

“A FALSE CREATION” – STAINS IN THE GLOSSY  
WORLD OF IMITATION OF LIFE  

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*“Uma criação falsa”: nódoas no mundo lustroso de  
imitação de vida.*

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In his two-volume comprehensive *The Story of Cinema*, David Shipman dismisses most of Douglas Sirk's highly regarded films. In *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), according to Shipman, “the locations, the colour, the fashions, the furnishings, the emotions are ‘beautiful’ – but plastic-wrapped, as attractive as sandwiches in an airport lounge (929)”. As to *Written on the Wind* (1957), he says that “the piece is flat, slick and characterless, but not badly made (929)”. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Martha* is described by Shipman as “a re-vamping of Sirk's *Sleep, My Love* and an excellent example of the second-rate imitating the third-rate (1157)”. Shipman does not make any direct comments on *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), and *Imitation of Life* (1959), Sirk's last film. But he indirectly refers to the latter when he discusses its first version and also the first version of *Magnificent Obsession*. Shipman thinks neither *Imitation of Life* (1934) nor *Magnificent Obsession* (1935), John M. Stahl's versions which preceded Douglas Sirk's, “would seem to appeal to anyone of mature mind for more than a few minutes – and that certainly applies to the remade versions of the Fifties (423)”. Jon Halliday, who published *Sirk on Sirk*, a series of interviews with the filmmaker, said that “as a film director, he [Sirk] was virtually ignored by the ‘serious’ critics, and until fairly recently written off as a purely commercial director of melodramas” (925).

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I chose to start this article with David Shipman's account (or rather lack of account) and Jon Halliday's comment on Douglas Sirk's glossy melodramas of the Fifties, because some of them – *All that Heaven Allows*, *Magnificent Obsession*, *The Tarnished Angels*, *Written on the Wind*, and *Imitation of Life* – have created a sort of cult following and are the object of study of many film scholars today. All of these films have been promoted from the status of "women pictures" or filmed soap operas, with all the prejudice that those labels may imply, to the status of incisive, rigorous meditations on the malaises of American society. In fact, they seem to have been made with a female audience in mind – on the assumption that most of the time it was the woman that chose the film a couple would see –, which does not mean these films cannot transcend this status. When I first saw these films, I remember having had a sort of ambiguous response. They pleased me immensely by what could easily catch the heart and the mind – dramatically lit scenes, gorgeous locations, a tight if somewhat over-the-top storyline, symbolic use of color, and intense music at crucial moments. At the same time, though aware that I was being manipulated to respond to the sentimentality that poured from the screen in the most dramatic moments, I sensed that there was something more than met the eye. These films might be making a serious statement about American society, but that was just a vague possibility to me, not something that could be easily seen on the screen at the time. The glaring melodrama, the careful but artificial mise-en-scène, and the unabashed sentimentality were the elements that prevailed and which, perhaps, guided readings like David Shipman's.

In relation to *Imitation of Life* specifically, when I first saw it as a teenager, it struck me as a very emotional film, which had important things to say about life and gratitude, good feelings, companionship, love and loss. In an era in which American values were being disseminated all over the world, the understanding and unprejudiced Lora stood for a country open to opportunities for all, and showed concern for the underprivileged and tolerance regarding minor ethnic groups. In short, in its mixture of pathos and good intentions, it looked as if it were a slice of life; rather a slice of an imitation of life, as the title indicates, for the characters always seemed to shun away from what was really important to them, as they could not give the right value to things they took for granted, like Lora did in relation to Steve's devotion to her and the "ungrateful" Sarah Jane in relation to her mother Annie's unconditional love for her. At that time I had no concern for such things as irony, discourse and self-reflexivity and paid no attention to the way a film was narrated.

When the film was reprised in the late sixties, I had already become aware of the Nouvelle Vague and other then innovative film trends, and had

begun to see films as a construct and to pay attention to their discourse. And *Imitation of Life* certainly did not meet the conditions to fit in the kind of art film that was most talked about at the time and did not seem to me, in this second viewing, as anything more than a typical product of commercial Hollywood cinema, that is, the sort of film that owed its success to the fact that it was a calculated form of adulation of the audience. The sets were lavish, top stars were cast, and the story begged for compassion for the poor black mother whose love was rejected by her light-skinned daughter, and for the ambitious stardom-aspiring Lora, who did not realize happiness was nearer to her than she suspected. It was a film that invited the viewer to take sides in relation to Lora and to the other characters – should Lora abandon a successful career as an actress and devote herself to Steve and her daughter? It was Hollywood melodrama at its best.

