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Zecchi, Barbara, coord. *Tras las lentes de Isabel Coixet: Cine, compromiso y feminismo.*

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Who is Isabel Coixet and where and how to place her work? This edited volume pursues these questions via twenty-two Spanish language selections focusing on the feature-length films, documentaries, writings, interviews, and self-image produced by the Barcelona-born director. In the prologue, Coixet speaks of a sense of “vulnerability” under such close scrutiny and her awe of “una mirada plural, apasionada y entregada” on the part of the twenty-three contributors and the editor, as well as her appreciation for the opportunity to “revisit” what she has done up until “now,” referring to 2014. Coixet has remained prolific since the appearance of this volume with three feature-length films, numerous documentaries, and other short projects in circulation between 2015-2019, attesting to the benefit of said volume in understanding the underpinnings of an already vast and valuable opus in constant state of expansion. Two initial features are Zecchi’s twenty-page comprehensive introductory overview followed by a translated essay (originally published in English by Nuria Triana Toribio in 2006), which set a tone recognizing Coixet as an early proponent of a form of post-national cinema that defies categorizing her work per se as “Spanish” or “Catalan.” As Toribio observes, “[s]us películas indican que se pueden esquivar algunas etiquetas hasta cierto punto, eligiendo en su caso las estrategias exitosas de los *autores mediáticos...*” (63). This initial commentary grants us insight into a committed relationship with the director’s artistry and perceived motivations in producing “global cinema.” Four “lenses” organize the individual studies and a final interview with Miss Wasabi into a rich guided tour of Coixet’s techniques, aesthetics, and driving ideologies. I chose to read this text strictly in the order presented to experience the sequential logic by which the sections (or *ángulos*) propose to guide us through the director’s “ways of seeing.”

**Parte I. GRAN ANGULAR: Travelling sobre la producción de Isabel Coixet** explores Coixet’s methods for deconstructing the traditional predominance of 1) national modes of identification, production, and recognition, and 2) the heterosexual male gaze in favor of framing her cinematic stories in terms of taste, touch, smell and sound which, to varying degrees, implicate the spectator as more than passive voyeur. It opens with the aforementioned Capítulo 1. LUGARES, a discussion of Coixet as a transnational phenomenon who employs strategies of language (often English) and other conventions such as the nowhere/everywhere of Independent American cinema to sidestep the confines of national labels. Toribio insists that she forces us to “despertar al futuro transnacional, que parece

estar en el porvenir de todos los cines, y no solo en el de Hollywood” (64). It seems Coixet’s present tense is “our” spectatorial future. The focus then shifts to sensorial aesthetics as discussed by the individual authors of the four subsequent chapters labeled 2. MIRADAS, 3. TEXTURAS, 4. SILENCIOS, 5. SONIDOS. Emphasized here are Coixet’s strategies for framing female protagonists in earlier films under the influence of John Berger’s seminal text, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), cited by Coixet as fundamental to her technical language in confronting the male gaze. The term “haptic” appears often and in reference to a sense of touch and proprioception that predominates in how the director shifts the traditionally central role of the gaze to other modes of perception, relationships, and agency. This shift from the simple dichotomy of seeing and being seen is most acute in Paszkiewicz/Zecchi’s discussion of a temporarily blinded male character who, in *La vida secreta de las palabras* falls in love with his nurse, a traumatized victim of the most extraordinary forms of rape/torture during the Balkan wars, once he can “see” her as the subject of her own experience through words and touch. The elimination of the “power” of the male gaze allows them both to experience the “tension” between proximity to and distance from trauma and intimacy (87-92). Chapters 4 and 5 deal more intimately with what we hear, emphasizing the importance of silence and words (124) in these earlier films in contrast to the overbearing soundtracks of many commercial films.

**Parte II. TELEOBJETIVO: Primeros planos de los largometrajes de ficción** enlists chronological studies of the first ten fictional films written and directed by Coixet, with the exceptions of *Elegy* (2008) and *Another Me* (2013) based on novels written by Philip Roth and Catherine MacPhail respectively. This section comprises a compendium of Coixet’s explorations of the interplay of distinct genres and gender, a generic fluidity, if you will, from a feminist perspective resulting in her understanding of the formal qualities of commercial art and art cinema. Chapter 6 opens with Coixet’s “ópera prima,” *Demasiado viejo para morir joven* (1988), whose reception was that of an “obra maldita.” Castejón Leorza makes the credible argument that the film nonetheless exhibits signs of successful alternative strategies employed by the 24-year-old director and which belongs as forbearer in the pantheon of “generational films” celebrated in the 1990s about disenfranchised Spanish youth. Chapters 7-10 return to the early films discussed at length in **Parte I** with a keen focus on relational dynamics, and the subversion of gendered “ways of seeing” or being seen that are intriguing. But as reader, I felt some fatigue per the content at this juncture due to the repetitive quality of secondary resources and concepts. As we re-encounter the noble film, *The Secret Life of Words* in Chapter 10, Ramon Girona cites Zecchi’s contribution to her edited volume on *Cineastas españolas...* (2014: 158), which sums up the guiding threads of these close readings: “Coixet ha ido proponiendo alternativas al discurso fílmico comercial....desde la deconstrucción de la escopofilia a la sitofilia, sus películas evocan, literal y figurativamente, la superioridad del placer del gusto, del tacto, del olfato y del oído frente a la vista: del roce a la caricia frente a la mirada; y del abrazo frente a la contemplación *voyeurista*” (231). Chapters 11-15 venture into more cosmopolitan waters offering rich readings of Coixet’s dances with distinct genres of storytelling set in “new” contexts such as the U.K., Tokyo, New

