

A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar

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A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar

Edited by

Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon

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A volume such as this, by its very nature, is a transnational venture, the product of intense collaboration among scholars and members of the Spanish film industry engaged in a cross-cultural dialogue that reflects the multiple dimensions of critical thought that surround Pedro Almodóvar's cinema in Spain, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. We are especially indebted to Jayne Fargnoli, our editor at Wiley-Blackwell who first encouraged us to develop our conception of this Companion to Pedro Almodóvar's cinema and who has served as a constant source of support and sage advice during all phases of the preparation of this volume.

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One of the unique challenges of editing an anthology of this sort is the need to coordinate a team of scholars who come from a diverse range of cultural and critical traditions. Each has demonstrated a passionate engagement in their own work on Almodóvar. Thus, a key part of our task has been to encourage creativity and originality but to try to balance the intensity of individual insights with the volume's goal of a collective coherence on the subject of Almodóvar's cinema.

This has involved a unique kind of collaborative effort in which contributors have often been called on to rethink and at times reorder their own contributions in ways that promote the overall design of the volume. We have been fortunate in working with a team of first-rate scholars whose groundbreaking approaches to Almodóvar's cinema are only matched by their intellectual generosity and willingness to collaborate in the formation of a collective discourse that is greater than the sum of the individual parts. This volume benefited tremendously from their uncommon scholarly *esprit de corps*.

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Introduction

The Skin He Lives In

Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon

A Spotlight on the Self-Conscious Auteur

Since the moment of his on-screen appearance as the master of ceremonies at the “General Erections” contest in his first commercially released film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), Pedro Almodóvar has never shied away from the self-referential spotlight, both in and around his movies. Over the years, the in-your-face Almodóvar has moved out of the sights of the camera lens—his last on-screen appearance in one of his own films was in *La ley del deseo*/*Law of Desire* (1987)—even as his off-screen promotion of his films has increased. By May 2011, with the Cannes Film Festival premiere of his eighteenth feature, *La piel que habito*/*The Skin I Live In*, we find on display the essential paradox of “auteur desire,” as Dana Polan called it (2001: n. p.), that mutual construction by filmmaker and spectator or critic of an authorial persona embodied and expressed through an artistically recognized body of work. On the surface, as he would claim to Spanish interviewer Angel Harguindey (2011), the film is not about him, yet it was presented and received through a festival promotion that makes the suggestion of *La piel* as an allegory of his own authorship unavoidable. That self-referentiality begins in the choice of a title for the film based on the novel *Tarantula* (Thierry Jonquet, 2005). Once before, in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*/*What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), he teasingly invited those interpretations by choosing the first-person pronoun in the film’s title. In that case, the narrative agency of the “I” of the title hinted at a symbolic identification between Almodóvar’s heroine, Gloria, brilliantly played by Carmen Maura, and the filmmaker’s own artistic and social biography.¹

La piel’s title similarly draws our attention to the agent of action, but with a notable ambiguity since none of the surface references suggest any overt biographical connection between the mad scientist, Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), and

Almodóvar's own life or career. The film's plot follows Ledgard, a famous plastic surgeon, who kidnaps the young man Vicente (Jan Cornet) who attempted to rape his daughter and in doing so aggravated her mental breakdown, eventually leading to her suicide. Ledgard holds the young man captive in his fortress home, performing a radical form of cosmetic surgery, including a vaginoplasty, that transforms Vicente into Vera (played by Elena Anaya) with the face of his deceased wife. In a twist on the dual Frankenstein-Pygmalion plot, Ledgard falls in love with his creation who appears to go along with his/her captor only to murder him at the end. One might therefore reasonably assume that the "I" of the film's title more appropriately refers to the regendered Vicente/Vera than to the creator/victimizer Ledgard. It is on this level of opaque associations, far removed from the film's explicit narrative, that authorial self-reference begins to take shape.

Ledgard's determination is to develop a superior form of human skin, impervious to fire or puncture wounds, as well as the effects of ageing. This emphasis on skin as the focus of the mad doctor's experimentation, reflected in the formulation of the film's title, suggestively moves us to connect his efforts to the magical properties of that other skin, celluloid, which in classical cinematic terms captures the image in time and does not age. Almodóvar's film, in fact, is very much about ageing as well as about the self-conscious construction of identity that the skin surgeon, like the filmmaker, proffers. Aside from Almodóvar's obvious lifting of major plot elements from Georges Franju's classic horror film, *Les yeux sans visage/Eyes without a Face* (1960), *La piel* contains very few of the cinematic quotes from other directors or films of the type that usually abound in Almodóvar's cinema. Instead, the film's title, alluding most obviously to the double perspective of a man imprisoned in the body of a woman, suggests a subtler and more complex allegorical cinematic signifier rooted in the curious etymology of the Spanish word for film, "película," which derives from the same Latin root as the word for skin ("piel" in Spanish).² Out of such surface wordplay, first postulated in Almodóvar's title, we may discern that much of what surrounds *La piel* as the latest installment of an ongoing discourse on film authorship alludes to the cinematic allegories of lives lived and those captured through technologies related to representation and appearance.

These embedded authorial self-references are only heightened by the decision to stage the world premiere of the film at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. Beyond its standing as a prestigious international launch site, Cannes offers the occasion for the biographical auteur and his film to share the spotlight. The French festival has long held a special personal association for Almodóvar. He had brought his early film, *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* to Cannes in 1982 but the film was ignored and, as he recalled, he felt like a tourist (Limnander 2009: 64). He would return again "officially" on at least six more occasions to participate in increasingly visible roles in the ceremonial competition. After serving as a member of the festival jury in 1992, he later won the Best Director award for *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999). *La mala educación/Bad Education* opened the festival in 2004 and he won the award for Best Screenplay for *Volver* in 2006, with the film's female leads capturing a collective

award for Best Actress. His fifth official appearance at the festival was to compete with *Los abrazos rotos*/*Broken Embraces* in 2009. As in his previous visits, the festival's main prize, the coveted Palme d'Or, eluded him, as it would again in 2011.

There is also an underlying artistic narrative linking Almodóvar with Cannes. Together with the non-competitive New York Film Festival, Cannes has played a crucial role in constructing the image of the international Almodóvar. Not coincidentally, it was the festival that frequently provided the stage for another legendary Spanish filmmaker, Luis Buñuel. Over the last three decades, Almodóvar has come to be viewed generally as the heir to Buñuel. So sure were the organizers that *La piel* would be an occasion of note, that they scheduled the film's screening to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the original, and highly consequential, screening of *Viridiana*.³ At first glance, such extravagant extra-cinematic details might seem to say less about the film than its commercial exploitation. Yet, as David James reminds us in *Allegories of Cinema* (1989), a film never exists in a purely textual vacuum but as the product and projection of the complex and layered operation that is the institution of cinema itself: "Cinema is never just the occasion of an object or a text, never simply the location of a message or an aesthetic event. . . . [but t]he whole panoply of visual and aural media, of advertising, of journalism, of the political process and the urban landscape of signs. . . . A film's images and sounds never fail to tell the story of how and why they were produced—the story of their mode of production" (1989: 5).

This series of contexts beyond the object of cinema—its multiple processes of creation, circulation, and construction of modes of reception—all tied to the persona of Almodóvar the auteur guides the elaboration of the present volume. Like the self-referential allegory of cinema that is contained in microcosm in every aspect of Almodóvar's brand of filmmaking, the Cannes premiere of *La piel* provides an opportunity to shed light on the salient features of the filmmaker's trajectory in a career that now spans thirty years.

At Cannes, Almodóvar would briefly share the spotlight with another cinematic personality, Antonio Banderas, an actor whose career, some would say, was invented by Almodóvar when the former made his first appearance in *Laberinto de pasiones*. Still it was Banderas's notorious role in *La ley del deseo* that brought the young actor to international attention, eventually leading to his crossover career in Hollywood. With major and secondary roles in five of Almodóvar's first eight films, Banderas last appeared in an Almodóvar film some twenty-one years earlier in *¡Átame!*/*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990). The actor's return to his cinema "home" with *La piel* led many spectators and critics to note the thematic similarities between the two films in their different takes on a kidnapping narrative.

Much had transpired in the two decades since the two men last worked together. Banderas has become a familiar face and an even more familiar voice for American audiences. Almodóvar, whose star was already in the ascendancy following his 1988 crossover hit, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*/*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, in which Banderas had a supporting role, has achieved an artistic standing that places him among the very few auteurs—Hitchcock, Buñuel, Chaplin—who

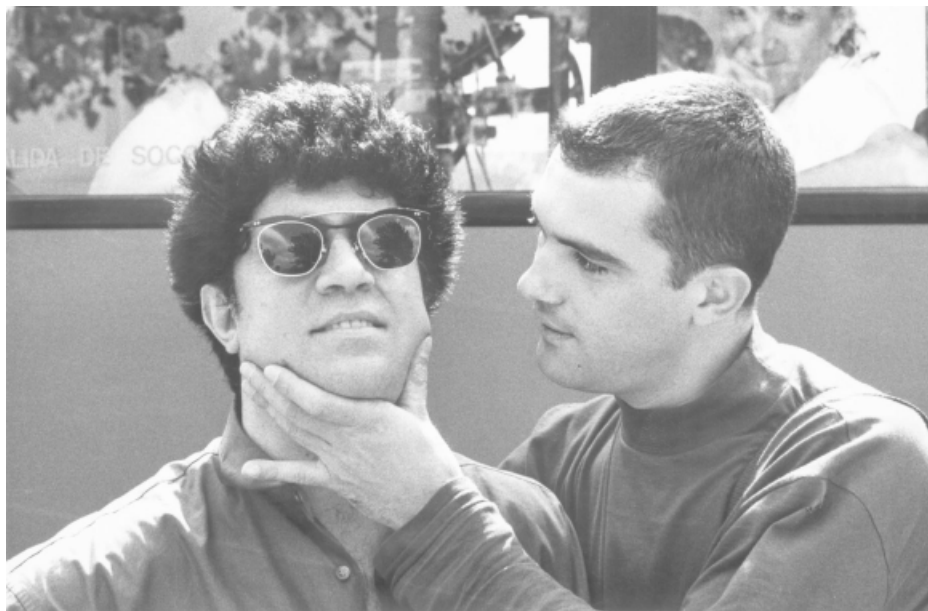


Figure 0.1 Role reversal: A playful Antonio Banderas adjusts the director's pose during the filming of *¡Atame!* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1990; prod. El Deseo, S.A.) © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jorge Aparicio.

might be classified as matrix figures whose impact transcends the purely textual domain of cinema. In other words, following Michel Foucault's famous meditation on authorship, Almodóvar not only possesses the stylistic consistency that characterizes authorship, but he is also an "initiator of discursive practices" (1977: 131). That is, he has established a cinematic style that other filmmakers imitate (the adjective "Almodovarian" is not only applied to his own work but also to the style of others who appear to be emulating him).

In such a self-consciously public reencounter, the Cannes commentators could not resist conjuring up the respective pasts of the filmmaker and his lead actor, viewing their professional re-encounter in larger bio-filmic terms. Banderas's star persona has taken shape as the result of a series of acting roles that rendered him an all-purpose Latin lover (*Mambo Kings* [Arne Glimcher, 1992]; *Miami Rhapsody* [David Frankel, 1995]); a parodic variant of the Latino swash-buckling hero (*Desperado* [Robert Rodríguez, 1995]; *The Mask of Zorro* [Martin Campbell, 1998]); a family man (*Spy Kids* [Gregorio Cortez, 2001] and its sequels); and most recently the reincarnation of a fairytale hero, but one without the claws or menace associated with his feline or Latin identity (beginning in *Shrek 2* [Andrew Adamson et al., 2004] and continuing in its spin-off into the 2011 hit *Puss 'n' Boots* [Chris Miller]). His presence as the iconic Latin male for Hollywood would pave the way for two other Spaniards, Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem, also Almodóvar



Figure 0.2 Banderas and Almodóvar relax on the set of *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Lucía Faraig.

alumni, who could easily be recast either as Latin Americans, U.S. Latinos, or “others” by Hollywood screen writers and directors. All three would help forge the aura of star-maker around Almodóvar their mentor but it is Banderas, perhaps owing to his successful sexual polymorphism in Almodóvar’s early works, that could be understood to best embody and reflect Almodóvar’s career trajectory.

The Banderas reunion with Almodóvar in *La piel* would bring into focus another bio-filmic dimension of the collaboration as it suggested to some critics a change in Almodóvar’s approach to one of his signature themes, sexuality. Banderas first appeared in *Laberinto* as a gay terrorist and was ironically marked in their subsequent films together as gay, heterosexual, or at times as sexually ambivalent.⁴ In this way he became a stand-in for the sexual and social fluidity central to Almodóvar’s early commercial filmmaking. That same fluidity is metonymically woven into the expanding Almodovarian narrative through the presence of transsexual characters who, initially, lean comic (Tina, played by Carmen Maura and her lesbian lover played by Bibi Anderson in *La ley del deseo*; Agrado [Antonia San Juan] in *Todo sobre mi madre*), and later, toward more tragic outcomes (Lola [Toni Cantó], also in *Todo sobre mi madre*; the adult Ignacio [Francisco Boira] in *La mala educación*). In *La piel*, it would seem, Almodóvar uses Banderas self-consciously to move those limits of gender in unexpected directions as Ledgard employs gender transfer as an act of revenge against the man who attempted to rape his daughter.

In this respect one may want to speak of Almodóvar's "evolution," to use the word his alter-ego, the romance novelist turned serious writer Leo (Marisa Paredes), uses in *La flor de mi secreto*/*The Flower of My Secret* (1995). Evolution for Leo meant precisely that shift from the popular vein to a presumed art discourse, what she calls at one point "las novelas que salen negras" (the novels that come out black), playing on the Spanish name for the romance novel form that made her career, "novela rosa." The phrase foretells Almodóvar's own aspirations in the face of his increasing success at home and abroad.⁵

To pin down the lines of that evolution, we might sketch out some of the important dates that mark the trajectory in the approximately twenty-year interval between Banderas's departure for Hollywood and his return in *La piel*. The 1991 production of *Tacones lejanos*/*High Heels* marks the first of a series of collaborative projects with the French production company CIBY 2000, enabling Almodóvar to stabilize his presence both artistically and commercially with respect to the lucrative French market where he wins a César for the film and begins to cement a mainstream European status. This commercial alliance apparently also provides El Deseo, his production company founded in 1985, financial stability as he aspires to redefine himself beyond the narrow contexts of Spanish national cinema. It is arguably the "Frenchness" of the international Almodóvar which, in addition to his critical and commercial successes in the U.S. market, defines the transformation of the punk populist of the early *Movida* films into the European art cinema favorite he would later become.

In 1993, El Deseo takes on the production of Alex de la Iglesia's first feature, *Acción mutante*/*Mutant Action*. This initiates a period of diversification in which Almodóvar is able, through his production company, to support the careers of other young Spanish directors (including Mónica Laguna, Daniel Calparsoro, Dunia Ayaso, and Félix Sabroso). This line of development culminates in 2003 with El Deseo's production of the first of two English-language films by Isabel Coixet, *My Life without Me*/*Mi vida sin mí*. Importantly, these filmmakers are not mere surrogates for an Almodóvar school or genre; rather, they reflect the fact that his authorial self-construction has progressed beyond the individual and has become institutional. Thus, by the third decade of his career, it is clear that he has moved beyond the conventional sense of the film auteur as the name given to a visual/narrative style and has become deeply engaged in what Janet Staiger calls "Authorship as technique of the self" (2003: 49–52), by which she means the concept of the authorial as "the art of existence . . . a repetitive assertion of 'self-as-expresser' through culturally and socially laden discourses" (2003: 50). While still deeply engaged in developing his own creative trajectory, the expansion of his cinematic activities beyond his own work marks a redefinition of the author as commercial entrepreneur that will move him deeper into the realm of a commodity production (James 1989: 84). Rooted in that role is the implicit view that the auteur is tied to but not constrained either by genre or nation. This is a scenario worked out in multiple ways in Almodóvar's

cinema and reflected as well in the complex transformation of audiovisual culture during the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first centuries.

We witness a further realignment of the auteur with the entrepreneur in 1997 with the release of the first of three compilations of recorded songs from Almodóvar's films, *Las canciones de Almodóvar*. This effort signals the beginning of a diversification project for the producer, El Deseo, and the expansion of the image of the filmmaker into a multimedia figure. *Las canciones* and the two subsequent CD compilations *Viva la tristeza* (2002) and *B.S.O. Almodóvar* (2007) differ from the customary movie soundtrack recordings of individual films that begin with Almodóvar's collaborations with Ennio Morricone and Ryuichi Sakamoto in *¡Átame!* and *Tacones lejanos*, respectively, and continue with Alberto Iglesias. Instead they function as independent signifiers of evolving creative agency, recontextualizing the music from his films around the figures of the singers whose careers he has helped reshape (Chavela Vargas) or whose posthumous fame (La Lupe) he has influenced in some way.

In 1999, Almodóvar earns the Oscar for Best Foreign Film for *Todo sobre mi madre*. While such recognition would for other auteurs represent the maximum achievement in international recognition, in this case the event confirms and celebrates the deterritorialization of Almodóvar's cinema beyond its presumed Spanish origins, a process that has been ongoing throughout the previous decade but which is now brought more dramatically into public light. The year 2000 also marks a critical juncture in the broader global vocation of the auteur and his production company as El Deseo enters the Latin American market with a series of co-productions, principally through two key producers: Mexico's Bertha Navarro and Argentina's Lita Stantic. Over the next decade El Deseo will become the prestige producer for six Latin American films, providing them greater international access and visibility while enhancing its own position as a pan-Hispanic brand.

In 2002, Almodóvar wins the Oscar for Best Screenplay for *Hable con ella*/*Talk to Her*, an achievement even more significant than the award for *Todo sobre mi madre* in that it comes in a category in which he is in direct competition with U.S. screenwriters. Again, the point is made that what is often perceived as the limiting imagination of the national (Higson 2000) has been largely superseded as Almodóvar's corpus and career become fully integrated into world cinema.

In 2006 Almodóvar receives two distinct but significant marks of recognition that reflect the local/global dynamic that his career has assumed. He is awarded the Príncipe de Asturias Prize for the arts, the highest national award that a Spanish filmmaker can achieve, and in the spring of that same year, the Cinémathèque Française inaugurates a retrospective exhibition in Paris of his career: *¡Almodóvar Exhibition!* This show, whose only antecedent for a Spanish filmmaker was the 2000 exhibition for the 100-year anniversary of Buñuel's birth, underscores once again the unique transnational institutional status

Almodóvar has achieved. In the continuing evolution of his authorial identity in response to radical changes in the technology, commerce, and art of cinema, Almodóvar appears to embody what Paul Julian Smith calls a “post-auteurist auteurism,” that bears little relation to the 1960s auteurism which, during much of his commercial career, had been the convenient way film scholars and commercial distributors of his films viewed his work. Rather, through an increasing absorption of a variety of mass media forms and new audiovisual formats, Almodóvar’s authorial presence expands as it migrates beyond cinema. At times, he will show himself resistant to the new technosphere involving multiple platforms for the circulation of his films and the cultivation of dialogue with his fan base through the internet. Yet he comes gradually to embrace an updated and intensified version of the entrepreneurial identity of one of his early authorial mentors, Andy Warhol,⁶ diversifying his authorial persona around the merging of art with cultural commerce.

In this tension between the traditional literary-inspired auteur and the author as cyber-phenomenon we may want to read back into the character of Ledgard an updating and expansion of the more conventional filmmakers-in-the-film who punctuate Almodóvar’s earlier work: Pablo Quintero in *La ley del deseo*; Max Espejo in *¡Átame!*; Enrique Goded in *La mala educación*; or Harry Caine/Mateo Blanco in *Los abrazos rotos*. Ledgard needs to be included in that genealogy by virtue of his resemblance to earlier mythological and literary creators as well as the origin of “piel” which recasts his obsession with skin as a coded reference to Almodóvar’s obsession with that other skin, film. Yet what most separates him from his predecessors is the tacit recognition of the radical changes in the technologies of creation that are within his grasp. Though his desires are rooted in the past (the dream of restoring life to his lost wife and daughter), his means of retrieving that past move him to engage with the instrumentality of machines. Ledgard’s immersion in technological gadgetry is marked by a notable ambivalence that is perfectly embodied in the mise en scène of the plastic surgeon’s house. Dependent on the elaborate panoptic technology of surveillance equipment to spy on Vera at every moment, he views her on the larger-than-life closed-circuit monitor that hangs on the wall of his bedroom, a curious cross between a photograph and a filmic image. The walls of the hallway adjacent to Vera’s room are decorated with equally oversized framed images, the reproduction of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* and *Venus with the Organ Grinder*, perfectly mirroring in the female subject’s posture Ledgard’s own view of his creation of Vera’s image in the classical pictorial terms of Titian’s reclining nudes. The painting, at once doubling the contemporary surveillance shot of the captive woman, harks back to an earlier age’s ways of figuratively “capturing” female beauty. This duality of scopical pleasures bespeaks the underlying tensions of Almodóvar’s own authorship, intimately rooted in a mastery of historical forms of creativity (the typewriter, celluloid, the photograph) but continually expanding its reach through new technologies.

The Companion to Pedro Almodóvar

The focus of this anthology of newly commissioned essays is an effort to identify and analyze the nuanced expressions of Almodóvar's evolving authorship from a contemporary vantage point that takes into account the established language of auteurism—a recognizable visual style, thematic continuities—but also the expanded references and meanings that have emerged from the circulation of his works in recent decades into new geopolitical contexts and through redefined audiovisual media. A central concern is also the relation of art to commerce in the evolution of the Almodóvar phenomenon; though often commented on in terms of particular films, the “business” of Almodóvar's art has seldom received the critical attention it is due as the engine that has contributed to his status as a matrix figure in contemporary culture.

The volume opens with a series of interrogations of the bio-filmic roots of Almodóvar's self-invention as a film auteur, what Paul Julian Smith terms his cinematic “self-fashioning.” Smith looks to *Los abrazos rotos* to illustrate the ways one may read into certain of Almodóvar's cinematic narratives a kind of deconstructive autobiography of the filmmaker's personal life and professional career. This is more than simply a fanciful biographical fiction, as Smith contends; the cinematic allegory of Harry Caine, a.k.a. Mateo Blanco, is a many-sided mirror of the world of Almodóvar's authorial creativity.

The young Almodóvar's multimedia apprenticeship in both literary and cinematic contexts is excavated through Francisco Zurian's examination of his earliest literary output: the unpublished short stories composed between Almodóvar's arrival in Madrid in 1968 and his first experiments with Super-8 cinema in the mid-1970s. Read retrospectively, these stories provide a projection of the future Almodóvar: an eclectic talent who has moved across a variety of performance modes, yet remains firmly rooted in his prodigious talent as a storyteller.

Dona Kercher acknowledges a similar eclecticism as she traces the way the young filmmaker recycled key tropes from numerous Alfred Hitchcock's films as these provided a primer during the years of Almodóvar's autodidactic formation as auteur. More than a simple instance of plagiarisms from Hitchcock, as Kercher argues, the appropriation of visual tropes and narrative style that channel scenes and sequences from Hitchcock films and television work constitute an authentic apprenticeship in popular auteurist filmmaking.

Alberto Mira discerns that same dynamics of recycling at the heart of Almodóvar's efforts at autobiographical reinvention. Reprising Smith's notion of authorial self-fashioning through on-screen doubles, Mira contends that the filmmaker “is” in his films in the only way an artist can be said to be “in” his work: by putting together and turning into narrative a series of fragments of other texts, brought to life through cultural mythologies and a number of biographical anecdotes as a guarantee that the fiction is anchored in a “real” self. Those elements come together for Mira in the pivotal self-recycling of *La mala educación*.

This fanciful cinematic self-referentiality which runs through Almodóvar's cinema, and even includes the director's brief cameos in films that recall Hitchcock's appearances in nearly of all his own films, helps to solidify a cluster of myths about Almodóvar's creative identity. Such practices work effectively to establish Almodóvar as an international celebrity through the circulation of his films outside of Spain. Yet Almodóvar never fully disengages from his national cultural roots, a dimension explored in the section devoted to the Spanish contexts of his films. For Marina Díaz López, much of what we see as the tension between the local and global elements of style in his films is mirrored behind the scenes in the fortunes of the production company the director and his brother Agustín established in 1985. She argues that over time, *El Deseo* has consistently and often precociously responded to the fragmentation of Spanish media space by venturing into new media outlets. In the process, the company has operated as the "author's brand" by supporting Spanish film auteurs and expanding their reach through co-productions with important Latin-American auteurs and with media-related Spanish businesses like the Barcelona-based MediaPro who share *El Deseo*'s approach to production and content.

Turning to the history of Almodóvar's complex relations with the Spanish press, Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández assess three specific moments in the interplay between the self-taught, outsider director and a critical establishment schooled in the art cinema paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s. Through an analysis of the extensive promotional materials generated by Almodóvar and his production company and the often virulent critical response to both his films and the public projection of his celebrity persona, they identify the inadequacy of the narrow and largely antiquated criteria of high culture versus low and art versus folklore that Spanish movie reviewers have long employed in their denunciations of a complex cinema they fail to appreciate in terms of its creative amalgam of visual sophistication and traditionalist populism.

Stoking some of the recent antipathy toward Almodóvar at home are his public pronouncements on Spanish politics, particularly noteworthy in the wake of his presumed apoliticism—itself the object of much criticism—during the 1980s. Juan Carlos Ibáñez contests that frivolous surface image, which had been fueled by the director's much cited claim that he made films as if Franco had never existed. He traces a set of textual references that reveal the essence of a much more complex, political Almodóvar. Taking *La flor de mi secreto*, *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997) and *La mala educación* as the crucible of Almodóvar's growing political maturity, his essay examines the expression of what he terms an "ethical postmodernity" that develops in Almodóvar's films of the 1990s and enables the director's critical rewriting of his own early career through the filter of the political disillusionment that has become a hallmark of contemporary Spanish cultural and political life.

Focusing on one of the central cultural and political reference points of that self-revision—that of historical memory—Adrián Pérez Melgosa examines the forms of retrospection and nostalgia, expressed in both subtle details and

broad-brush strokes, that constitute the reflexive turn to the past in Almodóvar's works. His analysis moves beyond plot details to reveal the evidence of a deeper concern with memory and trauma in a series of disruptive narrative devices and visual motifs: the embrace of anomalous temporalities, the privileging of apparently trivial objects, and the thematization of makeup and cosmetic alterations of the body.

This recent attention to Almodóvar's more public political engagement notwithstanding, the principal signature of his auteurist identity throughout all periods of his career has been identified with the no less politically contentious area of sexuality and gender. This section of the book addresses four distinct limit cases of that signature theme structured around discussions of rape, paternity, violence, and gender transformation. Leora Lev focuses on the staging of sexual violence, arguing that Almodóvar's representations of rape affirm an often misunderstood moral stance as the filmmaker dismantles and critiques, rather than espouses, gender essentialism by staging this act with grotesque, surreal, and darkly camp *mise en scène*. Importantly, she views his depiction of rape scenes as a critique of the media and its role in catering to consumer appetites for representations of sexual violence.

Dean Allbritton revisits Almodóvar's radical envisioning of gender categories, one of the director's characteristic tropes, analyzing the ways in which men and masculinity are insistently linked to illness, pathology, and death in his films. He considers these "pathogenic masculinities," identified with the paternal archetype, as a contagious nexus for sickness and death, whereby the good health of the ideal male body is shaded with an illness that reproduces and gives birth to itself, thereby enabling a narrative, most notably in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*, that affirms the fluidity between life and death as well as gender roles.

Noelia Saenz offers another approach to the representation of sexual violence in Almodóvar's cinema, identifying a crucial shift away from the visualization of violence and erotic spectacle in Almodóvar's films after *Kika* (1993) that is accompanied by a determination to consider the psychological and emotional impact of gendered violence. Similar to Lev, she discerns an evolution in the filmmaker's moral positioning regarding sexual violence. Saenz argues that his treatment of domestic violence in his latter works coincides with a broader societal movement calling for the criminalization of gendered violence in Spain and its recognition as a human rights violation across the globe.

The moral dimensions of gender violence is at the heart of Francisco Zurian's treatment of *La piel que habito*, as he underscores the way in which such violence, in this instance through the plastic surgeon's scalpel, can transform the body but cannot touch an individual's memory. The film thus becomes a reflection on the enduring strength of human identity, staged as a battle between the destructive power of art and science when harnessed to an unchecked ego and the moral and emotional power of the individual determined to resist such assaults and remain true to his or her memories.

Taking as a point of departure the complex webs of self-reference that operate within Almodóvar's narrative world, the authors in the next section offer complex readings and re-readings of particular films against the broader backdrop of the evolving audiovisual narrative patterns of his work; their work thus reveals dominant structures which, in isolation, might otherwise be inaccessible. In the first essay Marsha Kinder turns to the intricate genealogy of the treatment of sound, especially speech, in Almodóvar's films, focusing on "re-encicement," the act of combining "voices of authority" with "one's own internally persuasive voice," as a parallel auditory structure. She looks to Almodóvar's privileging of certain sonic strategies, such as the uncoupling of voice and sound from image, in ways that resonate across his cinema, producing new forms of pleasure and meaning for audiences. In particular she examines the deployment of the maternal voice and its role in the negotiation of gender identities as developed through Almodóvar's experimentation with the relation between sound and image

Celestino Deleyto focuses on the "mise en scène of desire" in a multi-protagonist narrative, *Carne trémula*, which he argues derives from earlier attempts to find a stylistic idiom to translate Almodóvar's sexual ideology into filmic terms. For Deleyto this mise en scène is not so much a fantasized setting as primarily a series of visual and aural techniques which turn desire into cinema, and affect into an aesthetic object. At the same time, Deleyto reads the film as a pivotal moment in the director's corpus as it looks forward to the stunning beauty and visual originality of his later films such as *Hable con ella*.

For Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, *La mala educación* represents another catalyzing moment in the Almodóvar filmography with its complex reflections on the filmic encoding of personal and collective histories. Set against conventional readings of the film as fictionalized autobiography, Gutiérrez-Albilla's analysis examines strategies that implicate cinema as the agency through which historical consciousness is self-referentially posited as a mediation of the traces of past traumas and as an embodied practice of witnessing the layers of memory that may even escape linguistic symbolization. His discussion of the ways the body reproduces experiences of personal and historical trauma folds back on the treatment of the body in earlier Almodóvar films. Most remarkably, although it was written several months before the release of *La piel que habito*, his essay offers an uncanny preview of the further textual imbrications of the body, and especially the skin, with memory in the latter film.

These discussions of Almodóvar's self-consciousness treatment of the film medium dovetail with Javier Herrera's exploration of the often intuitive approach taken by Almodóvar in developing an intertextual weave that is the result of a practice of appropriating "stolen images." Through an exhaustive study of the often cited movie quotations that punctuate Almodóvar's films, Herrera identifies Almodóvar's development, following Gerard Genette's suggestive phrase, of a form of textual "transvestism." This involves the camouflaging of the intertextual process whereby the source material is transformed such that it no longer bears

any resemblance to the original setting and meanings. Here, as in the previous work by Kinder, Deleyto and Gutiérrez-Albilla, we come to recognize the productive textual dynamics of Almodóvar's cinema as it both requires and rewards a continual progressive and retrogressive rereading of the filmmaker's cinematic art through the filter of each new film.

As the prestige and marketability of Almodóvar's films beyond the borders of Spain continue to expand, his work increasingly demands to be analyzed as an example of what Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover describe as "global art cinema" (2010); that is, as a visual-narrative style and even content, but also a genre and a marketing strategy, all of which imply a borderless spectatorship. In fact, that global dimension and ambition actually precede *La ley del deseo*, Almodóvar's first breakout film thanks to its reception in the context of international gay cinema. The presence of global referents can be traced back to his earliest films: in the international self-awareness of the British punk performance styles in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*; the parody of political intrigues involving the family of the deposed Shah of Iran in *Laberinto de pasiones*; or the prostitute-next-door Crystal's English lessons in anticipation of becoming a star in Las Vegas in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* These comic projections of a global consciousness are followed in later years by the more systematic and economically strategic efforts by Almodóvar and El Deseo to exploit that transnational appeal of the Almodóvar brand.

This section opens with Isolina Ballesteros's detailed study of one of the most spectacular of these, Almodóvar's active engagement in the production of the short-lived Broadway musical adaptation of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in 2010. She demonstrates the important affinities and shared theatrical, cinematic, and musical roots that provide the common ground for the show's fusion of a Spanish Almodovarian aesthetic sensibility with the effervescence of New York culture. In analyzing the show's generally negative reception in the U.S. press, she observes the similarity between those dismissals of its "excessive" and "superficial" female-centered plot and the criticism of Almodóvar's early work in Spain. Her own reading, following Marsha Kinder's theorization of retroserality (2009), argues for the opportunity afforded by the Broadway *Women on the Verge* for a reconsideration of the film in the original social, cultural, and political context of transition-era Spain.

Following in the wake of Ballesteros's treatment of the borderless appeal of musical sounds and sources in the Broadway musical, Kathleen M. Vernon analyzes the global contours and implications of Almodóvar's status as a transcultural entrepreneur. Studying the Almodóvar discography with its eclectic compilations of Latin and World music, she considers his role in promoting music by performers who appear in his films as part of a broader creative enterprise in which he functions as an example of Walter Benjamin's "author as producer." Vernon further seeks to understand the complex geocultural dynamics that underlie his collaborations with three contemporary singers whose careers have been reshaped in varying degrees by their experiences under the Almodóvar imprimatur: the Brazilian Caetano Veloso; Costa-Rican Chavela Vargas; and Equatorial

Guinean-Spanish Concha Buika. Tracing the mutual benefits arising out of these sustained artistic alliances between director and singer, both within and beyond the films, Vernon reveals the intricate workings of Almodóvar's global musical imaginary.

Continuing the emphasis on the role of music and sound that constitutes a significant subtext to this volume, Marvin D'Lugo explores the ways in which the geopolitical aesthetics of Almodóvar's cinema advances the sense of transnational Hispanic identity, largely through the emphasis on a complex acoustic blending of Latin-American and Spanish musical sounds in his films. A key film in this process is *Volver*, whose production coincides with a series of collaborations undertaken by El Deseo with Latin-American auteurs in the first decade of the millennium. These Spanish/Latin-American co-productions, in tandem with Almodóvar's own films, promote a global Hispanic imaginary by mobilizing both sounds and images that erase the traditional political borders that continue to fragment Hispanic audiences.

Two further essays, focusing on Europe and Asia, respectively, round out the portrait of the global Almodóvar by providing two intriguing case studies that interrogate the nature of the complex flows occasioned by the expanding international distribution and reception of Almodóvar's films. In the first, Jean-Claude Seguin documents the role of France as an important site for the early successes of Almodóvar's films in the 1980s in providing both an important revenue source for his subsequent productions and also firmly establishing the patterns for the European appeal of his cinema. Seguin uses this commercial framework to probe the conditions of the cultural transfer from Spain and Spanish to other cultures, exploring the linguistic and gestural limits of that transnational project. In doing so he asks pointedly: Is there a French Almodóvar? By way of an answer he looks to the obstacles (and the evidence of how they are or might be overcome) to the translatability of the substance and style of the Almodovarian oeuvre.

Beginning with the same perception of the transnational relevance of the Almodovarian project, E. K. Tan looks initially at the multiple affinities between the Spanish director and another widely celebrated global auteur, the Hong Kong filmmaker, Wong Kar-wai. Turning to a detailed analysis of the influence of Almodóvar's work on Taiwanese filmmaker Zero Chou's feature film *Splendid Float* (2004), Tan traces the former's role in providing an aesthetic model for the expression of alternatives to mainstream conceptions of gender identity as well opposition to the values imposed by a deeply rooted patriarchal society. Exploring the political and cultural parallels between post-Franco Spain and post-martial law Taiwan, he argues that one of the unexpected effects of the circulation of Almodóvar's films (as well as other recent Spanish cinema) beyond the west has been their function as a catalyst for filmmakers and audiences to imagine new identities and forms of cultural reinvention.

The collection concludes with a consideration of the role of art and commerce in three areas that reflect the convergence of aesthetic and entrepreneurial impulses in the development of Almodóvar's identity as an auteur. John Sanderson offers a

detailed analysis of the function of art direction through color codes, and set design in *Los abrazos rotos* in order to identify the key elements that define the director's distinctive *mise en scène*. Focusing on the work of Antxón Gómez, a member of the Almodóvar creative team for six out of his last seven films, Sanderson argues that the recognizable yet ever evolving visual texture of Almodóvar's cinema results from the stability afforded by Gómez's sustained participation over an extended period of time. The aesthetic, in effect, is the amalgam of an artistic vision and a stabilized art production department.

Gerard Dapena follows a complementary line of analysis in his study of fashion in Almodóvar's films and the extratextual presence of the filmmaker as fashion arbiter that suggests once again the multi-faceted nature of the post-auteurist auteur. Insisting on the intersection of Almodóvar's cinema, the fashion world, and the cultural policies of Spain's Socialist government in the period beginning with the Socialists' rise to power in 1982 to the loss of their parliamentary majority in 1996, Dapena suggests the broader extratextual impact of the fashion dimension of Almodóvar's cultural interventions as he brings fashion and film into a synergetic interface that makes fashion an integral part of the identities and fantasies of everyday people.

The volume concludes with Vicente Rodríguez Ortega's view of *El Deseo*'s recent efforts to engage new digital technologies as a demonstration of the multi-faceted nature of "Almodóvar" as producer, product, celebrity, trademark, filmmaker, and corporation. Implicit in the exploration of this multi-faceted figure is a generational divide between the auteur and his Spanish and international audiences. Focusing specifically on *El Deseo*'s problematic relation to cyberfandom, Rodríguez argues that the advent of these technological challenges to traditional patterns of film reception (not just the threat of internet piracy but also the breakdown of the creator-consumer divide) constitutes a crisis in Almodóvar's commercial career that also marks a moment of truth in the Spanish film industry's rocky relations with its national audience. This is a crisis worsened by the industry's inability to understand the newly interactive nature of artist-fan relations and the potential of new media.

Drawing on Almodóvar's early statements about the derivative nature of his own constructed celebrity personality, Rodríguez suggests the essential contradiction between those affirmations of a self-invention based on the free appropriation of recycled media texts and the later defensive response of *El Deseo* to fan-generated content on the internet. In effect, Almodóvar's auteurist identity has come full-circle: the early affirmations of liberating self-invention have blended into an increasingly more aggressive awareness of his own marketability as a cultural commodity. This, in turn, has led to progressively more authorial control of his self-image both on-screen and off. What emerges, finally, is the figure of the complex post-auteurist Almodóvar, the ever-resourceful master of his own self-reinvention: a versatile and multi-faceted entrepreneur who is the producer of a product also called "Almodóvar."

Notes

- 1 It might be better said that Almodóvar's autobiographical traces are dispersed among the characters, including Gloria and also visible in her youngest son Miguel's precocious artistic and sexual proclivities. The idiosyncratic title of the film is a cinematic reference to Fernando Colomo's *¿Qué hace una chica como tú en un sitio como éste?* / *What's a Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* (1978) in which Carmen Maura starred and in which Almodóvar himself can be seen in the on-screen audience for a rock concert. His earlier Super-8 feature *Folle... folle... fólleme Tim!* / *Fuck, Fuck, Fuck me, Tim!* (1978), while also using the first-person pronoun, does so as part of a play on the word "folletín" meaning a serialized narrative.
- 2 Latin "pellicula" is a diminutive form of "pellis" referring to a thin skin-like membrane. We are indebted to Brad Epps for bringing to our attention the shared etymology of "piel." See his discussion in "The Space of the Vampire: Materiality and Disappearance in the Films of Iván Zulueta" (2012).
- 3 Approved as the official Spanish submission to the festival, *Viridiana* was denounced as sacrilegious after winning the Palme d'Or by the Vatican newspaper *L'Observatore Romano*. Heads rolled among Spanish government cultural officials back home and the Franco regime sought, unsuccessfully, to have the film destroyed.
- 4 For a detailed discussion of Banderas's career before and after the first period of his collaborations with Almodóvar see especially Chris Perriam's (2003) *Stars and Masculinities in Spanish Cinema*, especially pages 47–69. For a discussion of Banderas's extensive Hollywood period, see Marvin D'Lugo (2003) "De Como Antonio Banderas Perdeu O Sotaque e Outros Fenononais Transnacionais."
- 5 Paul Julian Smith explores this transformation or evolution across three of the director's films, *La flor de mi secreto*, *Carne trémula*, and *Todo sobre mi madre*, in his article "Resurrecting the Art Movie? Almodóvar's Blue Period" (2003).
- 6 David James explains Warhol's diversification beyond filmmaking as inspired by his earlier successful career in fine arts and advertising, an engagement in "ventures in mass media manipulation and self-promotion that included publishing an extravagant fanzine and various forms of autobiography. Throughout, even in his activities as a pure celebrity, the same tensions and the same interdependence between art and business are present" (1989: 63).

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PART I

Bio-Filmography

Almodóvar's Self-Fashioning

The Economics and Aesthetics of Deconstructive Autobiography

Paul Julian Smith

There seems little doubt that Almodóvar is now the most successful Spanish filmmaker of all time, whether that success is measured in terms of financial or symbolic capital. With no fewer than eighteen feature films, none of which has failed to turn a profit, and countless honors, including the Prince of Asturias Prize, the Légion d'Honneur, many Goyas and innumerable Césars, two Oscars, and an honorary doctorate at Harvard, his career is unparalleled over some thirty years. His *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009) received a rhapsodic review from the chief critic of the *New York Times*, the most important “gatekeeper” for admission to the select world of art cinema in the United States (Scott 2009). The particular importance of this feature is that it focuses on the construction of an auteurist self for the filmmaker, the theme that will be a main concern of this chapter.

The contours of that career, which is of course still developing, remain unclear and cannot be reduced to the established models of film authorship associated with the “classical” auteurs (such as Welles and Rossellini) whom Almodóvar so regularly cites in his own oeuvre. Some sense of this unease comes from the diverse accounts of Almodóvar's career in different languages on Wikipedia. Thus in the English version, after rapidly dispatching “Early Life,” “Beginnings,” and “Short Films,” the anonymous authors simply enumerate the feature films in order of their appearance (Wikipedia 2010a). The trajectory established is thus purely chronological. The French version, somewhat more analytical, adds a section on “leitmotifs” to the chronological list. Almodóvar's persistent, but notably heterogeneous, themes are said to be: sexual identity; parent–child relations; women; the *mise en abyme*; references to world and U.S. cinema; drugs; and color symbolism (Wikipedia 2010b). A quote from the auteur, absent in the English version,

establishes his “passion” for cinema. Finally, spurning the simple list of films or motifs, the Spanish version places successive titles within a series of somewhat arbitrary “periods”: the “experimental period” of the shorts and first two features, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls like Mom* (1980) and *Laberinto de pasiones*/*Labyrinth of Passion* (1982); the “Fellini-influenced” period includes *Entre tinieblas*/*Dark Habits* (1983) and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*/*What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984); the “maestro-influenced” period stretches furthest (from *Matador* [1986] to *Tacones lejanos*/*High Heels* [1991]); while the “autobiographical period” concludes the cycle with *Todo sobre mi madre*/*All About My Mother* (1999), *La mala educación*/*Bad Education* (2004), and *Volver* (2006) (Wikipedia 2010c). In addition to this idiosyncratic periodization (apparently uncontested by Spanish-speaking collaborators of the website), the entry suggests some additional signifying contexts for the auteur, absent in other language versions, giving short sections on Almodóvar’s work as a producer, on his political activities, and on his “detractors.”

The three Wikipedias agree on some facts. For example, they all give Almodóvar’s date of birth as 1949, although the pressbook for *Los abrazos rotos* suggests with flattering vagueness that it falls within “the 1950s” (Almodóvar 2009b: n. p.). But the different versions disagree on other matters. For example the Spaniards do not mention Almodóvar’s alleged sexual orientation. The French claim he is “homosexual,” without offering a corroborative reference. And the Anglos call the director “openly gay,” although the only link they give in the entry is to a *Time* story of 2005 in which Almodóvar himself angrily rejects the label “gay director” and is rejected in turn by the gay rights organizations who say he “has never supported” them (Farouky 2005).

My point here is not to call attention to the controversy over even basic facts, intractable as they may seem, but to suggest the difficulty in providing plausible narratives to define this matrix figure and his growing oeuvre. Specialist scholars also struggle to constrain proliferating Pedros. An international conference held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (whose final session was attended by Almodóvar and a retinue of *chicas*) comprised four days devoted in turn to “History and Film,” “Ethics and Aesthetics,” “The Cinematic Universe” (on film form), and “Society, Culture, and Gender” (Zurian and Vázquez Varela 2005). This current volume is divided into six sections that include bio-filmography, Spanish and global contexts, re-readings of various films and sections interrogating Almodóvar’s cinema in relation to gender, art, commerce, and society. But a third collection employed a very different structuring principle, with loosely defined groupings of essays on “Forms and Figures” (sound, violence, comedy), “Melodrama and its Discontents,” “The Limits of Representation” (girls, brothers, and nostalgia), and (finally) “The Auteur in Context” (Epps and Kakoudaki 2009). Typically, Almodóvar himself has the last word, with his “diary” of the shoot of *Volver* (already posted on his website) reproduced in print as a final chapter. D’Lugo’s earlier monograph had also ended with an autobiographical text, in this case a “self-interview” on *La mala educación* (2006: 145–52).

In my own recent research I have explored Almodóvar's unpublished short stories of the 1970s, suggesting that the key themes they share with the subsequent films (most especially the twin motifs of the glamorous and vengeful transvestite and the mature fantasizing housewife) tend to support a traditional auteurist argument based on aesthetic criteria (Smith 2009b).¹ Almodóvar's work in text, as on celluloid, thus reveals a remarkable consistency of value, conceptual coherence, and stylistic unity. But I have also examined the corporate mentality of Almodóvar's production company El Deseo in its commercial context, revealing how it seeks to preserve and promote the "figure" of Almodóvar as part of its continuing business mission (Smith 2009c: 18–20). Kathleen Vernon (2007) has noted a similar blurring of boundaries in Almodóvar's appeal to music: the songs branded as "his" when released on CD are neither written nor performed by the director, nor, in some cases, even featured in his films. Yet they are somehow enlisted into his ongoing creative and commercial project. The line between the artistic and the industrial is thus difficult indeed to draw.

That line is of course complicated by Almodóvar's own continuing self-commentary, which follows a double movement of revelation and concealment. D'Lugo has noted that "through the evolution of a style and a conception of filmmaking, he has moved to a critique of his own past and the culture out of which his cinema has taken shape" (D'Lugo 2006: 129). But Almodóvar's extended printed comments in the lavish press kits that have long accompanied the releases of his features seek to influence the future also, providing a template for critical interpretation.² The pressbook for *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) distributed at the Cannes Festival is no exception. It is divided into eleven sections: "The Title" describes the film's inspiration in Rossellini; "The Credits" reveals the "ghostly, mysterious quality" of the shoot; "Editing" suggests "the fragility of film"; "Making of" focuses on the "secrets of the people . . . coordinating the fiction"; "Duplication" suggests the double as a theme in the film (as shown, for example, by the two names of its main character: Mateo Blanco and Harry Caine); *Chicas y maletas* (*Girls and Suitcases*) describes the film-within-the-film, freely based on *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988); "Noir" claims Penélope Cruz's Lena as a femme fatale; "Up and Down" identifies the staircase (down which Lena will fall) as a "cinematic icon"; "The Photo" presents another inspiration for the film: a picture of lovers embracing on the black sand of Lanzarote; "Parents and Children: The Monologue" introduces a comic short that is the "child" of the feature; and finally "Declaration of Love" asserts Almodóvar's dedication to cinema, which is "not only a profession, but also an irrational passion".

Offering his own list of signifying contexts, Almodóvar thus calls attention to aspects of film technique which are generally hidden or unrecognized; to cinematic sources that his audience may have some trouble identifying; to inspirations for his plot and structuring principles of his narrative; to items of the *mise en scène*; to peripheral works spun off from the main film; and to the cinematic obsession, at once personal and professional, which, he claims, contains and explains all these diverse elements.

In this essay I argue that *Los abrazos rotos*, a film about a filmmaker and his craft, can be read in part as a kind of deconstructive autobiography of Almodóvar's personal and professional career to date, complex and contradictory as it is. But it is not just the range, depth, and international profile of this career that makes the Almodóvar phenomenon so difficult to address in all its aspects. It is also the changes in broader cultural spheres, which this volume seeks to address and which have, in turn, transformed the context in which Almodóvar's cinema is both produced and received. *Broken Embraces*, I will argue, can be read in part as a series of reflections on current conditions for industry and authorship, conditions we can briefly address below.

El País's business section had reported back in 2007 that government policy intended to solve Spain's growing balance of payments deficit by promoting new priorities in exports: high tech goods and services, rather than the more traditional sectors of manufacturing, textiles, and cars (Triper 2007). The sole illustration used for this article is a photograph of Almodóvar looking through a viewfinder, citing his "promotion of the Spanish audiovisual sector abroad" as exemplary of this trend in cultural exports. But in spite of such Spanish praise of Almodóvar as a key exporter, the international film sector was beset by many and varied challenges which clearly affected Spain and *El Deseo*. For example the editor of *Screen International* (*SI*), the trade journal for the European film business, wrote that art-house cinema was facing an "ageing problem" (Gubbins 2008). In what *SI* calls this new "post-auteurist" era, festival programmers, specialist distributors, and exhibitors now feel the lack of "bankable name directors with built-in fan bases." Moreover younger directors favor "a more collaborative theory of production," with producers and writers "demanding more recognition of their role in the creation of a film." There has thus been a shift from "a handful of important directors" to a body of "important film-making," a change that *SI* claims to discern in the programming of recent festivals. While old-style auteurism arose in a pre-internet age when public demand was not so dominant, newer post-auteurs face the "postmodern challenge" of "engaging with audiences". Newly disrespectful, the latter may prove to be indifferent or even hostile.

This new climate of skepticism to auteurism and to film purism is compounded by trends beyond production and distribution. Thus *Sight & Sound* noted in a survey of the film industry that changes in specialized exhibition in the U.K. (as elsewhere) "have led to predictions that films by some of the world's finest auteurs may not make it into . . . cinemas" (Patterson 2008: 30). In the same year and in a special issue the editor of *Sight & Sound* asked "Who needs critics?" (James 2008). Given the decline in the status of film journalists, who had suffered mass culls in the United States, critics have been reduced to the status of consumer guides. Finding themselves unable to argue passionately in favor of art film or against blockbusters, because of the commercial priorities of their employers, film critics now tend to take refuge in humorous "satire" rather than to engage seriously with their chosen subject (James 2008: 17). While perhaps only one critic in the U.K. still

has the power to make or break a specialist release (the contributor to *The Guardian*, a national daily), film reviewers generally have rapidly “declined in market value” (James 2008: 17). Conversely bloggers, who are free from print media’s sense of professional responsibility and unfettered by policy interventions from superiors (James 2008: 18), can afford to take up passionately held positions, but have little social impact. A little later we will compare this Anglo-American panorama with the situation in Spain, whose media have also changed in ways discomfiting to a mature auteur like Almodóvar.

Even as the fortunes of the Spanish film industry revived (box office and share rose in the domestic market at the end of the first decade of the millennium), old-school auteurism was under attack from two sides, at once discursive and economic: the decline in respect for art movies and the rise in status of genre films. It was a trend confirmed by the 2010 Goya Awards, where prison-set action movie *Celda 211* / *Cell 211* swept the boards and Almodóvar went home empty handed. This was in marked contrast to previous years. As recently as 2007 an austere art movie like *La soledad* / *Solitary Fragments* (Jaime Rosales) could triumph over expert but populist genre fare such as *El orfanato* / *The Orphanage* (J. A. Bayona). It was significant that *SI*’s territory guide to Spain for the same year, which claimed that “Spanish films are experiencing an upturn in popularity” included a survey of distribution and box office entitled “Giving the audience what they want” (Evans 2010: 40).

Significantly, this apparent shift in taste also affects the distribution of Spanish films abroad. Charles Gant uses box-office statistics to disprove the commonly held notion that “arthouse audiences don’t care for [foreign language] genre films”, citing a U.K. distributor who acknowledges the “precedent” of Spain in this cross-over niche (Gant 2009). Indeed, of the ten highest grossing European horror movies in the U.K. no fewer than four (including the top two) are Spanish: *El laberinto del fauno* / *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), *El orfanato*, *El espinazo del Diablo* / *The Devil’s Backbone* (Guillermo del Toro, 2001), and zombie movie *[REC]* (Jaume Balagueró, 2007).

Nuria Triana-Toribio offers valuable insight into this increasing convergence of arthouse and mainstream in Spanish cinema at home and abroad. In a major article she traces the career of two “directores mediáticos,” Álex de la Iglesia and Isabel Coixet, media-savvy cineastes who combine auteurism and commerce. As Triana-Toribio writes, while Spanish film professionals have long lamented the absence of effective promotion in their cinema (Triana-Toribio 2008: 260), U.S. film scholars such as Timothy Corrigan suggested equally long ago that the auteur is “a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception, . . . a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 261). She relates the rise of the *mediáticos* in Spain to increasing pressure on distribution: the saturation of screens requires aspiring auteurs to compete as never before to “place their product” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 262).

Triana-Toribio also studies in detail the new auteurs’ homepages with a particular emphasis on those of Álex de la Iglesia and Isabel Coixet. Hosted by a

site run by transnational retailer FNAC, they both present themselves as “potentially authentic and autonomous modes of expression” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 263). In practice, however, the self-authored websites negotiate that curious combination of personal intimacy and physical distance characteristic of the web, creating “auteur personas” with distinct (and distinctive) “habitus”: a Bourdieu-originated term defined here as “schemes of perception, thought, appreciation, and action” (Triana-Toribio 2008: 272).³

Both sets of habitus in these case studies are contradictory. De la Iglesia ostentatiously divests himself of expertise in any area except gastronomy, even as he presents himself as a “pure filmmaker” in thrall to obsessive cinematic creation (Triana-Toribio 2008: 271, 273); Coixet portrays herself as an engaged and educated artist, citing Gramsci and Stendhal, even as she proudly displays her work as a director of television commercials and provides links for consumers to buy her products (Triana-Toribio 2008: 273, 275).

Both de la Iglesia and Coixet have had features produced by El Deseo. And Triana-Toribio had earlier dedicated a study to the Almodóvar brothers’ production company, a Spanish pioneer in promotion and marketing (2007). In this piece she treats a question that is also found in the specialist trade press: transnationalism. And she seeks to link the increasing academic interest in the topic with the industrial changes recounted by the trade press. She reminds us, however, that El Deseo “boasts a world-wide projection already well established long before we started to hear the word ‘transnational’ in film studies” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 156).

In Triana-Toribio’s account the company was first founded to take advantage of the Spanish Socialist Party or PSOE’s institution of advance subsidies in the 1980s, described as “a new form of financing films through a partnership with the state” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 156). However, El Deseo’s aim from the start, benefiting from the business acumen and activism of Agustín, Pedro’s brother, was to “use national financial resources [to] make Spanish cinema take pride of place among the world cinemas in a sustained manner” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 157). She cites Esther García, the company’s head of production, who notes that, unlike other Spanish producers, El Deseo has a strong record of overcoming the problem of international sales. Moreover the company has both opted for “quality” and kept budgets low (around two million euro). Triana-Toribio wonders whether such a phenomenon deserves a new name. Surely the cinematically literate “transnational” audience for Almodóvar’s films, however actively cultivated, is little different from the old-school cinephile public which sought out foreign-language films abroad. She concludes that while “the strategies for making films that travel [may] have changed . . . the films that travel are little different from the past” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 159).

Going further in this revisionist line, she enumerates a series of highly localist linguistic and cultural factors that suggest that *Volver*, say, is firmly “grounded in [its] nation of origin” (Triana-Toribio 2007: 160). Larger budgeted movies which are also made to be consumed internationally (such as del Toro’s *Laberinto del*

fauno) may, paradoxically, prove more vulnerable in the future, as they are funded only reluctantly by TV companies who are obliged by Spanish law to invest 5% of their income in cinema. Unfortunately the Spanish audience has “turned its back on [the small budget] home production” which comprises the great majority of local feature films (Triana-Toribio 2007: 161).

Triana-Toribio's media-savvy directors are, she says, “middle brow”; and the elastic nature of El Deseo's definition of “quality” (which extends even to genre films which push the envelope of conventional expectations) also seems to conform to Bourdieu's understanding of the middle brow as that which offers insecure audiences a shortcut to cultural capital which must elsewhere be laboriously acquired. Indeed if we return to Bourdieu's classic study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* we find a telling example of ethics and aesthetics in cinema. When confronted with a photograph of an old woman's gnarled hands, elite informants invoke art film in their responses, saying the subject could “almost be a character” out of Bergman, Dreyer, or Welles; likewise a chiaroscuro shot of a gasworks at night is said to be “beautiful because of [its] contrasts” (Bourdieu 1996: 45–6). In a similar way, Almodóvar's own citations of auteur cinema, increasingly prominent in later films, serve to establish his own cultural capital and to aestheticize his subjects. But note that, unlike in the cases of Bourdieu's photographs, which are studiously unpleasurable before they undergo the process of elite interpretation, Almodóvar's cinema, extravagantly art directed and colored, requires little cultural expertise to appreciate aesthetically. Indeed his films, less severe than many other auteurs past or present, have been regularly attacked for their visual excesses. Perilously poised between high art and vulgar commerce, Almodóvar's own oeuvre may thus well merit the label of middlebrow. Bearing this tricky position in mind, we can now turn in the remainder of this chapter to examine how Almodóvar's self-fashioning can be re-read in the various contexts sketched out above at the crucial time of the production and release of *Los abrazos rotos*, his seventeenth feature.

First of all, *Los abrazos rotos* clearly takes up its place in the late “autobiographical period” identified by the Spanish Wikipedia page, focusing as it does on a middle-aged filmmaker (Mateo Blanco, played by stage veteran Lluís Homar) who serves as a stand in for Almodóvar himself as he approached his sixtieth birthday. Mateo's lost masterpiece, reassembled only at the end of the film, is (as the press-book informed us) called *Chicas y maletas* and is a clone of Almodóvar's international crossover success *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* of more than twenty years earlier.

Confessional, albeit in a symbolic mode, such self-reference attempts to render long-term fans complicit with the films' creator by evoking shared and fond memories of past cinematic pleasures. In this case, however, Almodóvar does not engage the richly particularized cultural location of *Volver*. *Los abrazos rotos*'s background, both historical (the film is set in 1992 and the present) and geographical (the film was shot in Madrid and the Canaries), is only lightly sketched in. The film



Figure 1.1 Memories of past cinematic pleasures: Almodóvar on the set of *Chicas y maletas*, the film-within-the-film in *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

is of course a co-production, but this time not with France (CIBY 2000 and Pathé were long-term partners) but with the United States (in this case the major Universal's recently revived international arm). And as has been the case at least since *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), the budget was covered in advance by foreign pre-sales.

Unlike *La flor*, which includes a street protest against Felipe González's Socialist government, *Los abrazos rotos* appears unconcerned by current social conditions in contemporary Spain. Almodóvar went further in his personalized projection of the film. In repeated interviews he assured readers that Blanco's blindness (here caused by a car accident) was related to the director's own recently acquired "photophobia," a sensitivity to light which resulted in severe migraines (see Smith 2009a: 20). Mateo's conflict with the malign magnate who is the producer of his film (Ernesto Martel, played by film veteran José Luis Gómez) also recalls Almodóvar's early struggles with moneymen before the founding of El Deseo gave him artistic independence. For example, he has said in interview that he was obliged against his wishes to cast his producer's partner in the lead female role in *Entre tinieblas* (1983) (Vidal 1989: 94–5). In *Los abrazos rotos* Cruz's Lena is also the lover of producer Martel, on whom both star and director depend. While such conflicts may not correspond to Almodóvar's current situation (in which his loyal brother is his sole producer), this theme does connect with the current trend

elsewhere for producers to seek more credit for their creative contribution. Moreover the stress on movie finance in *Los abrazos rotos* (Cruz's character cannot leave the wealthy, abusive partner who is funding Mateo's film) testifies obliquely to the frequent and traumatic changes in film funding in post-Franco Spain.

Interestingly, in Almodóvar's two previous projects with cineaste protagonists (*La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* [1987] and *La mala educación*), the main characters were gay men enamored of younger lovers. Although Homar (born 1957) is presented in *Los abrazos rotos* as the perfect heterosexual partner for the radiant Penélope Cruz (born 1974), in *La mala educación* the same actor had played an ageing pedophile whose obsession with the handsome Gael García (born 1978) was depicted as poignant, if not pathetic. Almodóvar stresses in *Los abrazos rotos* the continued sexual desirability of a mature protagonist (the film begins with Mateo somewhat implausibly picking up an attractive young woman on the street). But he also suggests the same indifference to sexual orientation that is characteristic of his own media projection. Displacing queer interest onto the minor character of Martel's son (also sexually obsessed with Mateo), Almodóvar blurs that conflict over his own sexuality that has been played out in press coverage in different countries and languages. The film's plot thus serves as a distorting mirror for the real-life concerns of a continuing media metanarrative.

Beyond disguised autobiography, Almodóvar also makes a clear bid in *Los abrazos rotos* for the traditionalist criteria of auteurism, albeit without neglecting overt visual pleasure: the production values remain reassuringly high (especially the expert art design by Antxon Gómez);⁴ the themes of artistic creativity and *amour fou* run through the entire oeuvre (although the crazed lovers in *Ley* and *Educación* are not the film-obsessed directors, but the young boyfriend played by Antonio Banderas and the ageing ex-priest played by Homar, respectively); and the stylistic signature is unmistakable, even given the presence of a new and potentially disruptive director of photography (Rodrigo Prieto, who shot the hyperkinetic *Amores Perros* [Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000]).

But these artistic questions are also industrial: sold initially on the back of the "figure" of the director (the Spanish poster carried the now familiar single credit, "Un film de ALMODÓVAR"), the new feature strove to further *El Deseo*'s continuing business mission of promoting the durable prestige of the company's only begetter.

El Deseo thus deployed its now traditional skills in marketing, which are held to be characteristic of those rare media businesses that spearheaded Spanish service industries at home and abroad. Yet perhaps the increasing emphasis on Cruz in the promotional campaign derived from the company's concerns about the ageing of the arthouse and its audience and the difficulty for Spanish films to connect with a skeptical local public. In April 2009 (as the film was released) Spanish *Vanity Fair* ran a frankly risible cover feature on the star couple with the strap line "Intimate and Secret" (*Vanity Fair* 2009). Penélope's pull quote was "Both of us know that when we are flirting [*coqueteamos*] we are on dangerous ground"; and Pedro's "At 40 I almost fathered a child." In the glossy spread inside, Penélope pretends to play



Figure 1.2 Almodóvar on location in the Canary Islands with director of photography Rodrigo Prieto. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

the harp for Pedro, as he reclines languorously on a chaise longue; or, again, she poses pensively in a Chanel couture bridal gown.