I assume this personal account of my relationship with *Imitation of Life* in two different periods – when I saw films simply for entertainment and when I began to pay attention to their construction – can be related to the general reception the film had and to its rejection by supposedly sophisticated audiences. First, it would be rejected by those viewers who did not want to fall prey to its melodramatic conventions and would see it merely as a soapy film; second, it would also be rejected by those “serious” critics who would dismiss it for not aspiring at “high art” and for its apparent trashy outlook. Set against the experimentalism of Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) and Fellini’s *8 1/2* (1963), the film seemed to be conventional commercial cinema and looked beautiful but artificial and exaggerated.

It is exactly these characteristics that I intend to use in order to argue that *Imitation of Life*, in an almost Brechtian way, deliberately uses artificiality and over-the-top performances in order to create irony and invite the viewer to deal critically, that is, with distanciation, with the material it presents. I do not of course mean to say that *Imitation of Life* is representative, in filmic terms, of Brecht’s approach to drama. It is, first and foremost, a product of classic Hollywood cinema, a Universal studio melodrama, which is in perfect synchronization with the tenets of the star system of the fifties. What I mean to say is that in its discourse one can find elements that disavow its status of escapist product for the entertainment of complacent viewers, a status it certainly has on a certain level. But then it must be added that escapist films can also manage to criticize society by exposing its foibles.

For that matter, I will follow Barbara Klinger’s view of a category of filmic melodramas she refers to as progressive or subversive (75). “These texts”, she says, “while firmly entrenched within the system, display certain features that are critically deemed as combative to the conventions governing the ‘typical’ classic text (74)”. She makes a distinction, following Jean-Louis

Comoli and Jean Narboni's essay "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", between films which only perpetuate the existing ideology both in form and content and films which apparently support the norms of the current ideology but which formally present fissures and ruptures. In this way, and here she quotes Comoli and Narboni, they "partially dismantle the system from within" (77). And she goes on to say that "the progressive work must exhibit textual characteristics which are strategically reactive to commonplace 'classicism' (77)". Martin Scorsese, in the British Film Institute's documentary on the history of cinema, uses the term 'smugglers' to refer to the directors of this kind of work, those film makers who work within the studio system and somehow 'smuggle' subversive ideas into mainstream productions, in such a way that you have to take into consideration not the texts themselves but their subtexts. He includes in this category films like Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, which is not merely a 'weepie' and can be seen as a serious piece of criticism of small-town control of other people's personal affairs and the devastating effects that this repressive force has. As Jon Halliday aptly puts it, "Sirk was all the time – in both Hitler's Germany and in Eisenhower's America – constructing 'secret' critiques of the society in which he was working" (925).

*Imitation of Life* can be said to belong to the mode of classical Hollywood melodrama. Like many other films of the period, it deals with ambition and romantic love as they are hampered by social institutions. The film is technically flawless and the production values can be easily seen on the screen. Lora's rise from rags to riches gives the film the opportunity to display gorgeous settings – Lora's two-story luxurious mansion, for instance –, elegant costumes, fancy parties and successful opening nights of Lora's plays. It can be included in a large group of popular Hollywood family melodramas.

The Hollywood family melodrama has its origin in the nineteenth-century novel and drama. According to Thomas Elsaesser in "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", Scott, Byron, Heine, and Hugo revived the picturesque aspects of late medieval morality plays and other manifestations of oral narratives, emphasizing emotional shock and investing on the sympathies and antipathies of the audience. In opposition to tragedy, which deals with the conflict between the hero and a superior force and is thus metaphysical, melodrama is concerned rather with political, social and institutional questions. But Elsaesser's essay is more concerned with – and that fact will be of relevance to my reading – "the nonpsychological conception of the dramatis personae, who figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation (GRANT, 351)". In that respect, the flatness of the

characterization in *Imitation of Life* – the stress on performance and ‘imitation’ – will be taken into account.

