous world.

Yet it is precisely the everyday, the run-of-the-mill that Coixet tries to make aesthetically pleasing, fetishising laundrettes, beauty parlours and eating. Even factory work is visually glorified in *The Secret Life of Words*, with the camera and music combining to create a hypnotic opening sequence, introducing the isolated life of Hanna (played by Sarah Polley), a reticent refugee from the Balkans who coincidentally finds work as a nurse on a North Sea oil rig during an enforced holiday from her factory job.



Hanna (Sarah Polley) at work in the opening sequence of *The Secret Life of Words*.<sup>10</sup>

The tacky Chinese restaurant where she meets her future employer remains a million miles from the iconic and expensive New York eateries 21, as depicted in many Hollywood movies of the

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1950s. However, we rarely see the protagonists of these films eat; it is rather the social cachet of 21 that merits its inclusion in the narrative, allowing the audience a glimpse of the glamorous world of starlets and bankers drinking cocktails and occasionally consuming an olive. A close-up of the restaurant's famous tablecloths in *Written On The Wind* functions as a transition from one scene to the next, but it is this foregrounding of place, setting and its significance that creates an inescapable social environment in Sirk's films.

In Coixet's work, the eating is what is important, more than a mere detail, it is a pleasure. Her well-documented admiration for the films of Wong Kar Wai and his hungry protagonists runs parallel to this desire to portray the mundane.<sup>11</sup> Ann from *My Life Without Me* and Miranda Richardson's character in *Le trench rouge* enjoy their food on screen, happily making pancakes or relishing a spoonful of profiteroles, while the once unadventurous Hanna from *The Secret Life of Words* experiences a moment of revelation when her taste buds awaken to the meal cooked by the enigmatic oil rig chef Simon (Javier Cámara). The sequence begins as a tableau of Hanna framed in a medium shot, enclosed by the walls of the corridor, as she devours the remains of her patient's dinner on the stairs. The camera pushes in towards her as gentle tinkering music starts and then it sharply cuts to a close-up of Hanna eating, as she has never eaten before.

The unsteady camera shudders and bobs up and down, mimicking the waves surrounding the oil rig and the waves of emotion the protagonist feels. Instead of a carefully planned sequence of shot/reverse shot, Coixet captures it all in one emotional take. In this way, she playfully lavishes the conventions of *melos* (music) and *drama* on this seemingly banal moment, as we fully experience Hanna's moment of sensory epiphany. Incidents like these intensify

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<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Wong Kar Wai (Shanghai, 1956) published on her website, Coixet asks the director about his hungry protagonists, to which he replies: 'it's something I don't see in films from the West, at times it seems that nobody ever eats in Western films. It's really important to me how my characters earn money, where they live, how they sleep and what they eat.' (<http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/isabelcoixet/vida2.htm>, my translation.)

the veracity of the characters, sketching idiosyncratic details onto their personalities, as they luxuriate in the everyday, unlike the distanced, somewhat unreal protagonists in Sirk's world.



Ann (Sarah Polley) makes pancakes for her family  
in *My Life Without Me*<sup>12</sup>

Equally, in the Sirk films, *mise-en-scène* is tantamount to the unsaid, the repressed and the occult in the narrative. As critics like Thomas Elsaesser (1987) have noted, the hyper-expressive staging results in films rife for psychoanalysis, with every visual detail adding another layer to the dialogue. The lavishly decorated interiors are loaded with meaning, and characters are often united or distanced from their environment and the people that populate it through costumes of complementary colours. The spectators can choose to submerge themselves in this semiotic paradise or abstain from analysis and merely enjoy the painterly stylization offered by the films. Coixet's

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<sup>12</sup> By kind permission of El Deseo S.A.

pared-down approach to interiors and locations is decidedly more realist, or simply put, more normal than the stylized, almost parodic world of Sirk, as he offers a subtle critique of American society in the 1950s. She chooses to draw specific attention to the alternative and the eccentric, allowing the camera to linger on details for just long enough, inviting the active spectator to absorb these minutiae if they so choose.

This miniaturist approach is especially evident in her inclusion of books and literary references. In *My Life Without Me* Ann finds *Middlemarch* in her bag of laundry, with Lee's number written inside the cover. This aspect is essential to the plot, so that Ann can find him, but the fact that he wrote his number in a book is merely a whim of the director, a novel way of transmitting a message rather than the traditional melodramatic letter, which Coixet has replaced with voice-over and the taped messages Ann records for her loved ones. At the very end of the film we see *Middlemarch* again, as the camera pans quickly across Lee's bookshelf, finally coming to rest on his face as he smiles ruefully, no doubt thinking about Ann. Coixet has mentioned how the last scene of *My Life Without Me* was inspired by Eliot's novel (Cerrato 2008: 103), especially the last page, further entrenching the book into her narrative. This same attention to detail emanates from each director's work but while Coixet chooses to bring our eye to various aspects of her staging, pinpointing a rich detail amongst the sparseness, Sirk provides a more static *mise-en-scène*, allowing the spectator to zoom in where they choose.

### **Editing: subverting the classical system**

While creating his lush *mise-en-scène* in the 1950s, Sirk did not have recourse to hand-held cameras and thus his photography remains more static and smooth than Coixet's. His camera is mobile, but usually motivated by character movement or the need to include some aspect of the decor, often a mirror, which will tell us something essential about a character or merely offer another elegant fixed shooting option. Coixet exploits the possibilities of today's more portable technology, with her unsteady shots and almost incessant movement.