However unconvincing this media marriage may be, such role-play serves somewhat narcissistically to echo and reinforce *Los abrazos rotos*'s main plot strand: the love affair between Cruz's character and the brilliant director who casts her in his film. In an age, as we have noted, widely believed to belong to the post-auteur and in the midst of a global economic crisis felt with particular intensity in Spain, even the most bankable of veteran name directors may feel the need to lean more heavily than before on a younger celebrity, especially if she is the only Spanish actress readily recognizable abroad. Moreover, as Almodóvar's longest and highest budgeted feature, *Broken Embraces* seeks to separate itself off from those small Spanish pictures on

which local audiences had consistently turned their backs, staking its claim to the same transnational audience that prestige pictures like *El laberinto del fauno* won around the world. Whether that audience crosses over with the old-school cinephile public (as Triana-Toribio believes) or not, *Los abrazos rotos* was conceived as a film that would not only travel but would take most of its revenue abroad.

At a corporate level, there are other signs of El Deseo's desire to connect with changing audiences. The Almodóvars take their social responsibility seriously. Doing well by doing good, they see the sponsorship of younger directors, often from Latin America, as a cinematic duty that brings them little economic benefit but considerable credibility and good will. One El Deseo co-production, Lucrecia Martel's well-received *La mujer sin cabeza* / *The Headless Woman* (2008), was released just a few months before *Los abrazos rotos*. And responding to the pressure for disintermediation (going directly to the consumers), Almodóvar has, since *Volver*, exploited the internet in order to bypass the mainstream media in self-written blogs on two homepages to which I return later.

Also responding to the challenge of the internet and in a new strategy of de-aggregation (splitting the single work into a number of distinct parts), Almodóvar released part of *Los abrazos rotos*'s film-within-the film in a crudely comic short film satirizing the right-wing Partido Popular (*La concejala antropófaga* / *The Cannibal Councilor*) that was distributed independently on the web and television. Starring as it did Carmen Machi, Spain's most popular female television star, the short can be read as an attempt to connect with the mass audience who had followed Machi for some years on Tele 5's top-rated and long-running sitcom *7 vidas* (1999–2006) and its spin off *Aída* (2005–). The lavish photo shoots mentioned above might also be read in this way, as a canny (if unmonetized) de-aggregation of that once fetishized and unified work of art, the quality feature film. Moreover, when the DVD version of *Los abrazos rotos* appeared in Spain it was as a luxury two-disc boxed edition, replete with the extras (the short film, a photo gallery, and footage of Pedro directing Penélope), which the perfectionist Almodóvar had long resisted providing for earlier releases. With characteristic reflexivity, these commercial questions are incorporated into the film itself, where the "making of" footage shot by Martel's gay son plays a significant part in the plot.

The renewed debate between art film and genre movies, prominent in Spanish cinema of the 2000s, is also internalized in *Los abrazos rotos*, fed back into perceptions of Almodóvar's own artistic development. Mateo's production manager Judit (steely Blanca Portillo) remarks dismissively early on that Mateo might make more money by writing "one of those fantasy films for kids" (the blind director has now become a screenwriter with the pseudonym "Harry Caine," presumably named for Welles's character in *The Third Man* [1949]). Although this remark may well be a wry acknowledgment that teen movies, both domestic and foreign, are now the biggest grossing features in Spain, a central sequence in *Los abrazos rotos* has Mateo and his lover Lena, played by Cruz, intently watching Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) on television. But, as if aware that this allegiance to old-school auteurism

may no longer be shared by his audience, Almodóvar makes sure to embrace genre film with equal warmth. Mateo's lost masterpiece *Chicas y maletas*, indulgently described as "a work of genius" by Judit in the final sequence of the film, is no Wellesian or neorealist drama but rather one of those farcical comedies that Almodóvar himself abandoned in the quest for "quality" that became so central to El Deseo's corporate mentality. There is thus an unresolved ambivalence to genre film here. When Judit's son improvises a vampire premise for a film (one which Pedro himself had orally recounted at the conference held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, mentioned earlier), Mateo eagerly climbs on board, offering to help the young man with the script. We are thus left in no doubt that this most populist of teen-friendly themes is worthy of creative development.

The final area to consider in this survey of how *Los abrazos rotos* interacted with changing social and cultural conditions is one to which I have already briefly referred: newspapers and internet. Although El Deseo is often acclaimed for its professional marketing and Pedro has long been indefatigable in his promotional activities, it is striking that the press coverage in Spain is decidedly mixed. Almodóvar has openly argued with the Spanish Film Academy (AACCE), which has failed to nominate his features for their prizes as often as he would have liked (Anon. 2005). The premiere of *La mala educación* was marked by Almodóvar's controversial and unfounded claim that, after the terrorist outrages in Madrid on the eve of a General Election, the Partido Popular were planning a coup d'état (see D'Lugo 2006: 128). Likewise the main media story on the release of *Los abrazos rotos* was not the film itself, but Almodóvar's public quarrel with the leading newspaper, *El País*, which had featured so often within his films and had already provided so much advance publicity for his newest feature.

At the time of writing, Almodóvar, the pioneer of Triana-Toribio's media-savvy directors, has two homepages. The first is hosted, like those of de la Iglesia and Coixet, by French book and video retailer FNAC (Clubcultura 2005). Although claimed as an "official site" in three languages, it has not been updated for five years, with the most recent "News" being the pre-production of *Volver*. The biography given in the "Autor" (sic) section is skimpy, but shares some family photos; the "Films" section offers posters, brief synopses, and, for later works "Comments of Pedro" (i.e. self-penned texts originally from the pressbooks) or access to dedicated sites; "Bibliography" and "scor" (sic) allows surfers to buy books and CDs associated with the films from FNAC; while "specials" collects links to Almodóvar's exhibition of still photography (also held at FNAC's central Madrid store) and his self-interviews. While the design of the layout is reminiscent of El Deseo's distinctive graphics (designed by Juan Gatti), the lack of attention to detail (the frequent misspellings and tardy updating) are far from Almodóvar's normal perfectionism. Moreover with no facility for posting comments (de la Iglesia and Coixet actively participate in online forums with fans) the site remains fixated on his master's voice and declines to engage with audiences. As a commercial strategy for organizing reception, this avowedly auteurist site is clearly deficient.

Almodóvar's personal focus was now evidently elsewhere. And a second, more professionally presented trilingual site, which also claims to be "official," hosts his more recent blog (Almodóvar 2009a). This offers texts and photos (carefully copyrighted to Pedro himself) minutely documenting the pre- and post-production processes of *Los abrazos rotos*. Framed by stylish graphics designed to evoke the sprocket holes of a roll of celluloid, the text is in Courier typeface, evocative of a vintage typewriter and intended to personalize the electronic medium. Aware of the demand for intimacy in such a format, Almodóvar meditates on the nature of his blog in somewhat contradictory fashion. It is worth citing him at length:

I started writing this kind of "journey notes" in October and I intend to go on recording what is happening in my life in the little free time I have for writing. I hope to carry on doing it at least until shooting finishes. It will be a way of letting off steam for me and also provide a future memento. And above all, it will increase my level of stress and anguish, because literally I haven't even got time "to wipe my ass", as my mother would say. What's more, I'm not a diary writer. Apart from scripts (which I write because I'm driven by a hysterical need to tell stories, I need fiction like I need oxygen) I've only been able to write the rest of my literary output under pressure, in circumstances in which I never had any time. Even if it's hell on my nerves, I've decided to write this blog while I'm working, even if at times it may be rushed and arbitrary. The good think about writing a blog is that no one can accuse you of being egocentric. I promise to tell only the truth, but that doesn't mean I'm going to tell you everything about me and about the film and its preparation. On the contrary, I intend to say as little as possible about the story and the characters, I'll wander around on the fringes, in purely tangential elements. You'll think I've got a real cheek, and I'm sure you're right. (Anything to celebrate the lack of intermediaries.) (Almodóvar 2009a).

In spite of his tantalizing promise of disclosure, then, Almodóvar also admits that he will conceal key elements of his self and of his new film. Indeed, devoted as he claims to be to cinema, he gives away nothing at all about his private life, beyond the characteristic reference to his beloved late mother. And yet he speaks in the first person, addresses the reader directly in the second person, and celebrates the "lack of intermediaries" specific to his chosen genre and medium. This double movement of revelation and concealment is, as we have already seen, typical of Almodóvar's self-fashioning as a public artist in which carefully selected aspects of his life and art feed off one another.

Similar to the shooting diary for *Volver*, the blog provides fascinating material (both text and image) on Almodóvar's working methods: script corrections in north Africa and Mexico; table reads with the actors in Pedro's office; hair and costume tests for Penélope in *El Deseo* (her character will undergo the same process in the film itself); and shooting on location in Lanzarote and in the same studios at Barajas outside Madrid where *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* was filmed some two decades before. However, the blog also displays a disconcerting lack of self-consciousness, revealing as it does Almodóvar's residence in luxury

hotels around the world (from Tangiers to Cuernavaca) and dwelling on his participation in the annual Rose Ball in Monaco, which, in his honor, was given a *Movida* theme. At a time of unprecedented economic crisis in Spain, Almodóvar documents himself consorting with the crowned heads of Europe, whom he does not fail to flatter (Princess Caroline is said to be “warm” and Prince Albert “charming”). Lacking once more a facility for comments from readers, the blog is, in spite of its disclaimer to the contrary, profoundly egocentric.

Absent from the (professionally translated) French and English versions of this second website, but given a foregrounded role on the Castilian original, are extended texts documenting Almodóvar’s feud with *El País*. Significantly they turn around *El Deseo*’s transnational projection, which, we remember, takes pride of place in the company’s image of itself. Writing from Cannes, where *Los abrazos rotos* was in competition for the Palme d’Or (May 26, 2009), Almodóvar inveighs against the festival coverage by *El País*’s chief film critic, Carlos Boyero, and its arts editor, Borja Hermoso, perhaps the highest profile “detractors” of the director. The former had written that “not being a masochist” he would refrain from seeing *Los abrazos rotos* again at the festival (the Spanish premiere had already taken place), while the latter had attacked Almodóvar for telling the press that he was treated better in France than in his home country.⁵

Replying to Almodóvar’s attack on their colleague in an open letter posted on the paper’s website and reproduced by the director (May 27, 2009), *El País*’s “staff committee” responded unsurprisingly with some hostility. They deny the filmmaker has a right to veto the paper’s choice of festival reporter; remind him of the extensive positive coverage the paper has already provided for his film; appeal to their right to freedom of expression in print, no different to his in cinema; and suggest that this “tantrum” does not enhance his “figure.” Keeping the story alive, vampire-like, through another news cycle, Almodóvar responds to this response (May 28, 2009), citing Boyero’s abusive bodily rhetoric (which included the words “indigestion” and “masturbation”); protesting that he will not be “bought off” by the previous positive coverage, but will continue bravely to speak his mind; and denying that Boyero is a critic at all, given the prejudices to which he so clearly and openly gives voice.

How can we read this polemic in the context of Almodóvar’s continuing self-fashioning? Clearly it was a self-defeating strategy for the celebrity director, in that he succeeded only in lending the critic, much less known than himself, the oxygen of publicity that he no doubt craved. And anyone reading Almodóvar’s texts receives an unhealthy impression of, at worst, paranoia or, at best, “negativity bias” (Marano 2003). The latter is a widespread, but unattractive, psychological quirk whereby critical comments, however infrequent, are felt by their victim to outweigh positive opinions, however numerous and flattering. While one could perhaps read the polemic cynically as part of Almodóvar’s continuing attempt to compete to place his product ahead of that of other auteurs, it seems more likely that, as *El País*’s staff committee observed, his behavior served rather to damage his “figure,” that reputation which *El Deseo* is so devoted to burnishing.

But beyond pragmatics (Almodóvar could hardly have devised a surer way of alienating the Spanish press), this quarrel responded to and was facilitated by broader cultural changes, mentioned earlier, with which Almodóvar appeared to be unfamiliar. Thus the journalists' collective clearly felt no need to genuflect to an Oscar-winning auteur, whom they remind in their response is "not sacred." This new found skepticism to auteurism, within whose hallowed precincts Almodóvar was in any case never securely implanted in Spain, is combined with changes in film criticism as an institution. In an age of declining readership (*El País's* circulation, the largest non-sporting daily in Spain, is only around 400,000), even the quality press may feel the need for controversy to boost newsstand sales and internet footfall (the polemic garnered 131,000 hits). Boyero, flagrantly solipsistic and crudely satirical, is exemplary here, in that he openly refuses to engage seriously with his chosen subject even though he writes for what is felt by many Spaniards to be the newspaper of record. In this he does indeed mark a radical break with the earlier and less subjectivist traditions of Spanish film criticism (such as that practiced by *El País's* previous critic, Ángel Fernández Santos, nostalgically invoked by Almodóvar), which aspired to objectivity and avoided personal idiosyncrasy.

Hence, when Almodóvar attacks Boyero for walking out of a festival screening by demanding Iranian auteur Abbas Kiarostami (a piece of evidence he takes to be damning) or insists on the sanctity of the distinction between news and comment, he shows himself to be insensitive to changes in the habitus (to schemes of perception, thought, appreciation, and action) of both journalism and film culture in general, changes which younger "directores mediáticos" have proved more skilled at negotiating. The fact that Boyero is so clearly supported by *El País* as a matter of policy can only prove this point. Out of tune with the new demands on newspapers, Almodóvar also displays a tin ear for the particular pleasures and potentials of the blog, even as he reproduces the (too) passionately held positions typical of that medium. Revealing no personal intimacy, other than an acute sensitivity to criticism, and exposing the physical distance his glamorous lifestyle puts between him and his public, he can only alienate a Spanish audience already more kindly disposed to genre films than to art movies.

I would suggest finally, then, that these public arguments, which now constitute the principal vehicle for Almodóvar's continued self-fashioning, are more significant than they first appear. Indeed, they are structurally similar to the rise of "scandal politics," which has been treated so acutely by Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells. For Castells, political scandals (exceptionally frequent in Spain, as elsewhere) are one of the main characteristics of the new "network society": they result from the lack of clear differences in ideology between political parties; reveal that questions of personality now supersede those of policy; and demonstrate the complicity and volatility that results when figures from fields such as politics become active participants in the media, only to find themselves unable to control the resulting "stories" (Castells 1997: 337–42).

Mutatis mutandis, this is a fine description of Almodóvar's predicament. With no clear distinction now accepted between high and low culture and with Pedro's personality long used to promote his films, Almodóvar is not only actively complicit with the media, he even calls attention to that complicity, as when he cites in his blog the favor he did to *El País* in granting the paper unique access to the shoot of *Los abrazos rotos*. Yet, like the malign magnate at the heart of his film, whose lover is seduced away from him even as he funds her career, Almodóvar and his devoted co-workers prove unable to control the outcome of their proliferating media strategies.

More particularly in the age of the internet, amateur "detractors," previously excluded from the mainstream media, now possess a powerful echo chamber for any negative views they may come across. Triana-Toribio writes of her "mediáticos" that they "reconcile the paradoxes surrounding authorship in Spanish cinema [by] foster[ing] the cult of personality on which traditional auteurism rests while at the same time making this individuality accessible to the wider public" (2008, 276). The problem, then, for *El Deseo* is to devise plausible narratives that can effect a reconciliation between the (public) personality and the (private) individuality of an increasingly complex matrix figure.

To return to the starting point of this chapter, such polemics may barely compromise Almodóvar's current status as the most successful Spanish filmmaker of all time, especially outside his native country. And Marsha Kinder has shown convincingly how the conspicuous self-referencing in *Los abrazos rotos* enriches the film, demanding that spectators re-read the director's "entire body of work" at a crucial time for film: "an historic moment when the medium has gone digital and its methods of distribution are being redefined" (Kinder 2010: 28, 33). The changes in broader cultural spheres that I have sketched above, both economic and aesthetic, thus render Almodóvar's position and oeuvre more precarious. Almodóvar was once known, especially in Spain, by the label "post-modern," a term suggesting a radical skepticism to authoritative forms of politics and culture in his cinema, as in his person. Ironically, however, it has been more recently, when he has openly embraced political activism (on behalf of the Socialist Party) and high culture (on behalf of the venerable auteurs he has so showily cited in his own films), that Almodóvar's own hard won authority has been so frequently called into question. If the self-fashioning that he has pursued so doggedly can be described as a kind of deconstructive autobiography, it is because of just such discursive paradoxes.

Notes

- 1 Francisco Zurian analyzes these stories in chapter 2, this volume.
- 2 Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen (chapter 6, this volume) explore this phenomenon over the course of Almodóvar's career.
- 3 See Vicente Rodríguez, chapter 24, this volume, which provides details of the operation and polemics related to the Almodóvar webpages.

- 4 For a detailed discussion of Gómez's collaboration in *Broken Embraces*, see Sanderson, chapter 22, this volume.
- 5 Cerdán and Fernández Labayen also address this exchange, taking it as representative of the sustained "dialogue of the deaf" (to use an eloquent Spanish expression) between Almodóvar and the Spanish press.

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Creative Beginnings in Almodóvar's Work¹

Francisco A. Zurian

Pedro Almodóvar's short stories have received little critical attention, yet they contain key elements of his authorial aesthetic, his approach to narrative, and themes that later resonate in his cinematic work. Such consistency in his films, stories, and choice of music confers unity and coherence to what is now considered "*lo almodovariano*." This essay will examine some of his unpublished texts held in the general collection at Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional.² The stories are grouped in a volume entitled *Relatos* (T/49151).³ The date of record is July 10, 1975, barely four months before Francisco Franco's death, when Almodóvar was twenty-three. Much may be learned from tracing the director's early efforts, when he decides to move to Madrid and make a mark in the capital's cultural scene. This authorial "pre-history" launches his entire oeuvre: his genesis as artist and his self-creation as a person and as a celebrity. There are, however, various problems in investigating the early works. Many of the manuscripts were lost or forgotten; others were simply not accessible, either because of their poor condition or because Almodóvar zealously guarded access to them as he did his film shorts.⁴ The discussion to follow is aimed at shedding some critical light on these early stories, many of which are crude, unstructured, and lacking in literary merit, but full of freshness, an absence of restraint, and the pure creativity and imaginative gifts that characterize his later work.

The stories, covering the period from 1968 through 1975, reveal a young man full of literary and artistic musings, with a strong desire to express himself and find his own voice, which obviously matured with the passage of time: "'The Visit' and 'The Advertisement,' two of the stories from *Relatos*, announce distinct but related aspects of Almodóvar's creative enterprise which will continue throughout his career to date" (Smith 2000: 2). In this sense, it is interesting to note that Almodóvar signs the early stories "Pedro Almodóvar Caballero," using both his father's and mother's last name (she is ever present in his work). His published stories are

signed “Pedro Almodóvar,” as are his films. With success, the brand is eventually marked by the single word “Almodóvar” (“un film de ALMODÓVAR”).

Searching for His Own Voice

Almodóvar clearly holds the record for worldwide distribution of films by a Spanish director. His public image, a bit insolent and yet sophisticated, can also draw a huge audience, both Spanish and international. This was amply demonstrated in the talk he gave on October 10, 2009 at Lincoln Center during the New York Film Festival.⁵ Such celebrity may make us forget that this brilliant figure was born in a small Spanish village during the dark period when Spain was submerged under the Franco dictatorship. The year was 1951,⁶ and the small town, Calzada de Calatrava, was the birthplace of the only Spanish filmmaker who dared to initiate his film career dressed in fishnet stockings and a quilted bathrobe seeking not a cerebral intellectual message, but freshness, freedom, and a type of emancipating frivolity (Smith 2000: 2–4). When he was eight, the family moved to Orellana la Vieja, in Extremadura, another small village far removed from any traces of modernity. This is where he received his primary and secondary education, under the supervision of the Salesian and Franciscan religious orders.

Cuando Pedro, con 17 años, se vino a Madrid a hacer la movida, compartió un piso situado en la calle de Canillas, del popular barrio de la Prosperidad, con María Jesús [es la segunda hermana de Almodóvar], que estaba casada con un guardia civil, del que en la actualidad es viuda Cuesta imaginar la convivencia entre el Pedro Almodóvar de aquellos años locos de la movida y un matrimonio de clase media absolutamente convencional, pero cuando se lo comenté a María Jesús, me dice que ellos no tuvieron jamás problemas para compatibilizar la existencia de Pedro con la suya. Es más, los modelos femeninos que el cineasta lucía en *Las noches de boatín*, de Rockola, junto a Fabio McNamara, salían con frecuencia del armario de su hermana, pero también del de su cuñado, el guardia civil, con cuya chupa de cuero reglamentaria y unas mallas, salió más de una vez al escenario (Millás 2004: 43).

(At 17, when Pedro came to Madrid to participate in “la Movida,” he shared an apartment on Canillas Street, in the working-class neighborhood of Prosperidad, with his sister María Jesús, who was married to a member of the Civil Guard and is now a widow. . . It is hard to imagine the compatibility between the Pedro Almodóvar of the crazy years of “la Movida” and a staid middle-class couple, but when I raise the question with María Jesús, she says that they never had any problems in accommodating his life style with theirs. Furthermore, the feminine fashions that Almodóvar featured in “*Las noches de boatín*,” at Rockola along with Fabio McNamara,⁷ came from his sister’s wardrobe, but also that of his brother-in-law, the civil guardsman, whose uniform jacket he wore with a pair of tights in a number of onstage performances.)

In Madrid, Almodóvar begins to feel free. He spends the next three years “waking up” to a new life, to a new way of being. Although he wanted to study film, he

never enrolled in the Official Film School (EOC). In 1974–75, it ceased giving classes, and in 1976 closed its doors, and its functions were transferred to the Faculty of Information Sciences at the Complutense University of Madrid. Without a clear career plan, Almodóvar accepts a position as administrative assistant in Telefónica, the national telephone company.⁸ Gradually, he begins to make contacts and feels less isolated, less strange (Zurian 2009: 408). He also gains the desire to be free, to live his own life, and to devote himself to what he had always enjoyed. Without hesitation, he takes on any project that can challenge him artistically. At the time, that meant many diverse paths: music, drama, the visual arts, collaborating with the independent theater company, “Los Goliardos,” where he met Carmen Maura, writing scripts for comics, fotonovelas, short features, and short stories, the latter being the fiction that was (and perhaps still is) his first “natural” inclination: “Empecé a interesarme por la literatura muy pronto. A los ocho años, los curas del colegio me dieron un premio por una composición sobre la Purísima Concepción. Desde entonces, he escrito casi todos los días de mi vida” (I began early to devote myself to literature; the priests at school gave me a prize for an essay on the Immaculate Conception. Since then, I have written just about every day of my life) (Almodóvar 2000: 21–22).

Regardless of the medium in which he is engaged, Almodóvar seeks to express himself, to release what he feels inside. In the early years in Madrid, however, he has yet to find the proper venue through which to communicate. From his youngest years on, everything had consisted of telling stories, from reimagining a film's plot, to when, as a child, he regaled his sisters and mother with filmic narratives, to making up crazy lyrics for impossible songs or writing short stories and dreaming about being famous. Everything was a creation, everything a narration that for him had no limits. He opened new paths for his energies, venues that were never incompatible with each other and were conduits to other things, because, in the end, it was simply about narrating, telling stories. During these early years in Madrid, Almodóvar navigates among different genres with total freedom and freshness in order to fulfill his need for expression.

This is when he began to cultivate a personal style, a poetics, an aesthetic, and, most importantly, a sense of self. Literature, however, would remain his preferred medium:

Escribía cosas así [cuentos, relatos cortos] en la época en que llegué a Madrid . . . Me apasionaba la literatura, escribía todo tipo de relatos y pensaba dedicarme por entero a la escritura hasta que descubrí el súper 8” (Strauss 2001: 24).

(I wrote things like that [short stories, mini-narratives] when I arrived in Madrid . . . I was in love with literature, I wrote all kinds of stories and thought I would dedicate myself to writing, until I discovered the Super 8 camera.)

In 1991 at the formal press release of *Patty Diphusa*⁹ Almodóvar affirmed: “Si algo tengo es vocación literaria; me recuerdo escribiendo desde siempre, y es una vocación anterior al cine” (If I have anything, it is a vocation for literature. It seems

I have been writing forever. It was my vocation before I turned to cinema) (Almodóvar 2004: 11). His work was frenetic, feverish. When he left work at Telefónica, he morphed into a creature of the night, living the Madrid of the last of the dictatorship with passion and intensity:

Empecé en 1972. Antes de *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. . . , ya había dirigido muchas películas en súper 8 Me trasladé a Madrid en el '68, pero no me atreví a dar mis primeros pasos en el cine hasta que no pasé tres años en esta ciudad desconocida para mí, me rodeé de un grupo de amigos y pude ahorrar el dinero suficiente, trabajando en la Telefónica, para comprarme una cámara de súper 8. (Strauss 2001: 14).

(I began in 1972. Before “*Pepi, Luci, Bom*. . . ,” I had already directed several films in Super 8 I moved to Madrid in ‘68, but I didn’t dare begin filming until I had spent three years getting to know the city. I surrounded myself with a group of friends, and I saved enough money from my work at Telefónica to buy a Super 8 camera.)

He writes constantly during the period following his arrival in Madrid, gathering the pieces in the manuscript *Relatos*, which contains the following eight stories: “La vida por delante” (The Life Ahead), fol. 1–5; “La gorda Carmela” (Fat Carmela), fol. 6–7; “Relato superficial de la vida de Miguel” (Superficial Tale of Miguel’s Life), fol. 8–25; “La visita” (The Visit), fol. 26–44; “La anunciación” (The Annunciation), fol. 45–46; “La redención” (Redemption), fol. 47–60; “Muletas olvidadas” (Forgotten Crutches), fol. 61; and “La anciana” (The Old Woman), fol. 62–65.

His productivity from 1974 on is abundant and various, consisting of fotonovelas, comics, film shorts, musical numbers, etc. There are two film shorts from 1974: *Dos putas, o Historia de amor que termina en boda* / *Two Whores, or A Love Story that Ends in Marriage*, Super 8, 10 min. and *Film político* / *A Political Film*, Super 8, 4 min. The following year, 1975, yields *La caída de Sodoma* / *Sodom’s Fall*, Super 8, 10 min., *Homenaje* / *Homage*, Super 8, no length given, *El sueño, o la estrella* / *The Dream, or the Star*, Super 8, 12 min., *Blancor* / *Whiteness*, Super 8, 5 min. In 1976 he films *Tráiler de “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”*, Super 8, 5 min. and *Sea caritativo* / *Be Charitable*, Super 8, 5 min. and writes the script for *El anuncio* (based on the short story “La anciana”). In 1977 he films the shorts *Las tres ventajas de Ponte* / *Ponte’s Three Advantages*, Super 8, 5 min., *Sexo va, sexo viene* / *Sex Comes and Goes*, Super 8, 17 min. and *Complementos* / *Complements* (a series combining news spots, trailers, etc.) and writes the script, *A mi querida mamá* / *For My Dear Mother*, which, in addition to Almodóvar, is signed by Alicia Mora, Ramiro de Maeztu, and Montserrat Ordorica. In 1978 Almodóvar publishes his first short stories: “La ausencia” (The Absence), “Las últimas palabras de Rosa” (Rosa’s Last Words) and “Anonadado (El origen del Dadá)” (Anonadado [The Origin of Dadaism])¹⁰ in the anthology *Sueños de la razón* / *Dreams of Reason*. That same year, he films his first feature film, *Folle... folle... fólleme Tim!* / *Fuck, Fuck, Fuck me, Tim!*; shot in Super 8, it does not make it to commercial distribution. In addition, he shoots his last short from this period, *Salomé*, loosely based on the Bible story and featuring the appearance of his brother Agustín.

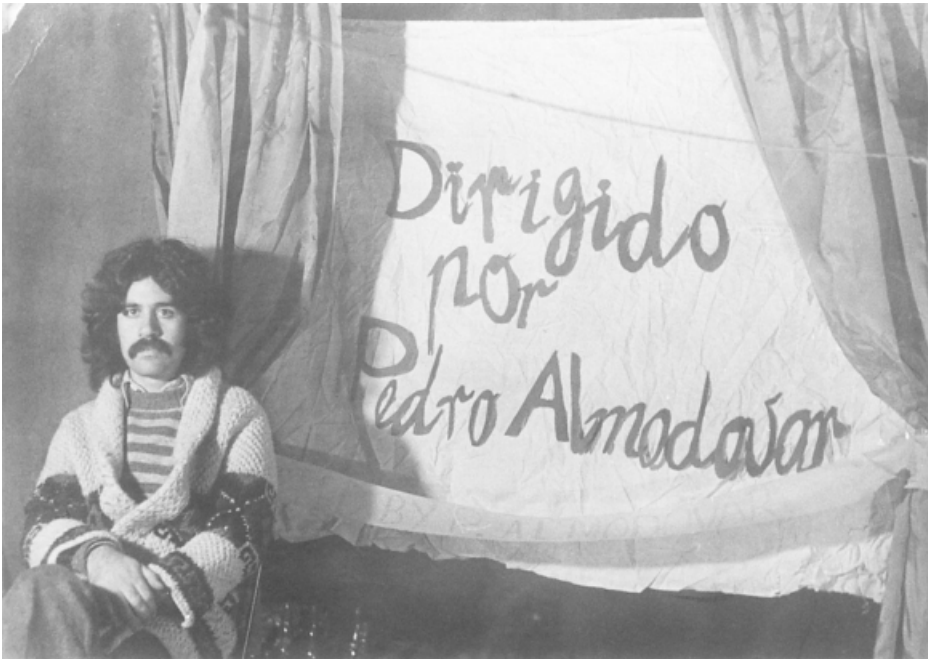


Figure 2.1 Almodóvar during his Super-8 period. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

The year 1979 is pivotal, in that it marks his entry into the realm of professional cinema, shooting his first feature film destined for commercial distribution: *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls like Mom*, based on the short story and later fotonovela for *El víbora*, “Erecciones generales” (General Erections). Filming was difficult, and not completed until 1980. *Pepi* premiered at the San Sebastián Film Festival that same year. Despite having successfully shown his first commercial feature, Almodóvar continued his life much as before, still working at Telefónica, but maintaining his passion for creative expression.

In 1980, along with Juan Caño Arecha, Manuel Ángel Egea Martínez, Fernando Morales Chamero and Javier García-Mauriño Múzquiz, he wrote the script for *Rafaela*, which is composed of four stories: “El anuncio” (The Advertisement);¹¹ “Concierto de violonchelo” (Cello Concert); “Muñecas de cero” (Zero Dolls); and “La diva.” 1981 is key for Almodóvar, as he has a new opportunity to publish the short story “Fuego en las entrañas” (Fire in the Belly) with illustrations by Javier Mariscal. Also, 1981 is the year he decides to leave the Telefónica in order to devote himself completely to filming his next feature, *Laberinto de pasiones*/*Labyrinth of Passions*, which premieres in 1982, the same year in which he publishes a punk fotonovela called “Todo tuya” (All Yours) in *El víbora*,¹² which marks the debut of Patty Diphusa, “sex-symbol internacional y estrella internacional del porno” (international sex symbol and porn star). In January 1983, in the middle of this period of

frenetic activity, he meets Andy Warhol in Madrid. In November 1983, he begins to publish the Patty Diphusa stories in *La Luna de Madrid* where they will run through 1984. Later, the newspaper *El Mundo* suggests a sequel to Patty, which he accepts. Between April and June 1993, four new stories are published, which are added to an expanded edition in 1998. It is undeniable that Patty Diphusa is a major character for Almodóvar, not only because of her continued popularity in subsequent editions, but also because of her resonance in his later works.

Subsequently, he premieres *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) and in 1984 *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?*. From that point on, Almodóvar has devoted himself entirely to film and, since the 1990s, has released a film on average every two years. Looking back at the variety of creative work, one can appreciate the “journey” initiated by Almodóvar upon his arrival at Madrid and his profound transformation over those years. The success is remarkable, given his humble background and lack of formal education.

The Short Stories in *Relatos*

As Juan José Millás noted on the occasion of the presentation of the published script of *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002): Almodóvar “demuestra que es un director de cine que tiene la cabeza de escritor” (Almodóvar demonstrates that he is a film director who thinks like a writer). This ability began to form in childhood and grew to fruition in Madrid. It is unusual for someone to deposit a typed manuscript in the National Library. That Almodóvar did so speaks volumes about his self-awareness as author, creator, and self-invented character. This is not a trivial point. In order to understand Almodóvar and his work, in order to get inside his universe, it is necessary to scrutinize all three identities, as author, as creator, and as character: He is an auteur in his own world (lo “Almodovariano”), with a specific aesthetic and a resolute fidelity to himself (even in spite of himself). He is a creator addicted to storytelling, who must write every day, who reads constantly, and who sees a story when others would simply see an occurrence. Finally, he is an invented celebrity persona without intending to be one, or, as a consequence of what he set out to construct through his eighteen films to date, his publications, and his various prizes. He is better known than his movies, an icon of modernity, but also, for conservatives and Catholics, a symbol of all that is offensively anti-Spanish.¹³ Such renown was forged in a mere decade, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Given his self-creation, one can better approach the first stories—tales that explore his youthful imagination.

The first of the eight short stories contained in *Relatos* is “La vida por delante” (The Life Ahead), a title borrowed from the Fernando Fernán Gómez film of 1958. Federico offers his girlfriend María things he cannot possibly give her: the sky, the sea. . .

– Soy un poeta, María.

– ¿Un poeta? ¡Valiente mierda! Basta ya de poesías, porque me vas a volver loca. ¿Es que te has creído que a mi me basta con palabras? Me has tomado por idiota, pero te equivocas. Soy lista, muy lista y voy a cortar por lo sano. (fol. 1)

(I am a poet, María.

A poet? Hot shit! Enough about poetry, because you are driving me crazy. Do you think words are enough for me? You've taken me for an idiot, but you are mistaken. I'm smart, very smart, and I'm going to end this relationship).

Canned sentimentality is not typical for Almodóvar, who is given to earthiness, desire, passion, and common sense over fantasies. The antithesis of those characteristics, Federico “moribundo, contempla su pasado como una película a cámara rápida” (dying, contemplates his past as if it were a movie in fast forward) (fol. 2). At this early point in his career, Almodóvar uses a cinematic structure, creating a flashback to capture “recuerdos de ayer” (memories of earlier days). One scene depicts the time Federico met María in the park where she would take little Rafael for walks and have sex with soldiers who passed by. Of course, she had the guard's approval, and a tip assured that he would reserve a pleasant grassy spot for her (fol. 2–3). But the day that María saw Federico appear in the park, “pensó que con él empezaba una nueva época” (she thought that, with him, a new period in her life was beginning). Then, coming back to reality and letting go of those thoughts, she remembered a Julio Iglesias song, “La vida sigue igual” (Life Remains the Same).¹⁴ At that moment, a car stops and picks her up. Still immersed in her thoughts, she describes what happened: “Era un tipo muy raro, un poeta. Yo creía que eso de ser poeta era importante, no había conocido a ninguno y tenía curiosidad, pero al poco tiempo he podido comprobar que ser poeta es una majadería” (He was a strange guy, a poet. I always thought that being a poet was special. I had never known one before, and I was curious. But it didn't take long for me to realize that being a poet is pure silliness) (fol. 5).

María is the epitome of an Almodovarian character: straight-talking, with a preference for reality over idealism. She is the kind of character he uses to make fun of himself a little, as a storyteller and a poet, in a wider context. She prefigures Patty Diphusa and connects with the multiple women from Spanish filmic and narrative tradition who come from a rural community to the city “para servir” (to serve) as cleaning women, kitchen aides and nannies, among other jobs, and who exist as live-ins, or tenants in rundown rented rooms.

The second story in the collection, “La gorda Carmela” (Fat Carmela) is an “esperpento,” a Spanish grotesque theatrical form, typically almodovariano, irreverent and offensive, characterized by a punk aesthetic and extremely scatological.¹⁵ Carmela had always been enormous, but she was happily married to her true love, “El Raspa,” who weighed a mere 48 kg. Nevertheless, he left her for another woman. Carmela felt she could not go on and, completely without hope, she decided to hang herself. Given her weight, however, the tree she is using breaks

apart. Frustrated by the failed suicide attempt, Carmela decides to throw herself into a well, but upon trying, “se quedó prendida en sus paredes a mitad de camino” (she got stuck halfway down) (fol. 6), because the narrowness of the well would not let her pass through:

Tantas frustraciones le habían descompuesto el estómago, las tripas se le retorcián molestas. En ese momento la gorda concentró toda su fuerza para liberar un estruendoso pedo que bombardeó el fondo del pozo haciéndola saltar por los aires como un cohete. La casa quedó arrasada por la explosión y la gorda fue encontrada maltrecha y sin vida a varios kilómetros de la casa (fol. 7)

(So many frustrations had messed up her insides. Then she concentrated all her efforts to release an enormous fart that hit the bottom of the well and shot back up, sending her into the air like a rocket. The house was destroyed, and fat Carmela was found dead a few kilometers away).

Scatological episodes are common in Almodóvar's works, from the famous scene of Bom (Alaska) peeing on Luci (Eva Siva) in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* to the odorous farts of Raimunda's mother (Carmen Maura) in *Volver* (2006). It is hard to find a film without a comparable scene. Almodóvar's characters regularly visit the bathroom and, with complete naturalness, urinate, defecate, and talk to themselves in the bathroom mirror. He also shows them cooking and eating, because for him the bathroom and the kitchen are places of privilege where it is impossible to lie. It is all part of daily life, and there is no reason to hide it (although most films do). Almodóvar savors the authenticity of having his characters eat and behave like anyone would in private.

The third story has more narrative depth and is the longest in the volume: “Relato superficial de la vida de Miguel” (Superficial Tale of Miguel's Life) (fol. 8–25). Readers find themselves in another world, in which people are reborn when they die and die upon birth. Consequently, they are born in a coffin and people “saluda tristemente arrojando un poco de tierra” (sadly bid them goodbye, tossing in a bit of earth) (fol. 8). Miguel's aunt tries to support his mother by saying: “Cualquiera que vaya a ser su vida, no durará siempre; al final tendrá como todos una feliz muerte que le liberará” (Whatever his life turns out to be, it will not last forever; at the end, he'll have, like we all do, a joyous death that will liberate him) (fol. 8).

What follows is the “birth,” which in reality is “un desentierro” (a disinterment). They remove the coffin, the priest says a few prayers and family and friends shoulder the box and take it to a hearse that will carry him home (fol. 8). There, his future friends, including his close friend Elena (whom he sees for the first time) await him. They all mourn Miguel's body. A woman who will later rent Miguel a room in her house produces his appropriate documentation, which states that he will only live to twenty-five. She also gives them Miguel's suit, which was hanging in the closet of the rented room for him to use in his birth (fol. 9). His aunt says: “El gran consuelo es que a todo nacimiento corresponde una inevitable y justa muerte” (Our great solace is that every birth has a

corresponding inevitable and just death) (fol. 10). It is difficult to contemplate Miguel's lifeless body as it awaits birth: "La proximidad del alumbramiento aumenta el dolor de los familiares, los padres nunca han estado tan afectados como ahora" (The imminence of birth only increased the family's pain. His parents had never been so affected before) (fol. 11).

Miguel has been shot in the chest; cleaning the wound makes it bleed more. Some men take the body to where it must be born. They drop him (in our world, it would be Miguel who falls from the gunshot wound) and, with a cry, Miguel gets up, and "de este modo se integra a la vida" (in this way, he comes to life) (fol. 11).

Unos segundos más tarde, casi simultáneo a este grito, Eusebio, en la acera de enfrente le dispara con una pistola. Miguel acaba de nacer, semiinconsciente da sus primeros pasos. Los hombres que le transportaron le abandonan, veinticinco años de vida le esperan. (fol. 11)

(A few seconds later, almost at the same moment of his cry, Ernesto, from the sidewalk across the way, shoots him. Miguel has just been born, semiconscious, and takes his first steps. The men who had carried him leave him; twenty-five years of life await him).

As if in a movie being shown backwards, Almodóvar reveals the lives of Miguel and the other characters. In this film, life's future is its past and present. For that reason, there is no "ever after" or past. Everything is closed. The doubt is if everything is predetermined or if liberty and free will can exist in this world, because "La vida utiliza a los individuos como piezas que pone en funcionamiento su desarrollo" (because life uses individuals as mechanical parts that put in motion its development) (fol. 13).

Eusebio, the man who shot Miguel, is Elena's boyfriend, and he asks Miguel not to leave with her. Miguel then enters a house at random, asks for Elena and meets her. They speak as if they had been friends forever. Life goes on without a past, because, upon traveling backwards, there is nothing to remember; everything is forgotten. The only possibility is to live the present completely, without past or future (the future is an illusion, because moving on in life means dismantling all that has transpired, and anticipating more is useless):

Extraordinariamente para Miguel no hablan [Elena y él] del pasado, ni añoran la época en que estaban mucho más unidos y planeaban irse a vivir juntos a París. No es que se hayan vuelto atrás de sus propósitos, es como si nunca hubieran existido. Con su poca experiencia, Miguel va comprendiendo que lo que domina sobre todo lo demás es el presente. Esta tiranía se ve ayudada por la despreocupación y la caprichosa memoria del individuo. (fol. 16–17)

(Very unusually for Miguel, he and Elena do not speak of the past, nor do they wax nostalgic about the time when they were closer and planned to go to Paris together. It's not that they reneged on their plans, it's as if those plans never existed. With his limited

experience, Miguel gradually realizes that what he mostly controls is the present. This tyranny is aided by indifference and the capricious memory of the individual.)

Miguel never fully understands the path of time, he doesn't comprehend that events have already been and for them to happen they must have already done so. Time advances, but in the reverse of our world. Therefore, twenty-year-old Miguel speaking with his editor doesn't understand:

[EDITOR]: No puedo explicarte cosas tan elementales como que para que un libro sea editado tiene que ser anteriormente leído por el público, comprado y después escrito.

[MIGUEL]: ¿También es necesario que yo desconozca mis propias historias, cuándo y cómo las imaginé?

[EDITOR]: Naturalmente, y no me mires así, yo no soy el responsable. Aunque tú seas el autor no puedes poseer la consciencia simultánea de todas las facetas de tus propias creaciones. Ya descubrirás cuándo las has escrito, y cómo. Ten paciencia, la vida es así. (fol. 18)

(EDITOR): I can't explain to you such elemental things like the fact that, for a book to be edited, it has to be previously read by the public, bought and then written.

[MIGUEL]: So is it necessary that I forget my own stories, when and how I imagined them?

[EDITOR]: Of course, and don't look at me like that. It's not my doing. Although you are the author, you cannot possess the simultaneous consciousness of every facet of your own creations. You will discover when you wrote them and how. Be patient. Life is like that.)

This all seems like a game of inconsistencies, but it echoes Almodóvar's own composition process, in which he saves what he has written and, with time (sometimes years later), recycles that same material, reworks it, and develops its meaning. In this world in reverse that the young Almodóvar describes for us, patience, in effect, is the key; you have to wait in order to know the beginning of what happens, because in this march to the past, the cause comes after its consequence(s). Therefore, something written years earlier can come to fruition in a temporal leap.

Almodóvar's hero, Miguel, cannot adapt to that world. He doesn't understand life, and he feels like an alien. It's similar to how Almodóvar has described his own life in the period before Madrid. Miguel simply lives: "Interviene [Miguel] durante un tiempo en películas de ínfima categoría, pero no le importa, no le tiene ningún respeto al cine y prefiere trabajar en productos insignificantes, sin envolturas artísticas y de este modo ir sobreviviendo" (Miguel takes a few parts in no-budget films, but he doesn't care. He has no respect for cinema and he prefers to work on insignificant projects, without artistic pretensions. This way, he can keep surviving) (fol. 19).

Miguel arrives in Madrid at seventeen. The self-portrait Almodóvar offers through his character is evident and reveals itself with clarity when Miguel enters adolescence and then infancy. Almodóvar writes this story after some six or seven years in Madrid. It strongly suggests a way to analyze his personal evolution. Therefore, the narrative structure (life going backwards) is especially appropriate, because his life really began when he arrived in Madrid, and it is from that vantage point that he can understand, by looking back on his life, his own existence. The difficult task of narrating a present that circles back to the past is the perfect metaphor for the same difficulty Almodóvar feels about fitting in with life and his struggle to understand his connection to it. He never felt “normal,” he never finished finding his place. Nevertheless, Madrid would come to signify the long-desired change, finding himself in a self-construction: “Problemas que había abandonado en el pasado porque estaba seguro de [su] insondabilidad,¹⁶ se le presentan con una melodramática necesidad de solución; y él se entrega morbosamente a las obsesiones sin lograr otra cosa que una estúpida y miedosa piedad, en el camino que le dicta el ambiente religioso del colegio” (Problems that he had abandoned in the past because he was certain that they could not be resolved, now appear with a melodramatic need for solutions. He morbidly gives in to these obsessions, but obtains nothing more than a stupid and fearful piety according to the dictates of his religious school) (fol. 22).

Miguel evokes his adolescence and a summer vacation with his relatives in a small village: a summer full of sex and films “basadas en sórdidos relatos de Tennessee Williams, con Liz Taylor o Natalie Wood, por las que se siente corromper poco a poco” (based on sordid tales by Tennessee Williams, with Liz Taylor or Natalie Wood. He felt that they perverted him, little by little). He’s an adolescent, “once años, catorce, desde su nacimiento. Miguel se ha convertido en un viejo melancólico y como siempre un poco ajeno a su ambiente, y solitario” (He’s just eleven, fourteen, since birth, Miguel has become a sad, old man, and, as always, somewhat removed from his environment and alone) (fol. 23):

Es un viejo sensible [recordemos que en nuestro universo eso equivaldría a un joven], con resultados brillantes en sus últimos años de estudios y cada día más cariñoso con su familia. A pesar de su edad avanzada continúa siendo un personaje especial entre los curas y sus compañeros; sus rarezas—utiliza un vocabulario bastante artificial e impropio de su edad, su delicadeza general y sus aficiones poéticas—contribuyen a aislarlo, pero está acostumbrado, siempre había sucedido así. Es en esta época cuando gana un concurso organizado, entre todos los alumnos del colegio, con un tema común: la Virgen María. (fol. 23)

(He’s a sensitive old man [Remember that in our universe that would be the equivalent of being young], with fabulous grades in his last years of school. Every day, he feels closer to his family. Despite his advanced age, he continues to be a special person among the priests and the other children. His unusual traits—he uses vocabulary words that seem artificial, inappropriate for his age; he appears to be delicate and has

poetic inclinations—contribute to his being isolated, but he's used to it, it had always been like that. It is during this period when he wins a competition for students of all levels at his school, with a common theme: the Virgin Mary).

The autobiographic trace is insistent throughout these texts. His story-writing serving as an exorcism for personal demons is another of his signatures, part of the Almodovarian universe. The story's omniscient narrator's style changes slowly, from a minor presence at the beginning of the text, with a greater use of dialogue, to becoming more and more central in the works Miguel writes when he is nineteen. As he advances in age, which is to say he grows younger, the use of dialogue is greatly reduced, and the omniscient narrator's voice predominates during his infancy. This could well suggest a view into his interior universe and an attempt by Almodóvar to approximate the subjective interior narrator, in the style of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. That novel is narrated from within the subjective minds of the characters, similar to Almodóvar's text, showing us a narrator who is "huidizo, ubicuo y protoplasmático" (evasive, ubiquitous and protoplasmic) (Vargas Llosa 2002: 11).

Ni siquiera a esta edad en que todos los hombres se acercan a la muerte dedicados a la práctica de diversos juegos, Miguel participa en ellos. En los ratos libres, que son muchísimos, le divierte más hacer cualquier otra cosa. Las últimas películas las ve también en esta época. A nueve años de su muerte disfruta intensamente con el cine, como si intuyera que no tardaría en desaparecer de su vida. Más que nunca, en esta época el cine es para Miguel un acontecimiento mágico, maravilloso, irreal. (fol. 24)

(Not even at this stage of life, when all men approaching death are dedicated to various games, did Miguel participate in them. In his free time, which is ample, he enjoys doing anything else. He sees the latest films in this period. Nine years before his death, he relishes movies as if he intuited that they would soon disappear from his life. More than ever, film is magical for Miguel, something marvelous, unreal.)

This passage connects with the images from *La mala educación* (2004), when we see Ignacio (Nacho Pérez) and Enrique (Raúl García Forneiro), children about nine or ten years old, in the Catholic school and their visits to the local cinema. Also, the relation between Ignacio (Francisco Boira) and Juan (Gael García Bernal) and their mother sheds light on the relation between Almodóvar and his mother as well as Miguel and his. There is an unshakable passion for the mother figure:

Su madre nunca había sido tan feliz como ahora por el mero hecho de poder ayudarle a morir . . . Cuando llega el momento, el médico le ayuda a morir introduciéndole por entre las piernas de ella.

A los pocos días la madre abandona la cama, hinchada por la presencia de Miguel en su vientre. Lo más doloroso ha pasado, paulatinamente, durante nueve meses Miguel se extingue en su seno.

Después nadie pensará en él. (fol. 25)



Figure 2.2 Almodóvar with his mother Francisca Caballero on the set of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Macusa Cores.

(His mother had never been this happy before, for now she could help him die When the moment came, the doctor helped him die, inserting him between her legs.

After a few days, his mother got out of bed, swollen by the presence of Miguel in her womb. The most painful part had passed, and slowly, during nine months Miguel dissolved in her breast.

Afterwards, no one would think about him).

His mother is there in birth and there in death, like a narrative beginning and end, just as Almodóvar's mother in his work, whether in a principal or minor role. There are films based on and dedicated to mothers (*¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* [1991], *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* [1999], *Volver*) and others in which the mother is presented as the family anchor, who makes sure that the protagonist doesn't drown. For better or worse, there are protective mothers and bastions of security, as in *Matador* (1986), *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997) or *La mala educación*. The mother is always present because Almodóvar's absolute need to narrate is born from his experience with his mother, doña Francisca Caballero.

From the beginning, she is a driving force, a constant reference in his personal life and in his work. At times, she seems to eclipse everything else: "Paca Caballero

ocupa tanto espacio en la existencia de Almodóvar que casi no ha dejado lugar para el padre Tal vez Pedro pueda hablar al mundo de tú porque habló a su madre de usted” (Paca Caballero occupies so much space in Almodóvar’s existence that she almost leaves no space for his father . . . Perhaps Pedro can address the world in the familiar *tú* form, because he spoke to his mother using the more formal *usted*) (Millás 2004: 47).

The fourth story, “La visita” (The Visit), is the root of *La mala educación*; yet because he names his protagonist Paula, one could easily think that this was an iteration of Tina from *La ley del deseo* (Smith 2000: 1–2).¹⁷ According to Almodóvar, “La visita” could be from 1973 (Almodóvar 2004: 11). It takes place in a city in Extremadura. Paula, twenty-five, sees Marlene Dietrich in *The Devil is a Woman* (Josef von Sternberg, 1935) and subsequently presents herself at the school run by the Silesian Brothers, claiming to be Luis Rodríguez Bahamonde’s sister. She tells Father José, the school’s director and Luis’s spiritual guide, that Luis’s parents died in a car accident a few months ago. Thus Paula introduces Luis, another character who seems to be Almodóvar’s alter ego:

Su ocupación [de Luís, tenía 24 años] más importante en los últimos años fue la literatura [¿cómo no?]. Era lo que más le interesaba. Tenía una gran desconfianza en su obra, es cierto que aún le faltaba mucho por aprender, *pero ya había escrito cosas muy interesantes*, aunque a él no le satisficieran. (fol. 30, emphasis added)

(His main preoccupation in the last few years was literature. It was what most interested him. He was very insecure about his work, and it is true that he still had a lot to learn, but he had already written some very interesting pieces. Still, he was not satisfied.)

It is important to keep in mind that, even in this early text, meta-fiction is the key to the narrative. A story refers to an interior tale as the basis for a blackmail scheme, which is, deep down, an excuse to air the many instances of abuse that Luis suffered at the hands of the school’s priests. Once again, literature serves as a mirror. It also helps create a necessary distance from the recounted incidents:

En aquella época [la del colegio] yo tenía una enorme desconfianza en la vida, me encontraba completamente desamparado, y trataba de refugiarme en la piedad, sin que eso me satisficiera. Pero era tan joven -10 años- que aunque no sentía la fe lograba perseverar en ella. En aquel período, la sensación de crearme en pecado mortal, me resultaba insoportable. (fol. 33)

(In those school years, I was very insecure about life. I felt completely defenseless, and I tried to seek refuge in piety, but it never worked. At ten, I was so young, however, that, even though I didn’t feel true faith, I was able to persist within it. At that time, the thought of living in mortal sin was unbearable.)

Thus he was easy prey for the priests:

¿qué armas tenía Luis a los 10 años para luchar contra vosotros? No solamente violasteis su cuerpo, sino que también deformasteis su espíritu, sembrando el caos y el miedo dentro de él. Y todo en el nombre de Dios. (fol. 38)

(How could a ten-year-old boy fight you? Not only did you violate his body, you also deformed his spirit, creating chaos and fear inside of him. And all in the name of God.)

Echoes of Zahara's accusation directed at Father Manolo in *La mala educación*: "¡A un niño de 10 años no se le quiere, se le acosa, se abusa de él!" (It isn't love towards a ten-year-old boy, it is harassment and abuse) (Almodóvar 2004: 112).

The story offers two alternative endings. In one, Paula undoes her dress and shows him that her bra is stuffed with cotton. She reveals herself, finally, as Luis, stating that the book he wrote will be published and that "y todo el mundo podrá despreciarles como se merecen" (and everyone will despise you, as you well deserve) (fol. 43). In the second possibility, the clergyman throws himself on Paula and stabs her in the chest with a letter opener. He repents, however, and tries to save her. Upon taking off her bra, he discovers that she is Luis, and embraces him, suggesting "una extraña piedad" (a strange *pietá*) (fol. 44), which mirrors a famous *pietá* embodied by Pablo and Antonio in the final scene of *La ley del deseo*.

The fifth story, "La anunciación" (The Annunciation), is a mini-fiction. Fatigued, María is wearing jeans, tired because of work and the fact that she slept little the night before. Suddenly, the angel Gabriel appears, hanging from a rope and tapping on the window for her to let him in. María becomes upset, because she thinks it is nonsense and a joke. She cuts the rope and shuts the window, without looking at what happened to the "angel":

El ángel yacía, con su flamante túnica empapada en sangre, sobre la calle.
María continúa lavando, todavía de peor humor, pensando solo en terminar y poder echarse una siesta. (fol. 46)

(With his resplendent tunic drenched in blood, the angel lay stretched out on the street.

María continues washing, in an even worse mood, thinking only about finishing up and taking a nap.)

Almodóvar establishes and plays with a dichotomy: the Angel=masculinity=laziness (fluttering around María's window), and María=femininity=work.

María is the one who initiates the resolution, as she is far from passive. Expecting the angel to appear to her (as in the Christian story), she is resolute. Completely depleted from work, she kills the angel, who, instead of acting on her behalf, flutters outside her window, disturbing her work.

Another constant in Almodóvar's work is the sacred (and its special relation to him) as devoid of anything supernatural. It is an event and/or socio-cultural

custom that evokes a certain sentiment, such as what happens to Tina (Carmen Maura, *La ley del deseo*), with her Cruz de Mayo and songs dedicated to the Virgin. Other examples include the images of the Virgin in *¡Átame!*, the choral numbers in *La mala educación* and the presence of the dead and the cleaning of the tombs in *Volver*. These moments, however, do not transmit faith. Rather, they suggest an emptiness.

This is perhaps why Almodóvar always treats religious subjects as desacralized and mundane, as seen in the sixth story, “La redención” (Redemption). The narrator, the town jailer, tells the story of a stranger who for years has passed himself off as the Messiah, the Son of God, the one for whom everyone had been waiting for centuries:

Por lo que a esta población se refiere puedo asegurar que nunca hemos esperado a nada ni a nadie, pero después de que el forastero lo repitiera durante años en distintas localidades, ha empezado a parecernos familiar la utopía del Mesías. Las utopías son contagiosas, y su extensión vertiginosa. (fol. 47)

(As far as our town is concerned, we have never awaited the appearance of anything or anyone, but after the stranger repeated the same thing in different locals, the utopia of the Messiah became familiar. Utopias are contagious and the news spreads rapidly.)

The stranger was truly handsome, “pero sus palabras resultaban más incomprensibles que su belleza” (but his words were less comprehensible than his beauty) (fol. 48), all of which begins to cause problems, and he is arrested. Barrabás, however, saves the stranger, and they escape together (analogous to the end of *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942]). The reinterpretation of Biblical stories will be returned to in Almodóvar’s last short from this period, *Salomé* (1978).

“Muletas olvidadas” (Forgotten Crutches) is a mini-fiction in which a boy forgets his crutches, and his angry mother confronts him:

[MADRE]: ¿qué has hecho con las muletas?

[HIJO]: Ya no las necesito. He aprendido a andar por mí mismo.

[MADRE]: ¡Cuánta alegría, hijo mío! (fol. 61)

([MOTHER]: What have you done with your crutches?

[SON]: I don’t need them anymore. I’ve learned to walk on my own.

[MOTHER]: I’m so happy, my boy!)

Here, Almodóvar is speaking about his liberation from the “crutches” of his childhood and adolescence. The crutches, given the location in the sequence of stories in *Relatos*, seem to refer to those of faith, religion, and the Church.

Almodóvar did not write the stories as an organic whole. He compiled them, however, in a particular order and placed them together in a volume called *Relatos*,



Figure 2.3 Authorial intention: Pablo Quintero at the typewriter in *La ley del deseo* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1987; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jorge Aparicio.

which does give a certain coherence to the text. What stands out is that he did this with the intention of depositing a copy in the National Library at a young age, demonstrating a precocious sense of his own identity as an author. Having chosen these particular stories presumes authorial intention.

The last story is “La anciana” (The Old Woman), a tale that will be recycled in various Almodóvar’s screenplays that were never filmed: “El anuncio” (June 14, 1976) and “Rafaela” (1980). “La anciana” takes place in Beirut. Doña Julia is about seventy and has a well-off bourgeois family. She sees an ad in the newspaper for good-looking secretaries between the ages of eighteen and thirty. She decides to apply. It turns out that the ad is a cover-up for a group engaged in international sex trafficking. She shows up for the interview to the astonishment of the interviewers, who reject her and tell her to go home. She goes off reluctantly.

El paseo la anima, decide volver a su casa, pero sabe que en la primera ocasión lo dejará todo para siempre.

– No es el único empleo interesante, ya encontraré otra cosa, la ciudad está llena de ocasiones. (fol. 65)

(The walk revives her; she decides to return home, but recognizes that she will leave everything behind at the first opportunity.

“It’s not the only interesting job. I’ll find another. The city is full of opportunities”.)

Doña Julia (doña Rafaela in the script “Rafaela”) is an early example in Almodóvar’s work of what will become a staple: mature women who want to change their lives. Some seek to enhance their sexuality: Luci in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, Queti’s mother escaping from the dry cleaners in *Laberinto de pasiones* or the mother superior in *Entre tinieblas*. Others choose to end bad relationships: Gloria in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, Pepa in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Becky del Páramo in *Tacones lejanos*, Leo and Clara in *La flor de mi secreto*, and Raimunda in *Volver*. In all cases, these are strong women who need to re-create themselves and make strengths out of weaknesses in order to move on. What stands out is the scarcity of positive role models of males in Almodóvar’s works, which are full of physically and/or mentally absent fathers. Men are incomplete, beset with identity problems and anxieties and frequently isolated, with the exception of Marco (Dario Grandinetti) in *Hable con ella* (2002) and Mateo Blanco/Harry Caine (Lluís Homar) in *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), two positive, heterosexual characters.

Epilogue

The readings of these early stories by Almodóvar help us to understand better the development of his successful career as a film director, born from his stubborn insistence on expressing himself and determination to master the medium he was working in. He never attempted to present his films as a profound intellectual reflection on life or as a weapon to fight Francoism or as an example of high culture. He worked, saved money to buy a Super-8 camera, and learned to use it. He learned to tell stories listening to the women from his village, watching Hollywood melodramas, and devouring all kinds of literature. He was not the black sheep, but a strange sheep, and strange in this case could mean “queer.”

Relatos speaks to us about Almodóvar’s awakening to the world of creativity and shows us how his universe is already present from the first step of his journey. His is a road of success and also of miscomprehension, especially within Spain. This is mostly true within the academic world and the film community, which never understood, and probably never will, what Leopoldo Alas wisely said: “La frivolidad es posiblemente la forma más seria de militancia” (Frivolity is perhaps the most serious form of militancy).

Notes

- 1 Background research for this chapter was supported by funds from Project FEM2009–07194 of the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación del Gobierno de España and work conducted as a visiting scholar at New York University from September 2009 through January 2010. I would like to express my gratitude to Jo Labanyi for her interesting and helpful comments on the present text.

- 2 For an analysis of his published fiction, see Zurian 2009: 408–28. For a study of the director's connection with literature, see Zurian 2005: 1–12.
- 3 The volume, a photocopied text, is in poor condition. Paul Julian Smith was the first commentator to mention these *Relatos* (Smith 2000: 1–2).
- 4 The only exception known to date is "Salome," which is available in DVD format: Mare Films, D. L. 2007.
- 5 The Starr Theater-Alice Tully Hall, with a capacity for 1,086 people, was packed. *Los abrazos rotos / Broken Embraces* (2009) closed the New York Film Festival.
- 6 Different sources give Almodóvar's year of birth as either 1949 or 1951. See chapter 4, this volume, for Alberto Mira's discussion of the possible reasons for this discrepancy.
- 7 Fabio de Miguel, better known as Fanny McNamara or Fabio McNamara.
- 8 Telefónica was, at that time, a public corporation. Almodóvar left its employ in 1981 to begin production of *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982).
- 9 There have been various editions, including the revised and updated 1998 version. The book has been translated into a number of languages.
- 10 The story was republished in *La Luna de Madrid* and retitled "El nacimiento de Dadá" ("The Birth of Dadaism") and also forms part, under the same title, "Relleno," of *Patty Diphusa* (Almodóvar 1998: 160–163).
- 11 Based on the story "La anciana" and the script for "El anuncio" but in this case doña Julia is Rafaela.
- 12 Almodóvar wrote the script and served as director. Pablo Pérez Minués was the cinematographer; realization by Txomin Salazar. Fabio de Miguel plays Patty. *El Vibora* (1982: 32–33).
- 13 Chapter 6, this volume, by Cerdán and Fernández Labayen traces the development of the Almodóvar public persona in the promotion of his work as well as the reaction by the Spanish film critical establishment.
- 14 In *Laberinto de pasiones*, Antonio Banderas plays Sadec, a Shiite terrorist in love with the Prince of Tirana (Inmanol Arias). On the wall in Sadec's room is a poster of Iglesias. Almodóvar's references to popular culture are a constant in his films and literary work.
- 15 To read about Almodóvar and the "esperpento," see Zurian 2005: 21–42.
- 16 Emphasis added. The word is not found in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Real Academia Española, 22nd edition, 2001) or in the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (1st edition, October 2005). But, more importantly, does Almodóvar make a veiled reference here to homosexuality?
- 17 Almodóvar uses this name for other characters in *Volver*, Chus Lampreave plays Aunt Paula, and Yohana Cobo is Paula, the daughter of Raimunda (Penélope Cruz).