Melodrama, according to the dictionary definition, is drama set to music, that is, music as an element that stresses emotional moments, an element that punctuates the development of the story. One can extend that definition and regard other elements, such as lighting, framing and cutting, in the case of films, which expressively highlight certain narrative moments as well. As Elsaesser says, the problems of melodrama can be seen “as problems of style and articulation (358).” Thus, “considered as an expressive code, melodrama might therefore be described as a particular form of dramatic *mise-en-scène*, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones (359).”

Therefore, I will try to detect what elements of the *mise-en-scène* are supportive of the meanings constructed by the film in the reading I propose. As the film melodrama is a highly conventional genre, it will hopefully become easier to find out the elements that manifest irony and distanciation. As Jean-Loup Bourget says, in “Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres”, “*Imitation of Life* is superficially naïve and optimistic, but profoundly bitter and antiracist (51)”. And this superficial gloss is evident in the very opening of the film, a beautiful, delicate and elegant shot of diamonds falling down in slow motion like snowflakes and gently resting at the bottom of a transparent glass in such a way that by the end of the credits the screen is filled with diamonds which have accommodated in order to form the beautiful pattern. At this moment, as the viewer is still ignorant of what is to come, all one can grasp is the soft colors, the slow movement of the falling diamonds, and the beauty of the sequence enhanced by the romantic tunes of the title song, which talks of “a false creation called imitation of life”. As the film ends, we see the screen full of diamonds again, but this time we have a freeze frame and the fact that the shot comes right after a somber funeral scene gives it an ironic meaning that could not be present in the opening sequence. That pretty last shot is uncomfortable and makes us re-evaluate the positive feelings we had in the beginning of the film in relation to the social group portrayed.

I will not for the moment comment on the title of the film, which appears in the credits sequence, for its ambiguity can be better accounted for, in my opinion, after other elements of the *mise-en-scène* are discussed. As soon as the credits sequence ends, we have shots of a glaringly sunlit beach and the year 1947 appears in a banner. This clearly defines the period of time the story begins. The diegetical time span will be of 11 years, but we do not find clearly noticeable traces of different historical periods – if it were not for the explicit references to dates, one could say the whole action of the

film takes place in the Fifties, so marked is the *mise-en-scène* by elements characteristic of that period. This reveals the film is not concerned with diachronic history, with the relationship between two different historical periods; it is rather concerned with a certain historical moment, the American society of the Fifties, and its paradoxes.

The account that the *Video Hound's Golden Movie Retriever* gives of the film is a good indicator of the prevailing reading the film had at the time it was released. I will transcribe it not only for this reason, but also because it summarizes the plot and will help situate further comments:

Turner [Lora] is a single mother, more determined to achieve acting fame and fortune than function as parent. Her black maid, Moore [Annie], is devoted to her own daughter, Kohner (Sarah Jane), but loses her when the girl discovers she can pass for white. When Turner discovers that she and her daughter are in love with the same man, she realizes how little she knows her daughter, and how much the two of them have missed by not having a stronger relationship. Highly successful at the box-office. (376)

Lora, played by Lana Turner, calls our attention not only for being a pale platinum blonde in striking contrast with her black maid – her daughter is played by Sandra Dee, a blonde as well –, but also because Turner's star persona, the sexy and beautiful "all-American" blonde actress, invites an identification with her and makes her the leading character in a film where there are characters of equal importance to the development of the plot. She is apparently the main focus of the film – the action seems to be filtered by her – but that is not effectively a perceptual filter, but rather an "interest-focus", a term coined by Seymour Chatman in *Coming to Terms; the Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. According to Chatman, besides the contextual signals offered by the story, there is the star effect: "we know before the film begins that we will spend most of our time in the interest-focus of any character played by, say, Cary Grant or Katherine Hepburn" (158). In the case of *Imitation of Life*, Lana Turner's presence is so powerful that it prevents us from assessing the real importance of a character like Annie, who has the most emotionally charged sequence in the whole film – the sequence of her funeral.