She operates the camera on her shoots, controlling this 'third eye' as it captures the footage and having fewer crew members on set allows for greater intimacy between the actors during emotional takes.

Coixet also utilizes postproduction technology in order to express the melodramatic mode and exploit the full potential of her medium. Within Sirk's world of classical editing, transitions between shots are fluid and he utilises frequent montage sequences in order to condense events into a shorter period of time. In *Magnificent Obsession*, he uses rapid editing to involve the audience in Bob Merrick's boat crash. The sheer speed of the boat and the short shots increase the tension and the powerlessness felt by the spectator, as the crash becomes inevitable. Water splashes against the camera, followed by a very tight shot of Bob in the boat, everything goes white, then an extreme close-up the boat spinning and a shot of his female friend screaming.

In contrast, the opening sequence of *The Secret Life of Words*, the slowness of the cinematography intensifies the powerlessness of the spectator and heightens the drama of the situation. The transitions between the shots are also slower, dreamier, with Coixet using quick fadeouts, giving the idea that this is a memory or flashback. She also uses more extreme close-ups on Josef's face as he is engulfed in the flames. The effect mimics the smoky, hazy experience of a blaze, along with the echoey, tinny voices of the crew members, adding to the veracity of the filmed experience. Although slow motion is not a new invention in cinema, its use marks a more postmodern type of editing, inserting an effect of unreality and announcing the presence of the author, yet it ultimately serves to provide a life-like experience for the spectator, intensifying the moment and emphasizing the melodramatic.



Josef (Tim Robbins) heads towards the blaze on the oil rig  
in *The Secret Life of Words*.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, each director uses transitions and montage elements to create distinct effects. For example, *Magnificent Obsession* and *Written on the Wind* both use the device of a calendar to show the passing of time, as the dates flick forward or indeed backwards as each shot fades into the next. Although this typical use of montage is not life-like, it functions as an accepted device in cinema, retaining as much invisibility as possible in the editing of the material. Coixet employs a more staccato form of transition when Ann sits in the grim hospital waiting room, separating the shots with jump cuts, and using the clock on the wall as a visual marker of time. In this clip she also inserts an unintroduced flashback, as the bespectacled nurse remembers her childhood, without any calendar pages rolling backwards or a dreamy haze appearing on screen. If we compare both methods we see that Sirk's creates a more fluid effect to preserve the suspension of disbelief, while Coixet's approach gives a harsher but more contemporary division of time. Using a jump cut to condense material intensifies the melodramatic aspect by pinpointing the important shots for the spectator; yet the visible editing reminds us

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that this is a deliberate feature created by the director. She transgresses the fourth wall, bringing melodrama up to date, utilizing classical representation through a postmodern system of signification where the director is clearly visible.

### **Conclusion**

The deliberate presence of the director in the text marks a sharp contrast to Sirk's world of classical editing, where seamless transitions and the illusion of invisibility were everything. Admittedly, the psychoanalytic implications of classic melodrama and its subsequent Freudian analysis appear in Coixet's work through her system of referencing. However, the distance she maintains from the classical canon assures the contemporary spectator that they are not watching a weepie or a chick-flick but something more in keeping with the American indie tradition. She explores the possibilities of classical melodrama, but does not exclude other modes from her narratives; her multi-layered work defies pigeonholing and represents a new postmodern form of melodramatic expression, where classical conventions are respected and upheld but where the clichés of the past are ultimately avoided or at least parodied. Using these subtle, tongue-in-cheek references and stylish cinematography, Coixet makes films for lovers and haters of melodrama alike, retaining enough postmodern cool to appeal to a cine-literate, audience, while preserving the love and loss we expect from the narrative. Her position within a Spanish national cinema remains tentative, as the definition of this cultural label becomes increasingly transparent in a market of multilingual co-productions, remakes and reworkings, where only the opposing categories of 'Hollywood' and 'World Cinema' can be applied without hesitation.

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### **Filmography Isabel Coixet**

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- My Life Without Me* (2003). Film. Spain/Canada: El Deseo.
- The Secret Life of Words* (2005). Film. Spain: El Deseo.
- La gabardina roja*. Film. In: *Paris, je t'aime* (2006). Film. France/Lichtenstein/Switzerland/Germany:Victoires International.

### **Filmography Douglas Sirk**

- Magnificent Obsession* (1954). USA: Universal Pictures.
- All That Heaven Allows* (1955). USA: Universal Pictures.
- Written on the Wind* (1956). USA: Universal Pictures.
- Imitation of Life* (1959). USA: Universal Pictures.

### **Others**

- A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). Film. Directed by John Cassavetes. USA: Faces International.
- Brief Encounter* (1945). Film. Directed by David Lean. UK: Cineguild.

- Gone With The Wind* (1939). Film. Directed by Victor Fleming. USA: Selznick International Pictures.
- Jules et Jim* (1962). Film. Directed by Francois Truffaut. France: Les films du Carosse; Sédif Productions.
- Mildred Pierce* (1945). Film. Directed by Michael Curtiz. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.
- ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984). Film. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Spain: El Deseo.
- Stella Dallas* (1937). Film. Directed by King Vidor. USA: The Samuel Goldwyn Company.
- The Woman Next Door/La femme d'à côté* (1981). Film. Directed by Francois Truffaut. France: Les films du Carosse; Sédif Productions.
- Volver* (2006). Film. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Spain: El Deseo.