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Almodóvar and Hitchcock

A Sorcerer's Apprenticeship

Dona Kercher

Introduction: Self-Education via Hitchcock

Much has been written about the impact of Hollywood classics on Almodóvar's corpus of works.¹ The director himself has responded to interview questions citing admiration for specific examples of golden age Hollywood, to the extent that even he discusses choosing an aesthetic "la más *hollywoodiense* de todas" (the most Hollywood-like of all) for *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991) (Strauss 1995: 131). An extensive interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, which appeared before the screening of *La Mala educación/Bad Education* (Hirshberg 2004) at the New York Film Festival exemplifies the director's strong sense of his relation to his filmic forebears as key to his place in world film history. Curiously, among the roster of influences named Hitchcock is not on the list. Yet A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* and a number of Spanish critics noted the presence of Hitchcock in *La mala educación*. V. A. Musetto's observation in the *New York Post*, "From the Hitchcockian opening credits to the final frame, Almodóvar has Hitch on his mind," served as one of the major advertising blurbs for the film (Musetto 2004). It is productive to look at how signs of Hitchcock have been present throughout Almodóvar's oeuvre, but most especially in the first stage of his career, up to *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), his major crossover hit. Hitchcock was Almodóvar's primary textbook and industrial model. Even after the global success of *Mujeres al borde* established him as a major filmmaker, Almodóvar continued to study and learn from Hitchcock's films.

It is important to remember that among contemporary Spanish directors Almodóvar is not a product of film school, or even a product of a fine arts education (as was Bigas Luna of the previous generation), but self-taught. He learned his

craft experimenting with a Super-8 camera, and watching movies. Hitchcock's films have been easily accessible on subtitled videos in Spain for a long time. Hitchcock's reputation as an innovator, among the first to incorporate sound in *Blackmail* (1929), and to experiment with it as a stylistic element in that very first sound film, makes his work an undeniable reference point for learning the craft of filmmaking. Moreover, Hitchcock is one of the financially successful masters with a long career to study. In his recent biography *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*, Patrick McGilligan stresses Hitchcock's success in the industry: "Hitchcock was not only the ultimate film director; he also mastered the pitfalls and politics of studio filmmaking that dogged him both in England and in America, and emerged as the industry's consummate professional" (2003: 747).

These factors argue for Hitchcock's work being an essential reference point in Almodóvar's autodidactic cinematic education. In fact the title of Frédéric Strauss's collection of interviews, *Pedro Almodóvar: Un cine visceral* (Pedro Almodóvar: A visceral cinema), comes from Almodóvar's comment on the eclecticism in his movies due to his self-education: "El eclecticismo en mis películas es algo como visceral que probablemente tiene que ver con el hecho de que yo no tengo una educación académica, no he aprendido cine en la escuela, lo que me da una especie de indisciplina y libertad" (1995: 39) (Their eclecticism is natural, instinctive. No doubt because I never had an academic education, because I never went to film school, I've always remained undisciplined and free) (Baigneres 25).²

In the Strauss interviews Almodóvar mentions Hitchcock only cursorily when he discusses his early discovery of film classics. He cites *Vertigo* (1958) as "madre de muchas películas" (mother of many movies) in the session on *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) (1995: 61). Yet Hitchcock's name pops up at key moments of that text, from *Laberinto de pasiones / Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) on. Almodóvar recounts that when he came to Madrid he spent three years in the 1960s and early 1970s reading about film and screening films in the Filmoteca.³ During this period he first saw John Ford's films, among other Hollywood classics. Hitchcock's work and criticism of it are well represented in the Spanish film archives.

When Strauss, addressing the attention to spatial design in *Kika* (1993), suggests that Hitchcock is one of Almodóvar's favorite directors, Almodóvar's reply gives a historical perspective to his reception of Hitchcock:

Sí, entre todos los autores se me había olvidado citar a Hitchcock. Visualmente, es uno de los directores más ricos que ha habido en la historia del cine. Descubrí a Hitchcock cuando ya trabajaba con el color, pero en ese momento, al principio de mi adolescencia, para mí era un director muy entretenido. Más tarde, cuando vuelvo a ver sus películas por segunda o tercera vez, es cuando empiezo a descubrir el enorme ingenio que hay detrás de cada una de sus imágenes. Estéticamente es uno de los grandísimos inventores. En su cine todos los elementos visuales son artificiales y deliberados por el director" (Strauss 1995: 160).

(Yes. And I forgot to mention him! His work is visually the richest in the history of cinema. I discovered Hitchcock when he started shooting in colour. I was an adolescent at the time and simply considered him an entertaining director. Later, when I studied his films, I started to understand the genius operating behind each picture. Aesthetically, he's a great innovator. All the elements of design in his work are deliberately artificial) (Strauss 2006: 143).

Just as Almodóvar corrects himself to recover his self-education through Hitchcock, we, too, will explore how Hitchcock's aesthetics resurface throughout Almodóvar's career. This is more than a passing relationship. What is most intriguing is how it appears to have been marginalized, or repressed.

Almodóvar's Guilt Complex from *Spellbound* to *Laberinto de pasiones*

Hitchcock is a reference point for Almodóvar from his earliest forays into film, in his cult movies depicting the *Movida*. When Strauss asks him to discuss the role of the psychoanalyst in *Laberinto de pasiones*, Almodóvar replies at length that Hitchcock's flashbacks to childhood were the reference point for his own parody of psychoanalytic explanations. It is worth looking at this exchange between Strauss and Almodóvar in detail. Almodóvar's self-construction via Strauss, his preferred chronicler, follows the interview model famously developed in the Truffaut–Hitchcock interviews. In bilingual sessions Truffaut, who was Hitchcock's professional equal, prompted Hitchcock to assess his career trajectory in terms of aesthetics, industrial strategies, and world film history. For publication the interviews were organized chronologically according to the release date of the first film mentioned in each chapter. By following this model, Strauss as a non-Spanish or “foreign” expert positions Almodóvar for transnational recognition as a serious artist just as Truffaut had for Hitchcock. Strauss prompts: “Uno de los personajes más divertidos de *Laberinto de pasiones* es la psicoanalista: no explica para nada la psicología de los personajes a quienes acoge en su consultorio, es realmente una figura de comedia casi artificial. Se nota que a usted le gusta como tal y que en ningún momento la toma en serio” (1995: 39–40). (One of the funniest characters in *Labyrinth of Passion* is the psychoanalyst. She has nothing to say about the psychology of the characters she sees. She comes across as a purely comedic character. One feels you liked her for herself and not for one moment do you take her seriously) (Strauss 2006: 25). Almodóvar responds:

Sí, la utilizo de modo completamente paródico. Pero representa algo que yo ahora no me atrevo a hacer: una parodia de todas aquellas películas—e incluyo también películas de Hitchcock—donde los traumas de los protagonistas se explicaban por un *flashback* infantil, y a la vez un trabajo de actor muy aparatoso para explicar una cosa que no necesita casi una explicación. Los dos personajes de *Laberinto de pasiones* están

hablando de que les gustan los hombres, están explicando su ninfomanía y eso no hace falta explicarlo, uno es así y ya está, pero para mí tenía un valor muy paródico hacer ese tipo de *flash-back*. Y de hecho, le puse una música muy parecida a la que Hitchcock suele poner en sus películas: Béla Bartók, que es el origen de todo Bernard Hermann, un músico que trabajó con Hitchcock. A mí, los *flash-back* infantiles son una de las partes que más me divierten de la película *Laberinto de pasiones* (Strauss 1995: 40).

(Yes, my use both of the character and psychoanalysis is strictly parodic. I wanted to do something which, in fact, I still haven't dared do: to make a parody of all those films—Hitchcock's included, which I like very much—where an elaborate flashback to the character's childhood attempts to explain the inexplicable. The two main characters of *Labyrinth of Passion* often speak of their nymphomania and I decided that they should do so to a psychoanalyst in order to show that this type of behavior has no explanation. That's my opinion, in any case. For certain scenes I used music by Béla Bartók very similar to Bernard Hermann's scores for Hitchcock. The flashbacks to childhood are some of my favorite parts of the film) (Strauss 2006: 25).

We know from Hitchcock's own comments that he, too, was none too fond of psychoanalysis, (Peck's character calls it "a lot of hooey" in *Spellbound*), telling Truffaut that *Spellbound* (1945) was "another manhunt wrapped up in pseudo-psychoanalysis" and that he, too, railed against superfluous explication in film, preferring to create character through a layering of details. So we cannot take Almodóvar as an accurate film historian in this passage. However, what is evident here is Almodóvar's deference to Hitchcock in his own development as a filmmaker, and his choice of Bartók to evoke the classic Hitchcock score at a critical juncture of *Laberinto*. He conflates several Hitchcock references, for Hitchcock's most famous representation of a female psychoanalyst is Dr. Constance Sedgwick, played by Ingrid Bergman, in *Spellbound*, whose score is by Academy Award winner Mikos Rozsa. Hermann did not come on board as a composer for Hitchcock until the 1950s with *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). Almodóvar may refer to Hermann's most famous score to *Psycho* (1960) or the thematic cueing of suspense in Rozsa's score to *Spellbound*. Significantly, the primacy of music for childhood flashbacks reappears in Almodóvar's films. Perhaps the strongest instance is the breathtaking "Moon River" sequence in *La mala educación*.⁴ Certainly in 2004 Almodóvar no longer dared to present the childhood flashback as a parody. From a wiser, more compassionate perspective, childhood traumas were too deeply felt to be subject to this treatment. Arguably the coupling of strong music with these sequences has its origin in Almodóvar's appreciation of Hitchcock's style.

Almodóvar is being rather devious in his mention of Hitchcock in regard to *Laberinto de pasiones*, for the Hitchcockian inspiration is profound, and not only in the psychoanalyst sequence. It is embedded in the picture's title. In *Spellbound*, in the sixth sequence, late one evening, Ingrid Bergman's character pulls a book from the asylum's library shelves. Its title is shown in close-up—*Labyrinth of the Guilt Complex*.

She uses the book, ostensibly written by the new asylum director, impersonated by Gregory Peck, the false Dr. Edwardes, as a subterfuge to visit Peck in his room. At that moment she does not know Peck is an impostor. The book's autograph, shown in an insert shot, will be the key through which she finds him out.

Their dialogue, at first about the book, turns into a confession of love, which then is masterfully punctuated by shots of a long corridor of a series of doors being opened. These shots represent a subjective reality of the couple. The leitmotif of psychoanalysis opening doors began the movie's intertitles. The more interesting analysis/interpretation in *Spellbound* is not retrospective then, but rather very present, in the passions of love, which is precisely Almodóvar's take on Hitchcock. *Spellbound* is a "labyrinth of the passions," especially Bergman's passion for Peck which overwhelms her "reason" as psychoanalyst.

Further, in *Laberinto de pasiones* Almodóvar selects another important aspect of *Spellbound* to parody, namely the psychoanalyst in the movie itself. Hitchcock in fact engages in a similar bit of mocking humor in the the sequence entitled, "Pittsburgh in Manhattan." Ingrid Bergman is trying to track down Peck who has fled to a Manhattan hotel because he was about to be unmasked as an impostor. When an obnoxious traveler from Pittsburgh approaches Bergman on the sofa of the hotel lobby, the house detective intervenes and throws him out. Both the Pittsburgh lout and the detective try to "read her." The detective congratulates himself for identifying her as a schoolteacher following her husband to make up after a tiff. He calls himself a psychologist, but of course gets everything wrong. Bergman plays along, to the pleasure of the audience, and gets the information she wants, the number of Peck's hotel room. It is a classic Hitchcock moment, and a surprisingly feminist one as well, where the audience shares a joke with the female character. Indeed this sequence portrays a classic Hitchcock theme that domestic fiction not only passes as, but also is preferred to, truth. Significantly Hitchcock's cameo also takes place in this same sequence.

At first glance Almodóvar's multiple references to Hitchcock in the discussion of *Laberinto de pasiones* seem out of place, for a more frequent recollection of the film centers on Almodóvar's "cameo"—his cross-dressing performance with call and response interaction that has given *Laberinto* an extended life as a kind of Spanish *Rocky Horror Picture Show* that emphasizes audience participation in its kitsch world. Hitchcock's films are not an obvious referent, even in parody. The inspiration of Hitchcock's films, especially of *Spellbound*, however, is pervasive in *Laberinto*'s plot elements and leitmotifs. This does not detract from the recognition of Almodóvar's originality, or an appreciation of the cultural chasm between the United States in the 1950s and Spain in the early 1980s. Almodóvar not only takes on a female psychoanalyst (Susana, played by Orfelia Angélica) to echo Bergman's role, but also plays with Bergman's most salient character trait in *Spellbound*, her initial frigidity. He inverts this by oversexing the female psychoanalyst, and further attributes the problematic Bergman frigidity to Sexilia's (Cecilia Roth) father, a doctor who specializes in artificial insemination to compensate for his own lack of libido.

Spellbound abounds in father figures in all the doctors: the murder victim Dr. Edwardes; the old head doctor of Green Manors, who turns out to be Edwardes's murderer, whom critics have suggested was Hitchcock's private representation of, and hence revenge on, his psychoanalysis-obsessed producer Selznick; Bergman's own first analyst, Dr. Bruhlo; and finally, the amnesiac John Valentine (Gregory Peck) whom Bergman first meets when he poses as Dr. Edwardes, the new head of the asylum. Hitchcock commented to Truffaut that he found *Spellbound* "very confusing" (McGilligan 2003: 379). For Hitchcock, the guilt spread over *Spellbound* is due to a dearth of testosterone that causes murder, even Peck's "accidental" childhood killing of his brother. For Almodóvar, the problematic excess in sex drive is displaced primarily onto the female characters, especially Sexilia, who is doubled/impersonated by the dry cleaner's daughter, just as Peck doubled for Edwardes. Moreover, just as Peck cured Bergman of her lack of passion, so, too, the dry cleaner's daughter cured Sexilia's father of his. The similarities in plot are most interesting when seen combined with the repetition of motifs.

Sexilia seeks analysis due to photophobia; Peck reveals his repressed guilt in trances provoked by whiteness. *Laberinto* develops this parallel in the sequence in Toraya Salevi's (Helga Liné) hotel room as it builds towards Sexilia's flashback, the scene cited by the director in the above interview. In the denouement Riza Niro (Imanol Arias) has just lost his virginity with Toraya when Sexilia bursts into Riza's room to see Toraya. Sexilia slumps onto a stool against the wall at her realization of the incest.

The film cuts to a medium shot of Toraya's menacing face directing a mirror's beam of light toward Sexilia as the reflection of light whites out the frame. A reaction shot shows Sexilia with the light beam on her face vowing never to love again. Violin music, similar to the thematic strains associated with Bergman and Peck in *Spellbound*, accompany Sexilia's next appearance, in a traveling shot as she runs to her psychoanalyst's office.

Eventually Sexilia's love for Riza will cure her of her photophobia, which is in turn a symptom of her nymphomania, just as Bergman's love cures Peck of his whiteness trauma and guilt complex. In one of the more famous scenes of *Spellbound*, Peck becomes catatonic at the glimpse of the white light off the tracks in the winter snow streaming in the window of Dr. Bruhlo's office.

Bergman has identified "white" as a clue to his illness. The couple goes off a ski resort to probe the repressed truth further. In *Laberinto* Almodóvar inverts the northern light world into a southern coastal beach sun. At the psychoanalyst's office, Susana opens the curtains so that strong sunlight falls on Sexilia who is seated against a white wall. The film flashes back to Sexilia's childhood, where as a young girl she walks on a blindingly bright beach. Peck's brief childhood flashback reveals he killed his brother when he slid down a banister and pushed the brother into impaling himself on an iron fence. Sexilia's flashback is longer in duration and more elaborate. In the flashback sequence Toraya pulls Niza away to make out with him as Sexilia remains buried in the sand up to her armpits with her hands covering her eyes. In revenge Sexilia agrees to be "la mujer de todos" (the woman/wife of everyone) in a game of house she engages in with the remaining adolescent boys. The young Sexilia



Figure 3.1 Toraya's mirror beam used as a weapon in *Laberinto de pasiones* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1982; prod. Alphaville, S.A.).



Figure 3.2 Sexilia with the light beam on her face in *Laberinto de pasiones* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1982; prod. Alphaville, S.A.).

is only shown with her bathing suit strap unfastened. Two boys leave together and go behind other bushes. *Laberinto* suggests but does not show adolescent sex, incestuous or otherwise, but this taboo gives force to the film. In a sense following Hitchcock's paradigm allows Almodóvar to find and define cultural boundaries.



Figure 3.3 John Valentine (Gregory Peck) is transfixed by the blinding white seen from the window in *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945; prod. Selznick International).

The final scene of *Laberinto de pasiones* strongly alludes to Hitchcock. Hitchcock ends *North by Northwest* (1959) with a high angle shot of a train whizzing into a tunnel. The protagonists' voices are heard making love inside their train car. Hitchcock told Truffaut that the tunnel scene meant sexual climax (Truffaut 1984: 150). He was proud of skirting the censors with the tunnel scene, which is considered audacious for his time. Almodóvar ends *Laberinto* with a prolonged take of an airplane rising, a clear phallic image. In voiceover Sexilia comments to Riza on their exceptional climax, "Darling, you're the first man I've screwed in mid-air." For as explicit as Almodóvar is in depicting transgressive sex—gay, communal, and incestuous—throughout *Laberinto*, it is curious that he returns to a heterosexual couple, in a happy ending to the film. The sequence acknowledges his Hitchcockian "guilt complex." Almodóvar embeds Hitchcock's well-known ending in his own as if it were a purloined letter, or a book in plain sight that is the clue to the mystery in *Spellbound*.

Casting and Close-ups in *Entre tinieblas* and *Stage Fright*

Entre tinieblas/*Dark Habits* (1983) is the Almodóvar film most overtly concerned with Catholicism due to its setting in a convent. Yet, it epitomizes more secular, industrial preoccupations for it represents the first of several struggles for control with producers. As Almodóvar recounts to Strauss, *Entre tinieblas* was not only a

“película de productor” (a producer’s movie) (Strauss 1995: 45), but a movie made, on spec, to showcase and woo Cristiana S. Pascual, the wife of his financial backer, Hervé Hachuel. Pascual had threatened to leave Hachuel. Meeting Hachuel, Almodóvar immediately understood the unwritten rule that Pascual, though only an aspiring actress, had to be the star of the script that her husband was shopping for.⁵ Almodóvar dutifully wrote *Entre tinieblas* as a star vehicle for Pascual, casting her as Yolanda, the actress who takes refuge in the convent.

The history of Hollywood is littered with stories of battles between directors and producers over casting and other elements of creative control. Few are more legendary, prolonged, or well documented than David O. Selznick’s dictatorship over Hitchcock.⁶ It is useful to compare how Hitchcock handled casting, especially that imposed on him by his producer for *Stage Fright* (1950), and how Almodóvar dealt with a similar dilemma, or opportunity in *Entre tinieblas*. Both films depict the world of the theater within the film. Most significantly, Marlene Dietrich was the source of inspiration for both films. In the conception of *Stage Fright* Selznick made clear to Hitchcock, his director under contract, that he wanted him to make a picture starring Jane Wyman, also under contract to Selznick. *Stage Fright* was already a star vehicle at this point, for it was written with Marlene Dietrich in mind. Coincidentally this caused numerous rewrites of the script’s ending because it was argued that a leading lady like Dietrich could be the prime murder suspect, but the audience would never accept her as the actual murderer. The solution was for her character’s lover to confess to the murder.

Almodóvar said that Dietrich, especially the theatrical Dietrich of *The Blue Angel* (1930), was his prime reference for Yolanda/C. Pascual’s part when he wrote *Entre tinieblas* (Strauss 1995: 46). *Stage Fright* marked Hitchcock’s sole collaboration with Dietrich. The problem with the film was not really Dietrich, for he handled her masterfully and convinced her to choose one of her contract mandated musical numbers, “The Laziest Girl in Town,” a Cole Porter song that became her signature piece. The director’s more vexing problem was Wyman because he did not think her appropriate for the part of the ingénue, who goes undercover as a maid/dresser to Dietrich. He insisted the ingénue dress in a homely fashion for most of the film. This went against Wyman’s desire, to literally shine in her wardrobe. Wyman was a star in Selznick’s stable, but it was tough, if not impossible, for any other star to shine opposite the diva Dietrich. When Hitchcock gave in to Wyman and Selznick, and dressed her up in a glitzy garden party frock, the effect in *Stage Fright* was discordant. Hitchcock has Dietrich comment sarcastically on the transformation—“Whatever happened to that peculiar girl?”

In a sense Cristina Pascual was Almodóvar’s Wyman because *Entre tinieblas* had in its cast more established stars such as Julieta Serrano in the part of the Mother Superior. Almodóvar has said about his career “*Entre tinieblas* es cuando empiezo a tomar conciencia de lo que es el lenguaje cinematográfico” (Strauss 1995: 48). (*Dark Habits* is when I begin to realize what cinematographic language is.) Finally, his producer now provided him with enough resources with which to experiment. One



Figure 3.4 Dietrich and a pouting Wyman in the dressing room in *Stage Fright* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950; prod. Warner Bros.).



Figure 3.5 Serrano in close-up, transfixed by love in *Entre tinieblas* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1983; prod. Tesauro, S.A.).

of the most important steps in his learning process was to discover the force of the close-up, whose use is generally considered the sine qua non of the contractual definition of a star. He discovered in *Entre tinieblas* that Serrano could hold a close-up



Figure 3.6 Marlene Dietrich telling the detective her story of unrequited dog love in *Stage Fright* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950; Warner Bros.).

and express deep emotions via the shot, whereas Pascual's role was not working out. In a sense, the veteran stage actress Serrano, like Dietrich from Wyman, stole not just a scene, but the whole movie from Pascual. The plot changed because of Almodóvar's experimentation with close-ups. Significantly when Yolanda performs her raunchy stage number, Serrano steals the spotlight with her soulful close-up reaction shot that shows she has fallen in love with Yolanda.

The reaction is later magnified in Yolanda's dressing room as Serrano, like a modern day St. Veronica, contemplates the cloth with Yolanda's image on it from the removal of her make-up. In comparison, we may recall Hitchcock's masterful lighting of Dietrich, as she always demanded, in *Stage Fright* and especially in the climatic section when the detective is holding her in custody in the theater. Charlotte (Dietrich) has just come under suspicion for the murder, but her demeanor shows her unperturbed. She is seated in a dark backstage area in front of a curtain facing the camera with a tall detective standing next to her. A beam of light falls over her. The mood is somber.

She makes innocuous but symbolic conversation to fill the time, telling the detective she once had a dog. When it didn't love her, or respond to her absolute love, she had it killed. The spotlight and her intense facial expression communicate soulfulness, worldliness. She is in control just as she controls her final close-up, which closes the scene.

Dietrich/Charlotte's soulful domination, as she spins a tale of unrequited love, is similar to the way the melancholy Serrano/Mother Superior controls the screen and eventually the narrative of *Entre tinieblas*, as Yolanda abandons her. Almodóvar calls the resolution to the love story "la parte más dramática de la historia, que supone casi una bofetada al espectador porque no es un fin amable, pero es el desenlace más honesto que a mí se me ocurre" (Strauss 1995: 56). (The most dramatic part of the story, which almost comes as a slap to the spectator because it is not a nice ending, but it is the most honest solution that occurs to me.)

Looking at Almodóvar and Hitchcock together reveals a similar production history, a common blending of musical and theatrical numbers in balancing the films' designated casting, and a masterful use of the close-up. It shows, moreover, how in both cases the need for close-ups altered the film's narrative.

The Domestic Crime Scene Enlivened by Wallpaper: "Lamb to the Slaughter" and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*

Looking at Almodóvar through Hitchcock foregrounds Almodóvar's detective side, or the crime story, in the narrative structure of his films. It shifts the perspective on his development as a filmmaker away from what some critics consider his overreliance on melodrama. Salient cases of his use of the crime story plot span his career and include: *Qué he hecho yo*, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, *Tacones lejanos*, *Kika*, *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997), *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999), *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002), *La mala educación*, and *Volver* (2006).⁷

Almodóvar's turn to the crime story coincides with what I am terming his commercial career—that is, the beginning of significant international distribution. This career really begins with *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* in 1984. This film was the first to receive distribution in France, three years after its Spanish release. Attention to Hitchcock in this film served as a bridge to commercial success on an international scale.

In *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* we find the first elaborate Hitchcockian structure to Almodóvar's narratives. *Qué he hecho yo* is basically a crime story, a detective story with a murder in it. The harried Gloria (Carmen Maura), who works as a cleaning lady, kills her cab-driver husband Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López) with a ham bone. The plot is an uncredited adaptation of one of Hitchcock's most well-known stories from the television series, "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," namely "Lamb to the Slaughter," which Hitchcock directed in 1957. It starred Barbara Bel Geddes, who played Midge in *Vertigo*, and was made immediately following that masterpiece. Patrick McGilligan in *Alfred Hitchcock: Between Darkness and Light* describes the episode: "'Lamb to the Slaughter,' based on a short story by Roald Dahl (who also wrote the teleplay), was about a devoted wife, spurned by



Figure 3.7 Mrs. Maloney's smile in Hitchcock's "Lamb to the Slaughter" (1957; prod. Universal).

her louse of a husband, who clubs him to death with a frozen leg of lamb. As detectives scour her house for clues to the crime, the lamb cooks delectably, ultimately becoming their supper" (2003: 556). Almodóvar changed the meat course to ham in *Qué he hecho yo*. He also has the detectives accepting a cup of the broth from the incriminating stew rather than sitting down to a full meal. He waits until *Mujeres al borde* to invite detectives to sit down and partake of a suspicious potion made by the female lead, in this case the gazpacho with sleeping pills. In both "Lamb to the Slaughter" and *Qué he hecho yo* the murderesses escape punishment, but are left isolated in their houses.

The final sequence of "Lamb to the Slaughter" shows the detectives and their team feasting on the lamb/murder weapon at the dining room table. The camera moves back to reveal the doorway and Bel Geddes in the other room. Then the film cuts to Bel Geddes who sits alone rigidly upright on a straight-backed chair against a wall of the living room. When one detective comments while reaching for more meat that the murder weapon must still be "right under our very noses," the film shows her wicked, but at the same time idiotic smile.

Her expression tells the viewer she has gotten away with the murder. She is portrayed against large print graphic wallpaper, a decorative motif that dominates Almodóvar's mise en scène throughout *Qué he hecho yo* as well.

The reincorporation of the wallpaper shows Almodóvar's attitude toward cinematic influences. Speaking on *Qué he hecho yo*, a film in which grandmother and grandson watch *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961) at the cinema together, he



Figure 3.8 The sorcerer's brush on the wallpaper in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1984; prod. Kaktus Producciones Cinematográficas and Tesauro, S.A.).

emphasized that any borrowing should not be reverential but rather undertake significant “active” revisions that become markers of his own authorship:

En mis películas el cine está presente, pero no soy cinéfilo, no soy una persona que cita a otros autores. Creo que mis películas son muy independientes. Soy más bien un ladrón. Algunas películas las utilizo como parte activa de mis guiones. Cuando una película sale en una película mía no es un homenaje, es un robo (Strauss 1995: 61).

(Cinema is always present in my films, but I'm not the kind of cinephile director who quotes other directors. Certain films play an active part in my scripts. When I insert an extract from a film, it isn't a homage but outright theft, and becomes an active presence rather than a homage, which is always something passive) (Strauss 2006: 45).

This call to action is taken literally in *Qué he hecho yo*. The wallpaper, which is a featured element of the *mise en scène* of Hitchcock's teleplay from the scenario of the murder to the Cheshire smile of Mrs. Maloney at its end, assumes an even more prominent role in *Qué he hecho yo* such that it becomes Disney inspired—“active”.

These magical special effects demonstrate Almodóvar's desire to assert his own humorous tone and demonstrate mastery over the original cinematic material. The use of special effects, which are rare in Almodóvar's films and Spanish cinema of the 1980s, too, underscores the claim to originality at the same time as it appeals to mass culture.

After Gloria has killed her husband, she hesitantly agrees to watch the psychic redheaded child Vanessa (Sonia Anabela Holiman) for Vanessa's mother Juani (Kiti Manver), who despises her daughter. Symbolically turning over a new leaf, Gloria is about to repaper the kitchen. She finds out that Vanessa "tiene poderes" (has magical powers) when the child repapers the kitchen telepathically. The wallpaper brush moves over the walls like Mickey's mops when he plays the sorcerer's apprentice in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940). Gloria's smile, shown against a backdrop of the vintage wallpaper, recreates Mrs. Maloney's sense of satisfaction at the end of "Lamb to the Slaughter." The viewer sympathizes with the female leads through reaction shots, which symbolize their freedom in the domestic realm.

The representation of forgery in *Qué he hecho yo* serves to characterize the cab-driver husband Antonio. As he proudly hands his passenger a book of Hitler's letters he has forged, he tells him of his love for a German singer he met while a *Gastarbeiter*. This scene characterizes Antonio both as a Fascist sympathizer and as a two-timer, which gives him a similar profile to the policeman husband Patrick Maloney in "Lamb to the Slaughter." Never taking off his policeman's blue coat while he downs a whiskey without ice, Patrick tells his wife bluntly that he is seeing another woman and wants a divorce. Through the forgery leitmotif Almodóvar implicitly acknowledges his debt to Hitchcock's plot of "Lamb to the Slaughter." It is one of a series of stagings of scenes of simulation that runs throughout Almodóvar's work. Yet the postmodernist interpretation also serves to reinforce the interpretation of the forgery leitmotif as an allusion to the stealing of Hitchcock's plot of "Lamb to the Slaughter" as the basis for *Qué he hecho yo*. Just as Antonio is proud of passing his talent to forgery to his son, Almodóvar proudly cites other classic American films to displace his theft.

This theft is further obscured by references to other Hollywood plots and stars. When the illiterate grandmother begs her son to compose a letter back to her village, she asks him to imitate Grace Kelly's style. A glamour shot of Grace Kelly from a magazine cover is inserted. Grace Kelly, one of the classic Hitchcock blondes, became a star through her work with Hitchcock beginning with *Dial M for Murder* (1954). In *Dial M* the husband tries to frame his wife Margot (Grace Kelly) for a murder he himself staged. He incriminates her by planting one of her love letters in the coat of Swann (Anthony Dawson), whom she kills when he attempts to strangle her. A head shot poster of Paul Newman, star of one of Hitchcock's last films *Torn Curtain* (1966), also appears on the wall of Gloria's son's bedroom. These allusions are meant to divert our attention from the primary "robbery" of "Lamb to the Slaughter" to a more general appreciation of cinematic history and Hitchcock's place in it.

Both directors approached filming tragicomedy through similar techniques. Although *Entre tinieblas* included crane shots, which Almodóvar says in interviews give the angle of God, their use in *Qué he hecho yo* is even more effective and communicates a social commentary, as did a similar use of this shot in the blackmail

sequence of *Dial M for Murder*. The debonnaire husband Tony Wendice (Ray Milland) strode back and forth in the apartment to demonstrate how the disheveled, penurious Swann should enact the murder of Tony's wife before paying him off. In *Qué he hecho yo* the high angle shots, that transgress the possible boundaries of the claustrophically small family apartment, effectively convey the oppression of Gloria by her husband Antonio. An example of the use of the high angle shot occurs in the "La bien pagá" sequence in which Antonio forces Gloria to have sex in order to get bus money out of him to get to her job. The film intercuts and gives a musical soundtrack to the exploitation with Almodóvar himself playing an officer in the television program, which the grandmother is watching in the other room. These transitions between sequences, whose effect is to thematically comment on Gloria and Antonio's marriage, mark one of the most brilliant moments of the film.

Almodóvar found his narrative stride in *Qué he hecho yo* through the hybrid mix of the kind of melodramatic crime story that gave Hitchcock his renown.⁸ How profound is the forgery, or as Almodóvar prefers to call his reworkings of other films, "the robbery"? Was the early shower scene of sex in the martial arts academy shower room another allusion to Hitchcock, in this case, *Psycho*? What is clear is that *Qué he hecho yo* "steals" Hitchcock's teleplay narrative, which is substantially reworked in the recurring motif of the ham bone/chicken leg/club/curling iron. All of these items are obvious phallic symbols, as was the leg of lamb Bel Geddes took out of the freezer, as were the "recurring motifs (including the phallic implications of certain household objects" (McGilligan 2003: 472) in *Dial M for Murder*. Their humorous effect is broad, domestically oriented, and analogous in Hitchcock and Almodóvar. The basic story of both *Qué he hecho yo* and "Lamb to the Slaughter" is of revenge on the caveman.

Yet the ironic humor of situations remains part of the plot as the movie ends by coming full circle. Back on her job as a cleaning woman at the martial arts studio, and working out her frustrations with heavy chops of the weapon sticks there, she again encounters the policeman she had sex with in the film's opening shower scene. When she confesses that she killed her husband with a ham bone, he rejects this story. He chooses to believe she is only distraught. Hitchcock played with similar narrative ironies often that tweaked our sense of the plausible, and reminded us playfully that we are watching cinema. The milkman in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) would not accept that spies could pursue the dashing protagonist, John Jones, who was pleading for help. Jones had to quickly weave another fiction to get the milkman's cooperation. The milkman was only ready to believe the story of a domestic affair—that is, that Jones was trying to avoid a jealous husband. Just like the detectives of "Lamb to the Slaughter," the investigator in *Qué he hecho yo* overlooks the obvious, wilder possibilities, and underestimates the protagonists. In both Hitchcock and Almodóvar the rejection of the protagonists' confessions shows that patriarchal society is not yet ready to accept the changed role of women.⁹ These films, however, position the viewer to recognize the process that set that change in motion.

Looking through Objects and Almodóvar's "MacGuffin": From *Dial M for Murder*, *The 39 Steps*, *Strangers on a Train*, and *Rear Window* to *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*

We cannot underestimate both Almodóvar's desire to make it as an international director and the effect that the two films that preceded *Mujeres al borde* in distribution—*La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987) and *Matador* (1986)—had on his reputation as a director. True or not, especially when seen within the context of a broader U.S. market, those two films pigeonholed him as a cult director for a gay audience, and even more crudely, as a director of kinky sex. Almodóvar was almost given a dare to make a PG-13 film for the sake of his career. Also as Paul Julian Smith notes, by achieving foreign popularity he could make credible his claim within Spain "to represent post-Franco Spain to the outside world" (1994: 102). Once again Hitchcock, who fought the censors valiantly over the years to put sex, double entendres, and taboo subjects on screen, with abundant humor and enormous success, was the perfect model. Hitchcock managed to entertain without offending the public. While incest is suggested, infidelity abounds, the protagonist will have a baby out of wedlock, and female orgasm is depicted, Almodóvar's next film *Mujeres al borde* was received as "puro teatro," pure theater. Since clothes are kept on, film censors judged the film totally inoffensive. Almodóvar slyly winks at (his self) censorship in one of the final sequences. As Pepa (Carmen Maura) walks by the fully clothed Carlos (Antonio Banderas) and Candela (María Barranco) making out on her sofa, Pepa pulls a towel up over Candela's cleavage. The towel is so small that the gesture only serves to mock facile rating standards.

While the story of *Mujeres al borde* speaks more to American screwball comedies—a genre Hitchcock only tried once, successfully, too, in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941) with Carole Lombard—both the overall balance in tone that melds comedy and drama/crime story, and especially the construction of certain shots and sequences that evokes "pure cinema" show a deep appreciation of Hitchcock. Almodóvar planned the shots of *Mujeres al borde* in storyboards, which represented a change in his practice. Hitchcock was known for such careful storyboarding that the legend goes that he was bored when he came to the actual filming.

Although Jean Cocteau's play *La voix humaine* / *The Human Voice* (1930) served as the inspiration for the film, the key object of modern life at the center of the film's story—the telephone—sent Almodóvar thinking of Hitchcock again. In commenting to Strauss on the importance of objects, particularly the answering machine, in *Mujeres al borde*, Almodóvar refers to Hitchcock's special effect used to give an object prominence in the frame in relation to action in deep focus.

Almodóvar gives the example of a cup—to recall, in *Notorious* (1946) Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) is drugged with a spiked cup of tea—but the true, repressed referent here are the large telephones Hitchcock used or made for *Dial M for Murder*, one for the filming and another for marketing. A giant phone became



Figure 3.9 Object lesson: the giant teacup in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946; prod. R.K.O.).

part of the publicity campaign for the film, similar to the way Almodóvar used a giant shoe for his opening night publicity parade for *Tacones lejanos*. In *Mujeres al borde* Almodóvar faced a technical challenge in depicting the foregrounded objects: “Era difícil tener en primer término el contestador muy presente y en la profundidad de campo Pepa viniendo. Hitchcock, si quiere poner una taza en primer término, lo que hace es fabricar una taza grande, es un modo de darle presencia, y da la impresión de que es la lente la que la hace mayor, pero no, es un objeto mayor” (Strauss 1995: 93). (The machine in the film doesn’t really have the presence I wanted it to have. This made it difficult to compose shots where the machine was in the foreground and Pepa behind. When Hitchcock wanted a teacup in the foreground with characters in the back, he had a giant teacup made. You think it’s the lens which enlarges the object whereas in fact it’s a trick) (Baignere 2006: 81). The most notable, famous sequence with this giant telephone in *Dial M for Murder* occurs when Margot gets up in the middle of the night to answer a call from her husband who is plotting her murder. The shot is filmed from the supposed vantage point of the hired strangler, whom the viewer has seen hide behind the room’s curtains. Suspense and sympathy are built in the viewer as Margot crosses the living room, her innocent and sexy white negligee backlit with the light from her bedroom, to answer the phone and is immediately attacked. Margot, however, withstands the onslaught and kills the intruder with her sewing scissors. The phone is a protagonist in the sequence as it both initiates the sequence of events and represents the husband on the other end of the line who has plotted the killing.

We should recall here as well that Almodóvar worked as an administrator at Telefónica, the Spanish national telephone company, during his early years of cinematic self-education. The Salón de Actos of Telefónica headquarters in Madrid was also the site for film screenings with actors and directors present. Although Peter W. Evans in his British Film Institute monograph on *Mujeres al borde* dismisses the potential references in the film to Almodóvar's telephone company years, as a "wish to take a parting shot at his former employers" (2005: 13), Almodóvar's attitude toward this experience has been more positive. He looks back on these years through the lens of a developing class consciousness: "... me dieron una información de la clase media española que, de otro modo, no hubiera conocido nunca y eso está muy reflejado en mi cine. Yo tenía experiencia de la clase baja y rural" (Strauss 1995: 21). (I learnt a great deal about the urban bourgeoisie which I could never have learnt otherwise. This discovery had a great influence on my films. Until then, all I knew about was the rural poor) (Strauss 2006: 9).

In 1996 Telefónica itself published a book *Teléfonos de cine* (*Movie Telephones*) by the critics Mariano Cebrián Herreros, Agustín García Matilla, and Eduardo Rodríguez Merchán. The authors devote substantial attention to the films of both Hitchcock and Almodóvar. They analyze the significance of the phone booth in *The Birds* (1963), *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, as well as in *Dial M for Murder*, comparing it especially to *¡Átame!*/*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) and *Mujeres al borde*. At the very least this "industrially" generated text, a luxurious volume, confirms a general and continued appreciation of Hitchcock's work in Spain. It is worth looking at how the authors describe and interpret the sequence that Almodóvar referred to in the Strauss interview as a technical challenge akin to Hitchcock's:

La planificación de los encuentros mujer-máquina, los planos detalle y aberrantes de los aparatos propician esta atmósfera duelística, subrayada, si cabe más aún, por el color rojo saturno del teléfono de Pepa. Existe una especie de dialéctica o enfrentamiento personal entre Pepa y su contestador; hay un punto de antropomorfización del aparato. De hecho, cuando la protagonista escucha los mensajes, da la réplica a la voz, como si tuviera a Fernando Guillén realmente enfrente de ella. Hay una escena antológica que lleva hasta el paroxismo esta relación con dependencia de Pepa respecto al contestador automático: en una de sus entradas en casa, Almodóvar nos la muestra clavando los ojos en el contestador que aparece de escorzo. Como siempre, Pepa se encamina hacia la mesa y el director acerca la cámara hasta que el aparato aparece en un primer plano de detalle, mientras el dedo presiona la tecla. Pero Almodóvar va más lejos: el contestador, como si se tratara de un personaje más, mira desde dentro a la protagonista; una sorprendente cámara subjetiva desde el interior del contestador crea un inquietante plano en el que los orificios de las cintas magnetofónicas se alinean con los desorbitados ojos de Pepa (Cebrián Herreros et al. 1996: 55).

(The shot plan of the woman-machine encounter, the aberrant insert shots that give those machines this dualistic atmosphere, underscored, if it could be even more by the Saturnian red of Pepa's telephone. There exists a kind of dialectic or



Figure 3.10 Pepa's eyes through the reels of the answering machine in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

personal dialogue between Pepa and the answering machine; there is a moment of anthropomorphization of the object. In fact, when the protagonist listens to the messages, she replies to the voice as if Fernando Guillén really were in front of her. There is an analogous scene that takes this relationship of dependence with the answering machine to its climax: in one of her trips home Almodóvar shows her with her eyes glued to the answering machine that appears foreshortened. As always, Pepa walks toward the table and the director moves the camera in until the machine appears in extreme close-up while she presses the button. But Almodóvar goes further: the answering machine, as if it were another character, looks back at the protagonist from its insides, a surprising subjective camera shot from the interior of the answering machine creates a disturbing shot in which the orifices of the recording tapes align with Pepa's exaggerated eyes.)

It is particularly in this looking through objects where Almodóvar's *Mujeres al borde* seems inspired by Hitchcock's exceptional camerawork. The objects themselves represent a modern consciousness that distances and deceives in their apparent function to establish communication. Hence, not only are the telephone and its subsidiary apparati (the answering machine, the phone booth, the microphones connected to them) the leitmotif of *Mujeres al borde*, as seen in the shot of Pepa's eyes, but looking at and through objects is its complex and transgressive *modus operandi*. The loudspeakers connected to the telephone left on by the dubbing studio receptionist early in the film symbolize *Mujeres al borde's* melodrama. All intimate details are broadcast to the public even as we look through the supposedly private space of the phone booth.

In addition to the telephone sequence and leitmotif, there are other scenes in *Mujeres al borde* that allude to Hitchcock and carry through their common



Figure 3.11 The fainted Pepa viewed through her eyeglasses on the floor in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

perspective of looking through objects while drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus as well. In an early sequence when Pepa is dubbing her voice for that of Joan Crawford in a scene from *Johnny Guitar* (1954) for which Iván has already recorded the Sterling Hayden role, she faints and falls backward. The final image is shot at floor level and shows her glasses in the foreground with Pepa in deep focus.

This dramatic conclusion to the sequence alludes to Hitchcock's stunning visual effects in the strangulation scene in *Strangers on a Train* (1951). To recall, two strangers, Bruno and Guy, meet on a train. Bruno suggests exchanging murders. He will kill Guy's wife; then Guy should kill Bruno's father. Bruno lures Guy's wife Miriam to a deserted island at a carnival. As Bruno strangles her, her glasses fall off and we see her falling down in the reflection of these glasses. Hitchcock used a giant concave mirror to achieve the floating shot of the fainting. He then double printed it on the image of a pair of giant glasses. Almodóvar stages his adaptation of Hitchcock as a rerun or dubbing of an old movie in a darkened room, like the carnival's island at night.

In his article, "Melo-Thriller: Hitchcock, Genre and Nationalism in Pedro Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*" in *After Hitchcock* Enrique Acevedo-Muñoz states, "The shot of Pepa on the floor is a direct citation of Miriam's death in *Strangers on the Train*" (2009: 181). In comparing the respective sequences Acevedo-Muñoz makes two points: first, "Formally, Almodóvar's shot is different from Hitchcock's since we see Pepa not reflected, but *through* the glasses, so it appears as mediation rather than a cinematic reflection"; and second, since the dubbing director, whom Acevedo-Muñoz considers a stand-in for Almodóvar, rescues Pepa, "the perversion of Bruno's (and Hitchcock's) action is here neutralized" (2009: 181). While Acevedo-Muñoz correctly appreciates the importance of the

formal characteristics of this shot, especially when placed in a larger context of Almodóvar's cinematic language of filming through objects, also seen in *Qué he hecho yo*, his interpretation of Hitchcock's shot as "cinematic reflection" is too literal and limiting. In the elaborate construction of the glasses shot Hitchcock "mediated" the cinematic experience of the viewer as well. Although Pepa doesn't die as Miriam did (although the carnival spectators when they find her body first yell "she's fainted"), Pepa does have, in Acevedo-Muñoz's words, "her first hysterical crisis over a Hitchcockian moment." Hitchcock's "perversion"—that is, the ability of cinema to affect the spectator—is very much exploited and left intact, rather than "neutralized" in Almodóvar's appropriation.

Almodóvar amplifies Hitchcock's "perversion," or focus on cinema's effects when he integrates *Rear Window* (1954) into *Mujeres al borde*. When Pepa leaves her apartment at night for the street in her frantic search for Iván (Fernando Guillén), she stakes him out at his ex's apartment building. She calmly sits down on a bench across the street where she gazes at a varied tableaux of actors and actions framed in the windows of the apartment building above her. The first character Pepa sees is a clear allusion to *Rear Window*'s Miss Torso, a buxom lady entertaining the viewer with her sexy dance to "Fancy Free" in her underwear. In a second apartment she sees a young man crying into a handkerchief. The third window she trains her view on reveals an argument between Carlos, Iván's son, and his crazy mother Lucía (Julieta Serrano), who will later attempt to murder her ex.¹⁰

Almodóvar stages "La ventana indiscreta" literally, "the indiscreet window" as *Rear Window* is known in Spanish-speaking countries, with a Madrid location shoot, rather than with a single elaborate studio set, as Hitchcock famously did. Nothing is hidden in a back courtyard, but rather every character crosses the imaginary boundary of the private space of a dwelling, whose Beaux-Arts style is decidedly more opulent than Hitchcock's Greenwich Village backyard set, to impinge on the public space of the street. With huge windows swung open to the night, Almodóvar's "Miss Torso" 1988 dances in the golden glow of a chandelier's illumination. Significantly both the weeping young man and the angry Lucía are not depicted within the confines of window frames at all, but rather he poses on and she paces on and off sumptuous individual balconies.

Hitchcock told Truffaut that *Rear Window* appealed to him for the technical challenge of "doing a purely cinematic film" to show how the art of montage shapes a narrative (Truffaut 1984: 215). He gives the example of using the same reaction shot of Stewart smiling which would be read as "kindly" if a little dog being lowered in a basket had been shown, or as "dirty" if the film had cut from "a half-naked girl exercising" (Truffaut 1984: 216). Likewise Almodóvar's series of vignettes—exhibitionist, tearful, and angry—always cut away for Pepa's reactions, slight changes in facial expressions which we interpret as accepting, empathetic, and upset because they are set up by the minimalist visual scenes which immediately proceed them. There is one exception to the alternating rhythm of the montage. The film cuts from Pepa to Marisa (Rossy de Palma), Carlos's fiancée, sitting in a

car waiting for him and peering at her via the rear view mirror before it sweeps up to Lucía arguing with Iván above. Although in the subsequent confrontation with Pepa at the telephone booth Marisa expresses disapproval of “the slut” who dances every night, her comment reaffirms that she did not turn away but watched the exhibitionist scene. In his more public *mise en scène* Almodóvar reaffirms and expands on Hitchcock’s point that “We’re all voyeurs to some extent, if only when we see an intimate film” (Truffaut 1984: 216).

Although the dominant tone of *Mujeres al borde* is comic, moments of suspense, and not just in the climactic chase sequence in which Pepa tries to prevent Lucía from killing Iván, give the film its balance and drive. These changes in tone are signaled by a change in the soundtrack’s theme, and with cuts to low angle shots of Pepa’s shoes pacing across her living room floor or the stairs to and from her apartment. Hitchcock was notorious for shots of lower legs in motion. Both *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Strangers on a Train*, two of the most significant films, begin with low-angle shots of primarily men’s shoes walking. These shots characterize the well heeled and convey a generic marker to establish a sense of action. Almodóvar achieves similar effects with these low-angle shots in a feminine register. They create tension for the crime story, mark Pepa’s social class, and emphasize her active sexuality. Later Almodóvar repeats his generic marker when he ends *Tacones lejanos* with a shot through the basement apartment window of high heels passing by.

Of all of Almodóvar’s crime stories, *Mujeres al borde* is structured most like Hitchcock’s films because of its use of a MacGuffin. In Hitchcock’s films a MacGuffin is a storytelling device that motivates the plot, but which is in itself inconsequential. A prime example is the secret society called “The 39 Steps” which Mr. Memory elucidates at the conclusion of the eponymous film. In *North by Northwest* the MacGuffin, a Precolombian statue, or “pot” as Cary Grant jokes, that contains microfilm, even evokes Hispanic culture. The use of a MacGuffin was often taken to indicate the apolitical nature of Hitchcock films because they were often absurd or “deliberately beside the point” by the time they were clarified (McGilligan 2003: 159). In *Mujeres al borde*, Candela functions within the narrative as the bearer of the news of the MacGuffin. Almodóvar’s own mother, who reads a fake news broadcast describing a terrorist threat, further inscribes the film’s MacGuffin. The threat of Shiite terrorists kidnapping a flight to Stockholm sets up the final chase and denouement of *Mujeres al borde*. It gives shape to the narrative like a Hitchcock spy picture. Yet in 1988 Shiite terrorism was not the political force on the minds of Spaniards.¹¹ Although any inscription of terrorism within Spanish film of the time may perhaps be interpreted as a veiled reference to Basque terrorism, the absurdity and comic effect of Candela pronouncing “shiitas” in her Andalusian accent argues more strongly for an apolitical stand, like Hitchcock’s, who famously said that “Politics is bad box office anywhere” (McGilligan 2003: 539).

Mujeres al borde alludes to more Hitchcock films than any other of Almodóvar’s films. Peter W. Evans, who notes the musical allusion to *Psycho* in the airport

pursuit scene, the reference to *Strangers on a Train* in Pepa's fainting fit, and Pepa's voyeurist evening as evoking *Rear Window*, finds "these three direct allusions to Hitchcock in the film, all ultimately related to a shared interest in male anxieties about powerful women, and especially powerful mothers" (2005: 15). Evans misplaces the emphasis in his comments on Hitchcock. The mother role, especially that of Lucía as mother, is of only minimal significance to *Mujeres al borde*, although the film indeed concerns "anxieties about powerful women." Ultimately *Dial M for Murder*, the Hitchcock allusion that Evans overlooks, affords the best insights for a comparative interpretation. In *Dial M* Grace Kelly, like Carmen Maura in *Mujeres al borde*, is dressed in vibrant red as she entertains her American lover in front of her husband. Both women are threatening, but oh so attractive, in their liberated sexuality. The actresses, and their respective characters, ultimately prevail in these respective films, truly star vehicles. Finally it is less the similarities in plot, or psychological stance as Evans has it, than the "pure cinema" technique of the *Dial M* telephone shot which *Mujeres al borde* shares with Hitchcock's films. Almodóvar looks through the representative objects of the middle class, connects with that class, and triumphs at the box office with a high international standard of production values.

Hitchcockian tenets of filmmaking, such as storyboarding and the use of the MacGuffin, which Almodóvar newly employs in *Mujeres al borde*, helped him fashion his authorial brand. Like Hitchcock Almodóvar understood the role of exceptional marketing in its creation. As Paul Julian Smith notes, the publicity campaign for *Mujeres al borde* in which Almodóvar posed in the shots with the cast as had Hitchcock, was an "attempt to theatricalize the publicity process on a much wider scale than had hitherto been attempted" (1994: 102). To reinforce the connection between the two auteurs, Juan Gatti, Almodóvar's preferred publicity photographer, who began doing the posters for Almodóvar's films with *Mujeres al borde*, specifically mimicked Hitchcock's iconic publicity shots in his series of portraits of Almodóvar that continue to be widely exhibited.

Conclusions

We have shown how deeply invested Almodóvar was in studying Hitchcock as an aesthetic and career model in the early stages of his film work. Allusions to Hitchcock by no mean diminish after *Mujeres al borde*. Hitchcock is still a constant, though sometimes with a more subordinate role. In many of Almodóvar's later films the influence of Hitchcock is subsumed within a broader self-reflexivity, a trend which Marsha Kinder has explored in a number of articles.¹²

It has now become commonplace to cite Hitchcock's films in discussions and appreciations of Almodóvar's aesthetics. Writing on *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009) critics, such as Roger Ebert, continue to cite Hitchcock as an

aesthetic inspiration, calling the film “a voluptuary of a film, drunk on primary colors, caressing Penélope Cruz, using the devices of a Hitchcock to distract us with surfaces while the sinister uncoils beneath” (Ebert 2009). Yet, as much as the Hitchcockian intertexts are acknowledged by film critics and especially, in sometimes oblique comments, by Almodóvar himself, they have not been substantially explored.

Indeed the depth and breadth of these instances, or “robberies,” to use Almodóvar’s own words, let us speak, in most conventional terms, of a strong, recurring influence. At moments, in the case of *Entre tinieblas*, Hitchcock’s career model, as well as his aesthetics in *Stage Fright*, served as a template and afforded an original perspective on the connections between them. How Almodóvar interpreted Hitchcock to build his career in his early stages has been perhaps the least explored, and at times the least acknowledged connection of all. It was truly a sorcerer’s apprenticeship.

What we have seen in specific cases in this essay has been most often the serious side to the two directors’ work. Exact parallels in terms of their sense of humor, the repetition of similar jokes, visual or verbal, are more difficult to construct, but no less important to underscore since it is in the continued presence of humor in crime narratives or in suspense that Spanish or Latin Hitchcockian adaptations differ from their French or American counterparts.

Both directors have a fine appreciation of ensemble work. Their minor characters are genuinely memorable. Take Chus Lampreave, in almost any film, but for example as the mother-in-law in *Qué he hecho yo*; and compare her to Marion Lorne as Mrs. Anthony in *Strangers on a Train*. Both mothers are funny through different ways in their absurdities. Or consider the group social dynamics of the working class: compare the pair of girdle salesmen Richard Hannay (Robert Donat) encounters on the train in *The 39 Steps* to the nurses on their lunch break in *Hable con ella*. How these workers interact is blunt and tone perfect in plausible dialogue, and yet incredibly funny—critics always say “drole” when speaking of Hitchcock—as well. Both directors appreciate and are fine-tuned to the place of the domestic in creating identifiable comic effects, and thereby genuinely connecting with the audience. In Hitchcock’s *Murder!* (1930) the landlady chatters away with witnesses, while the crime scene is being examined right in her living room, about how to make a perfect cup of tea. Hitchcock uses this recipe to its maximum humorous effect in *Frenzy* (1972).¹³ The cheerful wife of Inspector Oxford lovingly recites her nouvelle recipes for “soupe de poisson,” quail, and pig’s foot, fancy meals which he tries to avoid eating and which make him long for meat and potatoes. All the while she intuitively dissects the case, cracking it literally as she does her breadstick, and points the inspector toward the real killer. McGilligan considers these scenes “a transparent riff on Mr. and Mrs. Hitchcock” (702), who worked out their plots over mealtimes. During the filming of *Frenzy* Alma Hitchcock suffered a serious stroke, which preoccupied Hitchcock but only caused him to press on. Hence, the food interludes in *Frenzy* can also be considered an embedded love letter in the film.

Alma reportedly “wept uncontrollably with pride” (712) when she finally screened *Frenzy* for the first time.

In *Frenzy* the food motif builds through many phases and even takes a Latin turn. The underling policeman is subjected to his boss’s wife’s too exotic and overly sour margarita, whose recipe she has carefully recited to him, as she always does to her husband. This final Latin twist to the joke may have been particularly suggestive to Almodóvar. A similar, domestic, extended joke is a crucial component of *Mujeres al borde*. Pepa describes her recipe for gazpacho—which symbolizes her love for Iván—slowly and with maximum effect to the detectives, while she is waiting for the sleeping pills she has doped the mix with to kick in. Significantly, in *Frenzy* the wrong man Richard Blaney (Jon Finch) escapes from the prison hospital by getting all the other patients to pool their sleeping pills. They drug the guard by putting their cache of pills in his coffee. Even without delineating precise influences, we can say that Almodóvar’s work shows a sense of humor not unlike Hitchcock’s. The parallels, however, allow us to see how both Hitchcock, in his mocking of French cuisine and British preferences for stodgy cooking, and Almodóvar, in his ode to the Mediterranean gazpacho, play off national or local preferences for global effects.

The presence of Hitchcock’s films in Almodóvar’s work spans both the breadth of Hitchcock’s output, with notable emphasis on his British period in black and white as well as his later masterpieces for which he tends to be best known, and the breadth of Almodóvar’s corpus, from *Laberinto de pasiones* to *La mala educación*, *Volver*, and *Los abrazos rotos*. Almodóvar’s attention to Hitchcock, which at times, as in *Carne trémula*, has been mediated by allusions to Buñuel’s work, has been a major factor in a generational shift away from Buñuel that has brought Almodóvar acclaim as the most important Spanish director of our times. Almodóvar has long ago ceased to be anyone’s apprentice, yet his mature relationship to Hitchcock finds him mining the depths of the masterwork *Vertigo* for the first time in *La mala educación*. The intuitive modes of conduct that shaped his early films have now become bold authorial strokes. While aspects associated with the creation of “suspense” do not go unnoticed, as we have seen, Almodóvar’s work shows a far deeper appreciation of Hitchcock’s cinematography and construction of narrative.

Notes

- 1 References to Almodóvar’s Hollywood citations are virtually synonymous with his bibliography and encompass most critical approaches. These citations are seen as signs of postmodernity, as in Víctor Fuentes, “Almodóvar’s Postmodern Cinema: A Work in Progress,” or Peter William Evans, “Las citas filmicas en las películas de Almodóvar.” As Marvin D’Lugo notes, a Hollywood citation in Almodóvar’s films from early on represents a recycling of pop culture that “renders the audience complicit in its attacks on the culture of good taste” (2006: 19). The interpretation of Hollywood citations permeates genre studies, as Mark Allison remarks, “One of the

- key features that mark out Almodóvar as an auteur is his consistent borrowing from genre movies, in particular his acknowledged debt to Hollywood melodrama" (2009: 141). See also Allison's chapter "Genre," in *A Spanish Labyrinth*, 121–157.
- 2 Translations from the Almodóvar/Strauss interviews are noted by separate page reference with the name of the translator, Yves Baigneres, for the English edition (Strauss 2006). All other translations are mine.
 - 3 See D'Lugo (2006: 13–15) on Almodóvar's early viewing practices from his move from Calzada de Calatrava to Cáceres to Madrid.
 - 4 On music and childhood innocence in this scene see Vernon (2009), especially pp. 60–63.
 - 5 Almodóvar repeats this situation as fiction in *Los abrazos rotos*.
 - 6 See Leonard Leff (1999).
 - 7 By archiving key films of Hitchcock and Almodóvar under the rubric of "the house" in her popular compendium *Escenarios del crimen*, Nuria Vidal, who had published the first major critical biography of Almodóvar in 1988, signaled a call, at least in Spain, to reassess Almodóvar and Hitchcock together to which our approach responds in more depth.
 - 8 See especially Kathleen Vernon's (1995) reading of the film as postmodern melodrama.
 - 9 Many critics have commented that *Qué he hecho yo* is stylistically Almodóvar's most neo-realist film (Smith 1994: 58). In addition, he himself calls it "la película más social que he hecho" (Strauss 1995: 66) (my most social film) (Strauss 2006: 50). In the Strauss interview on *Qué he hecho yo*, Almodóvar comments, "De los movimientos europeos más importantes, el que más me ha influido es el neorealismo" (Strauss 1995: 61) (Among the modern Europeans, the neo-realists were the biggest influence) (Strauss 2006: 44). Although deeply appreciative of earlier German expressionist cinema, Hitchcock only experimented once in this primarily European export style of neo-realism. The major exception was *The Wrong Man* (1956), which he based on a contemporaneous true case. The respective neo-realist films of Hitchcock and Almodóvar vividly represent domestic trauma and offer social critique, for Almodóvar, of the sad economic conditions of the working class during the transition to democracy, and for Hitchcock, of the witch-hunt political atmosphere of 1950s America. Making their critiques more enduring, neither director portrays a full recovery of the female protagonist in his respective films. Gloria in *Qué he hecho yo* contemplates suicide and appears alienated and alone at the film's end until her youngest son returns to take over as the man of the house. Manny's wife in *The Wrong Man* remains in the insane asylum even after he is cleared of charges, although in the real-life case she did fully recover.
 - 10 Acevedo-Muñoz contrasts Pepa to Jeffries (James Stewart) and Grace Kelly (as Lisa) and concludes, "Pepa retains 'directorial' control for a moment before choosing to enter the action and claim narrative agency, something Grace Kelly (as Lisa) is not allowed to do since she is 'directed' by Jeffries to enter the action in Thorwald's apartment" (2009: 108).
 - 11 Just as Almodóvar has become more politically outspoken in recent years, notably participating in the Hay motivo campaign to discredit Aznar's implication that Basque terrorists were responsible for the Madrid train bombing, so, too is the reinterpretation of *Mujeres al borde* becoming more political. The 2010 musical in English (studied by Isolina Ballesteros, chapter 17, this volume) staged on Broadway in New York gave added meaning to Candela's fears.

- 12 Marsha Kinder (2005) discusses how Almodóvar in his mature phase has revisited themes and aesthetics of his own work, for example, reworking the theme of brain death across a trilogy of films.
- 13 It is significant that *Frenzy* marked Hitchcock's return to the UK, his first movie filmed outside of Hollywood in twenty years. Widely thought, erroneously, to be making his last film at the time, he was looking to recapture positive critical attention after *Marnie* (1964) and *Topaz* (1969) and thereby match his earlier box-office success. The movie begins acknowledging the shift in locale with postcard-like shots of London in a helicopter ride view of the Thames and Tower Bridge. In *Mujeres al borde*, whose very title recalls *Frenzy*, Carlos, Iván's son, holds up the postcards of Madrid's landmarks, the Cibeles fountain and the Puerta de Alcalá, written from his father to Pepa, which he discovers in Pepa's bedroom. Not only is Hitchcock a model for a good joke in the recipe recitations, but also how Hitchcock uses national referents through broad, ironic tourism is likewise a pattern for true entertainment and resuscitated box-office success. Almodóvar appreciated, and exploited, both.

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A Life, Imagined and Otherwise

The Limits and Uses of Autobiography in Almodóvar's Films

Alberto Mira

O poeta é um fingidor . . . / The poet is a faker . . .

(Fernando Pessoa, *Autopsychography*)

Los que piensan que *La ley del deseo* es una película autobiográfica se equivocan. La película que habla mucho de mí estaba hecha mucho antes de que rodara *La ley*. Esa película se llama *Lo que el viento se llevó*

(Pedro Almodóvar)

(Those who think *Law of Desire* is an autobiographical film are mistaken. The film that talks a lot about me was made long before I filmed *Law*. That film is called *Gone with the Wind*.)

Inventing the Self: Autobiography between Fact and Fantasy

Almodóvar is not alone among filmmakers in inserting biographical experiences as motives and characters within his films. Still, there are few contemporary directors so adept at using their films to reinforce their constructed public persona. Discussions on this (putative) autobiographical impulse became a focal point of much of the critical discussion generated around *La mala educación* / *Bad Education* (2004), which many reviewers read as a fairly literal account of Almodóvar's time in a religious school; some critics even speculated that "Enrique" (played by Fele Martínez and



Figure 4.1 School days: Almodóvar with the two priests from *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Diego López Calvín.

Raúl G. Forneiro) was the director's fictional stand-in. Consequently, they interpreted the film as a roman à clef in which whatever happened to Enrique in the story, both at school and in maturity, could be related back to the "real" Almodóvar.

Over the years, Almodóvar himself had encouraged then disavowed the idea that he had been abused as a child.¹ This ambivalence toward facts needs to be viewed beyond the specific questions of the director's veracity in public statements about any particular film of his but as a trope in which Almodóvar appears to blur the lines between his actual personal biography and his persona.² It is therefore worth looking more closely into the collapse of the public and private Almodóvar, on the one hand, and the blurred limits between reality and fiction, on the other, which arise out of the discussions surrounding *La mala educación*.