That is also why we tend to rejoice with Lora's rise to stardom and acknowledge the possibility of social ascension given by the American society. It is at this point that an element of the *mise-en-scène*, combined with other elements of the narrative, challenges this notion. Lora's success is gradual, as the montage sequence of the reception to her theatrical performances

makes clear, but we are all of a sudden introduced to the luxurious home she has purchased for herself. The camera follows a gorgeously dressed Lora, who, in her crimson red attire, wanders from one corner of the house to another, as we marvel at the immense cream-colored sofa and other light-colored objects. This over-the-top element of the *mise-en-scène* becomes ironical when we learn that, in spite of Lora's success, Annie still lives in small quarters and her environment is most of the time the kitchen. Although the film does not stress this point, it is clear that Annie is condemned to her lower position in life. Lora is depicted as a caring woman, who is deeply concerned with Annie's well-being. It is Lora's kindheartedness that attracts photographer Steve Archer and we may easily convince ourselves that Annie is lucky to have found this position in the household, where there are no class distinctions and where she is treated as an equal.

Or is she? Lora and Susie call her Annie, but Annie and also Sarah Jane call them Miss Lora and Miss Susie, as a sign of deference. There is a scene in which Annie is seen massaging Lora's feet, but the reverse situation – acceptable if they were real friends – is never seen. In the beginning of the film, Lora kisses Susie goodnight but does not kiss Sarah Jane. Annie's condition of subaltern is passively accepted by her: "God has made some white and some black and he must have had his reasons for that", she says. When Annie mentions her funeral and the friends she would like to be present, all of them members of the Baptist Church like herself, Lora confesses she did not know she had any friends at all. "Miss Lora, you never asked" is her reply. When Lora finally becomes a star, Annie, who is always looking after her, is referred to as a watchdog, to which she replies "And I can bite sometimes". She does not seem to be aware of the predicaments of being a black woman. Steve asks her in the kitchen, the place where she is seen most of the time: "How's everything been?" She replies: "Each day I count my blessings".

The first time she and Lora meet at the beach, Lora asks her: "How long have you taken care of her (meaning Sarah Jane)?" "All my life" is Annie's answer. "Oh, I wish I had someone to look after Susie". There is a lot of misunderstanding here. When Lora asks her first question, she means "How long have you taken care of her as a baby-sitter?", which is confirmed by her saying later, "Oh, I wish I had someone to look after Susie". Annie gives an ambiguous answer. She means she has been taking care of Sarah Jane all her life because she is the girl's mother. But her utterance may be read as "I have always been her baby-sitter". On another level, the dialogue also evinces Lora's first concern in life – her professional career –, as she wishes to have someone to look after her daughter. The fact is that Lora discards the possibility of Sarah Jane being Annie's daughter, either legitimate

or adopted, for she can only see the black woman performing the part of a housemaid or a baby-sitter. She acts like Susie who, when told Sarah Jane is dating a boy, immediately asks, "Is he a colored boy?" But Annie does not seem resentful with Lora's misinterpretation of her answer and, conformed to her lower status in life, agrees to work for Lora without getting paid: "You don't have to pay no wages". To a certain extent that is understandable, for Lora is then unemployed, but Annie's situation does not seem to change too much when Lora becomes a very successful actress. The film does not condone Annie's attitude. Her submission is so exaggerated, so complete, that we can only see it as an ironic comment made by the film.

Lora is not an actress onstage only. The over-the-top performance that Lana Turner gives in this film ironically counterpoints and disavows many of the attitudes Lora has, which an inattentive viewer might see as authentic and sincere. When Annie is in her deathbed, Lora convulsively cries, but the over-melodramatic tone of the scene brings to mind the fact that Lora did not really regard Annie as a friend – she knew nothing or nearly nothing of her personal interests. The moment Annie dies, Lora screams and the camera shows her face in close-up. There is a slight panning to the right and then we see a framed photograph of Sarah Jane, which is on Annie's bed-stand. She is looking left (at Lora) and, because she has a smile on her face, she seems to scorn Lora's grief. Early in the film, Sarah Jane says resentfully, in a tense scene between her and Susie: "Your mother doesn't know me". A clue that the film gives that Lora's life is an extension of her acting career is given in the sequence where she confronts Susie, who is infatuated with Steve, when Lora says, emphatically: "If Steve is going to come between us, I will give him up", to which Susie cries "Oh, Mama, stop trying to shift people around as if they were pawns on a stage".