York, and an abstract “future-present.” Here we enter into a world of adult protagonism in the form of a “particularly masculine melodrama” (253) in *Elegy*; a “feminized gaze”(277) in the realm of noir set in Tokyo which echoes some of the observations of Coixet’s particular focus on silence and sound already discussed in Chapter 5; the merger of documentary and fictional techniques in the sci-fi tinged *Ayer no termina nunca* evoke the contextual particulars of the Spanish economic crisis between 2012-2017 while exploring the universals of human suffering (284). Chapter 14 is particularly gratifying in that it discusses the horror film *Another Me* in dialogue with the numerous film texts to which it pays homage such as *Ringu*, *The Rear Window*, etc. while challenging the spectator to be fearless in occupying the terrifyingly subjective gaze. The section concludes with *Learning to Drive*. What perplexes here is that Pallás focuses on “the road trip” as unidirectional and all about Wendy (white, wealthy) and Darwan (Indian, immigrant) and their *Bildung*, while the most fascinating and transnational part of the film is that not only Wendy, but Darwan’s initially isolated Indian wife, a woman who has traveled further than Wendy, also learns how to drive. Through these ten readings, we learn how Coixet avoids punishing female or male protagonists who dare to challenge the false dichotomies that threaten to separate male/female protagonism, criminality, suffering, relationships, and human development.

The five impressive chapters comprising **Parte III. ZOOM: Los documentales de Isabel Coixet** offer greater insight into how the techniques employed in telling fictional stories of humanity can bring a director’s curiosity, empathy and social consciousness into greater focus, too. While Coixet’s cinema is always embedded in social reality (365), these chapters bring us to the ethics of her aesthetic choices in tackling inequities, injustice, violence, misery and hunger in terms of three main topics: In defense of women (against violence and abuse), the environment, and human rights. In an interview, Coixet sums it up: “Hay películas cuya visión es lo más cercano a una revelación...que nos enseñan cosa sobre nosotros mismos que ignorábamos...que no sumergen en universos paralelos al nuestro, que nos devuelven una visión de este tan real que, de repente, el mundo en el que vivimos nos parece falso, una mera y mala parodia...” (358). Chapters 16 and 17 offer an excellent overview of her documentaries, most of which are readily available online, and discuss cross-over stylistics, formal choices to best market her vision, while employing her talents in promoting specific causes. Unlike her fictional cinema, many documentaries are in Spanish and focus on people and stories linked to the Iberian Peninsula (393). Chapter 18 discusses her collaborative mode of working, while Chapter 19 focuses on *La mujer, cosa de hombres*. Belmonte Arocha’s study explains how Coixet’s juxtaposition of historically sexist advertising campaigns with reports of very real femicide today demonstrates the dangers of legitimizing, even in fiction, patriarchal scopophilia (421). The final chapter of this section juxtaposes Coixet’s wrap up of *Mapa de los sonidos de Tokio* with her abrupt shift to “a small room in Madrid” to masterfully film an interview between Judge Baltasar Garzón and the writer Manuel Rivas to denounce the establishment for condemning Garzón “for doing his job” (440).

**Parte IV. Las Gafas: Isabel Coixet Persona** offers two final chapters exposing various aspects of Coixet’s tastes, observations and concerns. Chapter 21 discusses Coixet’s

published diary, *La vida secreta de Isabel Coixet* (2011), in which her focus on food and “lo sensorial” prompts her to assume that there are more similarities than differences between people, and allows for the assertion that she does not believe that “los seres humanos de este lado sean muy diferentes” (457). But as someone keenly aware of distinctions between human desires and cultural imagery as a form of self-promotion, she observes that western cinema does not focus enough on food and eating, whereas eastern directors like Wong Kar Wai include where their characters live, sleep and eat (455). The final interview conducted by María Donapetry offers the director’s own insights into the experience of preparing, directing and finishing many of her films. Particularly insightful is her response to the question of her “interés por las mujeres” to which she responds that she always identifies more with her masculine characters, because “las mujeres en mis películas son heroínas, alguien capaz de saber que se va a morir y que no comparte ese conocimiento con nadie” (473). As such, Coixet is calling herself a coward, though capable of creative acts of heroism as evidenced in this volume by which the reader will come away understanding her vast, rhizomic opus up to 2014 well and, perhaps, by heart.

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