The way self-construction is presented by the director is relevant. Almodóvar's attitude vis-à-vis autobiographical inscription in the text has often made use of the rhetoric of the tease through his characters; in person he hints at a private truth that will eventually be revealed, only to pull the rug from under our feet at the last minute. His comments about *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987) are telling: he made a film which seemed to hint at some private truth, only to claim cheekily that *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) is a more accurate account of his true self. His texts of the 1980s (collected in *Patty Diphusa y otros textos*) constitute a catalogue of themes and mythologies that build up a seductive public persona. Yet, inconsistencies abound. We need to be aware that some of the problems don't

stem from any bad faith on Almodóvar's part but are inherent in any attempt to speak about oneself. It is important, though, to acknowledge from the start that autobiographical discourse is far from transparent or unproblematic. As Pierre Bourdieu explained to those trying to account for his silences about his early life (Bourdieu 1986): even if one is inclined to do so, the rules of storytelling are different from those governing experience.

In his analysis of autobiographical writing by Spanish gay artists, *Hindsight of the Real* (2003) David Vilaseca keeps returning to another aspect of autobiography which will be central to my own discussion: the *self-as-inscribed* in autobiographical writing is not the *consequence* but the *cause* of the life s/he is attempting to tell (taking a cue from Lee Edelman's *Homographesis*, Vilaseca uses the rhetorical figure of *metalepsis* to discuss this). So in *La mala educación*, it is the older Almodóvar who is the *cause* of young Enrique; Almodóvar is the "I" whose story is being told; consequently, Enrique only *seems* to be a forerunner of older Almodóvar. The past is always written about, in Lacanian terms, in a future perfect tense; and autobiographical self-inscription is always a matter of "I shall have been" rather than "I was." For Vilaseca, one key issue in such attempts at self-presentation lies in the fact that identity is always already inscribed in the subject, and the position from which the "I" speaks pre-exists the writing of experience.

In his study, Vilaseca showed how versions of the self as portrayed in autobiographical writings are revealed as based on the fantasy of autonomous subjectivity. *La mala educación* is a very good illustration of this. Characters exist within the film as projections back into the Francoist past from a future which is also represented within the film (1980). And the film represents past events (Francoism, 1980) as pointing toward the future author, Pedro Almodóvar, who is addressing contemporary audiences.³ Almodóvar's work overall is an excellent illustration of such a view of "becoming" in terms of future perfect: it is also too well contrived to be read in the complex terms Bourdieu demands.

In view of critical response to *La mala educación*,⁴ we might forget that the central plot strand is not about pedophilia but about a director finding inspiration through *passion* (the last word articulated in the film right before the credits). In choosing as its protagonist a character who shares important traits with Almodóvar circa 1980, that is, at a turning point in his career as a mainstream filmmaker⁵ and in the construction of his public image, it posits very specifically the question of who Almodóvar "will have been/is" and gestures in multiple ways toward Almodóvar's past: first, by setting a strand of the labyrinthine story in a school not dissimilar to the one the director attended; second, by inserting into the fiction a "real" short story with inspiration in "real" events Almodóvar wrote about ("La visita" / The Visit) and then by opening the gap, within that same fiction, between artistic fiction and reality by providing an alternate version (i.e. Señor Berenguer taking over after the end of the "Zahara" story and replacing the real/fictitious Father Manolo); and thirdly, because its gesturing toward reality is performed, typically in Almodóvar, through films in a double way: films are a key part of the

character's memories (*Esa mujer/That Woman* [Mario Camus, 1969]), but they also shape *La mala educación's* diegetic reality (*Double Indemnity* [Billy Wilder, 1944]).

The authorial first-person can be inscribed in films in different ways. His tastes and desires find more literal expression than in, say, Hitchcock (Almodóvar's films constitute a catalogue which assimilates his favorite films, books, and objects), but he warns us not to read events literally. In fact the model of self-insertion Almodóvar adopts is closer to that of another director he greatly admires: Federico Fellini, whose Guido in *8½* (1963) is a very thinly disguised version of himself in a plot which is largely fictional but represents metonymically a real impasse in his career. In *La mala educación*, and other presumed "autobiographical" films, there is an impulse in the artist that fiercely demands to be identified as the I (or "eye") of every image. But one important difference is that his films always give the impression of tidily rewriting the self, as if previous attempts to tell the story had been unsatisfactory, as if one were still trying to work out the correct version of oneself.

This ambivalence has puzzled commentators who try to approach Almodóvar as an individual. An insightful writer such as Juan José Millás insisted on the unknowability of Almodóvar the person precisely as he attempted to get at his objective truth. Millás was granted unprecedented access to the director for a feature to be published in *El País Semanal* (2004) at the time of the release of *La mala educación*, coinciding with the speculation on Almodóvar's childhood mentioned above. He was allowed to sit, physically, as close to Almodóvar as possible during the shoot, a position he ended up refusing (again, Millás interestingly describes this refusal in physical terms) in order to achieve a better perspective through distance. However, as he tries to delve into the real Almodóvar, or at least to uncover a sense of the person behind the carefully manufactured commonplaces, he ends up acknowledging defeat, as if stories as told by the artist had been carefully prepared to *conceal* the real Almodóvar, rather than to reveal him. His next step was to search out Almodóvar's rural roots in La Mancha, to try and find the real Almodóvar by looking into streets, scraps of family history, and traditional trades and ways of life (an interesting attempt to ground Almodóvar by discussing his father's profession) as if they could account for the mysterious face behind the mask. In the published feature, he provided a portrait of the filmmaker's father which is more complex than anything biographers and commentators have had so far. His findings about Almodóvar's early life are precise and interesting and yet don't seem to get the writer much closer to the kind of biographical truth he is seeking.

Of course this was to be expected: as we have discussed, raw reality as pursued by Millás is not the key to biography. In going back almost obsessively to certain character types, situations, or events, almost as if trying to get them right eventually (or more polished for public consumption), Almodóvar seems to dare the analyst or the curious spectator to make out the blurred line between reality and distortion. In other words, Almodóvar "is" in his films in the only way an artist can be said to be "in" his work: by putting together and turning into narrative a series

of fragments of other texts, brought to life through cultural mythologies and maybe a number of “real” anecdotes as a guarantee that the fiction is anchored in a “real” self.

My attempt to make sense of the meaning of authorial self-inscription in the Almodóvar corpus is markedly different from Millás’s. Rather than laboring to uncover some archaeological truth, I am acknowledging autobiography’s inescapable textuality and excavating into discursive mythologies as prime sources to help us make sense of Almodóvar’s imagined persona. The limitations to Almodóvar’s presence in his work are representative of general issues in autobiographical self-presentation and the limits are intrinsic to any biographical project. Multi-layered experience cannot be well served by linear syntax (“and then. . .”) and it is bound to end up in mere gossip, something Almodóvar seems to be keenly aware of, having inhabited gossip-ridden worlds. A second consequence, often overlooked by critics but something that Almodóvar knows, is that responses to certain kinds of knowledge about certain persons will always elicit the belief that those persons are predictable, and behave and desire according to certain clichés. Specifically, the knowledge that Almodóvar “is a homosexual” entails a number of assumptions on the part of critics (for instance he would be devoted to his mother, leaning toward frivolity, etc.) that the object of such stereotyping keeps on engaging with. Stereotyping has to do with perception, but it is possible, on the part of the subject, to make up a believable stereotype in order to conceal less stereotypical readings of experience. As we shall see later, a certain attempt to control discourses on sexuality is palpable in Almodóvar’s autobiographical persona.

There are specific ways in which the past becomes concrete and specific in Almodóvar’s films. As the editors of the 2006 Almodóvar Paris exhibition catalogue note (*Almodóvar: Exhibition!*, a title which reads as an injunction to show off), his films are full of objects which bring back the past in its physicality, to the diegesis. The director has spoken about his fondness for *objets trouvés* and how he uses these in his films. Many objects, like the little soldier figurine in *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997) or the toy diver in *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), gesture clearly toward the world of childhood, both the filmmaker’s and that of the characters. Another procedure to make memory present, singled out by the catalogue editors and used exhaustively in the films, is even more relevant: the abundance of framed pictures, whether it is Manuela’s picture of the happy days in Barceloneta in *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999) or the torn one that leads her son to realize that part of his life is missing. Look at each night table, every ledge or any dining room shelf, and audiences are bound to find several framed photographs which materialize in the present memories of the past. Also, in terms of narrative arc characters in the films are also touched, wounded or traumatized by that past, real damaged children like Victoria Abril in *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991) or lovers for whom the past is source of fond memories like Leo (Marisa Paredes) in *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995). This may not be a reflection of Almodóvar’s

own attitude toward the past, but it certainly is a way for the director to create a point of view which is always gesturing toward it.

Even more central than the three gestures already noted, there is a fourth way to make the past visible in Almodóvar's narrative: through intertextuality. Objects, pictures, and wounded childhoods are important clues to Almodóvar's self-presentation, but the core of identity in Almodóvar is often expressed specifically in terms of films, and a very specific repertoire of films has become part of his cinematic output, adding layers of information, contextualizing events or characters, and making sense of personal biography. The teasing claim that Scarlett O'Hara's story is closer to his experience than *La ley del deseo* can be read in this light. Films constitute the pieces of the puzzle, the identity always already pre-existing Almodóvar's persona as Scarlett O'Hara pre-exists Pablo or Enrique. As a complement to the 2006 exhibition (the first ever dedicated to a living filmmaker), the French Cinémathèque organized a "carte blanche" season of films in which Almodóvar was allowed to choose titles freely out of his personal canon.⁶ As listed in the catalogue, the films follow his career closely: one to three films were selected in connection to each of his works, the list consists both of film classics and works by filmmakers whose style has been a source of inspiration. The selection, which ranges from *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) to *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) and *Journey to Italy* (Roberto Rossellini, 1954), is largely unsurprising. The titles are what one would expect from watching Almodóvar's films, which contributes to the feeling of a consistent (because carefully planned) parallel story. They included not just films important to Almodóvar as a person, which are the titles recurring in interviews and articles by him, but films that can help in the interpretation of Almodóvar's life as presented in his narratives. Performatively, the selection does not just reflect who Pedro Almodóvar is but constitutes a vivid picture of what the filmmaker aims to be perceived as.

Film as featured in Almodóvar's works is more than just a series of images or plots inserted as quotes into the main narrative, Tarantino fashion. For Almodóvar, film also becomes the very point of articulation of plots, and to some extent they gesture toward an articulation of the self: Almodóvar's public persona is constructed through the films in his canon. So his mothers are sometimes *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and sometimes Lana Turner in *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959), his lovers recall the danger of Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, his artists gesture toward Cukor or Minnelli stories from Judy Garland in *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) to Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956). This plundering, which in the days before tightening copyright legislation Almodóvar shamelessly described as "plagiarism,"⁷ is a useful way of making Vilaseca's discussion of the construction of the autobiographical self specific to the case of Almodóvar. Although he may borrow, as we shall see, from cultural myths, his more direct and overwhelming borrowings are ready-made, plots that are not just stories, but stories charged with emotion and personal experience.

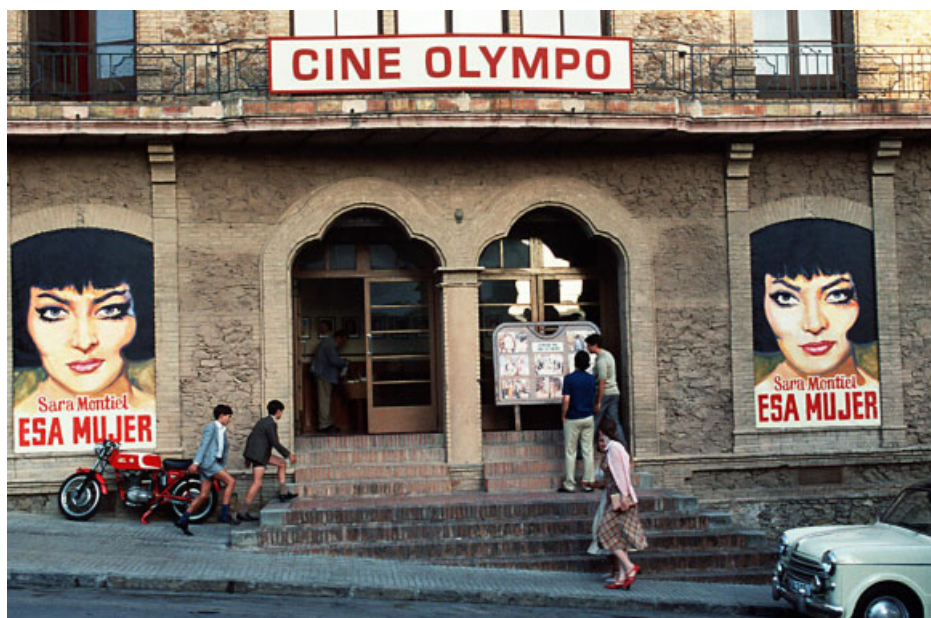


Figure 4.2 Portrait of the artist as a young gay man: the Cine Olympto in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Diego López Calvín.

There are two basic ways in which film matter is incorporated into Almodóvar's texts. They appear as actual movies seen by characters, often gesturing toward them: *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazán, 1961) in *¿Qué he hecho you para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) or *Esa mujer* in *La mala educación* are instances of this. In terms of contributing to an autobiographical discourse they express certain tastes and emotions felt at the cinema. Films being watched by characters may help them make sense of their lives. Some plots appear as fiction only to become diegetic reality: it is watching Losey's *The Prowler* (1951) that Ramón (Alex Casanovas) suddenly realizes the truth about his mother's death in *Kika* (1993). But in many cases, besides the film, we are shown the moment in which the film is invested with emotion. Dubbing a clip from *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) makes Pepa faint in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios / Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). And it is important in *La mala educación* that Enrique and Ignacio confirm their affection under a huge close-up of camp diva Sara Montiel in the cinema, as if the gay favorite of the period was actually blessing their union.

Film in these cases is an object within the diegesis invested with emotional meaning. Its function is performative: films are not just things watched, but represented images which make things happen. But there is a second, more prominent way in which film helps Almodóvar to develop an autobiographical voice: film can

function meta-textually as a way for Almodóvar the author to communicate with his audience, leading the spectator to read his plots in ways his characters may not be fully aware of. Plots are not just external to the characters in his films, but spill out into their lives, giving them a structure, a fate, a meaning. In *La mala educación*, Ángel (Gael García Bernal) and Señor Berenguer/Padre Manolo (Lluís Homar) attend a screening of *Double Indemnity* only seconds after a sequence with echoes of the supermarket sequence in Wilder's film. Berenguer can say "these films are always talking about us," as if they as characters preceded the films themselves.

Almodóvar has stated that his relation to films is not exactly "cinephilia" as it goes beyond being just a passive spectator of the films he makes films his own. In a way it is more like "cinefagy": he "absorbs" films, assimilates them, makes them become part of his plots, and, more indirectly, part of his life.⁸ That is why in going over some of the main autobiographical tropes in Almodóvar's canon, we often need to go back to film to make sense of them.

A Portrait of the Young Gay Man as a Star-to-be: Personal Experience into Cultural Mythologies

In the rest of this chapter, I aim to explore some aspects of Almodóvar's early life as a narrative that was always already inscribed in cultural myths as articulated in film. In tracing the cultural narratives that frame Almodóvar's autobiographical account I am attempting to read the materials provided by the director as non-natural, or constructed, and non-transparent, in other words, as a site for the kind of ideological discourse Roland Barthes called "mythologies," in which "l'opération critique consiste à déchiffrer l'embarras des raisons, des alibis, des apparences, bref tout le *naturel* social, pour rendre manifeste l'échange réglé sur quoi reposent la marche sémantique et la vie collective" (the critical operation consists in deciphering the excessive accumulation of reasons, alibis and appearances, that is, the "natural," in order to make evident the rule-governed exchange that underlies the both semantic meaning and collective life) (Barthes 1975: 63). In this "deciphering" by taking into account reasons or alibis through cultural mythologies, I am trying to clarify the meaning of autobiographical discourse for Almodóvar.

A number of areas form key nodes, recurring in Almodóvar's biographical self-inscription in his work. Of these, the first in chronological order is the construction of the rural as some kind of lost paradise recalled through nostalgia. In insisting on this idea, Almodóvar is trying to convey a certain idea of roots. Secondly, certain familiar narrative dynamics, central to many of his plots also work as a way to construct an autobiographical persona. Thirdly, and slightly more marginally, I will look at the idea of growing up constructed in the films, in which children and teenagers can be read as images of the director. These last two areas in the film narratives are linked to homosexuality, a key experiential area for Almodóvar invaded by cultural

mythologies toward which the director has kept a more ambivalent relationship than the ones he constructed toward rural origins or family. Homosexuality is one of the unspoken strains of Almodóvar's personal narrative and accounts for a number of alibis and causes pointed out by Barthes, thus serving as a decoder of motivations. Lastly the presentation of the artistic self, and in particular becoming a star, as a cultural myth articulated directly from certain Hollywood films is a powerful meta-narrative in his works, which re-interpret his personal evolution. This last fantasy, I will argue, is very much at the heart of Almodóvar's autobiographical agenda and it is not unrelated to his ambivalence toward homosexuality.

Pedro Almodóvar was born in Calzada de Calatrava, a small village in Ciudad Real where he spent his early childhood. Two birthdates, 1949 and 1951, have been proposed, as tends to happen with artists who are overly concerned about reputation or posterity, in order to fulfill the conditions of the "young genius" stereotype. The later date may have originated at a time when youth could have contributed to his aura: after all he was already thirty-one when *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* was released in 1980 and young geniuses, as the narrative cliché would have it, are meant to be under thirty. One could say he changed his official date of birth so that he could *become* a young genius when youth was almost slipping away, the idea superseding the facts. When he was seven, the family moved to another village near Cáceres (Extremadura). His childhood memories, though, tend to be inspired by Calzada de Calatrava, and so is the imagery associated with the countryside, that wide expanse of "aldeas" (villages) scattered in a never ending plain, mythologized by writers in search of a landscape correlative to Spanish identity at the start of the twentieth century. Although his formative years were not spent in La Mancha, being "manchego" is more heavily invested with cultural meanings than the less recognizable Extremadura. Such origins reinforce the idea of self-creation, and also the unlikelihood of talent triumphing in spite of coming from the wrong place. This is, it should be remembered, one of the key tropes of show business folklore (as seen in the movies), from Ruby Keeler in *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) to Christina Aguilera in *Burlesque* (Steve Antin, 2010): characters are always destined for success in spite of inauspicious origins. And so with Almodóvar: in his account, success in spite of awkward circumstances is a trope always already inscribed in the early stages of a life when such success could only be fantasized. Rural life is both the obstacle to success to be overcome and a source of nostalgia.

In his films, the myth of the countryside is delineated with a suspicious neatness. In *¡Átame!*, disappointed Ricky (Antonio Banderas) seeks solace in the village where he was born only to find it deserted and crumbling; in *Volver* (2006), the return to the village is a way to make peace with the past (its ghosts) and to close old wounds. More pointedly, Leo in *La flor de mi secreto* wakes up after her attempted suicide to the voice of her mother on the answering machine effectively "summoning" her to the country, which in the film appears as the place for healing heartache and building independence and self-reliance. In these and other instances,

the director is attempting to make a point, presenting himself as a man who leaves the past behind but keeps a healthy sense of roots through unhealthy nostalgia. These are all part and parcel of well-established mythologies of the countryside constructed from an urban perspective and recurrently presented in narratives created by the urban imagination: the country is, unavoidably, the city's other. But as Vilaseca notes in his discussion of Reinaldo Arenas's nostalgia for Cuba during his American exile, this may not be the countryside of lived experience (which is only offered to us anecdotally, both in Millás's investigations and in Almodóvar's plots) but a construction which is exclusively always already nostalgic. In real terms, the village was, is, and will have been unlivable for Almodóvar; nostalgia is superimposed on his feelings of detachment in order to communicate the idea of intensity and emotion. These films present the countryside as a dream, as a fantasy conveyed in pictures or sentimental poems, rather than the expression or real yearning or, more specifically, of "authenticity." In fact, his accounts of La Mancha before he reached international status were far less romanticized and less warm than later narratives would suggest (see for instance Vidal 1989).

In order to express personal memories he borrowed cinematic ones. He has mentioned his indebtedness to the films of Luis García Berlanga as sources of inspiration to represent this rural ethos. In *Bienvenido Mr Marshall/Welcome, Mr. Marshall* (1953) and other films of small-town life such as *Plácido* (1961), Berlanga perfectly conveyed the voices of simple folk from rural Spain and the echoes of this uncomprehending, baffling, rich speech may be heard clearly in many of Almodóvar's characters. Another influence, however, is visible although less prominent in Almodóvar's canon; this is the cluster of characters including the grandmother in *Qué he hecho yo*, the mother in *La flor de mi secreto* (both played by Chus Lampreave), or television host Francisca Caballero (Almodóvar's real mother) in *Kika*, who actually sound like the character of Paco Martínez Soria in a series of incredibly successful anti-urban comedies of the 1960s, the best example being *La ciudad no es para mí/The City is Not for Me* (Pedro Lazaga, 1966). Clearly, Almodóvar does not identify with the reactionary ethos of these films, but he finds it narratively useful (establishing tension, providing escape, creating nostalgia and a sense of otherness) and stylistically engaging to convey a certain idea of his past.

From his accounts we learn he was closer to his mother than to his father. He told Millás that his father really looked at him as if he were some kind of alien, and never understood his ambition to find success in the city. Of course the father's doubts sound out of place now, how could one doubt young Pedro was destined to be a star? Yet again, taking my cue from Vilaseca's discussion of Goytisolo, how could he have been a star *before becoming a star*? One of the insights Millás feels most proud of in his account is the acknowledgment that one of Almodóvar's regrets is that his father never lived to witness his son's success, as if he felt he never *proved he was right*. Although fathers are slippery in the Almodóvar canon, one could argue his narrative trope focusing on "unfinished business" (most explicitly conveyed in *Volver*) could be a *mise en scène* of his father's shadow in his work.

For a few years young Pedro attended a religious school in Cáceres (Padres Salesianos), he sang in the choir and became increasingly disappointed both with the idea of God and especially with organized religion. Again, some anecdotes are repeated in several fictional accounts of his experience: how he gave God a deadline to reveal Himself and He failed to show up (thereby turning the boy into a disbeliever); how he discovered the word “hedonist” in an encyclopedia and decided this was what he *really* was. Again, the persona follows the idea. Almodóvar’s attempts at conveying the conditions of life in a religious context go back to a brief scene in *La ley del deseo* and were already featured in *Entre tinieblas*/*Dark Habits* (1983). In *La mala educación*, however, we find his most sustained and detailed treatment of this period, implicitly contradicting his off-screen insistence that religion was never traumatic for him, and that he was not attempting to settle accounts through this film. In art cinema, the loss of faith has been a key topic for directors such as Bergman. Almodóvar certainly shows the influence of the more dramatically driven of Bergman’s films (for instance his rewriting of *Autumn Sonata* [Ingmar Bergman, 1978] motives in *Tacones lejanos*), but is unconcerned by the Swedish director’s metaphysical anguish. The key here is that a visual, camp element takes over his treatment of faith: for Almodóvar, the value and meaning of the Catholic ritual is based on its surface, not on its depth, as it might be in Cifesa films or Hollywood biblical epics. In a similar vein, his memories don’t attempt to go very deep into actual experience: the darker areas of *La mala educación* are those in which his alter ego characters are not personally involved.

It was in his teens that sexual identity and its consequences to social life became an issue: it is obvious how being a homosexual clashed with his ambition of being popular, how the two of them were not perceived to belong in the same narrative in the early 1960s. To some extent, Almodóvar’s biography as told by himself is the archetypal gay life. The word “gay” and implications of homosexuality only appear as elements within fictions and (as in the joke on *Gone with the Wind* being the story of his life) the connection to reality is muddled by first-person interventions. Almodóvar deals with the centrality of a marginalized sexual orientation in his films, yet he has annoyed Spanish gay activists in trying to distance himself from an account of his “gay experience” as if the idea were limiting to everything else Almodóvar was trying to be.

The films may help to discern exactly which aspects of “gay” Almodóvar finds problematic. One oblique method of dealing with the way he believes some areas of his life (very specifically sexual orientation) are private is through his treatment of television reality shows. One plot strand in *Volver* has a character having to deal with “telebasura” (“trash TV”). The fact that telebasura is used to drag private lives out into the open is marked negatively and it has seriously negative plot repercussions. An earlier statement on this was the character of Andrea Caracortada in *Kika*, a truly prophetic creation which announced the shape of things to come in Spanish television, but the need to draw some kind of line with the press is already present in *La ley del deseo* (with a clearer

link to the outing issue). In a way, labeling sexual “secrets” is the cardinal sin in Almodóvar’s world. As a gay man growing up during the years when the label was used against homosexuals, he has been suspicious of self-identification. The implication, so distant from classical activist doctrine, is that any labeling of sexual identity ghettoizes the subject. That there are commercial repercussions in such ghettoizing is not irrelevant to this discussion, but neither is it the whole story.

The fact remains that his vision of desire as a force hard to pin down ran against prevailing minoritizing versions of gayness. For many years there were few characters in Almodóvar who could be considered “gay” or who might even be aware of some kind of gay agenda or gay issues: the Antonio Banderas character in *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passions* (1982); the Eusebio Poncela character in *La ley del deseo*; the son in *Qué he hecho yo*; and the supporting character of Victoria Abril’s neighbor in *¡Átame!*; Bom in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*; the Rossy de Palma character in *Kika*; and the Marisa Paredes character in *Todo sobre mi madre* are good examples but the word gay is never spelled out. Even among these examples, Gloria’s son Miguel in *Qué he hecho yo* and the neighbor in *¡Átame!* might seem to be relaxed about categorization. The first instance where a character defines himself explicitly as “gay” is Ray X (Rubén Ochandiano) in *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), and even in that case we are talking about somebody who was married before coming out of the closet. This is also the first film where a politically charged word such as “homophobia” is used in the Almodóvar canon.

A second recurrent trope related to the instability of sexual identity is even more interesting: characters who look gay and give gay hints but are actually heterosexual. The Almodóvar canon is full of such characters and it is important to think to what extent there is a conscious strategy at work here: Javier Cámara in *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002) is the best example, but the taxi driver in *Mujeres*, Antonio Banderas in *Matador* (1986), or Juan Echanove in *La flor de mi secreto* are also instances of straight men who could be read as gay.

In spite of his mistrust of homosexuality as a self-defining label, his films present a number of motives which are part of cultural mythologies on homosexuality. A particular treatment of motherhood, for instance, is a key source of meaning in Almodóvar’s work. Given his very public attachment to his own mother, commentators have been quick to assume mothers in his films are all references, more or less literal, to his own mother and have puzzled over the title of *Todo sobre mi madre*, made at the time of his mother’s death. This is something the director encouraged by featuring Francisca Caballero in most of his films for twenty years. The ambivalence is comfortable to both audiences and critics who assume stereotypically that it is logical that a male homosexual director pays tribute to his mother. A key distinction needs to be made however. Motherhood in the films (apart from Caballero’s presence) appears as a myth (similar to his grounding in rural culture) and as a cultural stereotype based in a series of texts.

As Brett Farmer argues in his discussion of homosexual matrocentrism, not all homosexuals are matrocentric, yet, matrocentrism as constructed in psychoanalysis

and re-enacted in pop versions of it is a central discourse that makes sense of homosexual experience, both to artists themselves and to their audiences (Farmer 2000). Almodóvar chooses to deal with mothers who are quite *unlike* his own mother. To list examples from his personal canon: Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas* (Charles Vidor, 1937); Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*; Betty Field in *Picnic* (Joshua Logan, 1955); Lana Turner in *Imitation of Life*; Audrey Christie in *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961); Ingrid Bergman in *Autumn Sonata*. This suggests, following Farmer, that the homosexual self in the Almodóvar canon is better articulated through his cultural preferences and style and than through any literal representation of “the homosexual.”

One of the key moments in Almodóvar’s films in terms of accounting for these strands of his imaginative biography is the one in *Todo sobre mi madre* discussed by Leo Bersani (2010). A son, coded but not explicitly designated as gay, sits with his mother watching the camp classic *All About Eve*. The scene echoes the one from *The Fruit Machine* (Philipp Saville, 1988) (described by Farmer in which a gay son and his mother share some emotionally charged moments watching David Lean’s *Brief Encounter*, 1945). In Almodóvar’s film, the son makes a point about the title of the film literally meaning not “Eva al desnudo” but “Todo sobre Eva,” which becomes the title of his notebook “Todo sobre mi madre,” and subsequently the title of the film, thus constituting an empty promise for what comes after. What can we glean from this moment? First, clearly the director is not really Esteban (he has not lost his father, he does not live in the same conditions), but Almodóvar wants us to think of that connection. He is the first person in the title (the “me” in “my”); he is an “artist-to-be” (only he won’t become an artist or an adult, as Almodóvar did). Esteban is there as a guarantee of Almodóvar’s self-inscription in the film and logically he is the one who writes the title of Almodóvar’s film: it is his imagined self as a teenager. The Esteban figure has a precedent in Miguel, the younger son in *Qué he hecho yo*. Miguel was also a gay-coded, cinephile, mother-loving kid who dabbled in prostitution (and went further than Esteban). In the film, the boy comes back just in time to save his mother from committing suicide vowing to protect her from despair. The presentation of the mother in these two instances is just a way to define the son as an “I” and Almodóvar the director as an author with a passion.

Rather than being similar to his own mother, the mothers in Almodóvar’s films belong to what some American academics have recognized as a gay canon. The prominence of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis (whose image materializes not only in the film mother and son watch together, but also phantasmatically in Huma Rojo’s name and more literally in the pictures in her dressing room) is not to be associated with Almodóvar the person, but is undoubtedly a mytheme in his world peopled not just with mothers but with film stars playing mother roles with all the camp resonances some of these roles have.⁹

Almodóvar arrived in Madrid at the end of the 1960s. Once again, the exact date varies depending on the account.¹⁰ The fascination with the big city originated with reports from his mother (see his piece “Venir a Madrid” in the *Patty*

Diphusa collection), and the move, in all of its uncertainty and wonder, is featured in various plot strands in his films. His films discover the city as a welcoming place and there is a trope here of the city not just fulfilling dreams but, very specifically, nurturing a new identity. Then again he must have come into the artistic community in Madrid, literally, through the back door and he must have felt much more displaced than his rose-tinted version of making it in the city seems to suggest. There must have been moments of uncertainty or self-doubt, there must have been homophobia, clashes, lies, false steps, and betrayals, if only because they are the normal components of anybody's life, including young geniuses's. It is remarkable, however, to what extent the experience of these ten long years is practically elided in the accounts: if one listens to stories as retold by Almodóvar and others he was very visible in the Madrid party circuit after 1976, and also in artistic circles, and he has made it clear that he earned a living working hard at Telefónica, the national telephone company. Still the role of these decisive years in shaping his subjectivity is largely unaddressed in his plots, although some relevant aspects of his experience as an underground artist can be found in the short stories written in the 1970s (see chapter 2, this volume).

During the mid- 1970s, after the death of Franco, he started to produce Super-8 shorts, often exhibiting them in Barcelona, much more open than Madrid to avant-garde and experimental cinema. In this he seems to have been a marginal figure even within underground circuits: his marginality has a touch of the paradox, as he was too mainstream for the underground in trying to make "narrative" film: whereas some other filmmakers saw themselves as "artists" he saw himself as a "storyteller," somebody who aimed to reach broad audiences. This impulse toward storytelling was vindicated in the future perfect and he appears to want to have his cake and eat it by being both an avant-garde artist and a star.

The trope of distinctiveness is also a typical one in narratives about becoming a star, and one of the clichés show business stories are filled with: being oneself, being distinctive. In *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, 1968), Fanny Brice cannot compete with other Ziegfeld girls in prettiness, so she must sing "His Love Makes Me Beautiful" in her own special, parodic style. And, lo and behold, she becomes a star. This is the camp religion preached by some 1960s artists like Andy Warhol. One can imagine Almodóvar antics in the late 1970s very much along the lines of Brice's success, although the path may not have been so smooth. Once again, this kind of narrative has more than a touch of gay imagination. He had to become an underground artist and create a parody of the kind of glamour which was (and might have continued to be) out of his reach. A camp Hollywood fantasy of stardom runs through his *Patty Diphusa* writings of the 1980s and has an interesting twist in a text called "Consejos para llegar a ser un cineasta de fama internacional" (Advice on how to become a world famous film director).

We are now getting close to the golden years, the moment when Almodóvar finally made it and the story of those years is more or less written in stone now as the culmination of a series of film-based narratives. To recap: feverish activity is a

remarkable feature of any account of the 1970s Pedro Almodóvar. Besides his filmmaking, he worked in several capacities in Los Goliardos, an independent theater company, and was featured in mid-1970s films (for instance Pedro Olea's *Un hombre llamado Flor de Otoño* / *A Man Called Autumn Flower* [1978]), and played in rock and punk music groups. It is acknowledged that he was one of the key personalities behind the Madrid *Movida* of the late 1970s. *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, his first film, which he started shooting in 1978 (some sources claim 1979) secured him a place in the underground artistic canon. He financed the film, which took eighteen months to complete, largely through personal contributions from friends and acquaintances. Things were only marginally easier for his second feature film, *Laberinto de pasiones*. *Entre tinieblas*, *Qué he hecho yo*, and *Matador* were all personal films which contribute toward an upward creative and commercial curve in his output, although in all of them he was working as a contract director and feeling the restraint that producers exercised on his creativity ("I always felt the producer was making a film and I had another one in mind" [Strauss 1994]). At the time of *La ley del deseo* (1986), he and his brother Agustín took advantage of the Ley Miró to fund *El Deseo*, a company designed to support his films. *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, the first film fully produced under the new conditions, finally established his international reputation and constitutes an arrival point of sorts to his story.

All of these facts are faithfully retold in several interviews, as if the "becoming a star" fantasy, seen from the gay lens, was the end somehow already present at the beginning. This fantasy is, indeed, the dominating trope of Almodóvar's autobiographical project, the one that gives meaning to accounts of his life. Following one of the central trends in European auteur cinema, a fair number of characters in Almodóvar are, in some way or another, artists who have to balance personal and public life,¹¹ and which, rhetorically, reproduce the conflict represented so often in the work between being popular and being private, intensely personal. A review of the cast of characters in his films reveals how much they all turn around developing as an artist in a metaphorical rather than metonymical way. In constructing this opposition, a lot of rhetorical energy has gone, as we have noted, in detaching the self from mythologies of homosexuality while using "gay culture" to produce distinctiveness.

In the years after *La mala educación* the strength of his personal narrative seems to be fading and that, in a way, may turn out to be as stifling as the feared "gay" label as he keeps on returning to the same motifs and themes with great skill but less energy. Almodóvar could choose not to play that game of autobiographical reconstruction, but the issues of fame and the public image have become so central to his work that he would be risking to lose the very "Almodovarness" which characterizes it. In a way it is as if Almodóvar had told us as much about himself that he needed us to know. But telling this story has rendered him silent. He has been what the story was always already aiming for. Now there is nothing else to tell. In interviews granted in the 1990s (most significantly in the Strauss book) he becomes more explicit about working methods, but increasingly more tightlipped about the links between personal life, as if that had already been taken care of in

the films, and the emotions shaping his art and his development as an artist. Key aspects of his development from the 1990s are difficult to pin down other than as rumors, and attempts to get at some kind of narrative easily leave the biographer feeling guilty as if he were prying into some kind of forbidden territory. Almodóvar keeps on "being in his films," the old motifs, the variations on desire and creativity, on rural nostalgia, family, obsession and fame get continually recycled even in recent films: *Los abrazos rotos* seems to feature anecdotal similarities to his version of how *Entre tinieblas* came about, as well as a variation on a filmmaker's obsession with a performer which echoes *La ley del deseo* and *La mala educación*; in *Volver*, the rural community imagined in *La flor de mi secreto*, as well as the "black" novel Leo is writing comes to life; *La mala educación* looks back to *La ley del deseo* not just in the story of a director's involvement with his star, but also in re-enacting Tina's memory in the former film. This chain could go on to provide a complex, if fragmentary, puzzle which, as in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), might read "Pedro Almodóvar." Again, *La mala educación* is at the center of this process, not just because in the fiction he goes back to plot strands dating from his childhood and first introduced in his work in *La ley del deseo*, but also because the real conditions in which the film was born seem to reflect an aspect of Almodóvar's "truth," maybe the kind of emotional, personal truth Millás was aiming to discover, which is barred from the public eye. The very wall that marks the "private" area of Almodóvar's life somehow appears as imposing precisely because so many expectations about getting to know the artist have been set up. With such a personal artist, silences can just be as thunderous as the traffic on the Gran Vía.

Notes

- 1 The claim that he had been molested appears in a 1982 interview for *Maruja Torres* (Willoquet-Maricondi 2004: 12), although commenting on the same period in 2004 he seemed to have changed his version of the facts.
- 2 The official line seems to be that he does not discuss his private life in public (only actually he does) and that he expresses himself only through his films. In an interview for film magazine *Fotogramas* (March, 2004) at the time of *La mala educación*, the director felt the need to engage with speculation and clarify hints in the film by confirming that, yes, he was a student at several religious schools and also that, yes, some of the things Enrique does and says, like singing in the choir and identifying as a "hedonist," were based on things he had said as a child and, yes, naturally he heard lots of stories about children being sexually abused, but, then again, emphatically, no, the central storyline of the molester did not happen to him personally (although he then goes to add that the source was real and specific rather than general and that at least one of the perpetrators is still alive).
- 3 As an instance of this, in the autobiographical account of Juan Goytisolo's youth, Vilaseca identifies an agenda for the self (becoming a transgressive, rebellious homosexual) that could not have been in place for him in the 1950s.
- 4 See Mira (2008: 550–5), for an overview of responses.

- 5 It is interesting that Enrique in the film seems to resemble more a mid-career Almodóvar, at the center of a production company El Azar and with a number of successful films behind him. This is relevant to the idea that a certain persona of the successful artist is more important to Almodóvar's project than the mere biographical information. (I am grateful to Katy Vernon for this insight.)
- 6 See Javier Herrera's readings of these intertextual pairings in chapter 16, this volume.
- 7 See for instance Almodóvar (1998: 8): "Cuanto más plagiábamos, más auténticos éramos" (The more we plagiarized, the more authentic we were).
- 8 See Strauss (1994: 47).
- 9 David Thomson put it best in the 2005 edition of the *Biographical Dictionary of Film*. Regarding Almodóvar, he says: "America could prove a very fruitful inspiration, for he knows American culture, and he is ideally placed to smash our old, fixed dreams about what is to be Hispanic. But *All About My Mother* was his largest and warmest film—a sweeping tribute to women, and one of those films to make you wonder if God didn't mean the movies to be gay."
- 10 Sometimes he states this was around 1967, he also says he visited Madrid for the first time when he was sixteen (that is, around 1965).
- 11 Here is an incomplete list: Nacho Martínez as a mentor figure in *Matador*; the writer nun in *Entre tinieblas*, which also includes a performer character; then Eusebio Poncela in *La ley del deseo*; another director and another performer in *¡Átame!*; the singer in *Tacones lejanos*; a writer and a photographer, as well as a makeup artist in *Kika*; another writer and two dancers in *La flor de mi secreto*; the performers in *Todo sobre mi madre*; the guidebook writer and the dancer in *Hable con ella*; and further film directors in *La mala educación* and *Los abrazos rotos*.

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PART II

Spanish Contexts

El Deseo's "Itinerary"

Almodóvar and the Spanish Film Industry

Marina Díaz López

Behind the profusion of articles and books written about Pedro Almodóvar, we begin to discern the intimate nature of his production company, El Deseo. According to data compiled from Spain's Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA) about the movies produced each year and listed at the Ministry of Culture website, El Deseo S.A. ranks among the top five Spanish production entities. (This ranking does not take into account television station production companies which would surely diminish that standing somewhat.) The company's strategic position within the Spanish production scene places it advantageously in a corporate world which has long suffered from a chronic inability to function as a financially viable industry without state-sponsored protectionism or subsidies.

We need to keep in mind Spanish cinema's historical legacy when speaking of movies in terms of an industry, especially in matters of the scale of film production. After the Spanish Civil War, there were two or three production companies that put out, on average, one movie each year, together with a wide array of small companies, some of them in quite precarious financial straits. The prevailing attitude toward commercial film production during the Franco years, as well as toward the incipient "quality cinema" and independent filmmaking movements of the 1960s, often promoted by the regime itself, provides a sharp contrast with the picture of a restructured motion picture production system that emerged during post-Franco transition to democracy. The current array of film production is an odd mix of production formats and industry attitudes about the public that the various governments (going back forty years) have tried to establish with different laws, which always seem to come too late for the demands of the Spanish public and the transformations in the audiovisual market itself.¹

Founded by Pedro Almodóvar and his brother Agustín² just after the enactment of the 1983 Miró film subsidy decree (Riambau 1995: 400–5; Triana-Toribio 2003: 111–19; Torreiro and Riambau 2008: 888–95), El Deseo's *modus operandi* did not initially suggest the promise of continuity beyond its initial production, *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987). The company took the name of that first film³ and the idea was that Almodóvar would control his work in its entirety. At that point, Pedro had already made a name for himself in Spain through the originality and personal vision embodied in his early films. Throughout his early independent works and his first feature-length films, he grew increasingly unhappy with the creative and production relationships that he was forced to accept from producers.⁴ All of this occurred at an auspicious moment to move toward production autonomy. Through a fortuitous coincidence, the newly enacted film legislation decree known as the “Miró Law” proposed a subsidy model that centered on the figure of the director as the source of a film's artistic coherence and meaning. This gave a boost to the works of established auteurs through the back-up support of television distribution and the possibilities of government financing through funding advances.

Since that initial phase, El Deseo has firmly consolidated its resources as a production company, carefully measuring each successive move in its development as a quality player in Spanish film production. It has now amassed over twenty-five years of work, shaped by its skill at taking full advantage of economic opportunities in the Spanish and international film markets and strongly dedicating its energies to the work of Pedro Almodóvar. The combination of the director's creativity and his brother's meticulous organization and financial control has created one of the best structured production companies in Spain, but with audiovisual development that is geared to international markets. Looking at the almost forty films produced or co-produced by El Deseo, its strength appears to revolve around professional discipline in its control of production, which is predicated on an abiding respect for the creative work that first comes from the directors, and which is inseparable from the care taken by the company's production team in every phase of production leading up to the commercial release of the final cinematic product. This approach is based on the idea that all investment in the organization, content, and presentation of a movie goes through “value creation,” a financial term that refers to the precision with which a product fits into the idea and the effect it is intended to achieve. In this process, all financial investment is shaped by the potential cultural benefit of each film produced; that “benefit” is, in turn, understood in terms of its profitability in the marketplace and its reception in the cultural circuit that sustains it. These are the criteria that shape El Deseo's activities for both Almodóvar's work and the company's other productions.

This is why El Deseo establishes a well-thought-out production plan for each project which begins at the moment of filming and redefines the possibilities of cultural marketing and media coverage to benefit the films' public reception.⁵ The quality conditions in which the movies are finished can even be seen in the managed

production budgets and distribution design. None of this can be understood without understanding, as well, the company's tenacity in keeping the criteria clear for how each work, in each context, should connect to a film's audience. At its root, El Deseo's objectives are colored by a narrative and artistic development of cinema along commercial and aesthetic lines as these have been conventionally understood since the mid-1950s. The company's course of action is defined by its commitment to two key elements of the work: creative control over productions, always calculating the real possibilities of financing; and the cultural marketing of the film.

In addition to looking after the films' productions and distribution there is a promotion policy specially aimed at the international market, which explains why a good part of the company's profitability comes from abroad. In the midst of the radical transformation of the audience and the narratives that are redefining the audiovisual distribution spaces, El Deseo maintains its steadfast dedication to its principal product, Pedro Almodóvar himself, shaping its efforts for positioning the Almodóvar brand in international and virtual contexts. This approach reflects the production company's foresight in placing itself outside the Spanish cinema circuits long before the majority of the country's producers did. The positioning of El Deseo's films in the festival circuit, the careful international distribution of its movies, the positioning in new windows of promotion, all respond to a respect for the rules of the contemporary audiovisual game that are founded on establishing and maintaining a prominent place in the transnational market. The business savvy with which this operation has been carried out bodes well for the production company's longevity. Its structure is prepared to honor the Almodovarian legacy and its future.

Additionally, the production company has been involved in varied associations with other filmmakers and producers. In such collaborations one can see the effort to maintain a certain commitment to backing articulate projects from other production companies or directors. The budgets for these co-productions or productions defy the usual pigeon-holing of these films into any specific production niche. This, of course, is not unlike Almodóvar's own work and identity as author and cinematic brand for whom conventional genre definitions do not easily apply. If we had to point out a trait that encompasses the other productions of El Deseo, it would be essentially the same one that marks the company's approach to Almodóvar's work: the fidelity to the creative design of each author's intention, framed by a realistic view of the financial and commercial contexts of the production.

Marks of Identity

In the vast bibliography devoted to Almodóvar, it is interesting to note how the varied approaches to his work persistently allude to two terms: the Almodóvar brand and the Almodóvar factory. In the published proceedings of the international Almodóvar symposium which took place at the Universidad Castilla-La Mancha,

Paul Julian Smith quotes a European distributor of Almodóvar's work as saying: "What sells is Pedro: the Almodóvar brand" (2003: 144). Indeed, we may note how, over the years, the meaning of Almodóvar's work has been recognized first as a director's personal style; then as a "brand," as its cultural and commercial dimension are reconfigured within international movie culture. It is important to acknowledge that Almodóvar first came to prominence in an international film culture constructed around the "*politique des auteurs*" and presided over by film festivals and each auteur's aspiration of validation in the all-important American market. Because that international milieu is so intimately tied to the commerce of film auteurs, it is especially sensitive to the personality of the director and the new projects that the filmmaker brings to cinema at the end of twentieth-century cinema. Almodóvar arrives supported by *El Deseo* and the need to uphold the production company's operation with his own work. This is why the combination of his creative force and the infrastructure of his production company show the work of a cultural company ready to put all resources into play in order to present itself successfully.

Without a doubt, the development of this type of authorship within the contemporary commercial environment would have been impossible without Almodóvar's distinctive character as creator, which immediately links him to trends of international identity politics through which his deep commitment to Spanish culture is redefined. His cinema has been identified with the invasion of punk culture (Triana-Toribio 2000: 275–6), postmodern derivations of pastiche (Yarza 1999: 35–6) and performance (Allinson 2003: 277–88). His early films also linked to the gay culture circuit (Mira 2004: 525–8), which placed him in a space of transnational affirmations of gender and ethnic identity culture, above all, in the American context (Smith 2002: 98–102). The frame of reference of these interpretations of his films gradually impacts the way his subsequent style develops, which is weighted by the impact of Spain's process of modernization during the Franco regime and its aftermath during the years of the democratic transition. This is reflected in his filmic plots which, in their composite, illuminate the ways in which Almodóvar came to embody the cultural ethos of the transition. His has long been an open mentality that continually renegotiates the elements of rural culture with its traditionalist and new and modern social relations, establishing his positions of identity in terms of the evolution of the social relationships that an urban culture imposed on the Madrid centralism and from which he has progressively distanced himself. Thanks to the post-capitalist space in which the cultural industry of cinema is positioned, *El Deseo* operates to fulfill the needs of his cinema, closely tied as it is on one hand to the delicateness of a personalist, artisanal concept of filmmaking, and on the other to market demands, both domestic and international. Almodóvar is thus one of the best examples of the achievement of glocal (global+local) culture.

Inevitably, these essential qualities associated with his work become mythified around theories of film authorship and in the corresponding distribution of his films through channels that maintain this type of creative mark. In the process, the

Almodóvar public persona has unavoidably undergone a process of reduction and reification around the concept of the "Almodóvar" brand, now understood as the combination of the talents of the two brothers.⁶ The concept of "brand" is used here to underscore how the authorship and production of Almodóvar's films are established within the cultural industry of European cinema, as a structure of strategic, economic, and sociological content.

Secondly, the El Deseo productions other than those made by Pedro have come to have an unquestionable presence and have shaped the company's evolving identity as the "aura" of the brand accrues to the outside projects which, to varying degrees, it supports. One of the questions asked repeatedly by film historians is the possibility of thinking of an Almodóvar school (Cerdán and Pena 2005: 290–1). Beyond the difficulty in establishing affiliations, there is no doubt that the next generation has shown on various occasions its aesthetic and thematic debt. Nevertheless, a rigorous study of Almodóvar's influence on other filmmakers, and more specifically, on Spanish directors, has yet to be done, even as the director and those influenced by him when questioned on this, disclaim any such artistic genealogy.

Family Resemblance

Today, El Deseo appears as one of the emblematic production companies of Spanish cinema. It is positioned within the Spanish market among those who achieve the strongest returns on their financial investments, not so much quantitatively but in the measure in which they make their productions profitable, although these often do not exceed more than one movie a year. The company gives the impression of being a highly profitable operation with a distinctive and prestigious brand. After it was established as El Deseo S.A.,⁷ in 2002, operations were reorganized, dividing the enterprise into various companies whose common goal was to preserve the legacy of the company and have the funds available for producing its next production. The reorganization of El Deseo S.A. created the following divisions: El Deseo maintains the rights to the negatives and their management; El Deseo Inversiones manages the remaining economic activities which are not the negatives; and El Deseo P.C. is in charge of the production "service" to external businesses or those of the same group.

The production company occupies a building on Francisco Navacerrada Street in Madrid where they moved in 2001 from a large apartment on Ruiz Perello Street. The building's environment is attractive, with warm, bright colors that seem to distinguish it from the usual sterile look of a business office, and the attention to detail demonstrates the perfectionist work that informs everything that comes from this company. Amidst the desks, the large windows, and the functional stairways, one's eye is immediately drawn to the oversized movie posters of Almodóvar hits that adorn various walls in the building.



Figure 5.1 The El Deseo family: head of production Esther García on the set of *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Lucía Faraig.

The idea of “the factory” is one of a cluster of concepts associated with Almodóvar, such as “chicas Almodóvar” (Almodóvar girls), which refers to the actresses who habitually worked with the director in the 1990s, and who also embody a type of person associated with the director’s style. This is clear in his landmark work *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), which is, even today, one of his most popular movies. In his 1995 conversation with Frédéric Strauss (2001: 60), Almodóvar himself recognizes the meaning with which the media has invested these terms in defining his work. There have also been efforts to connect Almodóvar to that other legendary factory, Andy Warhol’s, where the comparison, following D’Lugo (2006: 7), “reflects the ways in which Almodóvar, like Warhol, was seen as a multitalented entrepreneur of a new cultural paradigm: writer, performer, film-maker, actor, and authenticator of a countercultural style—in short, the celebrity author.”

From this supposed factory, several “workers” are frequently given prominence by the media. Among these are: Esther García, head of production; Lola García, Pedro’s assistant and Esther’s sister; and Diego Pajuelo Almodóvar as head of the financial team run by Agustín.

But there are also the artistic workers in this factory whose contributions to various productions is evident; these include editor Jose “Pepe” Salcedo, designer Juan Gatti, and, ever since *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995), composer Alberto Iglesias.⁸

The company went from nine people listed by Agustín in the Sociedad General de Autores's Annual [SGAE Annual] (2000: 223) to the fifteen who work there today. The sense of internal, manageable coherency the company projects has been the subject of questions, for instance in the 1999 *Cinemanía* article in which then press chief, Paz Sufrategui, characterized the production company in an article entitled "Strange Blood Ties" (1999: 22). Later, in its Sunday supplement, the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, referring to the resounding success of *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002), published an article illustrated with images of the El Deseo's Navacerrada Street headquarters with a photo of its then fourteen employees (Francia 2003: 11–15). Such group images of the creative team may suggest to some that there is a secret to the success lurking in the image of Almodóvar and El Deseo. Far from a mystery, it is simply the hard work on production, administration, international management, communication, and press as the close-knit team that responds to the demands of the services that the company offers.

The Back Story: Almodóvar

The company began production of *La ley del deseo* with partial financing from Spanish State Television (Televisión Española / TVE) and a relationship with the distribution company Lauren Films, headed by Antonio Llorens, which, in a basic way, made it possible for the film to actually reach movie theaters. The association with Llorens lasted until *¡Átame!* / *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), at which point the distribution went to Warner Española (1991 to 1997), then to Warner Sogefilms (1999 to 2004), and ended up finally with Warner Bros. Entertainment (2006 to the present). Distribution is one of the pillars of production for El Deseo, especially given the importance it gives to the appropriate exhibition of its films. Warner has been a loyal partner from the beginning and has handled distribution in Italy and Spain. But the key to exhibition of El Deseo's products, strictly speaking, goes back to the association with Orion Pictures which handled the distribution of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* in the United States and the rest of the world (except Spain). The producers Tom Bernard and Michael Barker, who currently direct Sony Pictures Classics and who have been with Pedro and Agustín since they began with Orion, understood the importance of the international visibility of Almodóvar and they assured him distribution in what El Deseo considered appropriate exhibition formats.⁹ This stable distribution circuit, which reflects the productive collaboration of loyal partners, goes well beyond merely securing the optimal economic conditions for exhibition of the Almodovarian catalogue (Geitz 2005). At the same time, in Europe, the closest tie since *Hable con ella* is with Pathé Films which distributes in important territories such as France, Great Britain, the Benelux countries, and Switzerland.

Ironically, one of the effects of the distribution of Almodóvar's films as art cinema in the American circuit was to make his commercial importance more

visible in Europe, despite the recognition he had already achieved in critical circles and festivals with various European awards. Thus, the initial echo from Hollywood distributions was coupled with the foundation of the solid relationship with the French production house CIBY 2000, run by Francis Bouygues. The associations with the French group enabled El Deseo to become a player in a large European company with an audiovisual group which would lead to a series of associations that, over time, helped solidify El Deseo's own diversification plans. The 1990s were marked by this relationship in which they made the movies from *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991) to *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997), at which point the French production company broke up and diversified. During the CIBY 2000 period, El Deseo enjoyed 20 percent support in its productions, according to the data from the ICAA for each movie, as well as being able to serve as associate producers for other French films.¹⁰ The last movie co-produced with France was *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999), with Renn Productions and France 2 Cinema, and the Spanish group Vía Digital.

The Oscar for *Todo sobre mi madre* was a watershed moment for El Deseo in which the company achieved a level of importance and personnel growth, yet without losing sight of controlled production. The start of the new century was marked by the confidence and support of various important television companies as El Deseo became the only minority financial partner in association with public and private entities such as France 2, and the Spanish stations Antena 3 and Vía Digital¹¹ in *Hable con ella*, Television Española and Canal+España in *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) and *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009).¹² The television companies, be it by law (in Spain, the law mandates the investment of their capital in cinematographic production), or in support of films they consider appropriate for their programming needs and for building their audiences, have found in Almodóvar's films an ideal source for their prime time schedules. The cultural aura that the Almodóvar name carries, while assuring distribution advances on contracts that allow the search for financial support, enables television companies to completely cover without risk their investments in movies whose cultural legitimacy is grounded in the importance of cinema as a mass medium. From their point of view, Almodóvar is already a canonical figure and his association with television screening not only enhances their status but buttresses El Deseo's creative plans for future cinematic development.

The Course of Things: El Deseo's Other Films

In 1992 the idea of producing movies that were not directed by Pedro Almodóvar became possible, with the clear aim of supporting directors and projects that fit into the design of the company and followed ideas or storylines that Pedro and Agustín liked. As he acknowledged the impact of Alex de la Iglesia's *Acción*

mutante/*Mutant Action* (1992), the first of these new projects, Almodóvar tried to rationalize this other path taken by his production company as it generated the expectation that El Deseo was looking to back projects that were as novel and attractive as those from the beginning of his own career: "It doesn't have the feeling of a factory, especially because we don't have the time to dedicate ourselves to so much work. Although there are a lot of people working, really it's my brother and I who take care of all of the projects. We intend to continue to produce the works of other young authors as we did with Alex de la Iglesia's *Mutant Action*, but it will be little by little. El Deseo will never be a traditional production company that produces a lot of movies. We treat each project delicately, specifically, giving it all the time it needs" (Strauss 2001: 88).

The first two movies the company invested their potential in were the aforementioned *Acción mutante* and *Terra Firma*, a Portuguese co-production (Infofilmes and RTP), with the support of El Deseo and the French titan UGC. *Terra Firma* did not open in Spain but it was surely the first step in affiliations as associate producers that Agustín, on behalf of El Deseo, took toward international joint ventures. The production of de la Iglesia's movie was treated exactly like Pedro's movies and was also co-produced with CIBY 2000. Doubtless, *Acción mutante* was viewed as an obviously risky *opera prima*. As defined by Marcos Ordoñez and repeatedly quoted, de la Iglesia's breakthrough film amounted to a "coup against boredom" (1997: 73) since it appealed to audiences who Spanish cinema had lost along the way and which the Miró Law had manifestly ignored in order to favor quality cinema connected with high culture. What that state-orchestrated strategy did not take into account was the changes in tastes of contemporary audiences. The film's indebtedness to popular culture sources (Buse, Triana-Toribio, and Willis 2007: 33–8) was the very same cultural base out of which Almodóvar's cinema arose a decade earlier. *Acción mutante* thus seemed to acknowledge the passing of the baton from one generation of filmmakers to the next. This project in effect positioned El Deseo as a site of reference for the kindred spirits just emerging to shape a new Spanish cinema. It became a company known for its sensitivity toward creative culture, and even if the projects were perhaps not appropriate for official government subsidies, El Deseo was ready to provide its chosen filmmakers the necessary industrial infrastructure to bring such projects to completion.

The early 1990s, we should recall, was also the period in which audiovisual culture began to undergo a profound transformation which continues to the present. This was the moment in which new multimedia companies sprang up and began to invest in film production, although not exclusively. These include telecommunication conglomerates which, in their effort to diversify, sought content providers. One of the consequences was that the financial co-producer becomes a legal entity. These were individuals or corporate entities who invested between 10 and 25 percent, and who legitimized a more multi-faceted presence in the investment environment. In 1996, El Deseo was involved in two new

co-productions with Television Española and Canal+ España: *Tengo una casa/I Have a House* (1996), directed by Monica Laguna; and *Pasajes/Passages* (1996), by Daniel Calparsoro. Although not at all alike, and different from the production line and genre of *Acción mutante*, these films established what amounted to an independent movie aesthetic, something not as predictable in contemporary Spanish cinema, with its strong emphasis on setting as a production gimmick, but with the formal creditworthiness of scripted cinema. Both projects exemplify the singleness of purpose with which El Deseo cares for and develops in its products, without losing sight of the eventual goals of projecting these works into international markets. Both appear to engage in traditional Spanish filmmaking, but from a totally new perspective. While Monica Laguna's first work speaks to a thoroughly youthful tradition, in which it is a harbinger for an entire genre of adolescent movies, Calparsoro's film proposes more elusive and distant connections, albeit ambiguous ones, to the Basque conflict, which had already generated its own cycle within and even before the political films of the Spanish transition. Both are films that try to fit into a new niche market for new Spanish audiences. In the final analysis, these are productions that also portend a cinema that speaks with a style which tries to be international, something that can be seen in the majority of the movies from Almodóvar's company.

Three very different projects define the new century for El Deseo: two films by Isabel Coixet, two associations (one in cinema and the other in television) with the team of directors Dunia Ayaso and Félix Sabroso; and the support of *El patio of mi cárcel/My Prison Yard* (2008), Belen Macías's first work. Chronologically, the two Coixet productions, *My Life without Me/Mi vida sin mí* (2003) and *The Secret Life of Words/La vida secreta de las palabras* (2005) were El Deseo's next two Spanish film productions. As with Calparsoro, whose *Pasajes* was the director's second movie, and who had already given evidence of his personal style with his first film, Coixet's case combined differential elements within a Spanish panorama. After her largely ignored *opera prima* (*Demasiado viejo para morir joven/Too Old to Die Young*, 1988), she decided to place her work in a North American context, filming in English. As Triana-Toribio observes (2006: 62), Coixet's international career starts with an originality which also implies the difficulty caused by her position in the Spanish context. Her movies are situated in an unknown territory of contemporary cinema, impossible to approach with realistic budgets (almost a hallmark of Spanish cinema) and far removed from the crude and provocative comedy trend that starts with a movie like *Airbag* (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1997), and which the actor Santiago Segura continues with his production company Amiguetes Entertainment. Through her collaboration with El Deseo, Coixet pioneers a model for making a Spanish film with international ambitions that is supported through co-production schemes, first with Canada (Minestone Productions), and then with the British Focus Feature; it was further helped along by MediaPro, Televisió de Catalunya, and Canal+ España. In the same way that Almodóvar integrates culturally specific material into his films, Coixet assumes the same charge: she popularizes

independent American music, and writes extensively about the style and meaning of cinema. The international line-up of actors in her films, also indicative of this type of movie, enriches their strong transnational image. The international cast is complemented by the participation of important Spanish actors like Leonor Watling and Javier Camara, regulars with El Deseo. Thus, Coixet's international cinema was able to approach the Spanish public through a decidedly international aesthetic.

Félix Sabroso and Dunia Ayaso's work starts with a group of movies that perhaps best exemplify the tradition of Almodovarian comedy. The three movies that precede *Descongélate/Chill Out!* (2003) attempted a re-reading of Spanish light comedic genre films, with clear connections to a gay subculture, with a *mise en scène* and several stereotypical characters that inevitably connects them to the most popular and characteristic Almodovarian imagery. So, it seemed obvious that the two directors would end up in association with their master. That's how the production of the movie, based in the Madrid neighborhood of Lavapiés, was born, and how it auspiciously exploits the presence of Lolés León, who was associated with Almodóvar films at the end of the 1980s. *Descongélate* was a collaboration with two producers visibly committed to a personal cinema, but it does not shy away from the possibilities of television production. The production is complemented by the Galician producer Filmanova, run by the multi-faceted artist Anton Reixa, and the MediaPro¹³ group of media-related businesses, located in Barcelona.

The association between MediaPro and El Deseo was based, in the words of the managing director Jaume Roures, on the sum of experiences with businesses which have a similar way of working with content and its meaning (Yáñez 2009: 312). It was probably this production profile that made the need to carry out Ayaso and Sabroso's television series, *Mujeres/Women* (2005), evident. Starting with the title, there is a clear reference to the short-hand title of Almodóvar's own 1988 film. This thirteen-episode production takes us into the lives of four women from the Madrid working-class neighborhood of Hortaleza, in their ups and downs in trying to sustain a comfortable economic situation, but, more importantly, their essential well-being. The family is seen under a microscope, without the kind of paternalism or ceremony that will characterize the subsequent films of these two directors, providing a point of view that is an outgrowth of the dominant patterns of popular tradition that has invaded Spanish television in the last decade.¹⁴ The series was sold to RAI Italiana and it was almost a year before it was seen on Television Española. Its relative success proved that the formula was consistent.