References to acting, mainly to overacting, abound. When David, the playwright, asks Lora to play a part and she rejects it, he dramatically throws the script in the fireplace. Lora nonchalantly says to a perplexed Annie: "Just a theatrical gesture. He never makes less than six copies". In the lean years of her life, when she is still looking for a job, Lora pretends she was recommended by a Hollywood director in order to get a part in a play.

Like the plays Lora performs onstage, the situations in which the characters of the film find themselves look artificial, studied and exaggerated. One might wonder why Sirk, who was a renowned theatrical producer and director in Germany, with a left-wing reputation, who directed "audacious productions of well over 100 plays, ranging from Calderón to Hofmannsthal" (HALLIDAY, 925), would have chosen apparently very stale and conventional plays for Lora to act in. The fact is that those plays represent a device of

mise-en-scène to metaphorize the artificiality of the lives of the film's characters, which have to be taken into account, if we do not want to stick to the superficial reading that can only detect the soapy elements of the film.

And Lora is not the only character that acts theatrically. Steve is supposed to entertain Susie when Lora is away. Although on the surface he is seen as a protective elder man, his behavior towards the girl seems to be very courtly and even seductive. To this end, John Gavin's screen persona greatly contributes, as he gentlemanly takes her to dance, and disguisedly flirts with her. The film does not state it clearly, but we feel he is doing more than he has been assigned. We see both characters leaning towards each other as they have their drink at the dance, and his lines can be interpreted the way Susie does interpret them, the lines of a man who is more than entertaining the daughter of the woman he loves. Susie says she is secretly in love with someone and that sometimes she feels awfully lonely, to which Steve replies, "It is always a little lonely in the beginning, especially if you're not sure the other party feels as you do". "But it's heavenly, though, don't you agree?" Steve answers: "I do. Marvelous, no substitute for it". Steve's "false" behavior is not present in this sequence only, for throughout the film he displays what seems to be a genuine regard for Annie and Sarah Jane. On his first visit to Lora, however, when Susie and Sarah Jane are still very small, he takes Susie in his arms and carries her along the corridor, while Sarah Jane walks by their side, the social positions of the two girls having been clearly defined. Although Steve pretends he does not treat the two girls differently, the scene described above shows us that he does. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he pretends to make company to Susie in Lora's absence, when all the time he is playing the Prince Charming.

Susie is portrayed as a regular American cute teenager, blonde, sassy and immature, somewhat silly but lively and charming. She wears whites and pinks and looks childish. Sarah Jane, on the other hand, is more poised and sexy, and wears tight dresses of bright colors. She does not have Susie's wholesome aspect, which informs many family films of the Fifties. Nevertheless, the film challenges this stereotypical characterization by having Susie fall in love with her mother's fiancé, a situation that can be immediately related to Lana Turner's much publicized real life scandal, when her lover, the gangster Johnny Stompanato, was murdered by her own daughter, Cheryl Christina Crane. The event, which took place in 1958, one year before *Imitation of Life* was released, inspired Harold Robbins' book *Where Love Has Gone* (1962), which reinforced the rumors that Cheryl would be in love with Stompanato (BRITO, 35).

Sarah Jane, incapable of accepting the fact that her mother is a black woman, tries to pass for white and is punished for that. The scene in