El patio of mi cárcel is the latest Spanish production launched by the company. Once again, they are supporting the first feature film of a director whose shorts, *El puzzle* (2000) and *Mala espina/Uneasiness* (2001), were well received in the short film circuit. Perhaps Macías is the ideal next representative of that young new generation of promising directors El Deseo is so interested in cultivating. She belongs to a generation that was educated in film school and who began their

careers producing short films and television screenplays. *El patio of mi cárcel* is a movie that takes a bittersweet look at the prison environment; it is set in a past presented to the viewer as a reference to the genre of movies about delinquents, drug addiction, and thugs (*quinquis*) (2009), harking back to the cinematic and musical imagery that defined the 1970s youth culture. Again, *El Deseo* proposes a film genre that unites youth culture with a historical moment in Spanish society, although through a typically postmodern re-reading. A dozen actresses star in the movie and their performances are key, not only for their contribution to the narrative, but because they speak to the experience of the Yeses theater group, from the Yeserías prison,¹⁵ whose courtyard was used to film Bibiana Fernández's musical scene in *Tacones lejanos* (Fernández Valentí 2008: 22) in the mid-1980s. The movie is co-produced with 50 percent funding by Warner Bros. Entertainment Distributors.

Other Stories: Latin American Co-productions

With the recently achieved expertise gained from the international distribution of Almodóvar's films, in the late 1990s the company began to back associations with several Latin American directors whose works and career paths also have an undeniable international vision. The presence of the Spanish industry in Latin America, aided by a common language, has been and will continue to be one of the points of support for a fruitful range of associations that has yet to be fully realized after more than fifty years of shared industry history. The institutions developed in the 1980s to structure this exchange and promote joint productions between Spain and Latin America, most notably Ibermedia, have been able to assemble and maintain a group of directors and producers interested in a range of potential "Atlantic collaborations," such as film schools, workshops, and professional forums in the most important Spanish and/or Latin American film festivals. Nevertheless, the idea that this market is more cultural than industrial has cast a shadow over those efforts. Still the continued influence of the director as auteur paradigm in the broader cultural horizon has facilitated the development of a cohort of filmmakers from the region, several of whom have been backed by *El Deseo*. In explaining the recent success of these cross-Atlantic efforts, it is hard not to point to the skills exercised by the Almodóvars' production company in identifying those directors and films which are likely to be immediately well received internationally, and whose own skill in negotiating between the stories told and the means used to tell them seem to deliver an overwhelmingly positive result.

The first of those "discoveries" were the Mexican Guillermo del Toro and his entirely Spanish production *El espinazo del diablo*/*The Devil's Backbone* and the Chilean Andrés Wood and his disturbing movie *La fiebre del loco*/*Loco Fever*, both

from 2001. The filmographies of these directors, both before and after their productions with Almodóvar, show an obvious ability to tell stories in a narrative style and visual design clearly intended for an international viewer. Like de la Iglesia before him, del Toro has an established career path, with an obvious tie to horror movies. He consistently demonstrates the ability to create stories that exploit the audiovisual revolution that has come into play over the last few years. *El espinazo del diablo* was his first movie related to the Spanish Civil War (it would be followed by the much acclaimed *El laberinto del fauno* / *Pan's Labyrinth* [2006]). Both are film narratives articulated from the perspective of national cinemas, which oppose, in some way, the qualities del Toro used when he worked and produced in Hollywood. Through the collaboration of his Tequila Gang production company, then run by Bertha Navarro and Rosa Bosch, and with the additional collaboration of the Mexican company Anhelo,¹⁶ he joined with El Deseo to combine elements of fantasy, terror, and a cruel look at the horror of the Spanish Civil War. El Deseo assumed more than 50 percent of the production with international distribution falling to Sogepaq¹⁷ and the television rights to Canal + España. *La fiebre del loco* is also the result of Tequila Gang's work, with El Deseo's participation at just 20 percent of the budget. Primarily left to the director's production company, Wood Productions, the movie sets out to film in an inhospitable place on the Chilean coast, whose inhabitants fish the *loco*, a unique mollusk highly valued in the international market, especially in Japan. This was the director's fourth movie; it would be followed by *Machuca* (2004), which was well received internationally for its approach to the beginnings of the Chilean dictatorship, seen, as in *El espinazo del diablo*, through the innocent yet terrified eyes of children.

But the most important Latin American association of the last decade has been the co-production of two movies by the filmmaker Lucrecia Martel. After her debut in *La ciénaga* / *The Swamp* (2001), the Argentine director gained international recognition based on the honesty of a narrative and visual support built around affect, in direct opposition to the kind of genre cinema that, for instance, has become in part the hallmark of de Toro's work. The treatment of space, the depth of the characters, the slow and dense style, make Martel's work one of the unquestionable finds of the contemporary author cinema. *La niña santa* / *The Holy Girl* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* / *The Headless Woman* (2008), released in Spain under the title *La mujer rubia* / *The Blonde Woman*, are El Deseo's co-productions with the Argentine company of note, the prestigious producer Lita Stantic, who took on 60 percent of the first movie's production, and 40 percent of the second.¹⁸ Judging from the presence of El Deseo in the European presentation of these two films, their position in the international art film circuit benefitted from being in the network of distributors known by the Spanish producer.

The same practice of backing selected directors whose work displays a narrative drive capable of connecting with the market but with strong artistic inclinations, led to the distribution of *El último verano de la Boyita* / *The Last Summer of La Boyita*



Figure 5.2 Poster for the Argentine film, *La niña santa* (Lucrecia Martel, 2004; prod. Lita Stantic Producciones), co-produced by El Deseo. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

(2010) by Julia Solomonoff, with 20 percent of the production and distribution budget. *El último verano* was the second feature, after *Hermanas/Sisters* (2005), another co-production with Spain, by the Argentine director whose prior work included extensive experience as a television director. The intimist story, which approaches the problems of gender identity from a historical and even childlike point of view, once again taps into an international style for the gay markets, while providing as a reference for a new generation of Argentine cinema for whom these two directors have become a symbol.

Beyond these films, which are strictly Argentine in their idea and creation, Bertha Navarro also engaged El Deseo in the production of *Cobrador/In God We Trust* (2007), the movie that returned the Mexican Paul Leduc to filmmaking after his announced retirement. This emblematic director of the generation following the new cinema of the 1960s, is recognized for his categorical departure from

commercial formats, whereby a large part of his cinema undercuts dialogue and focuses instead on the detailed work of the soundtrack. With this film, markedly transnational in its merging of narrative elements from Mexico, Brazil, the United States and a secondary Argentine presence, Leduc presents what amounts to a political crusade across the continent, denouncing the influence of the capitalism that dominates the region. It is easy to connect its imagery with the rebellious spirit shared among independent Latin-American filmmakers since the 1950s. *Cobrador* capitalizes on its genre features as a tale of international denunciation. In addition to El Deseo's 15 percent share, it included the participation of Mexico (Salamandra Productions, 37 percent), Brazil (Morena Films, 18 percent), and Great Britain (Giroloco Ltd.) and Argentina (Arca Difusion), each with 15 percent.

Home Cinema

In recent years, the revolution in audiovisual technologies has dramatically moved to the domestic sphere as optimal audiovisual reproduction in the home has become available. The contents, designed and produced to be seen on the small screen, have reached a point of quality public presence that speaks both to the diversification that audiovisual industries have undergone and to the preeminence of television production as the dominant aesthetic models for quality films. In this new context, the diversification of film production into the realm of television culture has already led to the perception that movies are serials, or have been produced with the idea that they are destined for both theatrical and home viewing. Thus, motion pictures can no longer be thought of exclusively in terms of theatrical exhibition.

In addition to the series or made-for-television drama, documentaries have also been a medium designed for and viewed by the television public. Owners of thematic channels have shaped a good deal of the production line in which the viewer sees himself as a world traveler, or as a subject interested in places that might seem distant, but are no longer unknown. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, El Deseo began to work with several documentary directors and their producers. Their first such collaboration was with the producer Transglobe Pictures, then owned by the director Gerardo Olivares. He is a figure whose ties with world cultures have provided him with a dual identity as a fiction and documentary director. His production company uses the world as a set for filming and research, which is why it specializes in shooting in inhospitable places. Opting for an exotic presentation in the eye of the Western viewer, Transglobe also makes a sincere attempt to recover otherwise marginal narratives and stories that should be part of the memory of all people. In conjunction with Transglobe, El Deseo has participated in two movies, *Eyengui, el dios del sueño* / *Eyengui, the God of Sleep* (José Manuel Novoa, 2003), and *Caravana* (Gerardo Olivares, 2004), both of which were co-produced with Television Española and in the case of *Eyengui*, also with France 5.

They have also worked with Larry Levene and his production company Es Docu, a documentarian contributor to the Sogecable group and its documentary promotion program, Produce+for television. With Levene they have taken on documentaries directed more toward the human dimension of their subject matter with works such as *César y Zaín* (2005), which looks at the tragedy of the March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, but with the idea of bringing together Muslim and Western cultures, represented by the characters, and later, with *Historias de la montaña de la bruma/History of Fog Mountain* (2007), which shows current China between tradition and the budding modernization of the capitalist influx. El Deseo has also worked with Product+on the movie *Los sin tierra. Por los caminos de América/The Landless: Along American Roads* (Miguel Barros, 2004), which tries to shed light on land restoration in Brazil.

In November 2010, another documentary project backed by the company premiered in Portugal. This was a unique work in which the director Miguel Gonçalves Mendes filmed the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, José Saramago, and his wife, Pilar del Río, over a period of three years. The end result was the documentary *José y Pilar* (Relea 2010: 39).

Along yet another line, but consistent with the transformative process which continues to shape the Almodóvars' position in this new environment, El Deseo became involved in two corporate enterprises led by Juan Carlos Tous. Tous first created the DVD production company Cameo, and recently launched the internet platform Filmin.es to present streaming video on demand (Llopart 2010) with the telling slogan of "independent and original." This company was also backed by Alta Films, Golem, Tornasol, Vértigo, and Wanda Vision, production companies and distributors with an independent production background.¹⁹ There is no doubt about the potency of the internet market, and these two platforms allow the companies to design the appearance of their cinematographic and television works in a controlled framework. Filmin is clearly oriented toward watching over production in Spanish and social networks to give them the necessary coverage so that the producers feel secure in the content, but also clearly supported against the threat of piracy. The task is to continue to support independent cinema which already occupies a secure niche for a community of viewers who continue to demand it.²⁰ This is a virtual or "wired" public who has access to spaces where marketing and creation are able to reach those interested in continuing to enjoy the fruits of cinematic culture, past, present, and future.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to provide insight into the work of El Deseo as the creative home where Pedro Almodóvar has been able to create his work freely and without the usual constraints of the Spanish industrial mode of film

production. The indispensable cooperation of his brother in the development of the project, and the financial stability of the company over the years, have demonstrated that it is possible to create cinema without submitting to the limitations and pressures of the market. The audiovisual market has confronted multiple threats and challenges during the period since *El Deseo* began. In anticipating future challenges, it is nevertheless likely that in a world of increasing media convergence spectators will continue to demand stories that connect them to their own archetypes while stimulating them to imagine the future via new spaces and media. The explosion of the virtual world and the development of both mass and individual media, which have already become so integrated into everyday life, do not seem to pose a serious threat to the creation of narrative and aesthetic models that continue to dialogue with tradition. In looking forward, one can only meet these possibilities with optimism.

The structure of *El Deseo* as a business enterprise has allowed it to become a financially profitable company, identified with the work of a single director whose cultural capital is unquestionable. The production company has positioned itself well in the international marketplace, where quality festivals and distribution insure profits. Clearly the notion of a national cinematic space has given way to new understandings of national imaginaries redefined in cultural terms. Similarly, the categories associated with cinema culture continue to function, in the case of Almodóvar's work, in the form of an authorial brand that makes possible the circulation and consumption of his films within a national space as well as their engagement with a transnational audience.

El Deseo's incorporation of other projects also speaks to the need to support a continuous production schedule within a context of corporate diversification, where the capital that issues from the value of high quality work (from production to distribution) insures a position in the marketplace. The motion pictures and documentaries produced by *El Deseo* take their place in a panorama of audiovisual productions, Spanish and international, recognizable for their perfectly calibrated exploitation of the resources put at their disposal. We may thus recognize in *El Deseo*'s production lines a fidelity to a market niche whose characteristics reflect a recent reconfiguration of genres but also the embrace of a new and still developing dynamic governing the operation of international auteur cinema.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Agustín Almodóvar and especially Diego Pajuelo Almodóvar for their availability in working on this project, and their invaluable assistance. Their help is especially noteworthy because it is a difficult task to collect data from institutions and contemporary producers for whom academic work is invisible, if not useless. The results of the consultations that I made

to the department of box office collection and the ICAA, MediaPro, Sogepaq and Ibermedia, were a resounding silence.

I also had the daily support of my co-workers in the Department of Culture at the Instituto Cervantes, especially with the documentarians José Manuel Fuertes and Asunción García. It is a pleasure to work with two such professional and detail-oriented people. I should also mention all the people in the Spanish cinema profession whose informal talks gave body to my discourse throughout the years I have been working in the international and cultural distribution of Spanish cinema. I would like to thank the steadfastness of my academic colleagues, Spanish or otherwise, who feel that Pedro Almodóvar's work, understood as something that goes beyond his movies, is crucial in understanding our twentieth century and beyond. My thanks go especially to Marvin D'Lugo with whom I have an intellectual debt I will never be able to return and reward. Finally, I would like to thank Juan José Parras and Miguel Fernández Labayen for their conversations during the writing of this article, and for their reading of the text and their suggestions.

Translated by Nancy Brown

Notes

- 1 Cifesa and Suevia were the dominant players during the 1940s and 1950s, with their work in the area of commercial film production giving way to more modern figures such as Jose Frade and Alfredo Matas, in subsequent decades. At some ideological distance from these producers, Uninci was created in opposition to the regime in the 1950s and 1960s, as the distant heir of Filmófono where Luis Buñuel worked as head of production during the Second Spanish Republic. At the beginnings of the Transition, producers such as Pere Portabella and Elías Querejeta, and later Andrés Vicente Gómez were behind the renovation of filmmaking with an emphasis on quality production that foreshadowed the different laws put in place by the Socialist governments in the 1980s, a climate and set of policies conducive to the creation of El Deseo (Torreiro and Rimbau 2008: 809–913).
- 2 El Deseo S.A. began as a company in 1985, although the date that appears in the Mercantile Registry of Madrid is January 14, 1986 (Torreiro and Rimbau 2008: 256).
- 3 "By naming his production company El Deseo S.A., Almodóvar hints with typically sly irony at the intersection of the psychic and the commercial. His practice of cinema will also prove to be a model of libidinal economy, unprecedented in film history" (Smith 2000: 6).
- 4 Almodóvar's first movies included different producers. *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón/ Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), which had begun as a cooperative, was backed by Pepón Corominas in order to finish it. He was able to get the advance from his distributor, Jose Esteban Alenda. Other collaborations came from José Luis Borau and Pilar García. *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) was produced by Musidora, the production house born from the distributor Alphaville. The two following films, *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) were from the production

- company Tesauro, a company owned by the Argentine Jack Hachuel, who was living in Spain and was romantically involved with the actress Cristina Sánchez Pascual. Matador was in the hands of Andrés Vicente Gómez through Iberamericana Films, with the support of Radio Television Española (RTVE).
- 5 Pedro Almodóvar's personal role in the development of promotion ideas is well known; the imagery, objects, and the most solid ideas that identify each movie become the source of promotional elements, the image on the posters, and the graphic design where Juan Gatti joins him from the very beginning.
 - 6 "Really, I don't feel like a producer, that's Agustín's job. El Deseo is an idea from both of us, and, as a film-maker, I enjoy the freedom I give myself as a producer. When we get outside projects, I read them and I am part of the selection process, but my job is not exactly that of a producer" (Strauss 2001: 64). In a recent article by Angel S. Harguindey (2010: 54) about odd couples, he explains the relationship between the brothers in a way that anticipates a central focus of this article: "Decía Pedro Almodóvar hace 18 años: 'No debe ser fácil ser hermano mío'. Pero sí ha de resultar satisfactorio; 18 años después, Agustín responde: 'Me siento muy afortunado de compartir trabajo y fraternidad con él. Disfruto mucho presenciando el proceso creativo que implica escribir un guión y convertirlo en película'. Agustín es el hombre que siempre está ahí. Hay un Cameo suyo en cada película de Pedro desde 1978. Es el hermano pequeño y fascinado, de quien decía el mayor: 'Recuerdo siempre a Tinín mirándome'. Quienes los conocen cuentan que la independencia del cineasta tiene mucho que ver con la cabeza de su hermano. Agustín es el productor desde *La ley del deseo* (1987). La mente cartesiana (es químico). La organización. El papeleo. La burbuja que lo recubre y lo protege. La placenta cercana y familiar." (Eighteen years ago Pedro Almodóvar said: "it must not be easy to be my brother." But it must have been satisfying; eighteen years later Agustín replied: "I feel very fortunate to be able to share work and brotherhood with him. I thoroughly enjoy being part of the creative process of writing a script and converting it into a movie." Agustín is the man who is always there. He has had a cameo in each of Pedro's movies since 1978. He is the little brother and fascinated by it all, of whom his older brother said: "I always remember Tinín watching me." Those who know him say that the independence of the film-maker has a lot to do with his brother's brains. Agustín has been the producer since *La ley del deseo* (1987). The Cartesian brain (he is a chemist). The organization. The paperwork. The bubble that covers and protects him. The close and familiar placenta.)
 - 7 According to Torreiro and Riambau (2008: 257), in 1990 there appears in the register a production company called Lolailo S.L., with a million pesetas in capital, in the name of the two brothers which has not registered any productions.
 - 8 We could talk of the association, especially with Jose Luis Alcaine, but also with Alfredo Mayo and the Brazilian Affonso Beato in photography, or of Jose Maria Cossío's work in wardrobe, especially in the movies from the early 1990s.
 - 9 Miramax's exhibition formula for *Tacones lejanos* (1991) did not fulfill the expectations of the Almodóvar brothers who understood the importance of a reliable and efficient circuit.
 - 10 The French movies co-produced with Ciby 2000 are *Le maître des éléphants* (Patrick Grandperret, 1996), *Fallait pas. . .!* (Gerard Jugnot, 1997), *Messieurs les enfants* (Pierre Boutron, 1997), *Le serpent à mange la grenouille* (Alain Guesnier, 1998).

- 11 Vía Digital was born from the merger of Sogecable and Vía Digital. The partners of reference were Telefonica, PRISA, and Canal Plus Francia. Its shareholders were: TVG, Television Valenciana, TeleMadrid, Telefónica, Radio Popular (owner of the COPE radio station), TVC Multimedia, MediaPark, Promociones Periodísticas Leonesas, Difusora de Información Periodica (Época) in 1997. Vía Digital ceased operations in 2002.
- 12 United International Pictures was also involved with *Los abrazos rotos*.
- 13 Mediapro was born from the management of audiovisual rights for re-transmitting sports on television, and backed by la Caixa de Pensions i d'Estavis "La Caixa", the British advertising agency WPP, and Telefónica España.
- 14 It is interesting to understand the value of the series *Mujeres* compared to another two series whose view of the family unit shows the changes it is suffering in contemporary Spanish society. From *Cuéntame como pasó* (2001 to present) to *Aquí no hay quién viva* (2003–2006) we can see how the internal family dialogue and its understanding of the community and neighborhood, continue to be a primary focus of Spanish narratives.
- 15 The group is still active in the current Alcalá Meco prison.
- 16 Anhele is Jorge Vergara's production company, responsible for *Y tu mamá también / And your Mother Too!* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *Crónicas / Chronicles* (Sebastián Cordero, 2004), two undoubtedly transnational productions but with a presence associated with Latin American international cinema. In 2006 Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu created the production company Cha Cha Cha in order to benefit from their solvency as movie mecca directors and work on more personal projects. The first production was *Rudo y cursi / Rough and Vulgar* (2008).
- 17 In 1990 the distributor Sogepaq, run by Alfredo Matas was created. It also includes the production company Sogetel, the distributor Sogecable, and the television station Canal Plus and was financed in good part by PRISA, BBVA bank. Its distribution affiliate, Warner Española, supports businesses like Cinepaq (audiovisual rights management) and Impala. The producer Andrés Vicente Gómez is also part of Sogepaq with a catalogue of 700 movies in the first years. The Sogecable groups headed production in the transition from the 1990s to the middle of the 2000s.
- 18 Additionally, in *La niña santa* the Argentine companies Senso and La Pasionaria, and the Italian production company R&C (with 10 percent) participated. And in *La mujer sin cabeza* production was also backed by the Italian Teodora films and R&C Produzioni (another 10 percent) and the French Slot Machine Sarl (25 percent).
- 19 Without a doubt, this group of businesses also makes up a family within Spanish film production, and has tried to preserve the appreciation of movie production and viewing within the most film-loving tradition of respect for the work, but also by supporting the movie culture. Alta Films, managed by the current director of the Spanish Film Academy, Enrique González Macho, publishes the magazine *La gran ilusión* which follows the tradition of the movie info sheets started at the Alphaville movie theaters (now Golem), during the Transition. A good part of the festivals have found a home here, such as the Experimental Movie Week, Documenta Madrid, and the section of Sounds of the South in Pamplona, to name just three examples.
- 20 Following the arguments of Rick Altman in his classic *Film/Genre* (1999: 182–8), it is useful to understand the role and consumption patterns of different segments of the audience in the form of a constellation.

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Almodóvar and Spanish Patterns of Film Reception

Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen¹

Almodóvar puede ser muy listo, pero nunca será un genio . . . (Almodóvar may be very clever, but he'll never be a genius . . .).

José Enrique Monterde (1990: 35)

Durante mucho tiempo he tenido la tentación de cambiar de nombre y dejar de ser Almodóvar (For many years I've had the temptation to change my name and stop being Almodóvar).

Pedro Almodóvar (Heredero and Reviriego 2009: 12)

Un hombre que emplea el 75 por ciento del espacio para despotricar sobre mi persona (lo que ni siquiera es una novedad, porque lleva casi treinta años haciéndolo), y alrededor del 25 por ciento para despachar la película diciendo cosas como que la interpretación de los actores es “inane y lamentable” (dos de sus adjetivos favoritos) sin mostrar un sólo ejemplo que nos ayude a entenderle . . . Un texto en el que casi no habla de la película y por supuesto no aporta la más mínima razón en la que basar el tedio infinito que le provoca . . . Un texto así no es una crítica (Almodóvar 2009a).

(A man who uses 75% of the space of his text railing against me personally [something hardly new since he's been doing it for almost thirty years], and 25% dealing with the film in the form of comments like the acting is “inane and deplorable” [two of his favorite adjectives] without citing a single example that might help us to understand his point. . . . A text that hardly talks about the film and provides not the minimum explanation on which to base his claims against the infinite tedium the film provokes in him. . . . a text like that is not movie criticism.)

Those forceful words, published in May 2009 in Pedro Almodóvar's blog, “Crónica negra del Festival de Cannes” (Black Chronicle from the Cannes Film Festival), came in response to comments by Carlos Boyero, film critic for the Madrid daily *El País*, in his review of the screening of *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* at the

French festival. Without detailing the dueling charges and counter charges that flew back and forth during the succeeding days,² we highlight this exchange as a measure of the tense relationship Almodóvar and his films have maintained with the Spanish critical establishment over the course of three decades. Of course, given the director's extended career and sustained productivity, it would be easy to document a broad range of responses, positive and negative, to his work, a situation common to any artist with a thirty-year career trajectory. That is not our intention here. Instead we are concerned with identifying and analyzing the particularities of the Spanish response to Almodóvar, and primarily the paradox occasioned by the persistent characterization of the director as upstart and interloper on the part of both critics and relevant cultural institutions, on the one hand, as set against the need to acknowledge his talent in the face of the growing recognition and projection of his cinema beyond Spain's borders on the other. This first view provides a necessary framework for understanding the virulence of some of the attacks against Almodóvar; the second reflects the ongoing need to reorient critical discourse about his films, and, at the same time, his public persona (a process on self-referential display in the writings of Monterde [1993] and Boyero [2009]).

With reactions that range from hate to admiration, Almodóvar's cinema has attracted increasing attention in Spain as its sociocultural and economic importance has grown. The now sizeable body of writings devoted to both his films and his role as a public figure give evidence of his influence and importance in the construction of the cultural horizon, both filmic and extra-filmic, of democratic Spain.

In this chapter we propose to follow these developments through the analysis of three films, *La ley del deseo* / *The Law of Desire* (1987), *Kika* (1993) and *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002). These films have been chosen not for their artistic significance or quality but on the basis of their relevance for our study in terms of the promotional and distribution strategies deployed on their behalf and the critical reaction generated by them in the press, although in these respects they do not differ significantly from the director's other films. We begin with *La ley del deseo* as the first film produced by Almodóvar's own production company, El Deseo, and, as such, an example of the heightened attention to positioning both the films and filmmaker in the cultural marketplace. The other criterion is a desire to include films from the three different decades of his career. Through these films we intend to study the construction by Almodóvar of his own public persona and the effects of his efforts and their mediation by the national press on this process. Our goal here is two-fold: first, to map the discursive register of ideas and opinions generated by and around the films of Almodóvar and the larger Almodóvar universe; and secondly, to offer an example of the different critical practices that have developed in response to the cinema production of democratic Spain. This dialectical approach is necessary if we are to understand the ways in which cultural meanings are created at the same time that we chart the fragmentary and contradictory construction of a

national canon in the case of a corpus and an artist whose standing, as this volume attests, owes more to critical interventions from abroad.

Accordingly, this chapter will draw on material published in the non-specialized press—particularly Spain's major daily newspapers, *ABC*, *El País*, and *La Vanguardia*—as well as the most representative film monthlies, *Fotogramas* and *Dirigido por*. . . . In examining the encounter between Almodóvar and the press the goal is to analyze the configuration of certain normative representations of the dominant strain of film criticism in Spain, taking as its axis the notion of auteur cinema as well as the textualist bent of a number of Spanish analysts. At the same time, we will attend to the construction of a broader cultural and social imaginary, centered around Almodóvar but whose effects acquire a greater repercussion in the transitional, postmodern, and global contexts of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s in Spain.

Our discussions of the individual films will be structured around three central points. The first will consider the effectiveness of Almodóvar's deployment of a variegated public persona in addressing diverse audiences through multiple registers. His mastery of popular culture, his much proclaimed cinephilia along with his appeal to the tastes of the middle class, on the one hand, and those of urban and homosexual subcultures, on the other, bring together widely differing interests while allowing for the gradual development and exploitation of a corresponding range of market niches and opinions. This polymorphous appeal makes possible the polisemic nature and function of his films, their availability for different meanings and uses by different publics. Related to this question we will also investigate the launch and marketing of his films as documented in the promotional materials directly commissioned by the filmmaker (whether by his production company or third parties). This category includes pressbooks as well as feature articles and spots in the various national media that figure as part of the marketing strategy of the films. It also covers the official Pedro Almodóvar website hosted by Club Cultura, itself a publicity vehicle of the multinational chain, FNAC (Fédération Nationale d'Achats de Cadres).³ The second will deal with the mediating role played by the general and specialist press, as described above. As Manuel Palacio (2005) has noted, the limited shelf life and social impact of most media criticism is no obstacle for its usefulness in providing insight into the construction of the meaning of cultural artifacts and their reception in the public sphere. Nor should one forget that the three decades that have seen the development of Almodóvar's career are themselves marked by important changes in the production and consumption of such discursive practices, all of which factors will figure in the discussions of the three films. Finally, we will address, when necessary, the extra-cinematic ramifications of the films as well as the discursive fabric generated around questions of sexual, gender, and national identities. Thus, we will be concerned less with examining contrasting models of textual analysis than with studying different processes of cultural meaning in which performativity and discursive contextualization are the primary focus.

La ley del deseo

From the beginning of his career, Pedro Almodóvar's relation with the critics has been marked by a series of dichotomies. Initially these dichotomies originate out of the tense dialogue between the filmmaker himself, and his practice of modeling and discursively miming the release of each of his films, and the journalists who review them. There is no question that this tension has grown with each film but its foundation can be traced to the presumed "illegitimate" origins of Almodóvar's cinema as seen by the major critical and film industry institutions in Spain. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that Almodóvar's first feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* / *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom*, (1980) was screened at the San Sebastián Film Festival a mere seven years after Victor Erice's presentation in the same forum as *El espíritu de la colmena* / *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973). In these two films we are faced with two incompatible ways of understanding not only film art but also the universe of film as cultural praxis, the meaning of being young, and even the notion of Spain. Palacio (2005) has analyzed these questions with respect to the reception of Erice's film, whose aesthetic and points of reference could not have been more antithetical to the universe represented by Almodóvar at that moment. To these differences one could add a series of factors consistent with their respective backgrounds and education as well as their public image and projection, with clear consequences for the social and cultural models they mobilized. In contrast to Erice, who had studied at the state-sponsored film school, the Escuela Oficial de Cine, Almodóvar was a self-taught practitioner of amateur film. The former, in his work as critic for *Nuestro cine*, had been a faithful proponent of a certain form of Spanish film, linked to the concept of modern cinema, while the latter was a product of pop subculture with no pedigree beyond his accumulated and transnational cinephilia, and was best known for his performances as part of a parodic glam rock singing duo.

This historical mis-encounter would not only distort the critical reception of Almodóvar's films but would also shape their perception by audiences through the mediation of an authorial persona inseparable from the cinematic texture of his films. The construction of the director as a public figure took place around two clearly recognizable axes: the personal, anchored in a non-stop performance of a series of biographical tropes, identifiable with the image of a familiar and popular "Pedro"; and the cinematic, intertwined with the personal in an iconoclastic vision of art that over the years is absorbed into the logic of auteur cinema ("un film de ALMODÓVAR"). Of course, this reflects a balancing act between transgression and accessibility, fundamental for understanding his vocation as entertainer, or even a comic or comedian—with all the negative associations such a term entails in Spain today, despite its embrace by a number of important cultural figures, among them no less than Fernando Fernán Gómez. This role was most evident in the director's early career but, as we shall see, is a label that continues to shape the



Figure 6.1 Cover for the Almodóvar and McNamara recording of “Satanasa” and “Voy a ser mamá.” © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

vision of his work held by some critics. In fact the gestation process involved in Almodóvar’s emergence as a public performer is similar to that of other comedians, “constructed by acculturation, individual choice and industrial imperatives” (Haggins 2007: 5), although in this particular case we believe that the “industrial imperatives” have played a singular part due to the mutual mistrust between artist and critics that marked his early years.

The pressbook of *La ley del deseo*, as we have noted, the first film produced by El Deseo S.A., opens with an comically expansive bio-filmography of Pedro Almodóvar that begins in the 1950s and includes the cold war, music from the mambo to punk, and Super-8 films along with experiments and experience as a hippy and working at the national telephone company. Emphasizing his international renown and his reputation in the United States as “a new version of Buñuel and Billy Wilder” (Almodóvar 1987b: n. p.), the booklet refers to the brilliant future awaiting him. Subsequent sections serve to contextualize the film: “Summer in Madrid,” “Law,” “Desire,” and “Brotherly Love.” It is precisely in this last segment that Almodóvar retraces the gestation of the script, with reference to an eclectic series of cinephilic sources: from Wim Wenders to Warren Beatty in

Splendor in the Grass (Elia Kazan, 1961), *Cotton Club* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1984), the Marx Brothers, *Rumble Fish* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983), and *The Parent Trap* (Robert Swift, 1961). This list works as a clear challenge to orthodox cinematic canons of taste in their most highbrow version in which films are evaluated in terms of their aesthetic quality. It is of course to this audience of elite tastemakers, film critics central among them, to whom the pressbook is addressed. Until recently, when pressbooks became available for download on the internet, such promotional materials were generally distributed only to accredited journalists at press screenings. With his Hollywood-centered list of influences and references, Almodóvar would once again seem to usurp the critics' role, as the ironic mouthpiece of a certain cinematic memory.

Finally the booklet includes a "self-interview" that establishes a playful dialogue between the filmmaker and his alter ego (an exercise, as we shall see, that will be repeated at various moments of his career). There are two aspects of the interview that are especially important for understanding Almodóvar's projection as public persona. In regard to the first, from the opening words he insists on the fact that *La ley del deseo* "is not a scandalous film," a claim he will repeat at other points in the interview and in pieces published in a range of media, including the newspaper *ABC* (Arenas 1987). This despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that his reputation as a filmmaker and cultural agitator rested precisely on his capacity for provocation and transgression. These comments are not inconsequential since it is in 1987 with the release of a film unapologetic in its frank representation of homosexuality that Almodóvar initiates a campaign in pursuit of respectability. His self-imposed domestication arises as part of a discursive effort to expand the definition of "normality" by applying it repeatedly to the film, a "normality" that at least in statistical terms might not be as extensive as Almodóvar claimed but that could only serve to expand the film's potential audience.

The second aspect relates to the air of cheeky self-confidence expressed in the interview, reminiscent in its willfully frivolous tone of the director's admired Andy Warhol. Time and again Almodóvar's answers and explanations frustrate the possible aesthetic and biographical connections raised by the interviewer and direct the discussion into speculations about desire and passion. His performative abilities overtly on display, Almodóvar showcases his understanding and mastery of the promotional mechanisms of the film industry. His capacity for cultural osmosis results in a virtuosic manipulation of various discursive registers that mixes genuine erudition with a sensual fascination with the publicity apparatus he proposes to appropriate. In his playful engagement with the underlying logic of late twentieth-century culture industries, Almodóvar evinces a continuing if erratic attraction to the Warholian project that calls for taking control of the means of cinematic and media production in the name of what David E. James (1989) describes as "the author as producer." Ultimately, for both Warhol and Almodóvar, it is a matter of using the media largely for the purpose of "being seen" (James 1989: 54). By way of example of this provocative attitude, we turn to the director's simultaneously

self-deprecating and self-aggrandizing characterization of his film as “una obra maestra imperfecta. Un género en el que me estoy especializando. . . . Pretendía hacer un clásico, me dije a mí mismo: la moda Almodóvar como todas las modas acabará pasando, ya va siendo hora de que haga un clásico” (an imperfect masterpiece. A genre I specialize in. I was trying to make a classic film, I said to myself: fashions come and go and the Almodóvar fashion will too; it’s about time to make a classic) (Almodóvar 1987b).⁴ Once again the comment tracks a fine line between sincerity and parody in the cause of film promotion at the same time as it generates both a growing popular recognition for Almodóvar and a fraught relationship with Spanish media.

The filmmaker pursued the same tactics in other media, as in the feature titled “Directors recount their films” in the magazine *Fotogramas* (Almodóvar 1987a). Presenting the film in a cover headline, the magazine promises a pleasant surprise “for followers of the Manchegan director.” In his “popular photo-novel” version of the story, Almodóvar not only alters the sequence of events but awards the role of protagonist to Tina, the character played by Carmen Maura, despite her arguably secondary position in the plot. The star system hierarchy demands that Tina/Maura function as driver of the narrative and the accompanying photo spread centers on her image (she appears in nine out of the total fourteen photos while the main character Pablo/Eusebio Poncela is seen in five and his lover Antonio/Antonio Banderas shows up in only two). This insistence on downplaying the more “scandalous” aspects of the film from the point of view of the Spanish public (the homosexual relationship between Pablo and Antonio that is also elided from the film’s official poster designed by Ceesepe⁵) is perhaps not a coincidence in view of the fact that with the creation of his own production company the director is more directly implicated financially in the success of the film.

This liberty to play freely with the components of the film and Almodóvar’s connection to popular culture, together with his ironic attitude toward his own work, were nevertheless ignored in the published reviews. More concerned with applying a prefabricated evaluative model to the film, consistent with “an eagerness to assert that auteur and object were one and the same” (Smith 2000: 80), the Spanish press adopted a common formula consisting of a series of characterizations of the film’s supposed excess and lack of narrative control. Thus *ABC* describes the film as a “desorbitado melodrama” (extravagant melodrama) pointing out the director’s common practice of using comedy to defuse moments of tension as well as the film’s obvious homosexual eroticism. Pedro Calleja (1987) in *Fotogramas* insists that “apenas existe conexión interna entre todo lo apasionadamente expuesto en pantalla” (there is hardly any internal connection among the various elements so passionately expressed on screen), while evoking a prime touchstone of Spanish criticism of Almodóvar, his excess (“varias películas en una sola historia”/various films contained within a single story).

Among all the published reviews, a pair by Ángel Fernández-Santos (1987) in *El País* and José Enrique Monterde (1987) for *Dirigido por* . . . stand out, both for their

forcefulness and the authors' standing within the cinephile sector. In the first Fernández-Santos launches his complicated reasoning with a pair of almost sorrowful rhetorical questions: ¿Cómo de un derroche de habilidad puede deducirse de pronto una torpeza? (How can an overabundance of ability suddenly turn to clumsiness?); and, "¿Cómo puede el enorme talento de Almodóvar ser víctima de sí mismo?" (How can Almodóvar's enormous talent make him a victim of himself?) (Fernández Santos 1987). With the resonant title of "La ley del exceso" (The law of excess), the review written by *El País's* chief film critic (and the screenwriter for *The Spirit of the Beehive*) is anchored in a romantic conception of auteur cinema as an act of genius that lacks a relevant set of criteria for dealing with Almodóvar's film beyond the parameters of an inherited paradigm of "modern" film analysis. It is telling that Fernández-Santos ends up floundering in a sort of critical aporia when faced with the task of evaluating the film in question as well as with regard to the Manchegan director's filmography as a whole: "los filmes de Almodóvar no son del todo buenos, pero su cine sí que es bueno. . . . [En *La ley del deseo* hay] instantes del mejor cine que se haya hecho nunca en España . . . junto a . . . otros tiempos de cine común e incluso de cine vulgar" (All of Almodóvar's films are not good films but his cinema is indeed good cinema. . . . [In *The Law of Desire* there are] instances of some of the best cinema ever made in Spain . . . together with . . . other moments of ordinary and even vulgar cinema) (Fernández Santos 1987). The problem, according to the Madrid critic, derives from Almodóvar's "gusto por el exceso" (love for excess) that brings with it a kind of narrative over-saturation in a body of work that is also highly personal.

Harsher still was the diagnosis offered in the pages of *Dirigido por* . . . , a film magazine founded during the 1970s in the wake of various theories of the auteur, as its title, "Directed by . . .", indicates. Monterde has recourse to a dialectical strategy with Bazinian echoes in establishing a distinction between exhibitionists, exemplified by Federico Fellini, and voyeurs, with Alfred Hitchcock as the prime example. Almodóvar falls clearly with the first group, given the pleasure he takes in self-exposure and being seen. Striving to maintain his distance from poststructuralist accounts of Almodóvarian artifice, Monterde tags the director with adjectives like "resabiado" (mannered) and "superficial" (superficial), observing that "la capacidad visual y la inventiva de Almodóvar le empujan constantemente al truco, a lo fácilmente 'epatante', en resumen, a lo superficial Almodóvar . . . necesita recordar que en el cine que está haciendo la historia aún cuenta" (the visual ability and inventiveness of Almodóvar push him constantly toward the gimmick, the facile shock effect, in summary, toward the superficial Almodóvar . . . needs to remember that in the cinema he is making, the story still counts) (Monterde 1987: 12). In this way Monterde synthesizes the two major critical narratives about Almodóvar: the artificiality of his visual imagination and the lack in his films of a solid narrative structure. Of course these are problems only if, as in the case of Fernández-Santos and Calleja, film is understood in terms of a narrative structure of "rising and falling action," that is, in terms of classic

dramaturgy. It is worth recalling that film scholar Kristin Thompson had already argued for a reconsideration of cinematic excess, with the goal of developing more flexible analytic parameters capable of dealing with narrative arbitrariness (Thompson 1977).

Similarly, with respect to the notion of superficiality, beginning in the 1960s various theorists and commentators from the art world were calling for a turn toward a new sensibility, based on the appeal of exaggeration and artifice, that Susan Sontag characterized as camp (Sontag 1964). Nevertheless, it is apparent that Spanish critics of the era, still rooted in the parameters of realism and classical structures, were ill prepared for the encounter with Almodóvar's cinema. Far removed from what in another essay we have termed the "philosophy of the sensorial" (Cerdán and Fernández Labayen 2006), the leading voices of Spanish cinephilia roundly rejected the Almodóvarian project, thus reinforcing several of the dichotomies that already marked the mutual disregard between Almodóvar's cinema and the majority of the national press. Their distancing from the "erotics of art" proposed by Sontag as an alternative to certain established hermeneutic practices played a further role in the elimination of any possibility of dialogue.

Finally, in the course of the year 1987, echoes arrived in Spain of *La ley del deseo*'s international success: triumph in Miami; the announcement of the New York premiere; and an award from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association (ABC 1987). Thus was launched one of the other major tropes around the figure of Almodóvar, namely his growing international profile as evidenced for the Spanish public by the release of his films in the United States (without any mention of the contribution of the gay subculture there to this favorable reception of his work). By the end of the decade, thanks in large part to the success of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), Almodóvar had come to occupy a central place in the narrative around contemporary Spanish cinema, the result of a transformation over the course of a few short years from outsider to the quintessential Spanish director.

Kika

The critical and box office success of *Mujeres al borde*, both nationally and internationally, brought Almodóvar a recognition and visibility beyond anything he had experienced previously. Reacting to this new more mainstream appeal, certain critics were quick to criticize the film's supposed loss of spontaneity and sense of risk in comparison to his previous work (Martí 1988). In general, however, Almodóvar was hailed as an acclaimed artist of whom great things were expected by both the critics and the public. Little time would pass before a new polemic emerged around his next film *¡Átame!* / *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), the first production financed exclusively by El Deseo and which became the highest

grossing Spanish film of the year. His next feature, *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991), only confirmed this market dominance.⁶

In fact, the celebration of the film's prize for best foreign film from the French Film Academy in the Madrid club, El Morocco, managed by Almodóvar actress Alaska, served as the public launch of filming for the project then known as *Las uñas del asesino (The Fingernails of a Killer)*, later titled *Kika*. In his first press conference, Almodóvar was already characterizing it as a much more hard-edged comedy than *Mujeres*, as a film that "creará mucha polémica" (will create a lot of polemic) (Llopart 1993). At that moment in March 1993, Almodóvar also took the opportunity to offer a few clues about the film, announcing that it would include a rape scene and offer harsh criticism of the new television environment emerging in Spain following the creation of new private channels in the early 1990s.

The promotion of the film took a further step with the presentation of an eight-minute segment—some sources say twenty minutes (Torres 1993a)—as part of an homage to Almodóvar hosted by the forty-first edition of the San Sebastián Film Festival. Screened together with the Super-8 film, *Folle . . . Folle . . . Fólleme . . . Tim* (an untranslatable play on words that points to the film's dual references in porn film and serial novels) (1978), the scenes from *Kika* provided an opportunity to contrast the amateurism of his early efforts with the highly polished aestheticism of his recent work. A month to the day before the latter film's premiere, the national dailies reported on the success of the event, which some called "el mejor espectáculo del certamen" (the best spectacle of the festival competition) (Muñoz 1993).

The reporting on Almodóvar's triumph at San Sebastián mixed coverage of the social and the cinematic. On the personal front, one of the main topics was the rumor of a wedding between the director and the transsexual actress and performer Bibi Andersen, while in the film realm interest centered on the idea that *Kika* represented a kind of return to roots (Muñoz 1993; Torres 1993b), an aspect emphasized by its pairing with *Fólleme . . . Tim*. This ability to command attention from both the gossip pages and the culture section, together with the film's exhibition troubles in the United States—thanks primarily to the rape scene mentioned above—make *Kika* an important case study for the light it shines on the complexities of Almodóvar's reception in Spain.

This dual focus continued in subsequent coverage of the film shoot and premieres as well as interviews with the filmmaker that bubble over with gossip and details about the Almodóvar scene. The clothing and hairstyles of the latest or long-time "chicas Almodóvar," Rossy de Palma, Verónica Forqué, and Loles León; the celebrities visiting the set, from Lola Flores to Joaquín Sabina or Pablo González, the son of the then president: journalists put their best efforts into recreating the endlessly fascinating world generated by and around Almodóvar. The premiere in Madrid was received as a major public event, irrespective of the film's critical reception: "El triunfo del mestizaje" / The triumph of crossbreeding, *El País*; "Kika colapsó en la Gran Vía" / *Kika* fails on the Gran Vía, *ABC*; "La Gran Vía no es Broadway / The Gran Vía is not Broadway, *El Mundo*). It also represents

the closest approximation to the creation and exploitation of a personal star system linked exclusively to the director (the resonant expression, “chica Almodóvar,” was by that point a phrase in common usage in the Spanish press), adding a subcultural touch to the Hollywood-inspired spectacle celebrating the release of the film.⁷

Once again Almodóvar demonstrated his mastery and ability to manipulate the representational codes of contemporary information society. Following Juan Antonio Suárez in his study of Andy Warhol (1996), we are looking at a case of “the artist as advertiser.” Almodóvar, like Warhol before him, has devoted an inordinate amount of energy to the social and public spheres of Spanish cultural life, thereby assuming the roles of “discoverer, popularizer and packager of images, sensibilities, fashions and personalities” (Suárez 1996: 218).

The pressbook for *Kika* echoes these points. In it appear four texts written in first person singular and although only one bears Pedro Almodóvar’s signature, all display the traces of his authorship: the “Synopsis” begins with a forceful declaration of principles (“Si algo define a *Kika* es la imposibilidad de contarla en tres folios” / If anything defines *Kika* it is the impossibility of recounting its plot in three pages); “Génesis de un título” (Genesis of a Title) is the only text signed by Almodóvar and was supposedly written an hour before shooting began; “Cuadrados y círculos” (Squares and Circles) is the closest thing to a guide to interpreting the formal aspects of the film; and “Las palabras” (The Words) represents a reflexive text that provides an interpretation of the story as a fable about the lack of communication and carries the warning “se aconseja leer este capítulo después de haber visto la película” (one is advised to read this chapter after having seen the film). The most relevant of these in the present context is “Genesis of a Title.” In it Almodóvar once again assembles a roster of names and film references guaranteed to unsettle any conventional notion of a contemporary cinematic canon: Marilyn Monroe, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Blake Edwards, 1961), Noel Coward, *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960). The exercise takes on an even more provocative cast in the section supposed to present the filmmaker’s biography but that ends up as a string of names and titles he admires, to the effect that: “Odia que *Eva al desnudo*, *Sunset Boulevard* y *Opening Night*, por ejemplo, ya estén hechas, porque eso le impide intentar inventárselas.” (He hates the fact that *All about Eve* [Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950], *Sunset Boulevard* [Billy Wilder, 1950] and *Opening Night* [John Cassavetes, 1977] have already been made because that prevents him from trying to invent them himself) (El Deseo 1993). The self-referential games, initiated at San Sebastián with the timely revival of *Folle . . . Folle . . . Fólleme . . . Tim*, also make a reappearance. *Mujeres al borde* is mentioned three times but more notable is the director’s affirmation about *Kika* that “La verdad es que la película podría llamarse ‘Laberinto de pasiones,’ ‘Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto’ or ‘Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios.’ Los tres le van como anillo al dedo, pero esos títulos ya existen, yo mismo los he usado.” (The truth is the film could be called “Labyrinth of Passion,” “What Have I Done to Deserve This,” or “Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown.”

The three fit it to a tee but those titles already exist, I've used them myself). Finally, the pressbook also includes comments directed especially at the critics who can be counted on to systematically reject his films. He seems to be evoking them in somewhat elliptical fashion when he writes that he decided to abandon the possible title, "Una violación inoportuna" (A poorly timed rape), because "existe en el mundo gente muy susceptible, que no necesita ver una película para hacer campaña contra ella" (there are oversensitive people in the world who don't need to see a film to mount a campaign against it). More direct is his confession that he considers himself an "eclectico nato" (an eclectic by nature) noting that in this film "La convivencia de distintos géneros es más explícita y consciente que nunca. Esta característica mía siempre me ha creado dificultades con los críticos españoles, siendo a la vez la cualidad más destacada por los foráneos. (The coexistence of different genres is more explicit and conscious than ever. This characteristic on my part has always created problems for me with Spanish critics, while being the quality foreign critics most often point out) (Almodóvar 1993).

During these years Pedro Almodóvar achieved the status of a producer of cultural significance. Thanks to his fascination with stardom, commercial cinema, fame, and celebrity, to which one can add his perhaps diminished interest in the bohemian, homosexuality, and drugs, the filmmaker established a direct connection with the media-based imaginary of post-1992 Olympics Spain. It matters little whether the rumors of marriage to Bibi Andersen—who, one should note, gets only eighth-place billing in the cast list of *Kika*—were true. Her nude scene in the film and subsequent cover for the magazine *Interviú* (no. 963, October 1994), complete with an interview by Almodóvar, were sufficient to set tongues wagging in the capital while offering a cognitive frame and a wealth of information about Pedro, Bibi, and *Kika*.

Gossip, as spectacle as well as a form of social and cultural currency associated with Almodóvar and his fictional characters since Patty Diphusa, thus becomes a useful tool for generating expectation and transmitting information, while transforming virtually all of Almodóvar's words and deeds into potentially newsworthy events. And gossip also plays a key role in cementing Almodóvar's place on the public stage in Spain at that moment. The place in question is clearly identified with a certain socially avant-garde stance, a position celebrated by progressive sectors and decried by others. In either case these incidents illustrate what Marc Siegel has characterized as the "fabulous" character of gossip (2008: 155–6). In this context the confirmation or not of a wedding between Almodóvar and transsexual actress/personality Andersen fits with this fabulous, in the etymological sense of fable, myth or legend-generating capacity whose relevance in social terms exceeds the bounds of traditional cinematic culture, but without which it would be impossible to understand the larger Almodóvar phenomenon in Spain.

The premiere of *Kika* also coincided with a moment in which Almodóvar is increasingly seen and solicited in the pages of fashion magazines and Sunday supplements. Thus the cover of *El País Semanal* (1993) asked "¿Es Almodóvar un



Figure 6.2 Transsexual actress/personality Bibi Andersen during the filming of *Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1993; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jean Marie Leroy.

genio?” (Is Almodóvar a genius?), while in *Gente* the filmmaker evoked the image of the solitary and isolated artist proclaiming that “Cada vez me siento más solo” (I increasingly feel alone) (Ferrando 1993). If these features and headlines venture into the territory of clichéd representations of the author trapped by fame at the peak of success, they also provide information about diverse aspects of Almodóvar’s personal and professional life, all of which are transformed into products for consumption. As presented by the media, his life story can be read as a version of a democracy-era Spanish Dream whereby a homosexual boy from La Mancha without a university education or formal professional training becomes a world-famous film director. Consistent with the inspirational plotline, his cultural interests, memories, and tastes are made available as a kind of recipe for those who would aspire to imitate

his success, if not his artistic trajectory. In the case of *Kika*, media attention focused most intently on the designs of Jean Paul Gautier for the character of television reality talk show host Andrea Caracortada, although other design elements also attracted the spotlight, as when, in April 1994, the b.d. Madrid gallery (Bocaccio Design Madrid) organized an exhibition around “The Furniture of *Kika*.”

In terms of the critical reception of the film itself, despite the efforts in the pressbook and elsewhere to channel the supposed freedom and authenticity of Almodóvar’s early cinema—“con *Kika* vuelvo a mis primeras películas” (with *Kika* I return to my first films) (Muñoz 1993)—the critics tended to view these connections instead as evidence of a lack of new ideas and a sign of creative exhaustion. The reviews denounced the film in no uncertain terms, making it surely the most negatively reviewed work of Almodóvar’s career: Fernández-Santos (1993) finding it a “desastre” (disaster) and “hueca” (empty); Rodríguez Marchante (1993) for *ABC*, “ombligista y caprichosa” (navel-gazing and capricious); Boyero (1993) in *El Mundo*, “deslavazada, previsible y decepcionante” (disjointed, predictable and disappointing); or Monterde (1993), a “callejon sin salida” (dead end). They coincided in criticizing Almodóvar’s reliance on the facile and formulaic, once again lamenting the film’s alleged “confusión narrativa” (narrative confusion) while they rejected its embrace of a postmodern sensibility (what Almodóvar, as we have seen, terms its eclecticism).

Representative of this critical position is José Enrique Monterde’s review in *Dirigido por* . . . , one more chapter in the dialogue between Monterde and Almodóvar’s films. The article launches a frontal attack on the director, who the critic writes “prefiere ser famoso a ser importante Su cine no es más que un vacío más o menos bien adornado . . . por momentos patéticamente dedicado a preservar una imagen personal que acabará ejerciendo de ancla y puede contribuir a hundirle en el lodazal de banalidad y aburrimiento” (prefers being famous to being important His cinema is nothing more than a better or worse decorated empty void . . . at moments pathetically devoted to preserving an image that is destined to function as an anchor and that may contribute to burying him [or his cinema] in a quagmire of banality and boredom) (1993: 30). Monterde, as we will see, has recourse to his own earlier writings as he seeks to explain the sense of crisis or exhaustion he perceives in the film, a crisis he attributes to the nature of postmodern film with its spirit of “todo vale” (anything goes) and “subjektivismo acrítico” (acritical subjectivity).

Thus the Barcelona-based critic turns once again to the distinction between what he terms the filmmakers of spectacle (Fellini and Woody Allen) versus those of vision (Rossellini and Ford),⁸ consigning Almodóvar to the category of the trivial and superficial:

Mientras que Almodóvar se crea forzado a hacer desfilar a su circo, eufemísticamente conocido como ‘las chicas Almodóvar,’ integrado por el transexual más famoso de España, la actriz (?) más fea de nuestro cine, etc., se aproximará más a las funciones de Gabi, Fofó y Milikito [the Teletubbies in their Spanish incarnation] que no a la

solvencia de un narrador cinematográfico; . . . mientras se prolonga la convivencia de supuestos personajes con monigotes preexistentes a la propia concepción de cada film; mientras la obsesión del nuevo rico, que no sólo guioniza sino produce sus películas, rebose por todos los poros del film, haciendo de la más nauseabunda concepción del 'diseño' su bandera de enganche luciendo a Sakamoto/Morricone o Gaultier/Versace . . . (Monterde 1993: 33).

(As long as Almodóvar believes it necessary to parade his circus, euphemistically known as the "Almodóvar girls," and composed of the most famous transsexual in Spain, the ugliest actress (?) in our cinema, etc., he is closer to the antics of a Dipsy, Laa-Laa, Po, and Tinky Winky than to the artistic practices of a reputable film narrator; . . . as long as there continues to be confusion between the films' characters and the clownish paper dolls whose presence there predates the conception of the film; as long as the obsession of the nouveau riche [director] who not only writes but produces his films, saturates every corner of the film, wielding as his trademark the most nauseating concept of "design" as he flaunts his association with Sakamoto/Morricone or Gautier/Versace)

The seemingly unbridgeable distance between Almodóvar's artistic project and the criteria of the hegemonic critical establishment of the time only seemed to grow in view of the fact that Almodóvar's authorial profile was no longer that of the outrageous amateur but personified a creative identity embraced by much of the press, public, and institutions. By 1993 Almodóvar could be said to embody the status and function of film auteur as described by Janet Staiger (2003), that is to say, a concept of the author as a personality, a signature, a reading strategy, a discursive mechanism. It is with implicit reference to these concepts that the Spanish press carried out its critical dissection of *Kika*, fusing the author with his work while engaging in *ad hominem* attacks against the public projection of the director.

Only a handful of articles, including one by *Fotogramas* critic Daniel Monzón (1993) and a column by novelist Eduardo Mendicutti (1993) for *El Mundo*, came to the rescue of the film. Monzón took the tack of addressing the film's multiple problems as key to understanding its role as a kind of summary or epilogue of the first phase of the career of one of Spain's most daring film directors. Mendicutti on the other hand approached *Kika* as a reflection of the nation's own chaotic state. In his view the film's much criticized excess could and should be read as the emergence of a postmodern narrative and stylistic paradigm perfectly recognizable to Spanish audiences and society, if not to film critics.

Hable con ella

Filmed during the second half of 2001 and released in March 2002, in the wake of the worldwide success of *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999), *Hable con ella* represents the first time Almodóvar makes use of the internet to promote a

film, designing a website hosted, as mentioned above, by the French retailer FNAC at ClubCultura.com. The page offered reflections by Almodóvar on a variety of subjects: friendship, loneliness, communication, film as a topic of conversation, the joy of storytelling, madness. In addition to serving as a vehicle for the director's customarily extensive explanations of his film, the internet, as Vicente Rodríguez Ortega explores in his essay for this volume (chapter 24), offers a platform that brings together fans, consumers, and the general public drawn by their common interest in the film and the figure of the director.

Among its other contents the page included the by now obligatory self-interview in which Almodóvar explains the inspiration for *Hable con ella* in a series of real-life events. Subsequent sections invite us to explore information about the film's "guest artists," Pina Bausch, Caetano Veloso; or about silent cinema as seen through the example of "El amante menguante" (The Shrinking Lover), the fictional miniature included in the film. This electronic press kit is also accompanied by Almodóvar's diary of the film shoot and a feature entitled "Objetivo Almodóvar" (Objective Almodóvar) devoted to an exhibition on *Hable con ella* based on photographs taken by the director and presented at various FNAC locations.⁹ Other sections include photographs taken during filming, the usual cast and production details, and selected quotations from the critics. Noteworthy is the preponderance of Italian and French sources in this list, which fills six pages. In contrast, only three are Spanish, those of Ángel Fernández-Santos from *El País*, Sergi Sánchez in *La Razón*, and one from the *Diario de Cádiz*. The reviews from the United States and the UK, along with a column by Cuban exile novelist and cinephile Guillermo Cabrera Infante published in *El País*, appear separately in a header above the others. On the bottom left, a set of links provides access for purchasing the DVD, CD, and film script through the online retail outlet of FNAC.

Acclaimed internationally as a gifted filmmaker, the Almodóvar of 2002 was not the Almodóvar of 1993 and yet there continued to exist what we might call an approval gap in the reception of his films in Spain. In a long interview published in *Fotogramas* in connection with *Hable con ella* the introduction alerts us that "Pedro Almodóvar ha huido de posibles comparaciones. *Hable con ella* es un melodrama genuinamente almodóvariano y, sin embargo, distinto." (Pedro Almodóvar resists possible comparisons. *Hable con ella* is a genuinely Almodóvarian melodrama and, yet, distinctly different) (Montano 2002). The director once again evokes in this new film the freedom he enjoyed in writing *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* while reflecting on the impossibility of competing with new Spanish directors like Alejandro Amenábar, and finally describes the new picture as "Un disparate negro, siniestro, diría que hasta nauseabundo" (foolishly black and sinister, even nauseating) (Montano 2002). In this last reference Almodóvar's comments seemed designed to anticipate and deflect potential misinterpretations of his film having to do with its most polemical themes: the subordination of women to men that culminates in the rape of a comatose patient by her male nurse and the potential mistreatment of animals evidenced in the bullfighting scenes.¹⁰

Although the response to the film on the part of the specialized film press was positive, a certain ambivalence and lack of enthusiasm shine through. Sergi Sánchez, writing in *Fotogramas* commented that “la película es tan desigual como estimulante: . . . podría parecer el delirio de un loco” (the film is as uneven as it is stimulating: . . . it almost resembles the ravings of a crazy man) (Sánchez 2002), while Quim Casas in *Dirigido por* . . . (2002) related it to the visions of Fellini and David Lynch and emphasized the parodic mastery of silent movie style demonstrated in the “Amante menguante” fragment. As with earlier films, the intellectual elite praised the film, as in the case of Juan Manuel de Prada in *ABC* and Guillermo Cabrera Infante in *El País*, who declared himself an unabashed fan ready to emulate Penélope Cruz in her cry of joy at the Oscar ceremonies when Almodóvar’s name was announced as winner of the Best Foreign Film award for *Todo sobre mi madre*.

In the meantime the film critics for those same newspapers weighed into the debates raised by the film’s contentious topics, as in the case of Eduardo Rodríguez Marchante’s carefully equilibrated column titled, “Almodóvar sí, Almodóvar no” (2002). For his part, Fernández-Santos once again took up the charge against Almodóvar’s narrative defects, using the opportunity to revisit the director’s earlier films:

No es, aunque se acerca, *Hable con ella* una obra redonda, pues pierde resuello y desfallece en leves, pero inoportunas, arritmias de la zona final, que hacen que su tejido se resienta de sobreabundancia de hilos que crean espesuras y dilaciones y no nos dejan ir con rectitud al grano, rizando el rizo de algunas desviaciones bonitas y brillantes pero innecesarias, lo que hace perder a la secuencia parte de la energía de síntesis que derrocha en su arranque y despliegue.

Pero, pese a este balbuceo previo al firme y conmovedor desenlace, *Hable con ella* contiene los momentos de más intrépido cine hecho por Almodóvar desde los instantes de cumbre de aquella fractura que al nacer creó en las leyes de la pantalla *La ley del deseo* (Fernández-Santos 2002).

(*Hable con ella* is not a perfect work, although it comes close, for it loses steam and weakens in minor but inopportune arrhythmias in the final section. This has the effect of creating strains in its narrative fabric due to the overabundance of plotlines that results in bottlenecks and delays that prevent us from moving directly to the point, complicating matters with beautiful and brilliant but unnecessary detours that cause the sequence to lose part of the synthesizing energy displayed in its opening and development.

But despite this hesitation prior to the well-handled and moving finale, *Hable con ella* contains the most intrepid cinematic moments created by Almodóvar since the heights of that fracture with the laws of cinema that was born with *La ley del deseo*.)

All in all, the most critical voices raised against Almodóvar would come from groups like Ecologists in Action and other collectives. With their growing social



Figure 6.3 Cultural touchstone or animal cruelty? Bullfighting as a source of controversy in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Miguel Bracho.

and political influence in Spain, these groups realized the director's worst fears about possible confrontations with animal rights groups. Curiously, the filmmaker had anticipated potential problems abroad over the scenes depicting bullfights but he failed to take into account the attention and influence of "green" movements in Spain. An article appearing in the Catalanist newspaper *Avui* and written by the journalist and ex-militant of the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya party, Pilar Rahola (2002), was addressed directly to "A Pedro Almodóvar sobre la crueltat" (To Pedro Almodóvar concerning cruelty). Responding to reports that bulls were killed in the course of filming, she denounced *Hable con ella*: "En esta película no hay tan solo escenas de torero, sino que lo que hay es la muerte real y totalmente gratuita de seis toros, con generosidad de plástica cinematográfica—proceso de tortura incluido—, y con una chulería que ha llevado a Almodóvar a reírse de las leyes que rigen incluso en su comunidad" (In this film not only are there bullfighting scenes but the real and gratuitous deaths of six bulls, as depicted in glorious cinematic detail—the torture process included—and with a sense of shamelessness that has led Almodóvar to defy the laws of his own autonomous region).¹¹

At the same time charges also circulated that Almodóvar's film presented an apology for rape. In a column in *La Vanguardia*, entitled "Violadores con encanto" (Charming Rapists), novelist and literary critic Laura Freixas argued against what she identified as the falsely liberated attitudes expressed in some of most celebrated

recent films, especially *Hable con ella* and *En la ciudad sin límites/The City of No Limits* (Antonio Hernández, 2002). Her words laced with irony, Freixas characterized Almodóvar as the personification of cinema and machismo in Spain, adding that “ya se sabe que no hay como un buen polvo (voluntario o no) para espabilar a una mujer” (Everyone knows there’s nothing like a good roll in the hay to wake up a woman) (Freixas 2002).