which she is beaten up by her boyfriend Frankie – a blond Troy Donahue – equals Dorothy Malone's crazy dance in red veils as her father suffers a heart attack in *Written on the Wind* in that both sequences are highly charged emotionally, which becomes very evident in the mise-en-scène. Sarah Jane's abuse by Frankie takes place in a dark street, among trash cans and water puddles and is first seen reflected in the window of a bar, which doubles the dramatic effect. It is almost as intense as Malone's scene due to fast cutting, to the violence of the graphic beating and to the frenzied mambo-like tune, which intensifies the tension and is also reminiscent of tropical black music. By the use of this type of music, associated with a white boy's violent act, the film ironically comments on the stereotypical connection of black people with violence. In this scene, Sarah Jane's yellow dress makes a startling contrast with the darkness of the back street. Whereas Susie inhabits clear and soft-colored places, Sarah Jane has her date and is beaten up in a deserted alley. The camera shows her kneeling near a trash can, crying, dirty and hurt, and then there is a cut and the last note of the mambo-like music is heard on the image of Lora, dressed in pink, resting on her cream-colored sofa, surrounded by objects of soft colors, in a brightly lit scene. Annie is also sitting on the sofa, massaging Lora's feet, and her bright blue dress and dark skin contrast with the whiteness and softness of the shot. Her dark image in the frame is like a stain that tarnishes the well-composed setting.

In my first viewing of the film, I saw Sarah Jane as the ungrateful daughter who learns the hard way how insensitive and unjust she has been to her mother. But in the reading I propose now she seems to be the only character that is aware of the perverseness of the American ethnic segregation. However, instead of engaging in an open fight against this unjust order of things, she prefers to live an "imitation of life", as she can easily pass for white. It is because she knows all the constraints of being black in a country where opportunities exist for the whites only that she goes to the extremes of denying her origin and the natural attachment she had with her doting mother. That makes her a tragic character, for she cannot cope with being black and cannot have the benefits of looking white – she ends up by performing dance routines in nightclubs. But in her family circle she openly manifests her rage, as when she confesses to Susie she is dating a blond boy: "I want to have a chance in life. I don't want to come through back doors or feel lower than other people or apologize for my mother's color. She can't help her color, but I can". Even as a child, Sarah Jane's face expresses a repressed grudge against her condition: "I don't want to live in the back. Why do we always live in the back?" When her mother suggests she meets "nice young colored folks", Sarah Jane acknowledges their exclusion from the "American dream" by referring to them as "bus boys, cooks and chauffeurs". Sarah

Jane knows that people like Lora can succeed, but people like her, unless they do not reveal they are black, are doomed to fail. Annie, although passive, adjusted to her outcast condition, and capable of enjoying life in her lowly position, acknowledges Sarah Jane's nonconformity: "How do you explain to your child she was born to be hurt?"

Besides the lines quoted above, there are other elements of the *mise-en-scène* that reinforce this argument. Sarah Jane, as played by Susan Kohner, has a defiant face and does not act in a sugary way like Susie. The first time they are seen by Steve as grown-ups, there is a striking contrast between their entrances. Susie runs down the staircase and jumps into Steve's arms. She is wearing a white and light-blue dress and looks cute and charming. Then Sarah Jane, in a salmon-colored tight dress, slowly approaches them. She is framed between Susie and Steve, who hold hands, and has a mysterious look, somewhat distant, somewhat embarrassed and the warm but restrained way she embraces Steve certainly differs from Susie's exuberant embrace. It is as if she realizes she does not belong to that family circle. Lora, dressed in white, approaches the group and takes Steve by the arm. Then the three of them – Lora, Steve and Susie – joyfully leave the kitchen, as the camera frames Sarah Jane, who is left behind with a puzzled face. In the background we see Annie preparing the food.

This feeling that Sarah Jane does not belong to, and somewhat resents, the family she is part of, is reinforced by the impression she does of a colored slave, carrying a tray of refreshments to Lora's guests, saying she learned the trick from her mammy, who learned it from her master before she belonged to Lora. All the time she speaks with a fake Negro accent, as if to emphasize the distance between her and the white people she is serving. That is an open and bitter manifestation of her resentment against Lora who, some time before, had asked her to help her mother to serve the food. When Sarah Jane said she had a date, Lora, with the sweetest smile, her fair countenance almost glowing, immediately inferred it was the Hawkins boy, a black boy, simply because he had asked about Sarah Jane some days before.

After these accounts of the main characters and how they pretend most of the time in order to get the best out of life, it is time to linger on the title of the film. More than simply referring to the characters' inability to face the realities of life, it is my opinion that it alludes to the artificiality of the whole film, "a false creation", not only in terms of the performance that the characters make, but also in terms of the studio-like lighting – Turner's eyes are often highlighted to make her more gorgeous –, the striking color scheme, mainly in the costumes and Lora's extremely light house, and most of all, in the surprising funeral sequence, where the irony of the spectacle comes near to bitter sarcasm.