As a consequence the film found itself in an uncomfortable but productive position. The critical approbation from certain sectors that Almodóvar’s previous films had failed to achieve was accompanied in the case of *Hable con ella* by a rejection from those groups long considered closest ideologically to the director: the progressive strand of the non-urban popular classes and feminists. It is this interpretive ambiguity, this capacity for generating wildly divergent responses that has carried Almodóvar’s cinema from the narrow confines of the cultural circuit to the broader terrain of national debates where it came to share space with rows over football or politics. A letter to the editor from a female reader of *La Vanguardia* offers testimony of this phenomenon. She writes: “Nunca hasta ahora me había atrevido a decir en público que, en general, no me gusta el cine español y encuentro de muy mal gusto las películas de Pedro Almodóvar. Pero hoy lo confieso abiertamente porque me respalda la opinión de su colaboradora Laura Freixas” (Never before have I dared to say publically that, in general, I don’t like Spanish cinema and I find Pedro Almodóvar’s films in very bad taste. But I am confessing it openly today, buoyed by the opinion of your collaborator Laura Freixas) (Sánchez Coll 2002). Although the letter writer seeks support from a source of authority whose influence has only waned in recent years (the print media), the opinions expressed take their place in a succession of misreadings, misunderstandings, and miscommunications that are revealing for what they tell us, not only about the dominant presuppositions and methodologies of the Spanish film critical establishment, but also about the key cultural and social coordinates of democratic Spain.

Conclusions

In the course of this chapter we have charted the range of approaches to Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema in the Spanish press. Fundamental to the opening up of the cultural and cinematic mindset that has taken place in Spain over the last three decades, Almodóvar’s idiosyncratic profile has shaped the subsequent reception of his films as a hybrid if not contradictory process. Reflecting in 2000 on Almodóvar’s then twenty-year career trajectory, Paul Julian Smith described the director as “the embodiment of post-Franco Spain, the representative of a new nation” (2000: 2). Ten years on, one can question not only the place of Almodóvar but also the state of that relationship with a “new” nation, as well as with the viewers and evaluators

of his work. Over the course of those years Almodóvar has moved from a peripheral to a central position in the narrative of democratic Spain. A measure of the growth of his influence and prestige is found in his confrontation with the country's most influential newspaper, *El País*, over its coverage of *Los abrazos rotos*,¹² alluded to in our introduction, or in his appearance as "surprise guest" during the 2010 Goya Awards ceremony.¹³

If, according to Staiger, "authorship is also a technique of the self, creating and recreating the individual as an acting subject with history" (2003: 50), the case of Pedro Almodóvar and his reception in Spain is of particular interest for the study of this mutual process of national and self-creation. The trivialization and reduction of the Almodóvar phenomenon to a series of dichotomies by the press represents an oversimplification of the cultural field that obscures operations of deeper significance. The inability on the part of a substantial portion of the press and other institutions to make sense of the director's impact in interpretative, sensual, economic, and methodological terms is the expression of a failure in the writing and rewriting of the history of Spanish cinema. By way of one last example we turn to the reflections of Jordi Costa, a critic of eclectic tastes and postmodern orientation, on *Los abrazos rotos*, published in the newest Spanish film monthly, *Cahiers du Cinéma-España*:

La evolución de lo Almodovariano ha movido el concepto hacia un territorio más cercano a *Te querré siempre*, que a, pongamos, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*. Y el principal problema de *Los abrazos rotos* . . . está . . . en la prudencia o en el reparo que le da a Almodóvar sostenerle la mirada al clásico de Rossellini. Tanto *Volver* como *Los abrazos rotos* parecen nacer en el epicentro de la tensión surgida entre el cineasta (mayúsculo) en que se ha convertido y esa mala interpretación (cómoda y portátil) de Lo Almodovariano que buena parte de su público confía en que siga perpetuando (Costa 2009: 17).

(The evolution of the notion of the Almodovarian has moved closer to *Viaggio in Italia* / *Journey to Italy* [Roberto Rossellini, 1954] than, let's say, to *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*. The principal problem with *Los abrazos rotos* . . . lies . . . in the excessive caution seemingly felt by Almodóvar in looking Rossellini's classic straight in the eye. Both *Volver* and *Los abrazos rotos* seem to emerge in the epicenter of the tension produced between the filmmaker (with a capital f) he has become and that mistaken (comfortable and ever adaptable) interpretation of the Almodovarian that a good part of his public looks to perpetuate.)

The persistent inability on the part of many Spanish critics to appreciate the multiple facets of the Almodóvar oeuvre is the product of a schematic vision that continues to evaluate forms of cultural expression in terms of high versus low and art versus folklore. For them his films offer an impossible dialectic between visual sophistication and traditionalist populism. Thus it is not surprising that Almodóvar takes refuge in the international projection of his artistic products, at least in critical terms. In this sense a successful approach to his dual construction as

filmmaker and public figure requires nothing less than a thorough reevaluation of the dominant models of cinephilia and the tension between modernity and postmodernity as well as a revision of Spanish history from and through the audiovisual sector in the transnational context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Notes

- 1 Work on this chapter has been supported by the research project CSO2010-15798 (TRANSCINE), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.
- 2 Boyero had already made clear his objections to the film following its Spanish premiere (Boyero 2009) and *El País* felt the need to respond rapidly to its own chief critic, publishing a “Forum” piece the next day by the writer Gustavo Martín Garzo that openly praised the film (Martón Ganzo 2009). One can track the dialectical exchange between Almodóvar and various representatives of the paper, including the public editor, in Almodóvar 2009a, 2009b, 2009c. See also Paul Julian’s Smith’s analysis of the context and consequences of this incident in his essay for this book (chapter 1).
- 3 <http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/almodovar/esp/home.htm>. As of June 2011 this page has not been updated. The promotion of Almodóvar’s following film, *Broken Embraces*, appears on the site known as Pedro Almodóvar blog (<http://www.pedroalmodovar.es>).
- 4 Later, Spanish directors such as Alex de la Iglesia and Santiago Segura would adapt similar bio-filmographic coordinates for use in the promotion of their own films, following the strategies pioneered by Almodóvar.
- 5 Painter, illustrator, and comic book artist Ceesepe (Carlos Sánchez Pérez) created several designs for the poster, some of which made more evident the homosexual relationships central to the story, but the choice was made to use an image in which this aspect is only insinuated.
- 6 With 1,688,135 spectators in the national market, *Tacones lejanos* held a strong lead over its next most successful domestic competitors, *Cómo ser mujer y no morir en el intento?*/*How to be a Woman and Not Die Trying* (Ana Belén) with 654,015 tickets sold, and *Las edades de Lulú*/*The Ages of Lulu* (Bigas Luna), 641,983 tickets.
- 7 “El autobús de Esteban Rivas era una horterada sideral. Cuatro gigantescas letras—‘KIKA’—encima de su techo; cuentas de colores en los tornillos de las ruedas; y cenefas de plástico bordeando las ventanillas desde donde Pedro Almodóvar y sus ‘chicos’, ‘chicas’ y Bibi Andersen movían rítmicamente sus manos” (The Esteban Rivas bus was a tacky and over the top extravaganza. Four gigantic letters on the roof spelling KIKA; colored beads adorned the wheels and plastic bunting draped the windows where Pedro Almodóvar and his “boys” and “girls” and Bibi Andersen moved their hands rhythmically back and forth) (Escudier 1993).
- 8 Relevant here is Almodóvar’s own ironic allusion in the pressbook to the film canon: “Si dijera que me he inspirado en *Citizen Kane* o en *Centauros del desierto* [The Searchers], mentiría” (If I said that my inspiration for the film was *Citizen Kane* or *The Searchers*, I’d be lying), as if indirectly he intuited what the critics would expect of him—or of any “serious” film director.

- 9 As of July 2011 a handful of the selected photos remain accessible online at <http://www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/almodóvar/objetivo/objetivo.htm>.
- 10 With respect to the first, Almodóvar added “espero que a ninguna mujer se le ocurra decir, tras ver *Hable con ella*, que yo pienso que el hombre se comunica mejor cuando la mujer no habla o cuando está medio muerta” (I hope no woman takes away the message, after seeing *Hable con ella*, that I think that men communicate better with women when they don’t talk or when they’re half dead (Montano 2002: 90). As far as bullfighting, the director sent a conciliatory message, including a statement in the pressbook to the effect that: “Sé que en España no va a dar ningún problema porque pertenece a nuestra cultura, pero me preocupa lo que digan algunos grupos de otros países” (I know there won’t be a problem in Spain because this is part of our culture but I am thinking of the reaction among groups in other countries (Montano 2002: 92).
- 11 Rahola is referring to the Law 1/1990 on the Protection of Domestic Animals of the Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid. In July 2010 the Catalan parliament voted to outlaw bullfighting, becoming the second Autonomous Region to do so, following the Canary Islands in 1991.
- 12 In the wake of Carlos Boyero’s column on the film’s Cannes showing, Almodóvar wrote the following letter to the public editor of *El País*: “Como lector de *El País* desde sus comienzos, lamento el deterioro progresivo de sus páginas de cultura. Y el éxito de aquello que justamente combatía *El País* cuando se fundó, el amarillismo, el sensacionalismo, los malos modos literarios, el tono grueso, la banalidad, etc. *El País* original luchaba contra todo esto y me entristece comprobar que paulatinamente el estilo contra el que luchaba aparece en algunas páginas del periódico” (As a reader of *El País* since its origins, I lament the progressive deterioration of the paper’s culture section. And the triumph of that which *El País* fought against when it was founded: yellow journalism, sensationalism, literary fads, a coarse tone, banality. The original *El País* fought against all of that and I am saddened to note that the style against which it fought now infiltrates its pages) (Almodóvar 2009c).
- 13 Almodóvar’s problematic relation with the Spanish film industry is concretized in the ups and downs of his relationship with the Spanish Film Academy. The director abandoned the Academy in December 2004 alleging its “histórica falta de generosidad” (historic lack of generosity) (*El País*, February 7, 2005). His surprise appearance at the 2010 ceremony unleashed a standing ovation from the attendees, accessible on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziex4QPTBw0> (Accessed November 7, 2010).

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Memory, Politics, and the Post-Transition in Almodóvar's Cinema

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The analysis of the political dimension of Almodóvar's cinema, and more concretely, its relation to Spanish social reality, has always stimulated considerable debate.¹ During the mid-1990s Paul Julian Smith responded to charges from critics outside Spain that the director's films were "apolitical" or "ahistorical" with the observation that such attitudes were the product of "ignorance or indifference to the Spanish context in which that work was produced" (2000: 2–3). But such views were not limited to foreign critics. The fact is that Spanish media and critics have been the most reluctant to acknowledge the presence of a political vein in Almodóvar's cinema. An example of this mindset can be found in the response to a pair of declarations made by Almodóvar during the 2009 press conference following the screening of the film *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* (2009) at the Cannes Film Festival. In the first he observed that the film, starring Penélope Cruz and Lluís Homar, could be interpreted as a metaphor for the Spanish transition to democracy while in the second he recounted that he was working on a film adaptation of the life of communist Fernando Macarro, also known as Marcos Ana, who had spent twenty-five years as a political prisoner under Franco. The next day the Barcelona daily, *La Vanguardia*, published an article entitled "Almodóvar se pasa al cine político" (Almodóvar takes up political filmmaking) as if until that point his work had remained entirely on the margins of any of the ideological debates taking place over the last thirty years in Spanish society (Llopart 2009).

This was not the first time that the Spanish press questioned the political stance, or lack thereof, in Almodóvar's cinema. In the early 1980s the majority of the critics were at pains to decide how to take his films. On the surface their stories and plotlines appeared frivolous, disjointed, and ultimately trivial. At their core, however, lay a barely disguised interest in the social and a stunningly original

approach to the depiction of reality that engaged in unexpected ways with various aspects of the Spanish cultural tradition. The effects of this new “realism” were amplified by the director’s determination to distance himself from any recognizable theoretical frame of reference or affiliation. Thus when asked about *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* / *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980) he playfully defined it as a mixture of *film noir* and women-centered pop comedy with touches of Ingmar Bergman. Reacting to those surprised by the melodramatic tone of *Laberinto de pasiones* / *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) Almodóvar informed the press that his film was, deep down, an example of science fiction.

Even the writer Francisco Umbral, otherwise an astute chronicler of Madrid cultural life, seemed unsure of what and who he was dealing with. On the one hand Almodóvar seemed to be the “enfant terrible” of the lively and uninhibited post-Francoist youth culture, one more member, perhaps the most visible, of that tribe of frivolous, typically Madrileñan punks and punkettes who sought to dazzle onlookers by virtue of their so-called modernity and outrageous sense of humor. On the other hand his cinema offered an incisive vision of contemporary urban Spain, in a dramatic key at some remove from his public persona. Writing in *El País* in response to the premiere of *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* / *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), Umbral commented that “Almodóvar, que era la posmodernidad, la vanguardia, la ostiaspedrín, nos cuenta una historia de taxistas y asistentas madrileños. Me lo había advertido Angelito Harguindey: ‘Toda la peli pasa en el barrio de la Concepción’. Si esto lo filma/firma Bardem, en serio, dirían los críticos que es una película de comunistas denunciando que en España se vive mal.” (Almodóvar, who previously represented the postmodern, the avant-garde, the provocative, tells a story of taxi drivers and cleaning ladies in Madrid. [Writer and journalist] Angelito Harguindey had warned me: “The whole movie takes place in the Concepcion neighborhood [a working-class district of Madrid].” If Juan Antonio Bardem’s name were on it, the critics would have said that it was one of those communist films denouncing how badly people live in Spain) (Umbral 1984). The dominant interpretation of Almodóvar and his films at that moment stressed their aesthetic originality and innovation but cast him and them as falling short in achieving true “modernity” in a political sense, that is, a vocation for clarifying the social contradictions of the time.

In his analysis of *Laberinto de pasiones* Diego Galán showed clear irritation with the apparent “ideological” content of director’s early films:

Bastantes espectadores suelen confundir la mala calidad visual y sonora de un cierto cine joven español con sus planteamientos ideológicos... La pobreza económica se relaciona con frecuencia con una supuesta novedad moral. Esa mecánica identificación es, naturalmente, falsa. La mayoría de las primeras películas rodadas en los últimos años por nuevos cineastas han sido, en última instancia, más conservadoras que aquéllas a las que pretendían discutir. Siguen siendo Carlos Saura y Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón los autores más modernos de nuestro cine. (Galán 1982)

(Many spectators tend to confuse poor quality visuals and sound in a certain body of work made by young Spanish filmmakers with their ideological positioning The lack of resources is often thought to connote a new moral stance. This automatic identification between one and the other is, of course, false. The majority of first films made in the last years by new directors have ultimately been more conservative than those of their predecessors. Carlos Saura and Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón continue to be the most modern authors of our cinema.)

Everything in Almodóvar ends up being so “loco y disparatado” (crazy and outrageous), in the words of Galán, that the passion, freshness, and originality which inform his treatment of the social conflicts of the era lose their radical potential.

In the mid-1980s, for Galán and readers of *El País*, representatives of the urban, progressive middle-class citizens of the newly restored Spanish democracy, the debates centered on whether the embryonic Almodóvar “universe” in all its strangeness and creative “auteurist” potential would evolve and mature into the heir to Luis Buñuel or the next (Spanish) Pasolini or Fassbinder (and in doing so how many international prizes he might garner at the prestigious film festivals of Berlin, Venice, or Cannes). Nevertheless, Almodóvar’s concerns at that stage were quite different. “Madrid se ha convertido, sin proponérselo, en la gran competidora de Cannes” (Madrid has become, without seeking to do so, the major competitor for Cannes), he writes in his first opinion piece for the national press. “Medio mundo se muerde los muñones de nerviosismo tratando de decidir si va al festival de Cannes o a las fiestas de San Isidro. Si eres moderno, no hay la menor duda: procede venir a Madrid” (Half the world is driving itself crazy trying to decide whether to attend the Cannes Film Festival or come to the San Isidro celebrations [a festival honoring Madrid’s patron saint]. If you are modern there is no doubt what to do: head for Madrid) (Almodóvar 1985). Between his unique capacity for self-presentation in the public sphere and the nature of his filmic interventions in the cultural and media reality of the time, Almodóvar stirred up an authentic commotion in film circles. Up until then the figure of the director had been associated with the intellectual profile of such distant, sober, and politically responsible film auteurs as Carlos Saura, Víctor Erice, or Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón. The films and the persona of Pedro Almodóvar dared to question the fundamental canons of critical realism that had dominated Spanish art cinema since the 1950s.

In subsequent decades, the emergence of new interpretive paradigms has contributed to the development of new and more suggestive readings of Almodóvar’s films (D’Lugo 1991; Smith 1994; Vernon 1993; Vernon and Morris 1995; Vilarós 1998; Yarza 1999). These studies take as their point of departure the argument that the social and political dimension of his work can only be understood through the framework of postmodern thought and aesthetics. The theoretical arsenal of punk culture thus becomes the source of a rupture with the countercultural “progre” (progressive) mythology of the 1970s while at the same time the embrace of a camp aesthetic provides the means to rethink the role of

the subject and the question of social and power relations from a perspective without precedent in the Spanish cinematic panorama. Almodóvar himself had already made the point: "If there's any theme common to my films it's a striving for absolute individual freedom carried to the extreme and that may be considered a political position" (Besas 1985: 216–17). In the final analysis, the presumed frivolity of Almodóvar's cinema acquires a political dimension when it denounces the immobility of firmly implanted social and cultural stereotypes and the illusory naturalness of the dominant processes of ideological production, as well as when it lays bare the limits of the mimetic conception of representation, as Alejandro Yarza (1999: 32) has rightly noted, and with them the most conservative, the most crudely metaphysical aspects of the filmic discourse of modernity.

In this essay, in contrast, we propose to analyze the construction of political discourse in Almodóvar's cinema in a context far removed from that of the early 1980s. If during that era Almodóvar was concerned with issues related to the dissolution of conventional forms and concepts of representation, as effected from an ironic and carnivalesque (in the Bakhtinian sense) perspective, in the mid-1990s his cinema adopts a more mainstream and narrative style, in the course of embracing an overtly critical position toward Spanish reality. For some scholars (Labany 2000; Moreiras Menor 2002; Vilarós 1998), Almodóvar's narrative evolution can be understood in the context of a "wounded" culture that struggles for expression, and finds it only in the form of a spectral, phantasmagoric mode. Clearly there is no denying the prominence of a series of ghostly figures and the ever increasing interest in the place of memory in his most recent cinema; the "apparitions" of Víctor (Liberto Rabal) in *Carne trémula / Live Flesh* (1997) and Lola / Esteban (Tony Cantó) in *Todo sobre mi madre / All About My Mother* (1999), set in cemeteries, or the character of the adult Ignacio (Francisco Boira) in *La mala educación / Bad Education* (2004) are connected in various ways to Derridian juxtapositions of states of absence and phantasmagoric presence in films such as *Hable con ella / Talk to Her* (2002), *Volver* (2006), or *Los abrazos rotos*. The problem with this line of interpretation is that it derives from a series of questionable suppositions from an historiographic, sociological, and political point of view: the figure of Franco as the origin of the social conflicts and cultural specters affecting contemporary Spain; the persistence of the myth or shadow of the dictator over present-day decentralized Spain of the autonomous communities; and/or the vision of the transition to democracy as an experience of collective amnesia and the erasure of memory. What this essay proposes instead is an approach more closely tied to historical and social reality and thus to the conditions of the emergence in Spain of a "postmodern ethics," which is, at base, as José-Carlos Mainer (2005) insists, the expression of a "loss of innocence," and the shattering of the illusions created during the promising era of the 1980s.

If, for the right, the problem is the "fragmentation" of the nation, in other words, that the model of the decentralized state of autonomous regions has failed to check the aspirations of Catalan and Basque nationalisms, for the post-Felipe

González-era left, the strategic question is rather the crumbling of the welfare state. In response to this state of affairs, both sides of political spectrum have begun to construct new master narratives that aim to reclaim lost terrain. Thus on the right we see a reinforcement of neo-nationalism and charges that the left's economic policies threaten to upend peace and social order. On the left the failure to defend the achievements of the welfare state is viewed as a product of the ideological disarmament brought about by the "pact of silence" agreed to following the death of Franco, with the result that the insistence on the recuperation of "historical memory" as political policy is intended to serve not simply as a means to restore the dignity of the victims of the war and dictatorship but also as a way to reveal the continuities between the current democracy and the social and cultural structures of Francoism. The financial crisis of 2008 would transform this political scenario. With the contraction of the credit markets, the construction sector—so central to the country's economic growth since the 1960s—collapsed and unemployment soared to the point that one in five Spaniards lost their jobs. The socialist government, attending to the neo-liberal prescriptions of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, shored up the banks, cut public investment, and moved to reform pensions and the labor market. The application of these political and economic programs undermined the credibility of the left-wing platform of ideas that had brought Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero to power.

The social environment of Almodóvar's cinema in the 1980s is characterized by a transgressive impulse that celebrates the attainment of liberties that stretch beyond the goals and limits set by political institutions. But the ideological debates arising in the mid-1990s that questioned the development of democracy moved him to adopt a much more critical and pessimistic perspective regarding the achievements of the period, resulting in the incorporation into his films of a "transcodification" (Ryan and Kellner 1988; Trenzado Romero 2000) of the discourse of the new left. As Marvin D'Lugo emphasizes in his penetrating reading of *La mala educación*, Almodóvar not only trains his caustic vision on the ill-effects of Francoist society and education (the targets of countless earlier film critiques) but also, and above, on all deeper cultural processes never fully debated in the context of transition and post-transition culture, with the result that these "new demons . . . continue to act upon the contemporary Spanish psyche" (D'Lugo 2006: 128). This insight could be equally applied to the moralizing vein of *Carne trémula* and *Todo sobre mi madre*. In this regard the filmmaker's position has always been transparent: "mi posición política está perfectamente clara. Nunca he sido miembro de un partido político porque necesito mantener mi independencia. Pero soy muy de izquierdas. Y en mis películas no es necesario que los personajes hablen de política. La política está implícita en el filme" (my political position is perfectly clear. I've never been a member of a political party because I need to maintain my independence, But I am very left-wing. And in my films there is no need for characters to talk about politics. The politics are implicit in the film)

(Smith 2000: 178). In fact, the frontline presence of Almodóvar in Spanish political life has been a constant since the mid-1990s. And it is not surprising that following the events of May 15, 2011—the demonstrations by the “indignados” (indignant ones)—the director has once again expressed his criticism of the socialist government and endorsed a manifesto calling for “la necesidad de reconstruir el presente de la izquierda” (the need to reconstruct the left).²

In reconstructing the central elements of Almodóvar’s current political discourse we will center our discussion on the study of what Paul Julian Smith defined ten years ago with great intuitive accuracy as the beginning of a cycle. In the stage that emerges following the catharsis occasioned by *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), Almodóvar trains his focus on the problem of memory, transforming his characters into vehicles in the service of a new national, if inevitably postmodern, narrative, whose primary theme—in the spirit of the great nineteenth-century novels—is that of social change and the passage from dictatorship to democracy (Smith 2000: 185). After a necessarily brief discussion of *La flor*, we will concentrate our analysis on *Carne trémula*, *Todo sobre mi madre*, and *La mala educación*³ insofar as the three share an underlying premise: the belief that a critical reading of the past provides a regenerating source for present-day social and political life. In our approach to the films we draw on a critical framework that looks beyond the limits of the text as the epicenter of the construction of meaning, in the conviction that, as Kellner (1991) notes following Barthes, Macherey, Derrida, and other poststructuralist theorists, the textual margins can be equally if not more relevant for observing the process of transmitting ideological positions.

From *Novela Rosa* to *Film Noir*: The Breakdown of the Transitional Paradigm

La flor de mi secreto is the story of a writer at the height of her fame who cries out (her cries drowned out by those of a televised provincial screaming contest and a student demonstration) for change in her life. That change is expressed in her firm decision to seek out a place from which to intervene in social reality. As if responding to Truman Capote’s comment about the difference between writing and typing, Almodóvar proposes to illustrate the distance that separates the industrial production of stories with “narcotic” effects—narrative fictions that help their readers to “olvidarse de la sordidez en la que se vive” (forget about the sordidness we live in), as a character describes them—from stories conceived as intellectual tools to be used in understanding and transforming public life. While neither the first nor the last time that Almodóvar has dealt with author or director characters and with the creative process in his films, in this case the conflict centers explicitly on the question of the social function of artistic creation and the old but ever new polemic regarding the relation between art and life.

Leocadia (Leo) Macías (Marisa Paredes) is going through a difficult time. Her marriage is in shambles and she has lost interest in the sentimental novels (*novela rosa*) that have brought her wealth and fame under the pseudonym Amanda Gris. Leo is obviously an updated version of a character from *Entre tinieblas* / *Dark Habits* (1983), Sor Rata de Callejón, Sister Alley Rat (Chus Lampreave), also a successful author of romance novels. But in that film Sor Rata's character and story function to provide comic relief to the primary dramatic plotline, the impossible relationship between the Mother Superior (Julieta Serrano) and the singer Yolanda (Cristina Sánchez Pascual) who has taken refuge in the convent. Sor Rata's secret career and her sudden writer's block are played for laughs and given no more screen time than the private and parodic idiosyncrasies of her fellow sisters. The point is made that the mother superior considers her novels "basura" (trash) while Yolanda, with her more "underground" sensibility, would rescue them from the inquisitorial flames: "Por eso mismo me gustan. Los libros serios me amuerman" (That's why I like them. Serious books put me to sleep).

In the case of Amanda Gris, the dramatic significance lies in the public profile of the character, in her economic status, prestige, and social projection, in her "organic" function, in the Gramscian sense of the term. The writer is tied to a contract that determines minimum production goals (five novels a year) and imposes adherence to an ideologically and morally conservative editorial line ("nada de política"; "ausencia de conciencia social" / no politics; the absence of any social conscience). The secret of Gris's identity is also of greater consequence, owing to her status as a high-level media commodity, a fact which allows Leo's editor-bosses to threaten, should she break her contract, to ruin her life by revealing her identity to the tabloid press. To these circumstances one should add the specific sociopolitical context in which the writer operates, where, as one of the characters notes, Spain, and Leo, are "a punto de explotar" (about to explode). As she notes in justifying her own process of transformation: "El mundo entero puede cambiar de la noche a la mañana" (The whole world could change from one day to the next). Thus the parallelisms between Almodóvar's personal trajectory and the portrait he draws of Leo Macías tend to be much more detailed than in the case of Sor Rata. When her editors question the ideological turn taken by Leo in her latest novel she answers in all sincerity: "El problema es el color; no sé escribir novela rosa, me sale negra. Lo intento, pero cada página me sale más negra." (The problem is the color; I don't know how to write a rose-colored, sentimental novel, it turns out black. I try, but each page comes out blacker than the one before).

In this way *La flor de mi secreto* provides a bridge between the themes that circulate in Almodóvar's 1980s filmography and the debates and concerns that emerge in subsequent films. The irony, fragmentation, and superficiality characteristic of previous films will increasingly give way to an interest, as Smith indicates, in a "direct engagement with characters, coherent integration of plot, and a sense of psychological, social and historical depth" (Smith 2000: 186). Similar to Leo Macías, Almodóvar is about to initiate a new chapter in his creative life but

he continues to move in a liminal zone of embryonic projects that fail to find coherent form and expression. As a result, contradictory tendencies coexist in the film: the inspiration and protection provided by the return to the maternal home and the definitive refuge found in the downtown, bourgeois penthouse; versus the criticism of the political class with its cold and distant bureaucratic logic, as embodied by Leo's husband Paco (Imanol Arias), a military officer involved in the NATO peace mission in Bosnia, or in the figure of Felipe González, whom the demonstrating medical students send off to the dissection room; or the fascination with the journalistic-media establishment represented by the character of Ángel (Juan Echanove), most likely based on the real-life critic Angel Harguindey, director since the 1980s of the influential culture section of *El País*.⁴

Carne trémula: The Irruption of History

Following *La flor de mi secreto* Almodóvar turns to more ideologically rooted modes of expression, invoking as never before a set of concrete socio-historical referents. From this moment on, the social and political context comes to play a decisive role in the construction of characters and their life experiences. Seen in those terms *Carne trémula* appears as a hybrid between melodrama and *film noir* at the same time that it constitutes a milestone in the evolution of the ways of expressing the relation between film language and social critique in Almodóvar's body of work. "Twenty years ago," he tells Frederic Strauss, "my revenge against Franco consisted in not recognizing his existence, his memory, in making films as if he had never walked the earth. Now I believe it is wrong to forget that era and that it is important to remember that, after all, it wasn't so long ago" (Strauss 2001: 154). With this strategy in mind Almodóvar puts into motion a circular narrative (like the name of the Madrid bus route, the *Circular*, that carries the film's protagonist) with the intention of settling accounts with the past.

The film's political vision resides in its critical reading of a democracy that has been incapable of neutralizing social inequality, the guilt complex, machismo, excessive individualism, and the other legacies of a culture of complacency that once chilled the heart of the "españolitos" of poet Antonio Machado's time. Curiously, the period of the immediate transition and creation of a new democratic society is elided in the film, by the ellipsis that follows the opening sequence and takes us from the year 1970 to the beginning of the 1990s. Indeed, contrary to certain interpretations of the film as self-congratulatory, Almodóvar appears markedly less interested in signaling elements of modernization and change in Spain than in exploring the fractures of a society that, after twenty years of democracy, remains in thrall to its own contradictions. It is in this sense that *Carne trémula* suggests a line of continuity, a temporal ring or circularity, to pursue the bus metaphor, between the journey of Isabel Plaza Caballero (Penélope Cruz)

and her son Víctor (Liberto Rabal), and from the past of Francoism and the transition to the democratic present.

The intention to establish a nexus of continuity between dictatorship and democracy is established in the film's opening, with the evocation of the figure of Manuel Fraga, President of the conservative Partido Popular and the Xunta (regional government) of Galicia. The voice of Fraga, then Minister of Information and Tourism, is heard announcing a state of emergency, but the date is displaced from its actual occurrence in 1969 to 1970 in the film. The effect is to reaffirm the presence of the leader of the Spanish right in a key period in the political history of Francoism—one that begins with the Burgos trials of 1970 and concludes with the last political executions of 1975—from which he and his allies have tried to disassociate themselves. Something similar occurs in the representation of the political climate of the opening scene in which Isabel gives birth on a city bus, transmitting an almost atemporal and ahistorical image of Francoism. The film obliges us to (re)live as listeners and spectators the experience of Francoist media propaganda by means of a style both dramatic (the radio broadcast of the official text of the declaration of the state of emergency) and parodic (the mock version of the official Spanish NO-DO newsreel) that reproduces the rhetorical and communicative strategies of the 1950s and 1960s, their archaic character powerfully evoked in the voice of the veteran Matías Prats, narrator of the NO-DO from 1947 to 1971.⁵ But the angry graffiti glimpsed on the city streets conveys to us that the social climate no longer resembles the "time of silence" of previous decades.

The final scene of *Carnet trémula* marks the endpoint of a process of apprenticeship undertaken by Víctor who has arrived at full biological and ideological maturity. Traveling by taxi with his wife Elena (Francesca Neri) through the crowded streets of a festive Madrid decked out with Christmas lights and decorations on their way to the hospital where she will give birth to their child, Víctor's reflections could not be more explicit regarding the political function of memory. As the story comes full circle, Víctor looks around and comments on the obvious social and political differences that separate the two births. Addressing his unborn child (and the spectators) he remarks: "No sabes cómo ha cambiado todo esto . . . Por suerte, hijo mío, hace ya mucho tiempo que en España hemos perdido el miedo" (You don't know how much all this has changed. . . . Fortunately, my son, we in Spain stopped being afraid a long time ago). In the promotion campaign for the film, Almodóvar defined it as a "cuento de navidad y un cuento moral" (a Christmas story and a morality tale). Later during an interview with the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* (Escribano 1998) he elaborated on the meaning of the reflections expressed by Víctor in the film's final sequence:

LN: La película concluye con la frase "en este país hace tiempo que hemos perdido el miedo". ¿Por qué esta alusión?

PA: Necesitaba poner esa referencia y me parecía que era el momento oportuno, que no es el mejor de la democracia. Hasta ahora, en mis películas, hacía como si en

España hubiéramos sido siempre modernos y frívolos. Debemos ser conscientes de lo que nos rodea. Yo hice cine como si Franco no hubiera existido, y quería recordar que ese pasado tan negro no es lejano. La película comienza con la voz de Fraga Iribarne, que era ministro, declarando el estado de excepción y el fin de las libertades (sic). Era su voz y sigue teniendo esa voz en Galicia, por eso quería recordármelo. Otra vez, porque me estoy haciendo mayor. El pueblo español ha madurado más que la clase política y estoy convencido de que los españoles no permitirán que vuelva algo como aquello.

(LN: The film concludes with the phrase “in this country we stopped being afraid a long time ago.” Why this allusion?

PA: I needed to put in this reference and it seemed like the right moment, now that democracy is not at its best. Until now, in my films, I acted as if in Spain we had always been modern and frivolous. We ought to be aware of what is around us. I made films as if Franco had never existed and I wanted to remember that dark past that isn’t so distant. The film begins with the voice of Fraga Iribarne, who was a government minister, declaring the state of emergency and an end to citizens’ rights. It was his voice and they still have that voice in Galicia, that’s why I wanted to recall it. Also because I’m getting older. The people have matured more than the political class and I’m convinced that Spaniards won’t let anything like that happen again.)

Whether convinced or not, Almodóvar seems to interpret the assumption of power by the conservative Partido Popular as the threat of a return to the past and the loss of rights and freedoms. Seen in this light, the efforts made in *Carne trémula* to connect the social conflicts of the present to the troubles of a not so distant past have a clear logic. From Víctor’s standpoint, the recent processes of economic and social modernization do not appear to have made significant inroads in the enormous inequities that shaped the conditions of his birth. Significantly, he is unable to share in the collective jubilation occasioned by the 1992 Olympic Games, the very emblem of those changes, being at that moment imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. Clearly Víctor’s mother was never able to escape from a life of prostitution or raise her son as she would have wished (“I wasn’t a good mother,” she writes in her farewell letter to her son). And it is also evident that the speculative capitalism of the 1980s (symbolized in the enormous KIO Towers that dwarf the remaining houses in the La Ventilla quarter),⁶ the inheritor of the economic development schemes of late Francoism, has also failed to bring about the “envidiable perspectivas” and “vida sobre ruedas” (enviable future and smoothly running life—literally, life on wheels) predicted for him in the NO-DO celebrating his birth.

Almodóvar’s disillusioned vision proposes a clear-eyed reading of Spanish social reality: if Víctor’s birth coincided with the beginning of a period of renewed political awareness and increased rebellion against the dictatorship, the birth of his child is inscribed in a new era of social mobilization marked by the spirit of solidarity shared by the members of the non-governmental organization (NGO) created by Elena.



Figure 7.1 Víctor Plaza in the shadow of the KIO Towers in the La Ventilla quarter in *Carne trémula* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1997; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Daniel Martínez.

Memory and the Redemption of Theater in *Todo sobre mi madre*

In *Carne trémula*, as we have seen, the past makes itself felt in the opening sequence in order to provide a political frame for interpreting the subsequent evolution of the protagonist, Víctor. In *Todo sobre mi madre*, in contrast, the approach to the past is more abstract and metaphorical, in that the past plays a role not as a reference to historical reality but as a problem. The film speaks to us about the negation or concealment of the past that results in paralysis and the contrary decision to undertake a hazardous journey through the “tunnel of memory,” in the words of Almodóvar (Strauss 2001: 171), a journey that leads to the hope of a future free of the contaminants of that past (the future in which the third Esteban eliminates all traces of the AIDS virus from his system). The allegorical character of the allusions to the lived past do not imply the disappearance of the real historical traces of that time, however. In fact, the most revealing connections with history are found in the margins of the text, in the subtle intertextual play established by Almodóvar between the character of Manuela and the biography of actress Cecilia Roth.

Although the film does not show directly the beginnings of Manuela's personal trajectory, of necessity (and chronology) those origins point back to a concrete historical context: the Argentina of the first half of the 1970s and the political

climate generated by the so-called “Proceso” (D’Lugo 2006: 100). During those years young Argentines were engaged in an important movement of artistic and cultural renovation with links to the political struggle led by the left wing of the Peronist party. It is a much overlooked fact that the metaphor and experience of theater, almost as much as cinema, play a key role in the design of Almodóvar’s creative universe. Music and theater also played a decisive role in the events and activities taking place in Argentina, as in many other countries. Norman Brinski, director of the “Octubre” group, developed a dramaturgy designed and directed toward the popular classes. David Stivel, working on Argentine television, directed the group “Gente de Teatro,” which included actors of the stature of Norma Leandro, Bárbara Mújica, Carlos Carella, Marilina Ross, Federico Luppi, Emilio Alfaro and Juan Carlos Gené. Carlos Gandolfo, director of the group, “Nuevo Drama,” created café-theater productions in which Marilina Ross put music to the texts of works by poet, journalist, and later Montonero militant Paco Urondo. During the same period Nacha Guevara enjoyed success in Buenos Aires with one-woman shows like “Las mil y una Nachas” (A Thousand and One Nachas; it plays on the Spanish title of *A Thousand and One Nights*, *Las mil y una noches*) in which she interpreted songs by the irreverent and provocative French writer Boris Vian, who also inspired Manuela. But that particular cultural spring would end with the sudden, violent eruption of a burst of state-sponsored terrorism at the hands of the ultra-right Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Triple A). Following a bloody bomb attack that left one dead and various wounded in the theater where she was working, Nacha Guevara fled to exile in 1975, first to Peru and later Mexico. A short time later Norman Brinski left for Madrid. David Stivel emigrated to Colombia. Almodóvar, who during the same years was active in independent theater circles in Madrid (the period when he played the role of a communist in Sartre’s *Les mains sales*), at one point as a member of the group “Los Goliardos” directed by Angel Facio, undoubtedly had first-hand experience of the impact of the arrival of figures such as Brinski or Gandolfo, master teachers of various generations of Argentine and Spanish actors. Gandolfo, an expert in the works of Tennessee Williams among others, would stage a production of *Small Craft Warnings* at the Teatre Lliure in Barcelona in 1983 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in Madrid in 1984.

The biography of Argentine actress Cecilia Roth, who appeared in four Almodóvar films between 1980 and 1985 when she returned to her home country, is closely tied to this cultural and social reality and thus it is relevant to ask to what extent the back story of the character Manuela constitutes a direct reference to this dramatic period of Argentine history. Roth (Cecilia Rotenberg) began her acting career at a young age, like Manuela, and at the same age as the character arrives in Madrid in 1976 (Ciller and Palacio 2011). Cecilia’s father, Abrasha Rotenberg, the financial director of a prestigious independent Buenos Aires newspaper, *La Opinión*, headed by his friend and partner, Jacobo Timmerman, like Rotenberg a Ukrainian Jew, made the decision to leave Argentina when the political situation

became untenable. Threatened by the triple A (as were his *La Opinión* colleagues Timmerman and Gravier) Rotenberg recounts that he decided to leave for Madrid the day his teenage son Ariel was threatened together with his friend, Alejo Stivel, the son of director David Stivel and the actress Zulema Katz (Rotenberg 2000).⁷ After participating in a number of emblematic political films, such as *Operación masacre* (*Operation Massacre*, Jorge Cedrón, 1973) and *La Raulito* (*Lautaro Murúa*, 1975), Zulema Katz, ex-wife of the above-mentioned Paco Urendo, also went into exile in Madrid in 1976, where she founded a well-known acting school. Her last film role was a small part as a patient of the Roth character Sexilia's father in *Laberinto de pasiones*.

This web of experiences remains largely hidden in the final design of the character of Manuela, and although at times it is hinted at in the storyline, it does so only through oblique and isolated references that combine to form the visible tip of a larger intrahistorical iceberg: "... pero no hablemos de cosas tristes" (But let's not talk about sad things), Manuela cautions Rosa (Penélope Cruz) as she prepares to give birth, "porque hoy es un día importante. Han metido en la cárcel a Videla, y va a nacer tu hijo" (because today is an important day. They've put Videla in jail and your son is going to be born). "Prométeme una cosa" replies Rosa, "si pasara algo... prométeme que no le ocultarás nada al niño" (Promise me one thing. If something happens... promise me you won't hide anything from the boy). An immediate music cue featuring a bandoneón (a type of concertina typically used in tangos) washes over the scene, evoking perhaps some of Manuela's most intense memories and anticipating the appearance of her ex-husband Lola-Esteban at Rosa's burial. It should also be noted that the nurse/actress Manuela Coifman of *Todo sobre mi madre* (her Jewish heritage preserved) bears little resemblance to the earlier antecedent of the character in the entirely Spanish Manuela of the organ transplant rehearsal scene, played by Kitty Manver, in *La flor de mi secreto*. If we admit the possibility of a parallelism between the lives of Manuela and Cecilia, a far from unreasonable hypothesis given the evidence, then the shadow of the traumatic Argentine political and social experience also presides over Esteban *hijo's* determination to recover the past, precisely at the moment that he decides to become a writer, following the example of Truman Capote, engaged with contemporary reality rather than a simple "typist." In taking this step Esteban considers he must first learn where he came from and thus *Todo sobre mi madre*, the story he proposes to write about his mother, should itself be seen as a ritual of discovery that will ultimately provide him access to his own identity. Upon his death Manuela will take up the task which leads to the reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Esteban *padre* from their lives.

This political back story thus also has implications for the story of Esteban *padre's* personal transformation during the period of the Spanish transition, which consisted not only in a sex change but a radical alteration in his value system and ideology. When Manuela fell in love with him it is likely that both formed part of a group of politically committed young people who believed they could change

the world through their theatrical work. In the course of a few years, following his passage through the Barcelona *Movida* and 1970s Paris, Lola is transformed into a hedonistic entrepreneur, jealous and self-destructive, who combines “lo peor de un hombre y lo peor de una mujer” (the worst of a man and the worst of a woman). At first Manuela tries to fill the void following her separation by molding a new Esteban: a politically committed Esteban, a future Pulitzer prize winner ready to transform the world, the living image of the young man whom she fell in love with in the convulsive Argentina of the 1970s, and of the intellectuals, actors, and theater directors who dared to establish the oppositional theater company, “Teatro abierto,” in the Buenos Aires of 1981 during the last years of the dictatorship. Thus the first independent act of an Esteban *hijo* on the cusp of maturity is to fight against the paralyzing ghosts of the past. His curiosity about his father obliges Manuela to come to terms with a traumatic period that is not the years of the dictatorship but a later period, one of abandonment of political and intellectual ideals. Viewed at its most extreme, Esteban *padre*’s defection from their shared cause could be read as a case of ideological evolution similar to that of many of the former members of the Goliardos troupe, described ironically by Angel Facio as the journey “del marxismo-leninismo al social cachondeo” and “del materialismo histórico a la histeria materialista” (from Marxism-Leninism to social-intoxocracy; from historical materialism to materialistic hysteria) (Alba Peinado 2007: 125).

Todo sobre mi madre projects over the Spanish society of the late 1990s the same undercurrent of bitterness and disappointment present in *La flor de mi secreto* or *Carne trémula*. But it also counters this vision of sterility and lack of communication with the evocation of a parallel world of solidarity and capacity for action in the characters who represent a new generation of Spaniards (Víctor, Elena, Esteban *hijo* or Rosa). The experience of theater, rather than the role of media institutions as seems to be the case in *La flor*, figures as the key reference point. It is not a matter of reconstructing the failed experiments of 1970s independent theater but of a more anthropological and conceptually postmodern defense of the concept of interpretation and acting. “Mi idea al principio fue hacer una película sobre la capacidad de actuar de determinadas personas que no son actores” (My idea at first was to make a film about certain people’s capacity for acting although they are not actors), writes Almodóvar; “De niño yo recuerdo haber visto esta cualidad en las mujeres de mi familia. Fingían más y mejor que los hombres. Y a base de mentiras conseguían evitar más de una tragedia” (As a child I remember having seen this quality in the women in my family. They pretended more and better than the men. And using lies they averted more than one tragedy) (Almodóvar 1999). In the interclassist and utopian Almodóvar universe, inflected by camp sentimentality, the theatrical and spontaneous solidarity of women replaces the inefficient and bureaucratic model of conventional politics. Consequently it seems no accident that Almodóvar begins the epilogue to *Todo sobre mi madre* with an homage to Lluís Pascual’s production of *Haciendo Lorca/Performing Lorca* (1996), originally performed by Nuria Espert and Alfredo Alcón, two stars of the



Figure 7.2 Lluís Pascual directs Huma Rojo in a scene from Lorca's *Bodas de sangre* / *Blood Wedding* in *Todo sobre mi madre* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Teresa Isasi.

Hispano-Argentine theater who recall the years of struggle for freedom and liberty, actors whom the young Manuela and Esteban would have surely emulated.

Reinterpreting the Past: *La mala educación*

While preparing for the premiere of *Carne trémula* in the summer of 1997, Almodóvar and the Mallorcan director Agustí Villaronga worked on a script that would attenuate the tone of “furia adolescente” (adolescent fury) and the “excesivo sabor a revancha” (the excessively vengeful character) distilled by a short story written by Almodóvar thirty years earlier in which a former student returns to the religious school he attended as a boy. Almodóvar reached the conclusion that the story should be set during the period in which it was originally conceived (Torrecillas 2002). Later he would write in the pressbook for the film that, “Lo que me interesa de ese momento histórico es la borrachera de libertad que vivía España, en oposición al oscurantismo y la represión de los años 60. Los primeros ochenta son, por ello, el marco ideal para que los protagonistas, ya adultos, sean dueños de sus destinos, de sus cuerpos y de sus deseos” (What interested me in that historical moment is the binge of freedom that Spain was living, in contrast to the obscurantism and repression of the 60s. For that reason the early 80s are the

ideal setting for the protagonists, now adults, to take control of their destinies, their bodies and their desires) (Almodóvar 2007: n. p.). Four years after the premiere of *Todo sobre mi madre*, having solved the casting problems that had prevented him from filming the picture before the masterful, Oscar-winning *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar finally began shooting *La mala educación*. Seen in perspective, the film can be considered the natural evolution of an investigation into the therapeutic effects of memory which takes on increasingly critical, intimate, and almost autobiographical overtones. As an effect of the writing and filming of the story “La visita” (The Visit), both the writer in the making Ignacio (Francisco Boira) and the director in crisis Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), leave behind their creative and emotional paralysis (“Creo que en esta historia hay una buena película”/I believe there’s a good film in this story, affirms Enrique; “Creo que lo conseguí”/I think I did it, writes Ignacio in his last message). If we attend to the emotions experienced by Almodóvar during the rewriting of the script and subsequent filming of *La mala educación* the director seemed to share that idea: “tenía que quitármela [la historia de ‘La visita’] de encima, antes de que se convirtiera en una obsesión” (I had to get it [the story of “The Visit”] out of my system before it turned into an obsession.) (Almodóvar 2007: n.p.).

La mala educación returns to two of the fundamental motifs that shape the political frameworks of *Carne trémula* and *Todo sobre mi madre*: the need to find a new (ideological) space from which to advance in the construction of an engagement with social reality (the dramatic nucleus of *La flor de mi secreto*); and the relation between a suppressed past and a traumatic and paralyzed present. What is new in *La mala educación* is a narrative structure that allows for the introduction of both themes within a single thematic and discursive frame, thanks to the baroque superimposition of narrative planes by means of which reality and fiction interact and come into dialogue. On the level of reality, Almodóvar, an aspiring film director during the years of the transition, turns to his childhood experiences in a religious school and pens a short story called “La visita” which remains unpublished until he decides to use it in writing the script of *La mala educación*. On the level of the cinematic fiction, the character of Ignacio, an aspiring writer during the same period, draws on similar experiences which he shapes into a story also titled “La visita” that then becomes the origin of a film by Enrique Goded. The epilogue offered in the last frame of *La mala educación* can be read as the closure of a cycle that opens with the prologue in *Carne trémula*. The proleptic summary of the characters’ various fates functions to emphasize the return to the present moment from whose vantage point the film’s fictional time period of the democratic transition is judged and found wanting in ideological and moral terms. While Ángel Andrade/Juan and the abusive priest turned editor, Señor Berenguer (Lluís Homar), are left to stew in their own mediocrity and egotism, Enrique Goded is able to resist the downward pull of his own demons and “continúa haciendo cine con la misma pasión” (he continues to make films with the same passion). The film thus traces its own subtle circular structure (less apparent than

in the case of *Carne trémula*); *La mala educación* offers itself as the work that represents the cinema that Enrique Goded (alter ego of Almodóvar) continues to make twenty-five years later, in a story that opens and closes this time not with a literal birth but with the birth of a new film.

The vision of the past that Almodóvar proposes in *La mala educación* is a critical one insofar as it rewrites and reinterprets the same reality he had depicted in his earlier films. Where his films from the early 1980s portray a highly uninhibited and deliberately provocative society determined to break with the past, in *La mala educación* the same people, places, and behaviors are shown to reflect a hollow world of outsize ambition, mediocrity, and the absence of ideological reference points. Almodóvar recuperates the years of the transition as a time of disenchantment and demobilization, as he had already signaled in *Todo sobre mi madre* through the historical intertexts for the relationship between Manuela and Esteban padre. The representation of what Teresa Vilarós terms “el efecto resaca por la pérdida del contenido utópico de la superestructura cultural de resistencia a la dictadura” (the hangover effect produced by the loss of the utopian content of the cultural superstructure of the resistance to the dictatorship) or the “disolución del ‘yo’ social de la postdictadura” (dissolution of the social “I” of the post-dictatorship) (Vilarós 1998: 35) is no longer expressed through celebratory street life but in interior scenes of dark melodrama or stormy *film noir*. Consequently *La mala educación*’s scenes and images are claustrophobic and airless, alternating between bitterness and profound melancholy. There is something particularly sinister about the ease with which the pedophile priest Father Manolo has reinvented himself in the role of the modern family man and successful editor, a position that gives him the opportunity to discover and promote young writers. Like *Carne trémula* the film also raises the thorny question of the continuity between dictatorship and democracy. The sudden appearance of Ángel in the life of Enrique Goded occurs at a time in Spanish history in which “transformismo” (in the double sense of the word, literally, “transformism” or transvestism but also an opportunistic shape-shifting) is not only the order of the day in provincial clubs and rural discotheques but also in the offices of government and private industry. Parallel to the transformation of Juan into the would-be leading man Ángel Andrade, Father Manolo undertakes his own metamorphosis, erasing the traces of his former life and creating a new life for himself as the respectable Señor Berenguer. Only the fatal encounter with one of his former victims will frustrate his planned democratic makeover. Within the reality of those years recreated in the film, Enrique Goded will take up the cause to assure that his friend Ignacio’s denunciation does not fall on deaf ears.

Nevertheless, there is something sad about contemplating the ruins of the Cine Olympo that symbolizes the sense of loss of innocence talked about by Mainer. “Aunque suene extraño, cuando iba al colegio el cine logró protegerme de la mala educación que querían imprimirme los curas” (Although it sound strange, when I was at school cinema helped to protect me from the bad education the priests tried to impart) (Escribano 1998), Almodóvar confessed during the promotion of

Carne trémula. The Cine Olympo is thus seen as a space of resistance, now in ruins. In the imagined version of the film that results from Enrique's reading in 1980 of the short story "La visita," set in 1977, we see how, on the façade of the old movie theater, the faces of Adolfo Suarez and Felipe González, as well as iconic figures of the Communist Party, remnants of political posters for the first post-dictatorship general elections, merge in a palimpsestic collage with advertisements for Marianico el Corto and the revue "La Bomba." Significantly, the shot that tracks the wall of posters, just before it cuts to the performances of La Bomba, will center on the tattered face of Felipe González split down the center, an image that anticipates the boy Ignacio's cut forehead that divides in two following his struggle to escape from Father Manolo's attempted abuse. It is difficult to resist the comparison between this melancholic approximation to the reality of Spain's first democratic elections with the earlier interpretation—"muy punk, muy agresiva, muy sucia y muy divertida; era la moda" (very punk, very aggressive, very dirty and very funny; it was the fashion) (Strauss 2001: 24)—proposed in Almodóvar's photo-novel "Erecciones generales" (General Erections) that would serve as the basis for his first feature film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*.

Through the character of Juan-Ángel, a figure very much of a piece with the Esteban *padre* of *Todo sobre mi madre*, Almodóvar returns to the theme of the creative imposture and intellectual defection that marked the 1980s. In the opening scene Juan appears at Enrique's production offices, "disguised" as his boyhood friend Ignacio and presenting himself as a member of the independent theater company "Abejorro" (bumblebee; the name is an ironic allusion to the independent theater group Tábano [horsefly] founded by Juan Margallo that during the early 1970s mounted a production of Lorcas's *Retablillo de San Cristóbal*). Later he will confess with brutal frankness his opinion of that period of his life: "He estado tres putos años haciendo mierdas con el grupo Abejorro de los cojones" (I've spent three fucking years putting on shit plays with that asshole group Abejorro). In contrast to the model of productive engagement incarnated by the director Enrique or the actress-nurse Manuela for whom a passion for art and literature provides the path to social commitment, Esteban *padre* and Ángel are presented as pathological individuals corrupted by banality and selfishness. As emblems of reactionary behavior and attitudes, not surprisingly both characters turn their back on the spirit of collective solidarity and social militancy that propelled the work of independent theater groups during the transition.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the concepts of memory and identity play a key role in Almodóvar's most recent cinema, at the center of a broader social discourse that links developments specific to the evolution of political life in Spain with issues

and events occurring beyond its borders. Within this transnational context his cinema proposes a series of images and meanings susceptible to various forms of translation and reappropriation: whether in the case of the intermedial relations between cinema and the crime novel, as in *Carne trémula*; the staging of a geographically de-centered drama of identity in *Todo sobre mi madre*; or in amplifying the outcry surrounding the global scandal of pederast priests in the Catholic Church in *La mala educación*.

A further instance of this double dimension, local and global, to Almodóvar's discourse, is the theme of organ donation in two of the films studied, *La flor de mi secreto* and *La mala educación*. For Marsha Kinder, the central semantic element is the concept of "brain death" which allows Almodóvar to "reinvent Spain as a country" and "proposes a fascinating interaction between words and bodies" while presenting "new ways of using the body as a representation of changes in society, politics and questions of gender" (Kinder 2005: 256). For Marvin D'Lugo (2006: 102–3) the trope is linked to a notion of regenerative maternity and of new collective social structures that challenge the hegemony of the patriarchal family through the crossing of geographic and gender barriers. Paul Julian Smith (2000: 193) relates this idea to an attempt on Almodóvar's part to secularize Catholic ideology and iconography. For his part, Jean-Claude Seguin writes that the transplanted body functions as a way of exploring the limits between life and death, between the real, representation, and simulation, and in that respect "la geografía corpórea se superpone a la geografía humana" (corporeal geography is superimposed on human geography) (Seguin 2009: 102–10).⁸ Like Kinder, Seguin considers this aspect sufficiently central to the three films to justify grouping them as a trilogy.

The reading proposed by Kinder, however, can also be applied in a more literal and less rhetorical sense. If one of the key focal points in the left's struggle against the neo-liberal policies of the right is the defense of the welfare state against the tyranny of the markets, there is no doubt that the efficient, transparent, and democratic functioning of the Spanish ONT, Organización Nacional de Transplantes (National Transplant Organization), constitutes an indispensable reference for understanding the most authentic achievement of the modernization process that is taking place in post-transition Spain. The ONT is arguably the state institution that best represents the successful implantation of the European democratic model so keenly pursued by various generations of Spaniards. The "human" data on organ donation and transplants in Spain are overwhelming and far exceed any statistical or other measure that would chart the economic, social, and cultural progress of the country. Since the late 1980s Spain has moved from the lower half of organ donation levels to the highest, not only in Europe, but in the world. The ONT is seen as the standard bearer of the Spanish national health system and its model has been exported to Latin America as well as to the rest of the European Community. Clearly, not everything about the post-transition has been a disappointment. In the face of the crisis in conventional politics and the threat of another cycle of conservative government, Almodóvar offers as heroines

of a new era of social resistance the women who work on the margins of hidebound bureaucracies and traditional political institutions: social workers in NGOs like Elena and Rosa and certainly Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre*, a hospital transplant coordinator for the ONT.

Finally, how are we to understand the reasons behind the change in the critical orientation of Almodóvar's cinema between the rose-colored films of the 1980s and the somber *films noirs* of today? As we have suggested, the explanation lies in the different economic and social context that has conditioned the nature and direction of his work's constant if shifting engagement with political life. During the decade of the 1980s, reflections on reality were filtered through a focus on the necessary rupture with the cultural and aesthetic paradigms that since the 1950s had shaped the vision of that reality by Spanish cinema. Those are the years in which the director's concern was to develop and master a personal style and during which the belief in a postmodern avant-garde seemed to offer the best path to the reinvention of the subject in a new democratic era. In the 1990s this path came to be seen as a dead end at a moment when realities thought long dead began to circulate anew, in the manner evoked by Derrida. "Creo que la responsabilidad del pensamiento crítico consiste también en calcular una justa intemperividad" (I think the responsibility of critical thought also consists in calculating the rightness of a certain untimeliness), observed Derrida in a conversation with Nelly Richard following the publication of his book, *Specters of Marx* (1993). He continues:

Debemos decir lo que se cree que no debe decirse. Hoy el discurso dominante en el mundo entero nos dice que el marxismo ha muerto y que el comunismo quedo enterrado. Precisamente porque nunca fui un militante marxista, en un periodo en el que era muy tentador serlo, y porque me resistí a su ortodoxia, hoy creo urgente oponer una voz discordante frente al actual consenso sobre el capitalismo de libre mercado y la democracia parlamentaria. (Richard 1995)

(We ought to say exactly those things it is believed ought not to be said. Today the dominant discourse the world over tells us Marxism is dead and communism is dead and buried. Precisely because I never was a communist militant, during a period in which it was tempting to be one, and because I resisted its orthodoxy, today I believe it is urgent to offer an opposing voice against the present-day consensus around free market capitalism and parliamentary democracy.)

In a sense, and in line with Derrida's prophetic ideas, Almodóvar's cinema has always exercised a pioneering role in the diagnosis of the problems facing contemporary society and the defense of alternative social and political models. Seen from this perspective, Almodóvar has not undergone a radical change of course, nor does his later cinema contradict his earlier films. What he has done is attend to the political reality of his time in order to reformulate, in a social key, the same demands for emancipation made during the transition by the constitution and the recognition of a new critical subjectivity.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised and expanded version of the work presented at the seminar, "Pedro Almodóvar: Ecos alemanes, ecos internacionales," sponsored by the Humboldt University of Berlin, September 26–28, 2008. Support for research and writing was provided under the auspices of the Research Project I+D+I: "Los medios audiovisuales en la transición española (1975–1985); Las imágenes del cambio democrático," MCI 2010/00039/001.
- 2 The manifesto, signed by such significant political and cultural figures as Baltazar Garzón, Joaquín Sabina, Almudena Grandes, and Pilar Bardem, is available in Romero (2011).
- 3 The third film, although originally set for production following *Todo sobre mi madre*, was filmed and released following *Hable con ella* due to casting problems.
- 4 Harguindey had a small role as a reporter in *Entre tinieblas* and also appears briefly in a scene in *La flor* next to then editor-in-chief Jesús Ceberio when Leo visits the *El País* editorial offices.
- 5 The NO-DO pastiche, with its echo of the fake commercials inserted into Almodóvar's 1980s films, is not the only comic touch in the film. It is doubtful that a prostitute and single mother would have been considered an apt subject for a feature presentation in the official newsreel projected on screens all over the country, and even less likely that her offspring would have been named "adopted son" of the city of Madrid.
- 6 What for successive governments of the Comunidad de Madrid represents the most significant recent urban renewal project in Spain, consisting in the transformation of a near slum quarter into a modern neighborhood with decent housing and the necessary social and transportation infrastructure, is for Almodóvar an icon that evokes a new way to understand the social underpinnings of economic and political power in contemporary Spanish society. *El día de la bestia* / *The Day of the Beast* (1995), directed by Alex de la Iglesia, had also presented the KIO Towers, then under construction, as an emblem of the economic and social changes occurring in the 1990s.
- 7 Shortly after their families' arrival in Madrid Ariel and Alejo formed the successful rock group, Tequila.
- 8 See also Dean Allbritton's analysis of the theme of organ transplants in *Todo sobre mi madre* in chapter 10, this volume.

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The Ethics of Oblivion

Personal, National, and Cultural Memories in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar

Adrián Pérez Melgosa

No quiero ni siquiera permitir al recuerdo del franquismo el existir a través de mis películas. (I don't want to let even the memory of Francoism exist in my films.)

Pedro Almodóvar interviewed by *Paris Match*, July 1988, quoted in Martínez-Vasseur (2005: 109)

Pero llega un momento en el que es imposible renunciar a la memoria. Es necesario afrontarla para equilibrar la situación. (But a moment arrives when it is impossible to renounce memory. It's necessary to confront it in order to achieve balance.)

Pedro Almodóvar speaking at a press conference during the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, *La Vanguardia* (May 20, 2009).

Since the late 1990s, Almodóvar's public persona has gradually left behind the word games and cheerful dismissal of immediate political concerns that characterized his early interviews, to enter a new phase of increasingly overt and straightforward political engagement. Since then, among other things, the director has repeatedly denounced the media manipulations carried out by the Partido Popular when it was the governing party and has participated in demonstrations, petitions, and other public actions in opposition to Spain's involvement in the Iraq War. He has also expressed his strong support for the ongoing efforts to reclaim the missing bodies of the victims of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship and pursue justice for these victims and their descendants.¹

Two of these actions carry a more intimate connection to Almodóvar's film work. The first one is still a promise and was triggered by an article entitled "Cuando el primer amor llega a los 41 años" (When Love First Arrives at Age 41) that appeared in the Sunday supplement of the daily *El País* in September, 2007. The text consisted of excerpts from the autobiography of Marcos Ana (Fernando Macarro Castillo), a Spanish poet born in 1921 to a peasant family in a small hamlet in the province of Salamanca. As a young man, Ana became a member of the Spanish Communist Party, a combatant for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War, and a political prisoner during the dictatorship. He began writing poems during the twenty-three years he spent in jail. The fragment published in *El País* tells the story of Ana's first sexual experience immediately after being released from prison in 1961 (Ana 2007). Four months later, in February of 2008, another article in the same newspaper described how Almodóvar had read Ana's piece and become fascinated by its portrayal of the one-night love story between an ex-convict and a prostitute. In short succession, Almodóvar read the rest of Ana's work, made arrangements to meet him, and ended up purchasing the cinematographic rights to the poet's autobiography, *Decidme cómo es un árbol* (Tell Me What a Tree is Like) (Elola 2008).

Three years later, in the spring of 2010, Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo S.A., became the producer of *Cultura contra la impunidad* (Culture against impunity) (Azucena Rodríguez, 2010), a documentary featuring fifteen people connected to the Spanish culture industry, among them Almodóvar himself, who each related in the first person the story of an unsolved execution or disappearance carried out during the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship. In his segment, a grave and solemn Almodóvar recites the story of an early victim of the Civil War, an air force officer loyal to the Republic who was executed by his own peers for refusing to join the Nationalist uprising. On screen, against a solemn background in which dark purple fades into black, we see a close-up shot of Almodóvar, a hefty gray-haired man dressed in black clothes who retells the victim's story in the first person. The austere mise en scène and the first-person monologue construct a spectral presence of both the dead officer and Almodóvar's well-known persona. As both the director's image and the officer's story merge into each other, the image hints at the deep personal involvement of the director in the subject, a strong compassionate identification between Almodóvar and the victim he commemorates.