It is shocking to have to acknowledge the fact that only in death can Annie be the center of attention. All she was denied during her lifetime, the "untold want by life and land ne'er granted", as Whitman's poem goes (381), is made up for in the most extravagant of funerals. It is only by finally "going to glory" that she can have her place in a society that, pretending to have some concern for her, denies her the status of a human being. Mahalia Jackson sings *Troubles of the World* and refers to "no more weeping" and "going to live with my Lord". The celebrated jazz singer may be performing the part of a member of the Baptist Church and may consequently be one of Annie's friends. But as the film does not make any reference to her as a character – the camera simply shows her singing during the church ceremony – it is Mahalia Jackson, the great black singer, that is present at Annie's funeral, adding to the importance of the event and enhancing the ironical aspect mentioned above – only in death can Annie be seen as a deserving human being.

The scene of Annie's funeral is the first time in the whole film that the blacks outnumber the whites. The implacability with which the camera focuses on garlands, white horses, the band playing, can be read as the final irony in a film full of ironical comments on the good intentions of a supposedly superior white group. And the film ends with Sarah Jane's return and apparent reconciliation with Lora, Susie and Steve. But this last sequence of the film, dark, somber, sad, and terribly critical of an unjust society is an apt counterpoint to the bright, sunlit opening scene of the film, which shows middle class Americans – mostly white – enjoying themselves on a popular beach.

And then comes the final shot, already mentioned, of the diamonds falling, only this time we have a freeze frame and the tenderness of the opening shot of the film is lost. The lyrical credits sequence opened to an ordinary day at the beach; the immobile last shot comes right after a harrowing funeral ceremony. The film as a whole then could be an apt metaphor for the American society –outwardly it is all glamour and good intentions. Underneath the gloss, however, it is possible to discern the ugly face of rejection of those who do not fit the established pattern. Richard Corliss, in his article "Loving While Living a Lie", published in *Time Magazine* in 2003, says:

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term "passing" had an almost tragic poignancy. It meant not only secretly renouncing one's race but becoming a "real" American – enjoying the privileges of equality and anonymity, back when one-tenth of all citizens were denied true citizenship. If America was a club that admitted whites only, why shouldn't those who looked as if they belonged in the club try to join it?

Corliss goes on to say that unfortunately the will to pass for white has not passed away. He then mentions the fact that "the late *New York Times* book reviewer Anatole Broyard had been posing as white for decades". Anatole Broyard, who died in 1990, had come from a black New Orleans family. Thus, it goes without saying that *Imitation of Life* raises questions that are still relevant in terms of modern American society. It is understandable, although politically debatable, that a person wishes to be like most people, disregarding the fact that it is cruel having to deny your true nature. It is not the scope of this essay to investigate the necessity such individuals have of trying to get the best out of an organized but perverse system. It is enough to say, for the moment, that Sarah Jane, in her hampered but angry way, disturbs the complacency of Lora's world. She tries to pass for white and is not successful, and it breaks one's heart, as a good melodrama must, when she poignantly says: "Miss Lora, you don't know what it means to be different".

## RESUMO

Neste artigo procuro mostrar que o filme *Imitação da Vida* é mais do que um típico melodrama familiar hollywoodiano dos anos cinqüenta, leitura mais corrente do filme. Com esse propósito, apresento uma proposta de leitura que revela, através da análise de elementos como mise-en-scène e caracterização, a subversão de valores do gênero em que o filme se inclui e uma crítica acerba ao excludente e perverso "American way of life".

Palavras-chave: *melodrama hollywoodiano, racismo, subversão.*

## ABSTRACT

In this article I try to show that the film *Imitation of Life* is more than a typical Hollywood family melodrama of the Fifties, a current reading of the film. For that purpose, I propose a reading that reveals, through the analysis of the film's mise-en-scène and characterization, the subversion of characteristics of the genre in which the film can be included and an acerbic criticism of the excluding and perverse "American way of life".

Key-words: *Hollywood melodrama, racism, subversion.*

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