These two projects mark what Freud would call a "return of the repressed" in Almodóvar's work. Both Rodríguez's film and Ana's autobiography deal directly with, and are intrinsically connected to, the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, two historical periods which Almodóvar had insistently declared to be located outside of his interests, but which have progressively gained a larger presence in his work, either tangentially through allusion, as part of the films' backdrops, or through direct political statements.² It is in this context of his current preparation of a film about the Civil War, through Ana's autobiography, and acknowledging his previous resolve to avoid this topic, that Almodóvar pronounced the second introductory quotation to this paper, "Pero llega

un momento en el que es imposible renunciar a la memoria. Es necesario afrontarla para equilibrar la situación” (But a moment arrives when it is impossible to renounce memory. It’s necessary to confront it in order to achieve balance). This new will to explicitly take on in his films the periods of the Civil War and the dictatorship invites us to reframe the frequently bipolar and hackneyed discussion over the political/apolitical attitudes of both Almodóvar and his films.

The debate over the political engagement of Almodóvar’s work has pitted on one side those critics that read literally one of the director’s most quoted declarations from his early years: “hago películas como si Franco no hubiera existido” (I makes films as if Franco had never existed).³ This sentence, interpreted in its most straightforward denotative meaning, configures a perspective through which all of Almodóvar’s films are seen as paeans to unlimited sexual, aesthetic, personal, social, and political freedom, a freedom that refuses to acknowledge its ties to specific sociopolitical circumstances. Taking this perspective, Eduardo Subirats has elaborated a dismissive reading of Almodóvar, which he extends to the whole cultural ebullience of Spain’s democratic transition, as exhibiting, “una descocada incompetencia intelectual junto a una elocuencia más bien bullanguera” (a shameless intellectual incompetence together with a rather rowdy eloquence) (2000: 22). The argument countering this interpretation has been most persuasively articulated by Paul Julian Smith through a careful reading of Almodóvar’s films that shows their specific intervention in each of the most heated political debates taking place in Spain as they were produced (Smith 2000: 2–3). Later critical studies have shown the close connection between Almodóvar’s films and the cultural and political environment of Madrid during the 1980s. Updating this argument with analyses of Almodóvar’s later work (*Hable con ella/Talk to Her* [2002], *La mala educación/Bad Education* [2004]), Marvin D’Lugo proposes that far from being exclusively tied to the ebullient years following Franco’s death, Almodóvar’s films have become progressively more nuanced and complex and constitute one of the most thorough chronicles of “Spain’s evolving modernity” (D’Lugo 2006: 116).

Both Rodríguez’s film and Ana’s autobiography focus their narratives on stories of survival and resiliency in spite of the atrocities their protagonists suffered. Looking back at Almodóvar’s work from this perspective, we can register the presence of a quest that traverses all of his films, one that joins the personal and the political in the tight embrace of the aftermath of a traumatic experience. This chapter researches the articulation of a transformative idea of memory in Almodóvar’s films: a theory of memory profoundly based on the workings of narrative knowledge, on the weaving of stories that attempt not only to heal the devastating effects of trauma on its victims, but also of stories that manage to steal away from the perpetrators the power to decide over the actual meaning of the traumatic event they inflicted upon others.

Recent theorizations of the cultural and political dimensions of trauma have attempted to explore the connections between its personal and social dimensions. Perhaps the most often quoted, and frequently unfairly critiqued, of these attempts,

is expressed in Cathy Caruth's statement, "that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996: 24). To Caruth's reformulation of history, I would like to add the word "memory" from two different perspectives. The first considers memory as a means to access what official history has erased or banished, the meaning with which it has come to figure in current debates in Spain surrounding the *Ley de la memoria histórica* (Law on Historical Memory), and which is present in Almodóvar's apparently reluctant admission that "es imposible renunciar a la memoria" (it is impossible to renounce memory). In the second, memory is evoked as a category of the imagination emerging from the convergence of experience and creativity. It is in this latter sense that "memory" has figured in Almodóvar's films as a creative and repeated trace of a resistance.

Caruth's formulation hinges on the phrase "we are implicated," which suggests both the ability of trauma to resonate in other people and to be transmitted across generations. Thus, for Caruth both individuals and communities play multiple passive and active roles at every stage of the development of a traumatic episode. At the time the traumatic event takes place, one may be involved in the experience as victim, perpetrator, or witness. When these experiences are blocked from personal or collective memory, there appears the role of censor, either official, as part of an institution, or individual, as part of unconscious dynamics. Finally, the eventual struggle to represent these stories of trauma in public discourse allows for the emergence of other experiences of trauma including those of empathic witnessing, conscious and unconscious transmissions, and different degrees of resistance to the public acknowledgment that a traumatic experience took place. "Implication" also suggests the way one traumatic experience resonates with another, and how the exploration of a traumatic episode by one person or social group may facilitate for others the accessibility to represent their own traumatic histories, a phenomenon that Michael Rothberg has termed "multidirectional memory" (2009: 6).

Within literary and film studies, psychoanalysis has played a central role in interpreting the dynamic interplay between remembering and forgetting that characterizes traumatic memories. Andreas Huyssen suggests that we should also study cultural discourses that deal with trauma such as art, artistic creativity, juridical proceedings, truth commissions, reconciliation processes which have proven successful at bringing justice to the victims and as a way of avoiding the recurrence of historical trauma (2003: 9–10). This perspective provides a way to read Almodóvar's emphasis on aesthetics and style as both a practice of witnessing and as post-traumatic working-through processes rather than as a transparent reflection of the free-floating charm of post-dictatorial Spain. Following Caruth's and Rothberg's observations, these films provide access to specific modalities of "implicated" and "multidirectional" memory about the traumatic dimension of recent Spanish history.

Both the word trauma, and the physical and psychological scars left by traumatic experiences are frequent narrative motifs in Almodóvar's films. We find, among others, direct allusions to this in *Laberinto de pasiones* / *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), as

the film invokes childhood traumas to explain the origin of Sexilia's (Cecilia Roth) and Riza's (Imanol Arias) compulsive promiscuity. In *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) several of the nuns deliberately engage in trauma-inducing experiences as they seek to emulate the suffering of Christ. Traumatic experiences shape the compulsive personalities of characters such as Lucía (Julieta Serrano) in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), Andrea Caracortada (Victoria Abril) in *Kika* (1993), Ignacio (Francisco Boira and Gael García Bernal) in *La mala educación*, X-Ray (Rubén Ochandiano) in *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), and many others. Conversely, Almodóvar's films contain many characters who manage to avoid being traumatized while suffering experiences commonly regarded in our society as trauma inducing: rape, incarceration, severe accidents. These impervious-to-trauma characters figure prominently in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón/Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *Kika, Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991), *Hable con ella*, and *Los abrazos rotos*. As if to foreclose any study of this recurrence of the trauma motif in his narratives, Almodóvar himself explained it away in early interviews as a mere convenient comedic narrative ploy: "En la vida no puedes explicarlo todo con los traumas, pero en una comedia sí, lo justifican todo" (You can't explain everything in life with reference to trauma but in comedy you can) (Vidal 1989: 59). As these words try to discourage us from looking too deeply into the numerous instances of trauma suffered by Almodóvar's characters, it is worth noting the peculiar distinction he makes between traumas in "life," which do not justify anything, and those in "comedy," which do. Implicit in this differentiation is an ethical position that refuses to connect trauma to a particular outcome in real life. Possibly, the goal is to prevent trauma from foreclosing the future of the individual upon which it has been inflicted, a goal that we can also perceive in the first introductory quotation of this paper, "no quiero ni siquiera permitir al recuerdo del franquismo el existir a través de mis películas" (I don't want to let even the memory of Francoism exist in my films).

This open-ended view of the consequences of traumatic events has become more and more visible as his films have gradually left some comedic elements behind in favor of incorporating components of drama and verisimilitude. While the playfulness around trauma of Almodóvar's first films has never completely disappeared, his later work takes trauma ever more seriously, exploring in depth processes of loss, mourning, and melancholia, both in their personal and social consequences. This exploration includes the modeling on screen of possible therapeutic routes to confront traumatic memories, the dramatization of how memory and trauma act as triggers of the creative process, and the articulation of alternative models of gender construction and socialization. Writing about *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999), Isolina Ballesteros remarks how by playing the role of Stella in the embedded representation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Manuela finds a space to work through the personal trauma derived from the death of her

son (2009: 79–80). In fact, in a movie that shows a variety of traumatic events (some introduced in a key of tragedy like Esteban's death after being run over by a car, some presented in a tragic/comic tone like the thrashing of La Agrado at the hands of one of her customers, which ends with the victim tenderly comforting the wounded attacker), Manuela's performance as Stella models a theory of trauma not very different from the one advanced by Caruth, in which the exploration of another's traumatic story, even a fictional one, "implicates" the actress in her own traumatic history.

Kathleen Vernon has explored this counterpoint between lighthearted playfulness and trauma in Almodóvar's use of music in his work, concluding that throughout his films, the musical soundtrack "engages both the promise of utopian release into pleasure outside time or narrative and the dystopian intimations of loss or entrapment" (2009: 66). Arguably, the "intimations of loss and entrapment" have become more frequent with each new project of the director. Following the well-frequented road of reading Almodóvar films as lessons in gender studies, Linda Williams interprets the portrayal of deeply melancholic characters in *Hable con ella* and *Tacones lejanos* as narratives of a primal loss derived from the normative taboo against same-sex closeness, tales portraying a melancholia of gender that Judith Butler defines as, "the grief for the homosexual attachments that had been lost in the process of heterosexual identity formation" (Williams 2009: 168).

In all these examples, the exploration of the representation of trauma in Almodóvar's films looks at individual instances connected to plot events (Ballesteros 2009), traces its emergence in non-narrative elements (Vernon 2009), or analyzes its displacement onto the narrative of general traumatic psychical processes of identity formation (Williams 2009). Almodóvar's recent collaboration in Rodríguez's film and his projected adaptation of Ana's biography bring into focus a presence that had been there all along: the connection of his films' individual stories of trauma to the collective traumas of Spanish society springing from the Francoist dictatorship and the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. This is not to imply that memory and trauma should become the master signifiers through which Almodóvar's work must be interpreted, but to add these concepts to the multiple layers of interpretation that his films instigate. By looking at them through the concepts of trauma and memory, three aspects of his productions become more visible and significant, acquiring a renewed meaning: the truncated temporality that characterizes the progression of his narratives, the attentive looks the camera dedicates to apparently trivial objects, and the thematization of makeup and cosmetic interventions in the body of his characters. From different perspectives (one narrative, one visual, one thematic), these expressive devices combine to allow specific objects, characters, or events to shed away their commonly accepted meanings and become redefined as sites inaccessible to the power of trauma. As I argue below, this attentive play with time, with the apparently trivial, and with cosmetic change manages to wrestle away from memory its power to dictate the present, and from trauma its ability to freeze the lives of those who are targeted as its victims.

Visual Palimpsests and Narrative Arrhythmias

At the opening scene of *La mala educación* the camera places us in the office of a film production company as Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), a successful young film director undergoing a creative crisis, and Martín (Juan Fernández), Goded's production assistant, discuss possible themes for their next movie. Superimposed over the action we see the title "MADRID 1980" offering the viewer a strong temporal and spatial anchor for the events: the cusp of *La Movida Madrileña*, the name that has come to characterize the years of artistic and social ebullience during the Spanish transition to democracy. In 1980 a brand new constitutional democracy was operating in Spain, and Enrique Tierno Galván, a socialist who nourished the cultural and aesthetic life of the city, was the mayor of Madrid. At that time Spanish society was still "high" on the enjoyment of its recently regained freedoms. The brewing discontent, both from those in the right who were nostalgic for the unchallenged power they had during the dictatorship, and from those on the left who would eventually fall prey to a disenchantment with the shortcomings of the new democracy, remained a minority position with limited echo in the media and in society.

As Enrique and Martín talk, the doorbell rings. Martín opens the door to find a young man who identifies himself as Ignacio Rodríguez (Gael García Bernal).

A medium shot shows Martín and Ignacio in the doorway framed by four posters (fig. 8.1): on the left, a movie poster for the non-existent film *La abuela fantasma* (*The Ghostly Grandmother*); next to it, a painting of a bar scene by Ceesepe (Carlos Sánchez Pérez), one of the visual artists who designed promotional materials for earlier Almodóvar's films and an iconic figure of Madrid's cultural scene in the 1980s; on the right, another poster for *La abuela fantasma*, this time showing a close-up of an old woman's face framed by a black cloth covering her hair, and



Figure 8.1 Martín and Ignacio framed by four posters in the El Azar offices in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

farther on, a poster depicting two flight stewardesses clad in fantasy uniforms inspired in airline service personnel fashion of the 1960s. Given the office environment, these posters can be read as a display showcasing the achievements of the company, a compilation of the most representative films it has produced, and a declaration of Enrique Goded's aesthetic taste. The posters also compose a complex tableau of chronologically and aesthetically overdetermined motifs. The period-appropriate scene by Ceesepe points towards the centrality of a lively bar and club scene in early post-dictatorship Madrid, a theme further reinforced by the large format poster by the same artist that announces another non-existent film titled *La noche de Madrid* (*Madrid Nights*) (fig. 8.2) advertising a cast of actors who have worked with Almodóvar. Two of the actors (Carmen Maura and Alaska) were cast in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, the movie Almodóvar was actually filming in 1980.

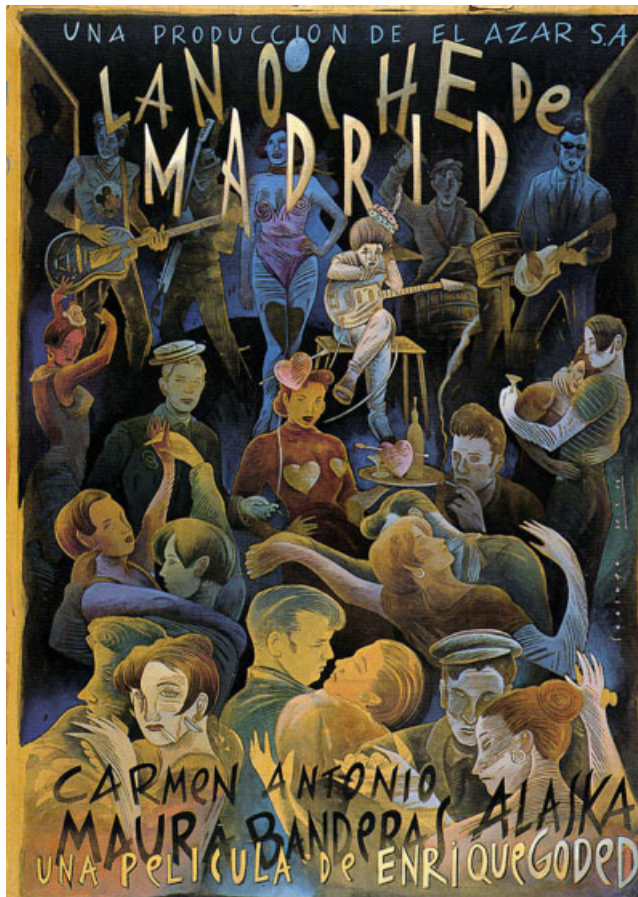


Figure 8.2 The *Movida* seen through a nostalgic lens: poster for the fictional film, *La noche de Madrid*, in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

The other (Antonio Banderas) would participate in his next film. Both artworks depict an idealized view of Madrid nightlife during the 1980s, one only possible as part of a nostalgic look at the *Movida* years that was emerging at the time *La mala educación* was being filmed.

Nostalgia in these images is further reinforced by the camp aesthetics they use as they recall the commercial design culture of the 1950s United States. The same camp aesthetics is present in the poster for a third non-existent film that depicts happy stewardesses dancing in front of a jet-plane. This view of aviation as a herald of a fun and carefree modernity is produced at a narrative time (1980) when those messages had already become outdated, and at a real time (2004) when air travel had become trapped in security concerns over repeated terrorist threats. The two posters of *La abuela fantasma* are also doubly anachronistic at first sight. On the one hand, the posters point towards a neorealist aesthetics that reconnects with some Spanish cinema of the 1960s, on the other, it suggests an early product of the Spanish film-horror industry.

Two years later, when *Volver* (2006) appeared with its plot based on the return to her family of a mother/grandmother who had been presumed dead for over three years, it also became possible to see in these posters from *La mala educación* a foreshadowing of this future film. The multidirectional flow of time implied by these posters (looking back from the 1980s at a rural Spain that inspired many of the movies from the 1940s to the 1960s, and from 2004 at the ongoing resurgence in Spain of the horror film genre, while also announcing the direction of future Almodóvar films) provides a visual illustration of the complex disconnection between narrative time and chronology that has become characteristic of Almodóvar's films. *La mala educación*, as a whole, contains a particularly complex narrative temporality. The story starts in 1980 when Enrique decides to direct a script brought to him by Ignacio. The script takes us to 1977 when Zahara, a transsexual drag artist, decides to extort money from a priest that had abused her sexually as a boy while attending Catholic school. The events related to the abuse take place in the 1960s and are shown through the perspective of Ignacio, his fictional alter-ego Zahara, as well as Enrique's, and the priest's. Noting the fluidity with which the film's story moves through time, Garret Stewart characterizes *La mala educación* as a film structured through narrative arrhythmia, a term he borrows from Jean-François Lyotard who described it as "rhythmic violations" which perform a "writing with movements" through either "variable pace or stasis" (2006: 174). In *La mala educación*, argues Stewart, the trope of arrhythmia helps articulate a new "narratography," one that suggests "the imposition of memory on lived time" (2006: 164). The tableau of posters in the film's opening scene complicates this description of the use of narrative arrhythmia as a trope. The posters convey not only a reversal of the logics of memory versus lived time, but a fully inter-dimensional conception of time, and of memory, allowing each temporality (past, present, and also, and most importantly, future) to invade and be fully present in the others: the future ends up making visible the past, or even coexisting with it; the past becomes visible as a possible future; and all of them are layered upon a palimpsestic narrative present.

If, among the films of Almodóvar, *La mala educación* displays the most intense concern with time, his films have been exploring the narrative potential of deliberate anachronism from the beginning. They have done so not only visually, as in the above scene from *La mala educación*, but also aurally (his dialogues bring together a variety of regional, class, and time-specific accents of the Spanish language), musically (the juxtaposition of songs from a variety of temporal and spatial frameworks), and narratively.⁴ In *Laberinto de pasiones*, for example, the coexistence of past and present becomes a plot-generating device when the ageing drycleaner (Luis Ciges) mistakes his daughter Queti (Marta Fernández-Muro) for his own wife and engages in a recurrent and repeated courtship/incest with her. After being abandoned by his wife for a more “masculine” partner, the drycleaner erases this event and the intervening years from his memory to live as if the traumatic experience had never taken place. More subtly, the transgression of the laws of time becomes possible in *Todo sobre mi madre* when an eighteen-year-old heart is transplanted into the body of a middle-aged man. The motif of the organ donation, which had already appeared in *La flor de mi secreto*/*The Flower of My Secret* (1995), becomes an anti-trauma, an “anachronistic” strategy that fights against time, in which the death of a young person makes the life of other people possible.

Another form of time bending, temporal fracture, is a structural motif in films like *Hable con ella*, a movie that slices in a nebula of fragments the stories of two relationships that occur in roughly simultaneous timeframes: bullfighter Lydia (Rosario Flores) meets and falls in love with Marco (Darío Grandinetti), the journalist who wants to interview her, and Benigno (Javier Cámara), a terminal-care nurse, has fallen in love with Alicia (Leonor Watling), who, as the result of a car accident, lies in bed in a deep coma. Both stories advance in time by means of a series of superimposed titles bearing messages like, “several months later,” “three weeks later,” “two months later,” and “eight months later.” In between these time-markings, a series of unannounced flashbacks revisit parts of the narrative that must have taken place in those times elided between the end of a previous segment and the superimposed time title. Almodóvar had explored this fragmentation of narrative time in previous films, most notably in *Kika*, and continues to introduce new ways to naturalize it on the screen through devices like the tale “La visita” (The Visit) in *La mala educación*, and the remaking of one of his own films in *Los abrazos rotos*.

To these multiple forms of deploying anachronism as a creative narrative trope we must add a trans-filmic one, the repeated use of a specific motif, character type, or theme across several films which, among other functions, serves to solidify the authorial persona of Almodóvar, and encourages viewers to engage in what Marsha Kinder calls a “retroactive reading,” or the reinterpretation of previous films in light of the evolution of specific repeated elements in new productions (Kinder 2004–5: 12). All these manipulations of time, the palimpsestic visual composition, the introduction of deliberate anachronisms in the plot, the fracturing and shuffling of narrative chronology, the arrhythmic use of time, and the

encouragement of retroactive interpretation, reflect a rebellious attitude against the linear, mechanistic thinking that always places causes before effects. Behind this rebellion rests an attempt to reverse the logics of victimization that permeates our understanding of traumatic experiences.

When Luis Buñuel described his ideal movie, he presented it as a series of questions emanating from an apparently banal scene: a beggar reaches down to the pavement to pick up a half-smoked cigar and is run over by a passing car. According to Buñuel, the questions would attempt to find a cause for this death and, with each answer, a new set of questions would appear, each leading to more and more questions until the chain of interconnected questions reached the disputed realm of the reasons for the existence of the universe, the meaning of life, and other weighty topics. In the end, ventures Buñuel, we would find a paradox: all the previous history of the universe leads up necessarily to that moment, but at the same time, each event was governed by chance. Buñuel was concerned with unburdening himself of the guilt for a traumatic event (even if the director thought of it as an insignificant event, it was certainly a traumatic one for the beggar), by explaining it away as the product of a long chain of events governed by chance (Buñuel 2008: 171–2). By contrast, Almodóvar's dramatic interventions in the flow of narrative times do not banalize the victim, nor the perpetrator, but strive to find ways to reframe and redefine the traumatic event itself, to wrestle away from the moment of trauma its power to install itself in the body and psyche of the victim. By opening up the flow of time, his films attempt to deprive both the perpetrator and the traumatic event itself of any power to decide the final meaning that this event will hold for the victim.

In *Los abrazos rotos*, Almodóvar focuses this playful relationship with time onto his own cinematographic past by embedding as part of a subplot a film entitled *Chicas y maletas* (*Girls and Suitcases*), which remakes some of the most famous scenes from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, the film that produced Almodóvar's crossover to larger audiences and to international film-markets. In *Chicas y maletas* we see Pina (Penélope Cruz) inhabiting an apartment that reconstructs Pepa's (Carmen Maura) penthouse in *Mujeres* with its terrace full of farm animals, the burnt mattress in the bedroom, and the broken telephones and answering machine. But although Pina inhabits the space of Pepa and wears similar clothes to hers, she speaks lines that remind us of those of Candela (María Barranco), Pepa's model friend in the original film. In fact, Almodóvar acknowledges that Pina's character "also has echoes of Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), the most modern ingénue of cinema and American literature, although the hairstyle is that of another character played by Audrey Hepburn, Sabrina" (Sony Pictures Classics 2009: 7). Marsha Kinder sees in this intertextual game a statement from Almodóvar that seeks to prove that his films still appeal to the mass market and will stand up to the challenges presented by a new generation of spectators, and the outgrowth of new technological supports of visual content (Kinder 2010: 33).

Curiously, this call to the new and to the future is carried out through a *campy* condensation on Pina's character of a number of actresses, roles, and styles drawn from both the personal and the cinematic past. Once again, we have a conceptual transgression of the flow of time, a play with anachronism that accompanies the work of Almodóvar from its beginnings, becoming more subtle and complex with each new film. As noted earlier, Marvin D'Lugo has declared the director one of the most thorough chroniclers of "Spain's evolving modernity." This insistent play with time suggests that modernity, for Almodóvar, has deep roots in a counter-intuitive kind of past. It is a modernity steeped with nostalgia for a past that is still to be fully defined, rebellious against any attempts to fix its meaning, in the end, an open past that rebels, in every possible temporal direction, against the fatality on which classical tragedy is built.

Rhopography: Making the Apparently Trivial into a Movie Star

Excess is frequently invoked as a distinctive characteristic of Almodóvar's films. Critics have seen and analyzed excess in the abundant use of color in his cinematography, the over-the-top emotional displays of his characters, the generous attention to overt and implied sexual content in images and dialogues, the extensive use of drugs, etc. As Paul Julian Smith asserts, not unapprovingly, "Almodóvar has founded a career on excess" (2000: 189).⁵ But his films also speak through the language of economy, thrift, and scarcity. Coexisting within this world of visual, aural, sentimental, and narrative excess, we find in his movies a plethora of instants when the camera looks attentively at the most humble details of everyday existence, those things, spaces, or actions that display the material supports of our lives and render visible the limitations of our bodies, institutions, and technologies. A non-exhaustive list might include the premonitory close-up shot of Pepa's finger getting in the way of a knife's blade as she chops tomatoes for gazpacho (*Mujeres*); the prolonged sequence that shows Leo (Marisa Paredes) struggling to free her feet from an unbearably tight pair of boots, a present from her emotionally and physically distant husband (*La flor de mi secreto*); the long shot that shows Antonio (Antonio Banderas) and another young man idling in the deserted lobby of a film theater where a random array of trash has been left behind by those who, unlike the two of them, actually have tickets for the show (*La ley del deseo*); the abscess on the hoof of a mule that is pulling from a cart filled with scrap-metals and papers its owner has selected from the city's trash for resale (*¡Átame!*); the entangled earrings dangling from the earlobes of Rebeca (Victoria Abril) and her mother Becky del Páramo (Marisa Paredes), forcing their bodies to stay together for longer than they want to (*Tacones lejanos*); the bothersome strand of hair that gets in Zahara's (Gael García Bernal) mouth that interrupts him when

performing oral sex (*La mala educación*); the rouge print on the paper tissue that Lola (Loles Leon) applies to her mouth after refreshing her lipstick (*¡Átame!*).

Linda Williams notes how Almodóvar's "queering" of the melodrama "offers novel objects of sympathy: sadomasochists, drag queens, male whores, pregnant nuns" (2009: 167). On one level, it is possible to read these shots of the apparently trivial or disposable objects that populate our daily lives as offering the viewer novel objects for their aesthetic enjoyment. On the other, following Williams, the attentive look of the camera to these details allows us to see the representation of marginal subjects in a new light. In these trivial objects there are echoes of the culture of scarcity and hunger that spread throughout Spain in the protracted crises of the Civil War and the long post-war and dictatorship period. These echoes permeate and shape Almodóvar's strategies to "queer" the melodrama and remain always present immediately below the "excessively" shiny surface of his films.

Art historians use the term rhopography to refer to a subgroup of still-life paintings depicting trifles, leftovers, scraps, garbage, and all the commonly considered trivial objects that surround our daily existence. Like the scenes just mentioned with regard to the objects they depict (fruit, knives, shoes, trash, hoofs, scrap-metal, earrings, fallen hair, stained paper), rhopography elevates to the category of art that which is normally discarded, marginal, expelled from the body, abject. In his study of pictorial rhopography, Norman Bryson highlights how this genre is intrinsically intertwined with its apparent opposite, megalography (paintings of the drama of greatness as performed by unique individuals). "The concept of importance," reflects Bryson, "can arise only by separating itself from what it declares to be trivial and insignificant; 'importance' generates 'waste'" (1990: 61). Rhopography focuses on that waste and, by foregrounding it as art, aims to destabilize the hierarchies that megalography aims to impose. If megalography places unique human beings at the center to convey their heroic feats, rhopography exiles humanity from its frame to concentrate on the objects humans leave behind (trash, excrements, leftovers, trifles). This focus on the materials left over after the body has satisfied its needs produces a humbling and leveling effect.

Almodóvar's incursion into the rhopographical explores the flip side of that which official culture and aesthetic norms have considered important, but unlike pictorial rhopography, his shots allow for the eventual presence of the human subject, producing a double resignification of each. The juxtaposition of characters and rhopographical objects produces a visual metonymy in which the character becomes "humbled" to the level of a rhopographic object, while the object becomes elevated to the star status of the character. Both movements occur simultaneously and none has preeminence over the other. Thus the scene of the knife cutting Pepa's finger in *Mujeres* also marks a cut in her life separating the moment when she stops waiting for her womanizer boyfriend Iván (Fernando Guillén) and decides to take her future into her own hands. The tight boots that bind Leo's feet in *La flor* not only embody the entrapments of Leo's marriage but also bring her to the realization that she needs to get out of both (boots and marriage). Similarly, the trash

surrounding Antonio in the theater lobby in *La ley del deseo* conveys both how he is feeling about himself and also the re-evaluative possibilities that Almodóvar's aesthetic vision sees in both trash and in the unpredictable passion of Antonio's character. The same analysis could be extended to all of Almodóvar's rhopographical moments to conclude that the "waste" that surrounds these characters, the byproduct of that which they consider of "importance" in their lives, not only provides a humbling description of the characters' psyche but also offers them a symbolic path to end their victimization.

In early Almodóvar films, these rhopographies appear in a crude and unbound fashion, with the plot frequently serving as an excuse to introduce them. We find an example of this in the chase scene at the end of *Laberinto de pasiones*, in which a succession of people stop the janitor (Socorro Siva), who is rushing to the restroom. With each delaying question, the janitor's urge increases until she defecates outside the bathroom door. The scatological final shot shows a close-up of a viscous substance running down the janitor's legs and making a small puddle on the floor in the middle of the screen. While the janitor's urge to get to the restroom introduces an element of suspense that intensifies with each interruption, and might be interpreted as a symbolic statement of the janitor's opinion about all these self-engrossed people, it is otherwise disconnected from the development of the main plot. Later films start an exploration of the connection between rhopography and advertising. Sometimes this is done directly through the inclusion of fake television commercials as part of the diegesis. Other times, the allusion is a formal one, carried out by mimicking the visual language of advertising in the composition of the rhopography. In *Qué he hecho yo*, Gloria (Carmen Maura), the working-class housewife who is the protagonist of the film, is frequently filmed from the point of view of the appliances that she uses repeatedly for her work. The objects are therefore personified, endowed with a capacity to "see," while the human character appears to be the actual machine these objects operate.⁶

The gazpacho scene in *Mujeres* and the earring scene in *La flor* look at these objects with the same fascination as a television commercial would. The object is filmed in a tight close-up with the intense three-point lighting commonly used to signal the "star" of the scene. The object rules the composition in such a way that the body of the human character adjacent to it appears fragmented. Making the object into the protagonist of the scene transgresses one of the cardinal rules of narrative cinema, the centrality of the human body as the main object of the camera. As they unveil the tight connection that exists between the commercial language of advertising and the classical aesthetics of rhopography, Almodóvar's films attempt to destabilize commonly held notions about the prominence of the seductive function in the former and the aesthetic in the latter.

In *Volver*, these two visual modes, rhopography and advertising, become conversant with an unlikely third reference, the Spanish tradition of religious still-life painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A panning shot of Aunt Paula's (Chus Lampreave) pantry appears filmed in the slightly high-angled perspective and

(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



Figure 8.3a–d Aunt Paula's pantry: fusing the *bodegón* tradition with the language of advertising in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

high-contrast tenebrism lighting characteristic of the *bodegones* painted in the austere environment of the Carthusian monasteries by monk-painters Francisco Zurbarán (1598–1664) and Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627).

As the camera pans from left to right in a single continuous shot, rhopography becomes literally fused together with the *bodegón*, and this one with the visual language of advertising. When Sole (Lola Dueñas) opens the pantry, the camera closes in on a group of jars capped by a piece of paper and bound together with rustic twine. Written in hand print on the paper we read RAIMUNDA. These are the preserves that Aunt Paula has promised to Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) and her sister Sole. Every aspect in this shot conveys a sense of the everyday, of the work of cooking, preserving, and organizing that makes our existence possible. These plastic containers and reused jars filled with traditional home-cooked food provide an updated treatment of one of the central themes of classical rhopographies: food and its connection with the inescapable human fact of hunger. Raimunda's name, written on a piece of coarse wrapping paper and bound to the jars with a piece of thin twine, recalls the film's opening scene at the village's cemetery, in which a crowd of determined women clean and decorate the tombstones of their relatives. The names and pictures of the deceased preside over the tombstones, next to the flowers and the pine needles brought by the wind. The linkage between the food and the cemetery is further enhanced by Aunt Paula's insistence that the preserves have been prepared by Raimunda's and Sole's mother, whose grave they had been cleaning that same morning.

As the camera moves right along the pantry, a coffee set comes fully into view. It is a shiny mass-produced porcelain set colored in red, green, and yellow, with four-petal white flowers. The light bounces off the smooth surface of the cups but is powerless to penetrate beyond the first row of cups, forcing us to imagine, more than see, the contours of the coffee pot and the back of the pantry. The petals of the white flowers look like crosses, making the whole scene into an improvised altarpiece and again conveying undertones of death and religion. The camera stops its horizontal pan on a second set of preserves. This time the paper attached to them, soiled with a drop of grease, reads "SOLE." The composition of the shot obeys to the highly restrained and frugal conventions of the monastic *bodegones*. Like them, Almodóvar's shot of the pantry connects the everyday with the mystical and endows common objects with an aura of supernatural mystery. Bryson suggests that the classical *bodegones* painted by Zurbarán and Sánchez Cotán approach food from an "anorexic" perspective, in that they distance themselves from any desire to eat the painstakingly detailed images of food they contain (1990: 66). This paradoxical pairing of an overwhelming visual attention to food and kitchen wares, on the one hand, and the exclusion of both desire and human presence, on the other, dramatizes for Bryson an evocation of the absent mother:

exclusion and nostalgia, this irresolvable ambivalence which gives to feminine space a power of attraction intense enough to motor the entire development of still life as a genre, yet, at the same time apprehends feminine space as alien, as a space which also menaces the masculine subject to the core of his identity as male (1990: 172–3).

It is at this point that the pantry in *Volver* breaks with the tradition of the *bodegón*, and with the emotional bind of its painful “anorexic” masculinity. It presents food as a restorative gift, a message from a loving mother, and a support for affective memory. This message is accepted and desired, as implied by Raimunda’s hands and face entering the frame as she reaches for the containers at the end of the shot. Her appearance also marks the entrance into the scene of the rhetorical conventions of advertising, in which the fully viewable object rules the composition over the fragmentary presence of the human body, a point further confirmed by Raimunda’s colloquial expression of surprise and desire: “¡Qué detalle!” (What a [thoughtful] detail). Her words mimic the advertising techniques of appropriating catchy popular language to market their products.

In making visible the interrelatedness of the mystical *bodegones*, commercials targeting female consumers, and rhopographic still-life paintings, this shot simultaneously subverts and pays homage to the aesthetic logics of each of these modes of visual representation. The scrutinizing and yet contemplative view of the preserved meals and the coffee set elevate these everyday items to aesthetic objects without fully leaving behind their being part, as mass-produced commodities, of a consumer economy. But the cups, jars, and foodstuffs also project an aesthetic based on order and simplicity which together with their allusions to death, recycling, and hunger make them into mystical symbols. The visual composition alludes to and transcends the abstract mysticism based on renunciation and restraint that became the official Francoist reading of the *bodegones* of Zurbarán and Sánchez Cotán and made the genre into one of the favorite artistic expressions of the regime.⁷ The shot in question rescues the focus on the materiality of the object that is also present in the *bodegón* and redeploys it to develop a sensual mysticism based on reconnecting the sisters with their absent mother through smells, flavors, decorative arrangements, and noises. In fact, every object in this pantry becomes an index of Irene (Carmen Maura), the mother of Raimunda and Sole, who all presume dead but who has in fact been in hiding at Aunt Paula’s house for over three years.

The pantry shot in *Volver* plays with the images and motifs of these pictorial traditions but manages to step out of their dynamics of “exclusion and nostalgia” by welcoming the character, and vicariously the viewer, to enter and pick up the prepared foods. As Raimunda grabs the portions marked for her sister Sole the exclusion transmutes into a welcome and the nostalgia becomes tamed by the comfort of the flavors and the familiar smells. Curiously it is the recourse to the visual language of advertising that allows the shot to transcend this generic/gender paradox. In the main plot of the film, a specific kind of masculinity that abuses and cheats is literally killed. Three generations of women try to outsmart the law after they have killed two abusive fathers: Irene burned the house where her husband and his lover were sleeping; while Paula, Irene’s granddaughter (Yohana Cobo), kills the man she thinks is her father to defend

herself from his attempt to rape her. The initial imaginary reunion between daughters and mother ushered in by this mystical pantry announces the posterior actual re-encounter of the family in the film, which takes place after these two "deaths of the father" have been revealed.

The Ethics of Makeup

Closely related to this thematization of the rhopographic object is the often-noted centrality that accessories and decoration play in Almodóvar's films. Clothing, makeup, accoutrements, hairstyle, and decoration, appear, at first sight, to dictate, more than indicate, the personality and behavior of most of his characters. This foregrounding of style and surface has been frequently interpreted as exemplary of current theories on the performativity of gender and identity.⁸ Characters in Almodóvar's films appear accessible and openly stereotypical at first sight yet they remain always unpredictable and mysterious. Running parallel to the conspicuous, highly self-conscious, and frequently spectacular promotion of surfaces and style, a more subdued, but equally ubiquitous, current flows through Almodóvar's work, one of quiet reflection on interiority, on deeply rooted identitary traits. According to Despina Kakoudaki, "Almodóvar also produces private spaces and a mysterious interiority, aspects of the self that remain stubbornly inaccessible to others and immune to collective demands" (2008: 35). We find traces of this mystery of the subject in many details scattered throughout his films. An apparently casual fragment of dialogue in *Matador* (1986), "Why is this mushroom poisonous? Because it is in its nature," offers a tautological explanation that becomes, with its suggestion of an immutable core identity, a metaphor for the necrophilia of the two main characters. Similarly, in *Todo sobre mi madre*, while talking about Lola (Toni Cantó), the transvestite who had fathered her son nineteen years earlier, Manuela exclaims "¡Cómo se puede ser tan machista con semejante par de tetas!" (How can anyone be so macho with such a pair of tits), a statement which suggests that not all surfaces manage to change that which they contain. Besides expressing a sense of mystery and puzzlement, these comments also communicate a hint of caring understanding for each character for what they can offer, an attitude that Paul Julian Smith has called Almodóvar's "radical humanism" (2000: 194). These comments, however, do not offer a justification for the crimes María Cardenal (Assumpta Serna) perpetrates in *Matador*, nor for the pain Lola has inflicted onto her loved ones in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Through their affirmation of mystery and paradox they emphasize the uselessness for the victim of inhabiting the space of blame for too long.

Two recurring characters across Almodóvar's films have become paradigmatic of this double commitment to looking openly at the motivations behind violent actions (be it from the point of view of the victims or from that of the perpetrators), and

allowing spaces of freedom either to remain intact, or to emerge from the scene of a traumatic event. One is the character of the young ingénue, embodied in women generally connected to the world of fashion, cosmetics, or show business. Unwittingly, they become the targets of violence, abuse, and rape, but end up surviving these trials with their innocence unblemished. The second group of recurrent characters is comprised by their complementary others: older women, frequently ageing mothers or grandmothers clad in simple, dark, unadorned clothing and subdued makeup. They are the only Almodóvar characters who escape the powerful forces of fashion and are as comfortable cooking a traditional meal for their families as they are anchoring television programs. Unshakable in their placidity, these ageing female characters are as resourceful, compassionate, professionally capable, forward looking, and transgressive of established social codes as their young counterparts.

In spite of their cosmopolitan and urban-centered lifestyles, the young ingénues are, like Almodóvar himself, migrants to the city who still keep strong ties to their rural origins. Their list would include, among others, Queti, the drycleaner who undergoes surgery to flee her abusive father in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*; Candela, the fashion model who has fallen in love with a terrorist in *Mujeres*; Crystal (Verónica Forqué), the compassionate prostitute in *Qué he hecho yo*; and Marina (Victoria Abril), the actress who falls in love with her kidnaper in *¡Átame!*. Representative of these young ingénues is the character of Kika (Verónica Forqué), the protagonist of the eponymous film, an aspiring actress turned makeup artist. She practices her profession with such zeal that she has been able, twice, to bring back to life the corpse of Ramón (Alex Casanovas), a young man who suffers from catalepsy. Beyond her shocking encounters with apparent death, Kika suffers all kind of events normally considered traumatic. She is raped by her maid's psychopath brother, betrayed by her voyeur boyfriend, made into an unwilling star of a crime reality show, and she witnesses the violent death of her lover.⁹ Kika's reliance on makeup, and her apparent ability to bring the dead back to life, gives literal and symbolic voice to a cosmetic/exhibitionist philosophy that is present in many Almodóvar films. This celebration of the power of makeovers is frequently cited as Almodóvar's recipe for achieving personal and national transformation after living through traumatic events.¹⁰ But underneath the makeup lies a strong and unchangeable belief in the power of life and compassion, an interiority that renders Kika unpredictable, mysterious, and almost impervious to all the violence and traumatic events that run through her body. As Carrie Ruiz suggests, this strength seems to come from a symbolic connection to nature emphatically alluded to in her flowery attires and the farm animals that decorate her apartment, which gets reinforced by her "return to the village" in the hopeful final scene when Kika, her face clean of all makeup and wearing a blood-stained dress, picks up a stranded driver on a road.

They are surrounded by apparently endless fields of sunflowers in the crisp light of the early afternoon. Undaunted by the violence she has experience in her recent history, Kika befriends the stranger, attempts to clean the blood stain on her chest, and decides to accompany him to his sister's wedding in the village of Montilla

(Ruiz 2007: 68–71). The return to this utopian village, filled with promises of physical and emotional healing, ebullient life force, and personal freedom, appears in the resolution of *Qué he hecho yo*, *¡Átame!*, *La flor*, *Kika*, and *Volver*.¹¹ Kika's return to the village, to the community and fecundity implied by the sunflower fields that surround her in the final shot and the wedding she decides to attend, are her responses to the repeated traumatic events in her life. *Kika*'s ethics of makeup, and the related refashioning of the Spanish nation, are predicated upon two traumatic experiences. One is hypervisible in the succession of violent events narrated in the film; the other is elided from the diegesis, its traces only implied by the nostalgia for a utopian rural village she once abandoned.

Emblematic of that restorative and welcoming utopian village are the characters of the ageing mothers. Some of these characters are played in cameo by Almodóvar's mother herself (Francisca Caballero), who, without changing her everyday appearance or layering makeup upon her face, may play the role of a television news anchor, a traditional rural housewife, or the host of a literary debate.

At times they are portrayed by Chus Lampreave, who blends her unique mixture of tradition and modernity in her repeated appearances as secondary characters. These clean-faced mothers confront vertiginous social change with time-tested wisdom and a host of personal rituals. They express the resiliency of a popular lore (family history, culture, cuisine, domestic economy) brewed in the intimate spaces of the family and the village. This lore predates the war and the dictatorship and has survived both, inaccessible to the long coercive arm of the regime, and has seamlessly adapted to the changing social landscapes of the new Spain.



Figure 8.4 Impervious to death, the heroine returns to life in *Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1993; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

Almodóvar's creative use of anachronism, his attention to the rhopographic detail, and the double resiliency of his female characters reveal a concern with trauma and a fascination with memory, with both its painful traps and therapeutic promises. Each of these narrative strategies is also marked by ellipsis, by the traces of an untold story of personal and national trauma that remains unspoken in an effort to emphatically banish the perpetrators from the lives of their victims. But leaving the story untold also means that a part of the subject is condemned to invisibility and the perpetrator is not brought to justice. Almodóvar's new projects signal a willingness to take up that challenge more directly, to tell the stories of Spain's national trauma surrounding the Civil War and the dictatorship while continuing to refuse the perpetrators a protagonizing role.

Notes

- 1 Over the last ten years, Almodóvar has become progressively bolder in his statements about conventional politics. In July 1998, as newspapers published the news of the arrest of General Jorge Rafael Videla on charges of kidnapping babies during the Argentinean dictatorship, Almodóvar was filming the scene in *Todo sobre mi madre* in which Sister Rosa is in a hospital bed waiting to deliver her baby. Manuela, sitting next to Rosa's bed, incorporates the news into her dialogue, characterizing the day as a great one. A year later in an interview given to the Spanish film magazine *Fotogramas*, he expressed a similar opinion about another Latin American dictator, stating that he hoped the new millennium would bring Chilean General Augusto Pinochet to trial (Smith 2000: 194). This detour through Latin American politics seems to have allowed him to look back at Spanish politics in a more critical way. In the 2002 Oscar ceremony he condemned the Iraq war, an issue with world resonances but which in the Spanish context meant a strong opposition to the then Prime Minister José María Aznar of the right-wing Popular Party (PP). But it was in 2004, in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings, that his public statements and his involvement in a variety of initiatives became more intense, from his highly critical declarations about the years of the PP government (1996–2004), to his support of the *Ley de la Memoria Histórica*, and his public defense of Baltasar Garzón, the judge that has been trying to put Francoism on trial.
- 2 We see the inclusion of direct political statements in the late 1990s, after the arrival in power of the Partido Popular, in the films *Carne trémula / Live Flesh* (1997) and *Todo sobre mi madre*. The first establishes a comparison between two births, one taking place during a state of exception in the midst of the "night" of the dictatorship, in 1970, the other twenty-six years later, in democratic times. Victor, the first boy now turned father, explains: "Cuando yo nací no había un alma por la calle. La gente estaba encerrada en su casa cagada de miedo. Por suerte para ti, hijo mío, hace ya mucho tiempo que en España hemos perdido el miedo" (When I was born there wasn't a soul in the street. People were locked inside their houses trembling in fear. Fortunately for you, my son, we in Spain long ago lost our fear). In *Todo sobre mi madre*, as explained in the previous note, Almodóvar introduces the news of Videla's imprisonment.
- 3 Repeated in Besas (1985: 216) as well as other many sources.

- 4 In their discussion of Almodóvar's collaboration with composer Alberto Iglesias to design the soundtrack of his films, Kathleen Vernon and Cliff Eisen analyze in detail the ways in which the soundtrack functions vis-à-vis the narrative in Almodóvar's films to conclude that music becomes what Michael Chion has called a space/time machine, a way to bridge and naturalize the passage of time and the change in space (Vernon and Eisen 2006: 55).
- 5 Linda Williams, for example, has analyzed and celebrated both the visual excess and the melodramatic excess in Almodóvar's films. See her *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (1989) and "Melancholy Melodrama" (2009).
- 6 In his interviews with Frederic Strauss, Almodóvar has commented extensively about this use of the camera in *Qué he hecho yo*. According to the director, by filming Gloria from the perspective of her appliances (from inside the fridge, the oven, the washing machine) he aimed to show the social invisibility of women like her. In the director's words, "I wanted to underline the fact that only these machines see her and watch her" (Strauss 2006: 47). In the same interview he comments on his "ambivalent attitude towards advertising," confessing that "[i]t entertains and horrifies me at the same time" (Strauss 2006: 46). Mark Allinson argues that the role played by the fake commercials in early Almodóvar films has been gradually assumed by theatrical fragments in his later ones. According to Allinson, "Parodies such as the spoof adverts in the early films, make for good comedy. But in his serious dramas, Almodóvar often finds a more metaphorical mode of address (less restricted by verisimilitude), by using the theatre" (2005: 234). In between the lines of these assertions it appears as a given that Almodóvar's career has experienced a transition from comedy to drama, that has been marked by his gradual abandonment of commercial language in favor of textual references connected with high art (theater, ballet, opera). Allinson also suggests that verisimilitude has gained an increased role in each succeeding Almodóvar production.
- 7 For an illustration of the ways in which the paintings of Zurbarán and of Sánchez Cotán became appropriated by the Francoist cultural propaganda machine, see Javier Portús's (2006) essay on the *bodegones* collection of the Prado Museum.
- 8 For example, in his book *A Spanish Labyrinth*, Mark Allinson connects Almodóvar's films to Judith Butler's theories stating that his films, "typify the assertion—made by Judith Butler (1990: 25) in *Gender Trouble*—that all gender is 'performatively constituted'. In Almodóvar, gender role play is often 'campily' self-conscious, but this does not exclude a more social, anti-hegemonic representation" (Allinson 2006: 89). For further discussions of the role of makeup and fashion, see chapters 9 and 23, this volume.
- 9 Kika's rape scene, rendered in a matter-of-fact tone that provoked laughter among some audiences, has been critiqued as dangerously insensitive. Writing about another one of these rape scenes filmed with an apparent comedic tone, that of *Matador*, Paul Julian Smith argues that, "Almodóvar is not simply concerned with humor in this scene. He is concerned not with the victimization of the woman but rather with the internal conflict of the man" (1994: 68). Kika's rape scene, with her addressing her attacker as a mother would a mischievous child, emphasizes this dimension of being able to preserve the agency even in situations when one is victimized. It will be the broadcasting of the event in a television program, the opening of her private life to the scrutiny of the public, which will render Kika, for a short time, into a defenseless victim.

- 10 See, for example, Marvin D'Lugo's insightful reading of Almodóvar's cameo appearance in *Matador* as the designer Francisco Montesinos. The fashion show that Montesinos supervises in the film, argues D'Lugo, becomes a synecdoche for a post-dictatorial version of the country as a whole, "the spectacle of Spain as an enticing, quasi exotic, but also chic performance for the international cosmopolitan audience is the engine that self-consciously moves the plot" (D'Lugo 2006: 47).
- 11 Elided from these rural returns are the narratives of exodus that took these characters from the rural Spanish interior to the city. They are part of the rural-urban displacement that started after the Spanish Civil War and peaked between the mid-1950s and 1975 (Harrison and Corkill 2004: 41-43).

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Our Rapists, Ourselves

Women and the Staging of Rape in the Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar

Leora Lev

Nearly all of Pedro Almodóvar's films deal with rape either as a principal action propelling plot or an insistent narrative trope; in either instance, rape functions as an objective correlative for, or literal and figurative embodiment of, broader scenarios regarding the vexed relation between gender, politics, libidinal economies, and specularizing media landscapes. Various critics and audiences have characterized these rape scenarios as misogynist, callous, or exploitative, consonant with a vaunted gender conservatism that idealizes traditional maternity, essentializes "femininity," or otherwise re-enacts patriarchal ambivalence about the female body. This essay suggests that Almodóvar's cinematic reflections on rape offer a more nuanced, troubling, and necessary analysis that complicates—even when it's also clearly grappling with—understandings of rape both within Spain and beyond in ways that resist reductive categorizations. Almodóvar's representations of rape dismantle and critique, rather than espouse, gender essentialism by staging this act with grotesque, surreal, and darkly camp *mise en scènes* that reveal the constructedness of normative notions of gender, sexuality, matrimony, and the misogyny embedded within them. Crucially, he also considers rape in terms of its exploitation in the media and its role in catering to consumer appetites for representations of sexual violence.

Almodóvar reveals the multiple ways in which rape—tellingly, *violación* from "violar," to "violate" in Spanish—is not only a brutal physical and psychic assault, but also a metaphor for and teleological endpoint of oppressive social, cultural, national, and class ideologies and the secular and religious institutions that support them. Before the veritable wave of Almodóvar studies that have appeared over the past decade, Kathleen Vernon and Barbara Morris (1995), in the first anthology to incorporate international perspectives and the most fruitful skeins from the body

of work known as “Theory” into analysis of the filmmaker’s oeuvre, observed that despite Almodóvar’s famous assertion that his work had nothing to do with the Franco era, his cinema did engage with the dictator’s legacy in brilliant, subversive ways. Indeed, his films explore how the unholy alliance between God the Father, his earthly House, and the *pater familias* within a Spain still struggling with its Francoist past all function according to a logic of *violación*. Almodóvar’s meditation on these linkages shares kinship with Luis Buñuel’s *Viridiana* (1961), which shows the collusion of Spanish socioeconomic and religious hierarchies with sexual crimes, and younger directors such as Alejandro Amenábar, whose film *Tesis* (1996) probes the specularizing of sadistic sexualized violence within a mediatized global landscape.

Many of the narrative meanings, intertextual cues, and visual/aural signifiers in Almodóvar’s films highlight the problematic links between agency, female desire, rape, misogyny, and retrograde patriarchal values that marred traditionalist Spain, but are now specularized within mediatized spectacles whose globalized gloss only further naturalizes *la violación* for mass markets. Such staged rape scenes reveal how falsely dichotomized and essentialized constructions of masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and other vectors of identity formation work destructively on the already complex negotiation of power and libido within individual and psychocultural spheres, and, now, vis-à-vis media specularizations. If “no” must still be treated as “no,” how might we understand this within a context of sexual mores in which “yes” is still proscribed to women? For even today, supposedly enlightened societies remain enmeshed within whore/Madonna dichotomies and other essentializing gender fetishes, and the female body still remains an object of mystification, fear, and trembling to a heteropatriarchal world view. Women are punished first by repressing, at great cost, the desire for sexual fulfillment that a misogynist culture still constructs as not quite “feminine;” they then serve as the vessels onto which rapists inflict the rage and frustration of not accessing *machista* power or sexual prowess as constructed by this same culture; finally, they experience the violation of a system complicit in covering up the crime, or subjecting the victim to humiliating legal procedures. As the rape victim Eva (Eva Cobo) in *Matador* (1986) says after being forced to relate the experience to police officers, “Primero te violan, después te hacen hablar de ello” (First they rape you, then they make you talk about it).

Although nearly all of Almodóvar’s films deal with rape, including rape between men and child abuse, this essay will focus primarily upon three emblematic films: *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) and *Kika* (1993), in which the act of rape is placed in a contemporaneous specularized media landscape; followed by *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002), whose critical elaboration of rape invokes an earlier intertextual web composed of a “monstrous feminine” of western cultural fairytales, myths, tropes, and cinematic representations.

Specularizing Visions of Excess: Of Human Bondage, *Petits Mortes*, *Parts Maudites*, and Rape

¡Átame! examines sexual assault vis-à-vis a series of mutually nourishing cultural mythologies and mediatized fantasies that are shown to underwrite seemingly disparate categories/scenarios: domesticity, pornography, romance, and horror. The film reveals the improbable similarities that connect these literal and figurative “set pieces” through a stylized aesthetic of self-referential and meta-cinematic cues. The elderly, crippled Máximo Espejo (Francisco Rabal), whose name playfully suggests Max(imum) Mirror, is a director making a B terror film called *El fantasma de medianoche* (*The Midnight Phantom*) that stars an object of his erotic fascination, Marina (Victoria Abril), a former porn actress and junkie. Ricki (Antonio Banderas), a young man who had had a brief liaison with Marina after meeting her at a nightclub appropriately called “Lulu,” has just been released from the mental hospital where he’s been kept for surveillance. Nonetheless, his fixation on the actress remains robust. Accordingly, he tracks her to her film set, albeit with a heart-shaped box of chocolates that metaphorically recalls the sacred hearts pulsing within the images of Jesus and Mary that had emblazoned the asylum walls, and metonymically suggests his own beating organ. Riffing through Marina’s possessions, he discovers and dons a woman’s wig; this is accompanied by a soundtrack musical leitmotif similar to that of Ur-stalker Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1966).¹

Hitchcock’s horror masterpiece evokes a cultural libidinal schizophrenia whose unresolved oedipality perpetuates the whore/sacred mother dichotomy internalized by Bates, who murders Mother only to cannibalistically subsume her into his fatally split identity as Norman/Mother. Almodóvar elaborates on this, revealing how horror porn and status quo domesticity have become equally specularized and fetishized within a mediatized culture that disavows the misogyny and constructedness of these spectacles. This recognition, latent in *Psycho* in the physical similarity between the doomed Marion Crane’s (Janet Leigh) boyfriend Sam (John Gavin) and her other would-be suitor, psychopathic murderer/rapist Bates,² is mirrored in Banderas’s resemblance, as a thin, dark, handsome young man, to the two male characters in Hitchcock’s film. The porousness between “normal” and psychopathic *novio* (boyfriend) is later reinforced when the camera cuts from captor Ricki’s red shirt and white slacks to the duplicate ensemble worn by a presumably “regular” young fellow promenading with his *novia* (girlfriend).

Just as the *Midnight Phantom* makes its entrance in the film being shot by Max Espejo, Marina commands it to “come out from there” but also, as the cross-cutting camera suggests, seems to address Ricki, associating him with the phantom. Breaking the fourth and fifth walls, Almodóvar creates a series of visual mirrorings that connect the diegetic space of Máximo’s film to the outer frame of Marina’s universe and then to *¡Átame!*’s spectators’ world. Almodóvar’s

cross-cutting thus links the impulse driving the mentally unstable Ricki to sequester Marina to the diegetic and real-time spectators' own desire to consume the schlocksploitation film.

Ricki accordingly breaks into Marina's apartment, imprisoning her on the bed with elaborate bonds and handcuffs stolen from the movie set. Kidnapping is also a form of power abuse that always implies rape (or its possibility), as does the bondage that renders Marina helpless. However, Ricki's yearning for an idealized domesticity is performed in fetishistic ways similar to how Espejo builds his horror film sets; in each case, a fetishistic illusion is created with the aid of artificial props and the psychic investment in a fantasy that is fragile, perverse, and chimerical. Espejo's assistant's comment, "más que una historia de terror, parece una historia de amor" (more than a horror story, it seems like a love story), reveals the link between these two seemingly disparate tropes, while foreshadowing Almodóvar's transcending of both in the *dénouement* of his own film. Sexual violence against women is shown to be the subtext for both Ricki's and Max Espejo's phantasmagoria, insofar as rape is a channeling of anger and frustration into the overpowering of a female "other" perceived as punitively elusive, within a masculinist social code that privileges *machista* aggression, even as, hypocritically and somewhat nominally, it punishes rape. Ricki's impotence as a spurned admirer/asylum inmate is linked to that of Espejo, an old man whose symbolic castration, marked by his waning sexual prowess and physical impairment, are suggested as he propels himself in circles in his wheelchair, a phallic prosthesis equipped with suggestive handles. Yet Ricki's crypto-ravishing of Marina via kidnapping is consonant with rape logic, which channels male fury into the violation of assaultive hyper-domination; he symbolically enacts the lawless assertion of male power that Espejo can't.

The film enlists dark camp and grotesque juxtapositions to explore how clichéd marital scenarios, whose mediatized images increasingly spawn and are fed by spectators' own distorted "realities," share much in common with bondage, voyeurism, and the eroticizing of the interplay between voluntary submission and coercion. The couple performs scenes of matrimonial "normality," dressing to go out, donning sleepwear, or sharing a meal while handcuffed. As a spousal surprise, and camp parody of romantic comedies from the 1950s on, Ricki carries the still bound-and-gagged Marina to the neighbor's empty apartment next door, which is decorated with the stylized luxe of a film set. The bed upon which Marina is trussed is itself adorned with filigree arabesques, and the camera zooms in on Marina's face within an ornate mirror whose frame resembles a sunburst. Metonymic chains of images show characters framed by and/or peering through elaborate apertures, such as the art nouveau grill work of the elevator in Marina's building or the bars of a pharmacy's security gate, or the film set's artificial foliage. This underscores not only the constructedness of horror porn and domestic fantasies, but also their shared ideological underpinnings. Domesticity has its own fetishistic series of strictures and regulations, even if the BDSM (bondage/domination, sadism/masochism) paraphernalia are invisible. By placing the criminal act of kidnapping

within filigreed frames and baroque set pieces, and by blurring boundaries between media spectacles, the characters' diegetic world, and the audience's, Almodóvar is highlighting the constructedness of convention as well as criminality, the role that subjectivity and wish fulfillment play in these fabrications, and cinema's mediation of all these registers of fantasy, desire, and reality.

More crucially, Almodóvar underscores not only the generally binding nature of traditional matrimony and sadomasochism alike, but the asymmetrical power structures that have culturally constituted these realities as well as their mediatized images. As noted feminists from Simone de Beauvoir (1949) to Haunani Kay-Trask (1986) have observed, power imbalances within culturally constructed domesticity, no matter how repressive for everyone, nonetheless privilege patriarchal dominance, valorizing masculinist ontologies and realities over those of the women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this same power asymmetry underwrites social environments that purport to transgress boring, bourgeois social norms with subversive libertinage, from *l'amour fou* as practiced by the Surrealists (Suleiman 1992) to the sexual underworld of latter-day libertines evoked by bourgeois art historian Catherine Millet in her own rightly notorious autobiography (2002).

An intertext for *¡Átame!*, the cult B classic *Circus of Horrors* (Sydney Hayers, 1960) highlights these connections. Dr. Schuler (Anton Diffring) is a would-be plastic surgeon who botches an operation and flees England for France. There he proceeds to create a circus full of underclass women, erasing through illicit surgery the scarred visages that signify the always already dissolute femininity that's led them to a demimonde of prostitution and alcoholism. But eliminating and cosmeticizing the literal and figurative blemishes of these prostitutes and alcoholics only imprisons them as performers in a spectacle fed by its viewers' voyeuristic fetish for unnaturally ideal women performing life-threatening tricks. If the ladies attempt to leave or "tell," to rip away the façade to reveal the horror show within, the surgeon as ringmaster will murder his caged starlets. And he will do so as they perform, thereby creating snuff performance scenarios that anticipate the emergence of the genre.

Like these performers, Marina too had worked in a circus, riding horses while striking a sexy, dangerous pose, after which her fall into prostitution and addiction gave way to a marginally improved existence as a star of B films that nonetheless feed their viewers' and director's fetishistic fantasies of degraded women. Almodóvar's insight is to show the kinship between traditional domestic existence and the circus of horrors as parts of a chain of specularized performances of women stigmatized by some primordial wound, whether inflicted by their "naturally" meretricious ways (e.g., Eve, Lilith, Jezebel), or the terrible incompleteness of spinsterhood.³ In each case, the injured woman is then reshaped with "beautifying" scalpels that enable her to enact titillating scenarios as a male ringleader cracks the whip and voyeurs consume the show.

However, Almodóvar offers an alternative *dénouement* to these specularizations of implied or actual sexual violence against women. Máximo Espejo decides not to

kill off Marina within *El fantasma de medianoche*, but instead to use her circus prowess to lasso her assailant and escape. Outside that film's diegetic space, Marina does fall in love with Ricki, but not as an internalizing of misogyny via acceptance of male dominance. As Chris Perriam observes, the film parodies oppressive gender norms, and rejects an easy Stockholm syndrome answer (2003: 61). And, as Paul Julian Smith has noted, it's only when Ricki's masculine aggression is challenged, and he's injured while attempting to find black market medication to alleviate Marina's pain, thus breaking the power imbalance of masculine/feminine, captor/captive, that Marina experiences desire for him (1994: 115). Ricki's wounding by his assailants positions him with the scarred women of *Circus of Horrors* and with Marina, whose abusive past has created physical and affective wounds, an objective correlative for which is her persistent toothache.

As Marina and Ricki consummate a passion that is shown to unite them as equals, the camera multiplies mirrored reflections of their entwined bodies beneath Marina's naïf-style paintings of Jesus and Mary, with Ricki's repeated movements suggesting those of prayer. The androgynous Jesus and Mary images, visually echoing those at Ricki's mental institution, which had throbbed with unintentionally macabre sacred hearts, are as culturally constructed as any other signifier/scenario. Perhaps true experiences of salvation occur with the rejection of older, kitschy, mass-marketed religious icons as well as more "modern" fetishes, such as mediatized specularizations of women's subjugation, abuse, or implied or actual rape. Deviance from the patriarchal power structures mapped by these status quo signifiers and spectacles is what proffers epiphany.

Ricki abandons misogynist norms to become Marina's partner; yet he shares intertextual kinship with Banderas's other stalker character Antonio in *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), who pursues the filmmaker Pablo to become a caretaker, symbolic parent, devoté, and fan; and with *Matador's* Ángel Jiménez, an aspiring *torero* and introvert who identifies with his bullfighter-mentor Diego, and attempts to rape Diego's girlfriend Eva to prove his masculinity or perhaps vicariously experience sex with him, but fails when he ejaculates before penetrating her. The son of a rigid, Opus Dei mother and absent father, Angel seems to express the conflicts, burdens, and possible redemptions of post-Francoist masculinity. The remorse over his deed, expressed in false confessions of crimes that Diego, a closet serial killer, has committed, "feminizes" him, revealing him to be a mystic who faints at the sight of blood and has hysterical visions à la Santa Teresa as he helps the police discover the literal and figurative bodies in the backyard. Almodóvar's films feature numerous male characters whose deviation from culturally constructed "masculinity" renders them a more positive alternative to the Francoist patriarch: the empathic taxi-driver (Guillermo Montesinos) who tearfully offers the struggling protagonist Pepa (Carmen Maura) hankies, aspirin, and music in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988); the judge/transvestite (Miguel Bosé) and the compassionate television newsman (Javier Bardem in a cameo) who comfort Rebecca (Victoria Abril) in

Tacones lejanos/High Heels (1991); and many more. If rape exemplifies *machista* abuse, then the repentant suitor figures played by Banderas, of fluid gender and/or sexuality identification, suggest a more flexible version of masculinity that for Almodóvar is clearly preferable to one modeled after the dictator Franco.

Masters of Delusion

If *¡Átame!* raised many a critical hackle for audiences and critics who perceived it as condoning *machista* domination and implied sexual assault, *Kika*, Almodóvar's most controversial film to date, was roundly condemned for a vaunted misogyny that trivialized rape and sensationalized its visual representation. However understandable such responses may be, the film's exaggerated staging of *la violación* rewards further—necessarily uncomfortable—viewings with a nuanced meditation on the connection between cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity, specifically Spanish gender myths that perpetuate household angel vs. whore dichotomies dating back to medieval Marianism, and a contemporaneous media landscape. For the latter both spawns and is fed by the delirium symptomatic of this new society of spectacles that perform even while disavowing their fetishistic relation to these cultural mythologies.

Kika stars Verónica Forqué, whose role as the prostitute Cristal in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) becomes an important intertext for this film's representation of rape. In both films, Forqué plays a woman whose job it is to realize the fantasies that issue from her clients' libidos and are also purveyed by vertiginous processions of media simulacra in an undecidable moebius strip. She literally and figuratively cosmeticizes herself and her customers, creating scenarios to sate the multiply mediated desires of these consumer-voyeurs. As Cristal, she fabricates scenarios to gratify her tricks' clichéd erotic fantasies; in *Kika*, she's a makeup artist who creates illusions for clients who are now, a decade after *Qué he hecho yo*, even hungrier for airbrushed spectacles, whether starring a deceased loved one on display in a coffin, a celebrity, or one's own mediatized persona enjoying his or her fifteen minutes or seconds of fame. As with Antonio Banderas's characters in *La ley del deseo* and *Matador*, Forqué's intracinematic personae refract each other to elaborate the relations between eroticism, sexual violence, fantasy, voyeurism, and their mediatized specularization.

Kika's inaugural moment is the image of a keyhole, primordial signifier for all the apparatuses of voyeurism—whether penny arcade, viewfinder, telescope, chink in wall or curtain, illuminated window at night, or film screen itself—through which the viewer is invited to “peep” at the spectacle of a winsome lingerie model undressing to be photographed by Ramón (Alex Casanovas), an inveterate voyeur who will become Kika's lover. Camera in hand, he mounts his



Figure 9.1 Newscaster Andrea Caracortada on the prowl for “The Worst of the Day” in *Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1993; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jean Marie Leroy.

subject à la fashion photographer Thomas (David Hemmings) in *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), which, as Marvin D’Lugo has observed (2006: 83), references the infamous scene in which Thomas shoots supermodel Verushka as an overdetermined allegory for sex. This dynamic foreshadows Ramon’s fetishistic filming of his liaisons with Kika, which reiterate the tension between male photographer/subject/sexual aggressor and female visual/sexual object. This also connects him to the shocksploitative newscaster Andrea Caracortada (Victoria Abril), or “She of the Scarred Face.” Garbed in Gaultier cyborg-wear, she too flaunts a camera, but one affixed to her forehead, that elongates into an erect prosthetic phallus, all the better to film the latest horror show for her bottom-feeding “news” television program “Lo Peor del Día” (The Worst of the Day).

Through these characters, for whom the photographic act is a stand-in not only for erotic depredation but for murderous sexual assault, Almodóvar is glossing the ways in which films such as *The Prowler* (Joseph Losey, 1951), *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), and *Blow-Up*, have anticipated an historico-cultural “twilight of the gods,” in which voyeurism, technology, and an increasing hunger for sensation have colluded. Their offspring are ever gorier “reality TV” and video games that make gladiatorial spectacles look quaint; exploitative, “truthy” news programs; and torture porn delivered via a free-floating, 24/7, live-streamed carnival feed sustained by consumers’ and producers’ collective libido. Seemingly infinite

voyeurs within *Kika* film, spy on, survey, purvey, and otherwise infiltrate each others' private worlds, enlisting this footage for private or public perversions and lucre. But it is specifically the female body that is a casualty of this fetishizing; rape might be an apt metaphor for this free-floating appetite for murderous violation, but it is also a real-time, ugly, traumatic fallout of this brave new world.

The connection between rape, fetishism, and mediatized psychosexual phantasms is explored through the cultural production of Ramón, Andrea Caracortada, and Ramón's stepfather, aptly named Nicholas Pierce. The latter is an American writer and sexual predator/serial killer, played with louche brilliance by Peter Coyote, who beds Kika after she's done his makeup for a television appearance. His son will similarly desire Kika after she's cosmeticized what seems to be his corpse, but is only his swooning body, in preparation for the funeral vigil. The "work" of all three reveals a neurotic ambivalence toward the female body, eroticism, and pleasure that persists within a supposedly evolved late twentieth-century, western world, but, Almodóvar suggests, has also been performed by Spanish religious and lay cultural spectacles since the Middle Ages.

Ramón's art collages associate holy virgin figures with fleshy naked woman whose juicy femininity is indicated metonymically by fruit or flowers. A poster for his exhibition titled "La Mujer Florera" hovers above altar-like curiosity cabinets showcasing images of the Virgin Mary and the sexy, evil stepmother of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. His, in his own words, "amor sucio" (dirty love) objectifies Kika on the one hand as a voluptuous older woman/sacred mother figure to be obsessively filmed during sex (whore) and, on the other, and without her consent, performing household tasks (Madonna). Ramón's conflictual fetish for artificial cultural fantasies of whore/Madonna figures, which he shares with the Disney franchise, the Church, and much of western culture, forecloses any possibility of interacting with Kika as an actual woman. Although so mild-mannered as to suggest a pathologically regressive *niño mimado* (spoiled child), Ramón's predatory proclivities are connected to his father's and to Andrea Caracortada's; all three obsessively stage, film, and/or perform spectacles that fetishize and degrade female bodies, suggesting that even within the newly globalized Spanish capital, vestiges of essentialist conceptions of femininity compete with more enlightened understandings of gender and sexuality.

Andrea's winking, whirring phallic videocams, armored breastplates with nipple-shaped camera lights, and prosthetic extremities all suggest a futuristic androgyny beyond gender. These photographic prostheses, however, are ideal for mass production and marketing of misogynist sex-and-violence fantasies whose simulation comes ever closer to the ultimate pornographic "money shot," the capturing of actual jouissance on screen that Linda Williams has characterized as the goal of all pornography (1999). Andrea perpetually quests after this "real" akin to the Lacanian *réel*, the abyss that gapes open when the censors that construct our tenuously ordered consciousness collapse into pre- or trans-verbal freefall in which abjection and ecstasy mingle. This associates her not only with *Blow-Up*'s Mark,

but also with Mark Lewis (Karlheinz Böhm) of *Peeping Tom*, the psychopathic filmmaker who fits his machine with a spear that murders his female models so that both they and he can see the women observing themselves dying and being filmed as they do so.

Andrea's post-apocalyptic flamenco couture features crimson slashes of fabric and a raven updo with curls that mime the curlicue of her self-inflicted face wound, itself mirrored by faux-bandaged finger prostheses; this dismemberment chic suggests symbolic castration that is overcompensated for with multiply penetrating camera devices, as it was with Max Espejo and his wheelchair prosthesis. These hyper-stylized vestments specularize the constructedness and artificiality of value systems, traditions, and social codes previously naturalized within the older Spain's lay and religious festivals, whether flamenco, *corridos de toro*, or Santa Semana processions. They also highlight the orientalist consumption of an exoticized "femininity"/Spanishness as performed by flamenco for its foreign consumers, from Prosper Mérimée on, echoing a critique articulated by Buñuel in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), as Kathleen Vernon has analyzed (2004). The Buñuelian barb is mirrored in Nicholas Pierce's depredations of both Spanish culture and women, which/who become figurative and all too literal fodder for his fiction.

Yet if the orientalist fetish of femininity as enacted by flamenco has metamorphosed into the sartorial futuristic cyber-spectacle quite literally mounted by Andrea, *Kika* makes the point that the persistent misogyny of the old Spain, internalized by the many women who also enable it, is only exacerbated within this new, mediatized world. Andrea's self-scarring, caused by despair at her abandonment by Ramón, her former patient, bespeaks a vulnerability whose visual aestheticizing within necrophilic fashion and media spectacles improves little upon the old models of gender performance issuing from traditionalist Spain. This insight had already been articulated by Almodóvar himself, in the ultimate self-referential cameo as director of a fashion extravaganza in *Matador*: after his model Eva is bruised during Antonio's attempted rape, Almodóvar as fashionista urges his makeup artist to emphasize the purple wound even further, against her mother's (Chus Lampreave) protest, "What's this? A fashion show or an anti-aesthetic farce?"

It is in this context that *Kika*'s infamous rape scene is staged. The rape occurs when Pablo Méndez, alias Paul Bazzo (Santiago Lajusticia), a mentally impaired porn star who is the brother of *Kika*'s maid Juana (Rossy de Palma), escapes from prison and eventually flees to *Kika*'s apartment, having first pretended to join the religious *Procesión de los Picados*, a parade of self-flagellants. Andrea's camera zooms in upon the pinpricks and slashes inscribed like ciphers and feminine "wounds" on the flagellants' skin, revealing the spectacle as a site of sadomasochistic fetishism both enabled and disavowed by participants and viewers. This elaborates Luis Buñuel's deconstruction of religious festivals in *L'Âge d'Or* (1930), *Él* (1953), and *Viridiana* (1961). *Kika*'s close-ups of Spanish religious festivals emphasize the perverse, specularizing nature of these traditional lay and religious spectacles.



Figure 9.2 Staging rape in *Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1993; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jean Marie Leroy.

Almodóvar links their disavowal, and thus normalization, of sexual violence and its fetishism to those of an apparently transnational landscape of sensationalistic, mediatized spectacles.

This linkage underwrites the film's infamous rape scene. Greatly concerned because her mistress is slumbering nearby, Juana offers to collaborate in Paul's theft of Ramón's video equipment. She also offers to have sex with Pablo to aid him in discharging his outsized desires, if he promises just to take the loot and run. Having tied up and hit Juana with her consent to render the scenario more "auténtico" (authentic), he gets sidetracked by the sleeping Kika and proceeds to rape her. Critical controversy emerged from the scene's prolonged, uncomfortable, quasi-camp staging: the rape continues as Kika awakens, tries to reason with Pablo, who threatens her with a knife, and Juana, still tied to her chair, enters the room and also attempts to negotiate with him to stop the *violación* at three climaxes.

Is Almodóvar saying that rape is funny or trivial? Patricia Hart asks the understandable question, "Can a Feminist Sit Through *Kika*?" (1997). Perhaps another question that is consonant with the film's queries is whether feminists, or anybody with an iota of social and ethical conscience/consciousness, can or should sit through the violent sexploitation that had already become banalized in 1993 within mainstream culture and its mediatized representations. For the difficulty of watching this scene does, indeed, seem to be its point. Jouissance is undercut by the scene's refusal of illusionistic eroticizing or aestheticizing, and its

overdetermined layers of performativity. These alienating strategies run counter to the goal of pornography, which seeks to suture the gap between mediatized fantasy and “reality” as seamlessly as possible. The scene is cross-cut with point-of-view shots, from an anonymous voyeur’s camera, of the sleeping Kika and Paul’s break-in. This emphasizes the multiple frames and filters that specularize media fantasies for viewer/participants in the contemporaneous voyeuristically fixated world. Simultaneously, close-ups of furniture, which we later learn contain the dismembered pieces of one of Nicholas Pierce’s victims, are shown being hauled via pulleys from the latter’s upstairs apartment in a surreal defenestration recalling Buñuel’s *L’Âge d’Or*. Other framing shots feature Kika’s face between Paul’s denim-clad legs, and the typically impotent Almodovarian police who arrive belatedly, keystone-cop style, reflected within a round hallway mirror.

Jouissance is also undermined by the camera’s signaling how, in many real-life erotic liaisons and their mediatized pornographic simulacra, heterosexual masculinity is a performance that has nothing to do with women’s physiognomy or desire, but rather with the dissemination of myths of male virility, while requiring a performance of acquiescent “femininity” by women. Paul is a handsome porn star whose exclamation “I’m good! They all said so on the set! I can achieve five climaxes without withdrawing!” emblemizes this reality. And, as Marvin D’Lugo (2006) and Susan Martin-Márquez (1999) have observed, his exclamation reveals his inability to distinguish between life and cinema. Pablo’s solipsistic declaration literally bespeaks the performativity that marks both “real life” and simulated sexual encounters which, despite claims to “money shot” verisimilitude, are all revealed to be constructed scenarios predetermined by misogynist cultural mythologies.

The point is reinforced when the camera focuses on Ramón’s art collage, featuring a passive, naked woman splayed above a suggestively placed apple; Paul had mimicked this suggestive scenario by penetrating Kika with an orange section prior to the rape. Rape is a specific violation irreducible to any other; however, it’s shown here to be connected to the misogynist fetishism that “inspires” all Ramón’s artwork and prevents him from deriving sexual fulfillment with Kika unless he’s filming her. Pablo is only enacting what is latent within Ramón’s perverse shadow boxes, as did Ricki with Max Espejo’s B film visions. Almodóvar is highlighting the web of mediatized violation, sexploitation, and misogyny that may not directly produce acts of rape, but does perpetuate the dehumanization, objectification, and subordinate status of women and “femininity” in ways that minimize *la violación*’s seriousness, and erode its epistemological, psychosexual, and legal status as real-world trauma and crime.

Juana, who awakens, charges into Kika’s room still tied to her chair, whose spokes evoke the horns of a charging bull and, inevitably, a *corrida de toros*. Although Juana had urged her brother to make the crime scene “auténtico,” the self-referentiality of this scenario persists in reminding us that what’s unfolding before us is staged. This is not a rape, and nor is it meant to simulate the “real” or “réel”

of rape, as would a typically misogynist heterosexual pornographic film. Rather, it is a performance that comments upon and deconstructs the complex relation between misogynist fantasies, the banalization of sexual violence, and the increasingly mediatized landscapes through which Spanish and global citizens negotiate ever-multiplying sexexploitative fantasies/urges/desires. And Juana's depiction as a lesbian who aspires to be a prison matron, because "soy muy auténtica" (I am very authentic), is also a parody of homophobic clichés about lesbianism via a camp deconstruction of "authenticity," while her visual association with a *toro* dismantles the *corrida* as a fetishized site of Spanish hetero-masculinity and national identity par excellence.

Kika's attempt to escape her rapist through pretense and negotiation meta-cinematically references Forqué's character Cristal's attempt to rid herself of her exhibitionist client by feigning complicity with his *machista* fantasy in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*. Rape is, of course, different from any other sexual interaction because it's a vicious act of domination meant to disempower and humiliate the victim. However, this intertextual link between the two female characters suggests that for Almodóvar, rape must be viewed in conjunction with a persistent climate of misogyny that has also problematized female sexual desire. These cinematic intertexts thus represent women's double bind: being required to massage oversized male egos, while all too rarely experiencing jouissance issuing from the supposed virility that's propped up these egos, but all too often being victimized by the eruption of misogynist anger and thwarted masculinist pride then channeled into a traumatizing sexual attack. Either a paucity, or a violating surfeit.

Cristal's enactment of pleasure, produced for tricks for whom the female body is only a vessel through which to assert their virility, is aligned with her neighbor Gloria's (Carmen Maura) continual sexual frustration with selfish *machista* partners. Gloria, roped into playing the role of voyeur for an exhibitionist client (played by filmmaker Jaime Chávarri), and Cristal are shown self-consciously cheering on his vaunted erectile miracle as he strips. Cristal's feigned orgasm as he squirms above her is aligned with Gloria's caressing of the booty paid for by her stint, a curling iron that's far more satisfying than its phallic metonym performing dubious incursions mere inches away. Although it cannot be overstated that rape is a unique violation, incommensurate with any other, Almodóvar's linkage of Cristal's and Kika's tortuous and torturous gender role-play suggests that he's concerned with the problems of gender essentialism, and the violence and inequity that these ideologies spawn within specific gendered interactions. Cristal's subjection to a system of class and gender inequity within which prostitution seems, ironically, the only viable economic opportunity, requires complying with the fantasy of her arrogant and insecure client.

Kika's parallel subjugation is, of course, far worse, because at least Cristal has exercised some agency in submitting herself to degrading transactions. But Kika is attacked, and unable to reason with Pablo, who cannot seem to understand the difference between his film sets and "una violación real." His dim-wittedness may

be seen as the blind will to power that spurs men to rape, as well as an allusion to the “thinking with his penis” problem, given that that organ most determines his rape-and-pillage trajectory. Once again, the discomfort incited by viewing this scene, whose affective tenor is tinged with camp *noir*, is meant to emphasize the impossible predicament of women’s persistent objectification within a mediatized environment that formulates new, virulent strains of misogyny while continuing to privilege the hyper-masculinity that enables rape culture.

The scene is then recycled as fodder for newscaster Andrea Caracortada’s show, “Lo Peor del Día,” a blistering comment on the devolution of news into porn, but also on the extent to which nightmarish societies of the spectacle, with signifiers unhinged from signifieds, simulacra from historical referents, have fulfilled Baudrillard’s warnings. Andrea essentially breaks into the apartment, as had Pablo and the police before her, and assaults the traumatized Kika with invasive questions concerning the rape, including whether she experienced an orgasm. When Kika indignantly refuses to answer, Andrea astonishingly accuses her of attacking liberty of expression, and continues to film the devastation with her phallic photographic headgear. Even after Andrea is thrown out, she attempts to film from the sidewalk, at which she receives a single drop of Paul’s semen on her forehead, closing her eyes beatifically. A benediction, in the spirit of Jean Genet, but testifying now to an unholy veneration of the mediatized capturing of abjection, and, unlike in Genet’s all-male world, how women are targets of scopophilic sadism within a system of asymmetrical power.

Footage of the scene is then transmitted via television screen in a cannibalistic, unhinged production/ consumption of specularized violence. An illuminated Sony sign upstages a hyper-real moon, which morphs into the porthole of a glass laundry machine door and then an eyeball-shaped ceramic flower pot, in a metonymic chain echoing proto-Surrealist Odilon Redon’s eyeballs and those of *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929), and Georges Bataille’s *L’histoire de l’oeil* (1928). The historic hunger for voyeuristic pleasure and perpetual surveillance chronicled by these Surrealist image-makers is now enabled by infinite ocular prostheses, perpetuated within a *mise en abyme* of gazes ever hungrier for lurid spectacles. The succession of fringed orbs suggests eyeball, testicle, vulva, and the connection between de-oculation, castration, and their symbolic stand-ins and attendant anxieties. This in turn points to the wielding of camera lens as an overcompensating gesture of masculinist violation, endlessly re-enacting a self-situation as subject/voyeur dominating a vulnerable object—even when the Andrea Caracortadas of the world internalize this misogyny and grab the lens. Although Almodóvar is not suggesting a reductive causality between screen and real-life rape, he is revealing the deleterious ways in which this specularizing orgy persists in objectifying the female body *in extremis*, permitting new strains of misogyny to be performed in spectacles whose slippage between simulated and real time becomes increasingly porous.

The scene's prolonged, repellent character, and simultaneously self-referential and meta-cinematic staging, thus acts against the banalization of trash spectacles that a globalized world has only provided new modes of producing and consuming, while disavowing the problem of cultural ideologies and systems that still enable rape. Almodóvar's strategies here are in notable contrast both to heterosexual pornography, and to mainstream Hollywood films that feature grand guignol massacres of and by cartoonish women action figures who embody sexist, racist "ideals" of beauty but whose aestheticized, balletic filming is meant to elevate all this to art, and distract from the primordially adolescent, arrested-development nature of these spectacles.

However, as in *¡Átame!*, which ends with Marina and Ricki tracing a new route away from their past, Kika suddenly changes paths, having dispatched her duty and seen Ramón to safety via medical care for yet another faux deathly swoon, when a handsome young man offers her a ride through fields of flowers. Credits roll as the characters are literally and figuratively conducted away from traumatizing spectacles along an open road, toward a freer future.

Immaterial Girls: Of Graves and Private Places

Hable con ella, for many audiences and critics a film equally as controversial as *Kika*, features protagonist Benigno (Javier Cámara), a male nurse who both cares for and loves the dancer Alicia (Leonor Watling), who has fallen into a coma, and Marco (Dario Grandinetti), who befriends Benigno when his own bullfighter girlfriend (Rosario Flores) meets Alicia's fate. Certainly, the dynamic of two powerful women reduced to a vegetative state while their boyfriends attend to them lends a necrophilic tenor to the film on multiple levels. The women are dressed, posed, and even accessorized, like life-sized dolls, a misogynist uncanny whose referent is, of course, the female corpse. Such scenes reference the plethora of moribund, morbidly passive, or actual dead female bodies that have been fetishized, eroticized, aestheticized and projected onto, within western arts, fairytales, and mythologies by male artists for male audiences, as Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) and Bram Dijkstra (1986) have observed, as well for the female spectators who have internalized such misogynistic gazes as status quo. Poe's (1986) assertion that "there is no more poetical topic than the death of a beautiful woman" underwrites fairytales such as "Sleeping Beauty," which is clearly an intertext of *Hable con ella*. Normalizing and romanticizing a fetish for the slumbering lady arrayed so beautifully in her vitrine, to be kissed by the prince in a blissful teleology of matrimonial enshrinement, lays rest to any troublesome narrative peripeteia concerning women's quest toward being-in-the-world. This trope has whitewashed necrophilia with surprising success.

However, are the film's critics conflating the problematic comportment of some of its characters with Almodóvar's own perspectives? The camera shows Benigno spying on Alicia from his apartment as she dances in the studio across the way, before her accident; and then washing her, brushing her hair, doing her nails, and gently providing sanitary napkins for her. This is all before he commits the act of crypto-necrophilic rape. So, yes, he is a psychopath whom Norman Bates would envy. But when he tells a horrified Marco that he has a better relationship with Alicia than do most married couples, he is revealing a disturbing insight about matrimony's constructedness within the cultural imaginary, evidenced both in traditional rituals and newer mediatized spectacles. This echoes *¡Átame!*, in which Ricki orders Marina to literally and figuratively make herself up so that they may "go out, just like a normal couple," and the two accordingly attend to their grooming in the bathroom mirror while handcuffed to each other. In that film, Almodóvar was revealing the cultural constructedness of Ricki's notions of domesticity, and the link between these and other fetishistic rituals, including those that underwrite horror porn. Benigno's fetishistic devotion to Alicia, not to mention the actual rape, which is never seen, are not eroticized or aestheticized; rather, they reveal the extent to which matrimony and domesticity, even in "enlightened" democracies, still run according to "Sleeping Beauty" logic. The dark camp here is not mocking sexual assault, but suggesting that Benigno's pre-rape ministrations are, in fact, gentler than many supposedly "normal" masculinist husbandries of wives, and no less fetishistic.

These ideas are developed in the film's silent film-within-a-film, *El amante menguante* (*The Shrinking Lover*), which has achieved a cult status all its own, and bears a complex, provocative relationship to *Hable con ella*'s diegetic world. Amparo (Paz Vega), a mad scientist with a distaff twist, is working on a weight-loss formula. Her plump husband Alfredo (Fele Martínez) drinks the potion to test it for Amparo and also, it's suggested, to atone for his selfishness. Shrink he does, to their horror, until he's small enough to be carried in Amparo's handbag, as she desperately searches for a cure. This wink at Freudian dream signification posits the receptacle (like its family relations the jewelry box and cigar case) as a metaphor for female genitals and a foreshadowing of Alfredo's fate. The surreal *dénouement* features the sleeping Amparo's bodily landscape, which, shot from Alfredo's point of view, has become gargantuan, like one of Dalí's human/mineral topographies. He crawls across her Brobdingnagian breasts and discovers the primordial chute from which all humans emerge, inevitably diving into the waters inside the darkest of Freudian territories, the very terrain that had the good Doktor, as well as endless others before and after him, wonder despairingly, at the end of a long psychoanalytic life, just what it is that women want.

As Ann Davies has observed, "Both Benigno and Alfredo gladly accept the dominance of the woman, but the ideas expressed here have deep roots in older and negative ideas about women as dangerous to men, devouring and castrating" (2007: 113). It's certainly true that images and texts from time immemorial have expressed



Figure 9.3 The look of love: female pleasure magnified in the silent film *El amante menguante* in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

a misogynist ambivalence toward the female body as impossibly, maddeningly alluring and castrating in equal parts. As Louise Kaplan asserts, even Freud was unable to recognize the difference between his own irrational fears and those of pre-Oedipal boys regarding female genitals; namely, that the latter signal a terrible wound or absence and that female body parts are not merely different from, but constitute a nightmarish, irredeemably lacking, version of men's (Kaplan 1991).⁴ However, are the "negative ideas about women" here Almodóvar's, or those of a phallogocentric culture that is being critiqued? Amparo's vulva is fringed with astroturfesque pubic hair, and her enormity suggests earth goddess as well as Medusa, vagina-dentata wielding sorceress, *The Leech Woman* (Edward Dein, 1960), *The Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman* (Nathan Juran, 1958), vampire, succubus, vessel for creation and destruction—anything, in fact, but a dimensional, faceted human being. Given that *El amante menguante* is a self-referential and meta-cinematic commentary on silent and B-grade mid-century horror films grappling with contemporaneous societal terrors, it seems likelier that Almodóvar's short is not assenting with but rather parodying and problematizing the misogynist phantasmagoria that Barbara Creed has aptly called "the monstrous feminine" (1993).

A series of classic as well as B films expressing these ambivalent approach-avoidance attitudes are explicitly referenced in *Hable con Ella* as in *¡Átame!* and *Kika*. In *The Fifty-Foot Woman*, protagonist Harry Archer (William Hudson) is both attracted to and preyed upon by his "pathologically" jealous wife Nancy (Allison Hayes). Nancy's well-founded fears about her inveterate philanderer of a husband's

fidelity are shown to be symptomatic of a free-floating, generalized, female madness lurking just beneath the surface of her well-lacquered, soigné 1950s feminine appearance and its extension, the psychopathically ordered domestic space. When Nancy is infected by an alien whom nobody else believes she's seen, she morphs into the titular giantess, literally breaking the chains that bind her to the bed to seek out her cheating man. In a climax of feminine fury replete with wildly outsized appetite, she wreaks havoc on the town, lays waste to its puny diner, and grabs her tiny, cowering husband, who dies in her enormous hands as she's electrified to death in an inversion of the Frankenstein life-jolt. *Hable con ella* understands that these visions of gargantuan women and Lilliputian menfolk express both terror and desire for re-absorption into the womb, a regression to, or consumption by, the primordial female body. Indeed, the real-life fetish of Voraphelia, or "Vore," has spawned an entire underground pop-cultural literature and artwork representing this fetish for consumption by an enormous (usually female) figure. Ramón's obsessive depictions of oversized women in *Kika*, "La mujer florera," certainly suggest this fetish as well.

Further, the concoction is a diet formula, a stand-in for products that primarily target women with the necrophilic message that far, far less is more, causing a raft of body dysmorphia-related maladies that court and sometimes result in the death that is misogyny's purest physiological manifestation, "Sleeping Beauty" once more. Here, the potion is an instrument by which a man, overfed by his egotism, shrinks until the fear of/desire for re-absorption into the woman's watery chambers via her vagina becomes a reality. This seems a rather ingenious parody of misogynist equations of the female body with a monstrous feminine, as expressed in early film, throughout western culture, and in the legal and social practices that are the endpoint and concrete manifestation of such anxieties. Alfredo's venturing into Amparo visually recalls Dante's descent into the dark hole that Gustave Doré evidently envisions *Inferno's* antechamber to be, as well as Norman Bates's sliding the automobile that functions as his bodily extension into the huge swamp out back.

This entrance is non-consensual, since Amparo is sleeping, yet the two are a couple very much in love, and Amparo's smile reveals her pleasure. The scene asks us to consider the complexities of agency, pleasure, and feminine jouissance, as does the scene's intertext from *¡Átame!*, in which Marina relaxes in a bath with the aid of a scuba diver-shaped dildo. The miniaturized Alfredo's plunge into Amparo's depths, effected through his agency, must be distinguished from Marina's conscious controlling of her pleasure via the mechanized Cousteau; nonetheless, these cinematic mirrorings share suggestive commonalities. Both Amparo and Marino's full-sized lovers or suitors have shown aggressive and/or *machista* traits; Alfredo's selfishness is implied, while both Máximo and Ricki attempt "entry" into Marina's graces and body, through fetishistic voyeurism and pursuit. Before these two respective scenes, all three men's *machista* impulses expressed a desire to conquer the dark feminine continent, dehumanizing the women into alluring,

mysterious, fragmented landscapes. Yet the surreal metamorphosis of Alfredo into a *de facto* dildo might be understood as a surrendering of a misogynist will to power that causes Amparo to experience pleasure, in the same way that the mechanized deep-sea explorer enables Marina's jouissance.

It's difficult to see Alfredo's metamorphosis into a sort of human dildo *cum* fetus as condoning rather than critiquing the misogynist terrors vis-à-vis women's genitals disseminated by the heteropatriarchal, which is to say the cultural, imaginary throughout human history; or as condoning the phenomenon of rape as logic and act that actualize this fear and hatred. This is further reinforced by the fact that the short film is then shown to be a surrealist allegory and foreshadowing of the criminal event at the core of the outer film, Benigno's rape of Alicia, which results in a stillborn fetus, after which she awakens from the coma. None of this is shown, but instead related by various characters. But does the film promote dangerous ideas about women or rape logic, as it's been charged with doing? That Benigno's violation of Alicia is connected to *El amante menguante*, a film that has "disturbed," and fascinated him, suggests that his incursion into the sleeping woman is, among other things, an expression of ambivalence toward the monstrous feminine, as was Alfredo's. Rape is always a violation, always about the untenable assertion of power, even if in this case, the conquest is not of a struggling woman, but a sleeping goddess and object of veneration with whom Benigno is obsessed. Still, the act expresses terror of, vulnerability to, and longing for the monstrous feminine, all of which are channeled into an act of depredation meant to master the anxiety and yearning for a return "home."

El amante menguante's cinematic and symbolic exploration of connections between feminine jouissance, male aggression, and mediatized cultural spectacles is connected to but also distanced from Benigno's actual rape of Alicia. For in Almodóvar's cinematic vision, there is no place for sexual predators, whether men who embody Franco-era *machista* brutality, or the more mild-mannered, tormented fetishists who harbor "un amor sucio," such as Benigno or Ramón. Benigno is imprisoned, and subsequently commits suicide; Marco visits his grave to mark his passing. Finally, having learned the lesson that he must listen better to women, his egotistic effacing of Lydia's voice with his own having lost him his *torera* girlfriend, first to her previous *torero* boyfriend, then to the *corrida's* *duende* (the spirit that emblemizes death and passion's secret connection, and, within Spanish culture, haunts any true artist), Marco finds himself in the same theater whose spectacle inaugurated the film: the magisterial Pina Bausch work in which male dancers rush to remove obstacles from female figures pursuing an oracular dream trajectory. Instead of sitting next to Benigno, as he had at the film's beginning, he's near a radiant Alicia. A new dance performance shows a woman being borne aloft by men who offer her a microphone, support her, help her open her arms in flight. After the trauma wrought by *machista* violations, the film encourages a precarious hope for new horizons, and perhaps this time, *un amor limpio* (a clean, honest love).

Almodóvar's staging of rape in disturbing nuance within a decidedly iconoclastic, non-Anglo cinematic aesthetic continually returns to the unwelcome persistence of disconnects between libidinal fantasies and individual or psychocultural ideologies with respect to the expression and satisfaction of desire, including dark frictions that underwrite some family romances. His provocative cinematic language expresses the inconsistencies, blind spots, and paradoxes that mar Spanish and western "enlightened" discourses about rape, power, desire, gender, and the consequences of their specularizing within fetishistic spectacles that disavow and thus naturalize their own rape logic. Almodóvar's staging of rape is the unwelcome mirror image whose very distortions and dark camp tenor speak uncomfortable, even unbearable, truth to power, and in doing so, also refuse reductive discourses featuring predator/victim and self/other binaries. This forces viewers to acknowledge their own complicity in perpetuating ideologies and practices that enable rape culture and rape itself.

Volver's (2006) young heroine Paula (Yohana Cobo) accidentally murders her would-be rapist stepfather, and her mother Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), who is also her sister (shades of *Chinatown* [Roman Polanski, 1974]), hides the corpse. The body, stored temporarily in a freezer around which Raimunda will create a new, vibrant, gastronomic livelihood, is then permanently buried, displaced by a future that abandons the old narratives and old ways. Cemetery plots, film plots, and plots of land are all carefully cultivated by the women under the presiding spirit of Irene, a return of the feminine repressed who cannily enlists traditionalist Spain's village culture of folkloric superstition to perform a feminist justice that human courts of law still fall short of actualizing. Pretending to be the ghost that the villagers think she is, Irene forges a new language of existential freedom from the *machista* confines of the pueblo that Federico García Lorca and a spectrum of brilliant Spanish cineasts had written of and filmed. Under the iconic sign of windmills, Raimunda and Irene join forces to fabricate fictions that form the visionary core of this film, even if the world is not yet ready for them. Like the subjunctive intimation of wholeness experienced by the child in Lacan's mirror stage, Almodóvar's films narrate a—what-might-be, after the trauma of disempowerment and malaise that mark current fetishizing of the female body in pieces is superseded. In *Volver's* case, the subjunctive celluloid dream imagines a moment in which the fragmentation of female bodies and psychosexual landscapes, as dictated by a rape logic inherent to both older cultural spectacles and newer media specularizations, is countered by a creative female spirit. Carmen Maura's magisterial *fantasma* Irene, who promptly gets her hair done upon returning from the crypt, enlists the magic of art and illusionism like Kika, Marina, and *Hable con ella's* women dancers, to create new visions no longer beholden to predatory voyeurs and their dehumanizing specularizations of femininity. These magic lantern phantasmagoria are animated by moving images no less vivid for being wrought of ephemeral light and shadows.

Notes

- 1 For an analysis of the influence of Hitchcock on Almodóvar's films, see Dona Kercher, chapter 3, this volume.
- 2 Bates's stabbing of Crane is clearly a stand-in for the sexual penetration he can't perform.
- 3 A notion still endlessly iterated within the marriage industrial complex and its armory of bridal magazines, improving little over Freud's insight that women marry and have children so as to acquire by proxy the phallus whose absence mars them and signals their primordial wound.
- 4 Kaplan observes that "To this day, some psychoanalysts speak like King Lear, Gustave Flaubert, and four-year-old boys, as though the inevitable fright of castration has something to do with the inevitably horrifying vision of the sexual organs that lie beneath the female waist. Freud did not help to dissuade his colleagues from these impacted stereotypes of the female body when in his later paper on male castration anxiety and female penis envy he reinforced the tendency to portray the female genitals as castrated or absent organs . . . even an intelligent and otherwise realistic adult can unconsciously reexperience the fear and discomforts he felt as a little boy. Freud was no exception (1991: 46–47).

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Paternity and Pathogens

Mourning Men and the Crises of Masculinity in *Todo Sobre Mi Madre* and *Hable Con Ella*

Dean Allbritton

In *Almodóvar on Almodóvar*, Frédéric Strauss writes that “visual pleasure is only one aspect of the sensual stimulation Almodóvar’s films embody. They are films of the flesh, or immaterial feelings made flesh by the actors” (1996: x). By grounding Almodóvar’s films in the flesh, Strauss highlights the confrontation between desire and the body in the director’s work. I want to begin here, with the fleshiness of this cinema that is (at least, in part) a focus on physicality and sexuality. What are the outcomes of a film made flesh? There is certainly a reimagined body politic proposed in such films, one that surges from the particularly “transgressive” cinema that Almodóvar makes and in the negation of the existence of law. That being so, what happens when the flesh fails, as it must? It is in reaching the limits of the flesh, of sexuality, and of life that Almodóvar offers a radical envisioning of the categories themselves, imagining a place beyond the scope of life or gender that is nevertheless intimately connected to these. In very real ways, such a cinema of the flesh may actually breathe life into death and encourage the spectator to think beyond its parameters, as I hold to be the case in *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002). Through these films, Almodóvar mixes life in death, and the interactions between the two give way to reformulations of gender, time, and mortality.

There is much at stake in reimagining the metaphors of death, life, and gender, and it lies beyond the scope of this chapter to fully consider those other mortal moments—of which there are a great many—in Almodóvar’s works that tie mortality into gender and masculinity. Men and masculinity are insistently linked to illness, pathology, and death in the director’s films. This is evidenced in the long list of fathers, lovers, and brothers who are killed and incapacitated or who exceed the

bounds of normative masculinity in transgressive ways: David (Javier Bardem) in *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997), whose disability is intimately connected to his masculinity and inability to please his wife sexually; Antonio (Antonio Banderas) in *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), who murders a rival love interest so that the man he desires will love him; Ricky (Banderas) in *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), who kidnaps and forces himself on the girl he adores; the deadbeat father Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López) in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I done to Deserve This?* (1984), who is accidentally killed during a fight with wife (Carmen Maura); Nicholas (Peter Coyote) and Paul Bazzo (Santiago Lajusticia) from *Kika* (1993), who both physically abuse the women who refuse to comply with their demands, despite their seemingly disparate dispositions; the priests of *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) and Juan/Ángel, who surpasses them in the urge to obtain whatever he desires; and all the men who put their women on the verge of nervous breakdowns.

By teasing out the interplay between queer temporalities of gender and well-being, this chapter makes note of the ways that loss, illness, and gender bleed into each other in these films. In so doing, I claim that Almodóvar resists normative notions of identity and health while producing radical new forms of personhood based on illness and mortality. In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the director's use of creational and viral masculinities (what I will term "pathogenic masculinities") sets up possibilities for new ways of imagining gender. That is, in recasting the paternal archetype as a contagious nexus for sickness and death, the good health of the ideal male body is shaded with an illness that reproduces and gives birth to itself. In *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar highlights the vulnerability of the body, its susceptibility to death and loss, and the way in which masculinity both complies with and contributes to this process. In distorting masculine gender norms and linking these to mortality and vulnerability, the film advocates an understanding of the connecting lines between gender and death, and shows how these ties help to shape human experiences of the world.

If over the years Almodóvar has developed a reputation for being a "women's director," it is an admittedly simplistic tag that does a disservice to the nuances of Almodóvar's filmography as much as it marks a problematic adherence to expectations of gender norms. In a 1987 interview with Marsha Kinder, Almodóvar comments: "Fathers are not very present in my films . . . This is something I just feel. When I'm writing about relatives, I just put in mothers, but I try not to put in fathers. I avoid it. I don't know why. I guess I'm very Spanish." Alluding to Almodóvar's earlier and much cited comments that he ignored the existence of Spain's former dictator in his films,¹ Kinder remarks: "I guess you treat fathers like Franco, as if they never existed . . ." (Kinder 2006: 143). Although this exchange would almost certainly be read differently now, over twenty years and a few father-centric films later,² what is most striking about this comment is that it seems to correlate the absence of the father figure with his ineffectuality. But, if anything, the absence or disavowal of a thing hardly means that it no longer compels. Writing

in *Cultura Herida* on the drawn-out death of Francisco Franco and the politics that emerged from the deterioration of the dictator's body, Cristina Moreiras Menor stresses this point:

The body of the dictator resisted death. His long agonizing, during which Franco's body clung to life only through its connection to breathing machines and the like, is exactly what creates this silence. Not his death, not his life, but the transformation of this body (loaded with tremendous symbolic and affective meanings for the body of the nation) into a ghostly trace, a there but already gone, that continually imposes, in its ghostliness, the particular structures of fantasy that still dominate the cultural imaginary of the country (2002: 56).

Just as Moreiras Menor stresses how the transformation of Franco's body in illness exercises cultural dominance over Spain's population by leaving a ghostly imprint, I find something of this trace in Almodóvar's comment on paternity. This is not simply to re-create Franco as meta-father, although there may be something of that at work in the director's oeuvre and in the casual connection Kinder notes; rather, it is to note that the absence of masculinity and paternity does not purge their effects. The re-creation of the dead and dying dictator who is obeyed even in death references not only his power in the recent past, but contemporary Spain's silent acquiescence to his memory. Dually disavowing the dictator and masculinity may be a silent acknowledgment of that systemic violence that allows the smooth functioning of the world, the violence that is done every day against a backdrop of peace. Such a compliance has echoes in the Spanish transition to democracy and in the ghostly traces of the dictatorship that haunt it.

The lingering ghost of the dictator on life support still compels, still haunts. The proximity of death, its alternating delay and inevitability, and the smothering presence of a moribund masculinity—made even more oppressive in its illnesses and absences, a discernible shadow of lack—are found throughout Almodóvar's films. In the linkage of masculinity and death, made possible by disabling the former's normative strengths and portraying it as perpetually affiliated with death, masculinity seems to engender mortality in his films, pathogenically giving birth to death in a sort of motherly (read: creational) birth of bad blood. Seeing masculinity in this manner places it in sharp contrast to the visions of nurturing mothers in Almodóvar's films, those women who beget life through new formations of kinship structures (the reconfigured family structures of *Todo sobre mi madre*, for example) or even in negativity, as flawed mothers who sacrifice for the good of their children, as in *Tacones lejanos / High Heels* (1991) or *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* The father figure similarly restructures the family through reconfigured lines of kinship, albeit a family unit forced together under the threat of damages, violence, rape, and incest. As with death itself, it is easy to write off the representation of these actions as only detrimental, only harmful, but there is more to it than this; in reconvening family along the lines of violence, and placing masculinity and death in tandem, Almodóvar envisions new possibilities for both.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes that a father's demise is "the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life" (2010: xxvi). When Almodóvar speaks of the absence of fathers in his films, it is to discredit the impact that loss and death have. However, as suggested before, might not the recognition of the father's ghost—that is, lack, absence, elision of masculinity in his narratives—confirm instead the pervasiveness of masculine domination? Almodóvar's account of a scene in *Tacones Lejanos*, in which the protagonist Becky del Páramo (Marisa Paredes) comes home to die, places emphasis on the formational power of loss:

It's one of the rare scenes in my films which has to do with my father. He died of cancer twelve years ago. At the time, my family lived in Extremadura. When my father felt the end was near he asked my mother to take him back to the village of his birth. He was very ill. We all went back to the village, but obviously we no longer owned our family house. So my father moved into his sister's house which, in fact, happened to be his exact place of birth. His sister had the tact to give him my grandmother's bedroom and the very bed where he was born. When he arrived my father only had a dozen hours left to live, but the pain had entirely disappeared. It's amazing to see that death waited for him to return to his birthplace in order to take him away (Strauss 1996: 54).

It is not my intent to psychoanalyze Almodóvar or to find hidden instances of the dying father in all of his films. What Freud only intimates in his quote is the most important point: that death, and the emotional responses it is capable of producing, will always barrel forth from the past and bleed into the present.

An echo of the loss of the father occurs in *Todo sobre mi madre*, in which a young man laments the absence of a father he has never known, and lives marked by that absence. Despite his mother's reluctance to reveal any information at all, the teenage Esteban (Eloy Azorín) begs to know more. His mother Manuela (Cecilia Roth) promises to reveal more to him as a sort of birthday present, only to be ultimately stopped short by the son's accidental death. As with Esteban, who so keenly felt the lack of a paternal relationship, Manuela is deeply marked by this moment and the death of her son. Just as Esteban had once represented freedom from her unhappy past, his loss tethers her back to that past and to the boy's father (who, we soon find out, is indeed still alive).

Todo sobre mi madre is explicitly concerned with death and the liminal spaces where it seeps into life. The film opens with a slow pan down a drip bag, fading into life-support machines with colorful buttons in an apparent hospital setting, and up to Manuela. She studies the body laid before her, listening to the intermittent blips of the life support. She goes to make a call. Manuela's work in the hospital is soon after established—the camera focuses on a door sign that reads "Coordinación de trasplantes" (Transplant Coordinator). She explains to the woman on the other end of the line that, after the results of the EEG (which has presumably confirmed that the patient is brain dead), they have a possible donor. She gives a few vital details of the patient, and her colleague begins to look up a list of possible recipients for the man's liver.

The scene immediately cuts to Manuela at her home, the clinical shades of white in the hospital replaced by the vibrant splashes of color in her kitchen. She prepares dinner while Esteban watches television in the living room and writes in a notebook. The mechanical whirrs and ambient muffle of the hospital are replaced by the sounds emanating from the television of children laughing and playing. Esteban looks up from his writing to see a commercial for diapers, toddlers laughing and doing mock exercises to the sounds of a cherubic jingle that promises no diaper leakage. The sharp break in tone, in which decisions of life and death gives way to children dancing and singing, shows Almodóvar's intentions very early on. The omnipresence of death and illness in the hospital is set against the exuberance of life represented in children (including Manuela's own child) and the warmth of the home, and scenes of mortality and life are thus woven together tightly into a spectrum of life in death. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's contribution to the anthology *All About Almodóvar* will make a similar note of these early scenes, although with a slight shift in focus. Writing of the symbolism of life-liquids which are restricted, processed, or excreted (from the intravenous bag to the never-leaking diapers), they note that the film "begins with appealingly light reminders of the beauty of liquidity, its life-saving virtues, and the relative ease with which an undisciplined flowing can nonetheless be contained and absorbed" (2009: 254). What Bersani and Dutoit see in the flow and harnessing of life-liquids is the film's preoccupation with life and death, and the borders of life that are always clearly marked by mortality.

In a similar manner, the first few moments of the film present an amplified view of death: the physical transplant of the organ of a (dead or brain-dead) donor into a new body, one that is debilitated but stands to be renewed by this transplant, recalibrates death in such a way that it is no longer just an unambiguous ending of life. In turn, Manuela's position as transplant coordinator prefigures her role as mother not only to Esteban, but perhaps even to the orphaned organs of the hospital, her responsibility the safe care and delivery of her charges into a new home. The slide between scenes of death in the hospital and life in the home do not emphasize the difference between the two, but the ways that death and life always cross and mingle.

Shortly after these opening scenes, Esteban asks to come visit his mother at work during one of the mock transplant counseling sessions she takes part in. Set up as a training session for physicians, Manuela plays a grieving widow who is being informed of her husband's death. The physicians explain to her that through organ donation, and with her consent, her husband could "salvar la vida de algunos enfermos" (save other patients' lives). Esteban watches his mother and writes in his notebook. More than simply supporting the "good act" of organ donation, this scene actually transforms death and mourning into a communitarian process. Even in the fiction of the training session, the linkages between lives are made more evident while the division between life and death is made more porous. When Manuela's character misunderstands the concept of organ donation, responding to the physicians with "¿O sea, que le pueden hacer un transplante?"

(You mean you could give him a transplant?), they in turn stress that her husband's heart can help *another* person to live even though he will die, and that these acts (her act of signing off on the donation, his posthumous act of the donation itself) show proper concern for the lives of others. The physician remarks "Bueno, pero supongo que él era solidario con la vida de los demás" (I imagine he felt solidarity with the lives of others), which frames organ donation as a decidedly political act,³ one that ties human lives together in life and death and, importantly, suggests that failure to follow suit means that one is therefore "against life" or even "pro-death." Marking death and life in these ways clearly oversteps bounded concepts of living and dying so that what occurs in *Todo sobre mi madre* is never just a simple renewal of life, or a pure life carried out.⁴

The interjection of life in death is made most pointed when Manuela's son Esteban is run over and killed. In an echo of the opening scenes of the liver transplant and the mock counseling session, Manuela is forced to deal with the loss of her son and approve the donation of his heart. When the two physicians arrive to inform her of her son's death, the same two who led the mock counseling session alongside Manuela, they inadvertently recreate the training scene. Rather than play the stunned widow who meekly signs off on her husband's donation, Manuela begins to sob at the physician's first words. Weeks later, still in shock, she locates the records of the transplant, goes "tras el corazón de mi hijo" (after my son's heart), as she will later tell her supervisor, and arrives in A Coruña to witness the recipient emerge from the hospital. The man exclaims "Se respira como de antes!" (I feel like I can breathe like before!) and his wife happily replies, "¡Vamos, con uno de dieciocho!" (Yes, with an eighteen-year-old's heart!). The camera stays fixed on the man's chest as he walks toward the audience until finally it closes in on the space where the heart lies. The screen goes dark.

Holding life and death as fixed binaries means that Esteban's death will only ever be read as *death*; in turn, the continuation of life where life already is, or the curing of the specters of death (the old, bad heart) by the renewal of life (the heart of an eighteen-year-old), is supposed to circumvent death by promoting life. But fixing life and death in this manner refuses to take into account the vulnerability of the human body and how a capacity to be harmed can mark our social interactions with others and constitute, in part, a sense of self. The middle-aged man who emerges from the hospital with Esteban's heart does so at the expense of the death of the teenager, a death that he admittedly did not cause or bring about but one that now thoroughly marks his living. This man now lives and breathes because of the boy's death. Where could the line be drawn between death and life in this moment? Does Esteban live, in a fashion, if his heart still beats? If we consider the symbolic importance of the heart as affective center of the body or seat of the soul, the line is further blurred by this sequence, with the implication that some critical essence of Manuela's dead son is now incorporated into another's life. The point is clearly made: death is at work in life. Maybe we breathe easier at the death of another, or maybe we reconsider our places in the world after a death

scare, or maybe the death of another shakes the very core of self-perception, but loss and mortality reveal the vulnerability of our social selves.

In staging human encounters with death in this fashion, Almodóvar frames death in much the same way as Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, which gives an account of a politics based on loss, mourning, and the social constitution of our bodies. Butler writes that we are "subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization. This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (Butler 2006: 20).⁵ It follows that our proximity to loss and death as social beings must be read as humanizing and constitutive of a sense of one's self. That is, rather than reading loss and death as privatizing or as finalities from which there is no return, Butler rethinks the potential of mourning to reveal our affective bonds to others and to expose how constitutive sociality is to the formulation of the self. Therefore, grief "displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (Butler 2004: 19).

When Esteban claims his life to be "missing its other half," it is not only to say that his father defines his very core, but that he is also defined by the *loss* of the father—that poignant, powerful loss that dwells at the heart of every man, according to Freud. Butler (or perhaps even Almodóvar, after a fashion) might challenge Freud by saying that loss always already dwells at the heart of everyone, by nature of our socially constituted selves. In focusing on mortality, mourning, and the interpenetrability of the human body by another, then, *Todo sobre mi madre* stamps vulnerability as a state of being that is at once physical, social, and political. Underscoring a politics of vulnerability allows us to see the man's emergence from the hospital as an emphasis on the ways that death inflects even the most joyful celebration of life. Similarly, when Manuela runs after her son's heart and finds it still beating, still alive in the body of the other, it is to emphasize humanity's interconnectedness on the basis of death and loss. As physical bodies that inhabit shared social spaces, our skin and flesh "expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence" (Butler 2004: 21), which is part of Manuela's pain in that moment: the healing powers of the transplant means that there must be a violence committed somewhere else, the invasive touch to her son's heart.

In her professional position as advocate of this interconnectedness and "solidarity" with the well-being and mortality of the other, Manuela is faced with a very real and personalized loss in the wake of her son's death. This grief leads her on two journeys: the first in search of her son's heart; the second, in search of her son's father, abandoned years ago in Barcelona. Thus she abdicates the role of spokesperson for human interconnectivity and begins to *enact* it, through her grief. It is the

opposite of what is expected of grief, a resistance to its paralysis. When her hospital supervisor shows up at her home only to learn that Manuela has recently returned from A Coruña and is now headed to Barcelona, the woman worriedly notes: “Manuela, no estás para viajar sola. ¡Estás enferma! Tienes que descansar y recuperarte” (Manuela, you’re in no shape to travel alone. You’re ill! You have to rest up and get better). The solution is posited: resist the “ill” effects of grief, rest, recuperate, move forward. But Manuela, mirroring Butler’s line of questioning in *Undoing Gender*, refuses to let go of the grief. Butler’s probing line is clear, rhetorically asking if there is something to be gained from “tarrying with grief, remaining exposed to its apparent tolerability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence?” (2004: 23). The answer is apparent even as the question is posed. Rather than the passivity and powerlessness of grief, Butler asks, might we be “returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?” (2004: 23). To tarry in this manner foils time lines, resists the move forward that is thought to mean the move towards something better, and instead pauses and turns to face the past. It is much the same for Manuela, when the loss of her son aids the reconnection to her husband and old friends, while also allowing her to establish new friendships and forms of kinship.

To “tarry in grief,” more than being solely an affective response to a situation of loss, may also serve to reveal the physical bonds and the vulnerability that we are exposed to as social beings. Through grief and mortality we experience vulnerability, the laying bare of one’s death in the mortal reflection of the other, and the encounter with our own physical fragility in our interactions with the world. The body therefore has a public dimension and social dimension that must not be resisted. Butler will cite the physical exposure of the subway as a dimension of sociality, the “others I do not choose to have in proximity to myself” (2004: 21). Social experiences might largely be defined as vulnerability to others, and “staying with” the effects of grief can amplify (or simply reveal) this. Instead of following her supervisor’s exhortation to rest and recuperate so that she may be healed of her grief, Manuela embraces vulnerability and consequently finds herself thrust back into the social—exposed to physical violence and sadness, but also to love and the healing of wounds both new and old.

That death is overwhelmingly figured as masculine and paternal in many of Almodóvar’s films is no accident, then, particularly when seen alongside Manuela’s maternal characterization in *Todo sobre mi madre*. While the film uses the metaphor of organ donation and Butler uses the analogy of war, both posit that our “very survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control” (2004: 13), which in turn highlights a precariousness of life that is rendered most dramatically within gender and sex. Surely, opening the self up to vulnerability can be a radical disruption to normative masculinity, which for so long has been held as that which is the most stable, the most unchanging, the most impermeable. Making masculinity vulnerable and lingering within that vulnerability allows any set of assumptions about manhood and men to be challenged and allows for new possibilities of what masculinity might come to mean.

In this manner, perhaps a simplistic reading of *Todo sobre mi madre* would locate Manuela on one side as the good mother, rendering her capacities as bearer of children and nurse who promotes life's extension as equivalent forces—while also viewing her pre-op transsexual husband Lola, a prostitute dying with AIDS, as the oppositional bad father, the omnipresent promise of death. But the lines aren't so clearly delineated. If Manuela is both biological mother and affective father to Esteban, Lola is matched as Esteban's biological father and, post surgery, a mother. In blurring the distinctive markers of life and death and subsequently pinning these to a gender system that only intermittently obeys normative rules via a masculinity that is made vulnerable and mortal, *Todo sobre mi madre* continually breaks down and complicates concepts of mortality, gender, and well-being. It would thus stand to reason that if Manuela is characterized as the film's good mother-to-all, it is only by way of her contact with and reconstitution of the parameters of mortality. This capacity for reworking life in death is measured not simply in a feminine proximity to childbirth and reproduction, but in masculine mortality. That is, it is not simply through Manuela's efforts as a woman or the curative powers of her femininity that the differences between death and life are rendered unclear, but also through the debilitating (when not wholly deadly) effects of certain types of masculinities. Or, to simplify further, it is not just that all of the women of the film are good and healthy and all of the men bad and sick, but that these boundaries are constantly being crossed. What is further intriguing about this film is the generative aspects of its sick masculinities, destabilized as they are from healthy ideals of manhood and paternity. In this regards, Almodóvar's reworking of masculinity in *Todo sobre mi madre* reads fatherhood as a sort of viral pathogen, the spreading of a sometimes social, sometimes physical sickness that destroys and creates with equal measure.

For this reason, and in many ways justifiably so, Lola⁶ receives the brunt of the film's ill will. When the grief-stricken Manuela returns to Barcelona to inform Lola of the death of their son, she meets Rosa (Penélope Cruz), a young nun who has a similarly complex relationship with Lola. Rosa's relationship with Lola is slowly revealed to be much more physical than initially suggested, and the audience soon learns that she is now carrying two of Lola's legacies: her unborn son, and HIV. When she learns of Rosa's interactions with Lola, Manuela coolly notes that "Lola tiene lo peor de un hombre y lo peor de una mujer" (Lola's got the worst of a man and the worst of a woman). By way of a third-person story that is obviously about herself, Manuela explains that after marrying Lola at a very young age, she was left behind in their native Argentina while her husband went to secure a job and save some money. After two years, she came to Barcelona to find that her husband had "changed." As she explains to Rosa, "El cambio era más bien físico. Se había puesto un par de tetas más grande que las de ella. Mi amiga era muy joven. Estaba en un país extranjero. No tenía nadie. Exceptuando el par de tetas nuevas, el marido no había cambiado tanto así que terminó aceptándole" (The change was more physical. He'd gotten a pair of tits that were bigger than hers. My friend was very

young. She was in a foreign land. She had no one. Apart from the tits, the husband hadn't changed that much, so she ended up accepting him). When Lola's controlling behavior and misogyny become too much, a pregnant Manuela abandons her husband in Barcelona for Madrid.⁷ With the memory of Lola's betrayal still sharp, she humorously remarks: "¿Cómo se puede ser machista con semejante par de tetas?" (How could someone act so macho with a pair of tits like that?).

When Lola finally reveals herself at the end of the film, Manuela angrily tells her: "No eres un ser humano, Lola. ¡Eres una epidemia!" (You aren't a human being, Lola. You are an epidemic!). Lola, who has ghosted through the entire movie by rumors of her whereabouts and stories of her misdeeds, appears in the only place that makes sense—a cemetery. It is the only place she could appear, as the embodiment of a masculinity on life support, a proximity to death that is correlated in the narrative to her bad and dangerously viral masculinity. Using a cane to support herself, she sees Manuela and smiles: "Cuánto me alegra verte. Lástima que sea aquí" (I'm happy to see you. What a pity it has to be here). Manuela is implacable: "No podía ser en otro sitio" (It couldn't be anywhere else). If the location of this encounter further ties Lola to death and its processes, a bad specter haunting the cemetery, it does so by referencing her masculinity—even while physically demonstrating a sex that goes beyond masculinity's normative boundaries.

Framing Lola as epidemic casts her as infecting pathogen, one that slips into the emotional and physical well-being of the film's characters. Here it is useful to consider the Greek roots of *pathogen*, which can be translated as "I give birth to suffering" (*pathos* + *gen*). Indeed, when she holds Rosa's infant son and says: "Hijo mío, siento dejarte una herencia tan mala" (My son, I'm sorry to leave you such an awful inheritance), that legacy is meant to be both emotional and physical.

That is, not only the real possibility of the child developing HIV *in utero* (which he does), but also the death of his mother from the same disease; and "disease," at this point in the film, may well be read as Lola herself. Her pathogenic masculinity, presented to the audience through a body made vulnerable from illness and unintelligible to a normative sexual system, impregnates Rosa's well-being. This is not to suggest that a pathogenic masculinity must be only ever read as "bad," or that its effects may only be thought of as negative, but that it may have creational capacities. If suffering is birthed, it does so at the expense of one and the gain of another. The Galician man who leaves the hospital breathing new life does so with the implant of Esteban's heart, a beating symbol of death and loss. The incubation of life in the man's chest and the child that Rosa carries are born out of suffering, death, and illness—twin pregnancies that emerge out of proximity to mortality and through loss. The results of suffering, what is birthed in this moment is something like a life (a dead man's heart allows one to live, a terminally ill baby is conceived) that must always be rooted in its own mortality.

In the film's final scenes, we are told that the baby has in fact developed HIV, but that he has subsequently "negativizado el virus en un tiempo record"



Figure 10.1 Manuela, Lola, and the third Esteban: the ambiguous legacy of pathogenic paternity in *Todo sobre mi madre* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Teresa Isasi.

(neutralized the virus in record time). Manuela thus returns to Barcelona, some two years later, so doctors can study the child's medical records. In a tearful reunion with friends she explains that the virus has disappeared "de la noche a la mañana" (practically overnight) in the child, and that his case "demuestra que el virus puede desaparecer" (proves that the virus can disappear). Manuela is beaming: "Todavía no se sabe cómo—lo están investigando. Pero es un milagro" (They're still trying to figure out why, but it's a miracle). In a film filled with the shades of death always at work in life, what place does this utopic neutralization have here? Is it that Esteban is born from death, the sickness of his biological parents bringing about a curative fantasy of life? It does seem, after a fashion, to be a fairly orthodox ending for a film that challenges the bounded nature of life and death; settling firmly settling on the side of more life, eradicating the specters of mortality. Or perhaps it can be read differently. In short-circuiting a normative idea of masculinity within the film's male characters, *Todo sobre mi madre* highlights the feminine while at the same time stressing its intimate connection with masculinity, and vice versa. In doing so, in building a world that is bolstered by death just as it is by life, one that finds femininity and masculinity similarly in flux, this child "miraculously" escapes from the bad legacies of the past even while he must live within and because of them.

To read the ending of *Todo sobre mi madre* in this manner means that we must go beyond the prevailing ideas of what *death* entails; or to be more accurate, what these prevailing ideas entail at this moment in time. As John Sutton Baglow makes clear in “The Rights of the Corpse,” “When it comes to life and death, we are not really dealing with boundaries at all, but with a shifting liminal space whose outlines depend upon culture, time, and circumstance” (2007: 231). Indeed, reactions to death and the dead body have varied throughout history and in different societies. There is no modern *Ars moriendi*, for example, no commonly held tradition of artful dying complete with rules of conduct for giving up one’s soul in Christ-like death. In this manner, death does not mean one precise thing across time and space, but rather holds an ever-shifting trace that is found in the films of Almodóvar.

Films like *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella* seek to dwell in that liminal space that exists between death and life, a porous field full of ghosts and corpses. Writing of this space, Baglow claims that,

between life and death there lies not a boundary but a space, differing, certainly, from culture to culture and from historical period to historical period, populated by ghosts and near-ghosts, the prematurely buried with no discernible pulse or breath, “neo-morts,” that is, breathing corpses with beating hearts, cryonic “corpsicles” awaiting revivication, restless, “unusually spirited” corpses who do not go gentle into the good night, and others who do so relatively tamely (2007: 225).

Whether figured as the bordering kingdoms of the sick and the well, evoked by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1990: 3), or existing in a boundless liminality, the contemporary distinctions between illness and health, death and life or corpse and living body have been rendered unstable in popular thought. This may be from the advancement of medical procedures that allow the body’s functions to be extended even when the mind has ceased activity, which in turn creates a medial category that is in reality neither qualified life nor actual death (the so-called “neo-mort”). Even in Esteban’s “death” his body has not died, which is what allows for the transplantation of his heart to another. This not-dead body that holds the image of Esteban is no longer him, sending Manuela out for Galicia to find the trace of her son, that which for her is still alive. This is to say, as Baglow writes, that “the boundaries between individuals, between the living and the dead, and between the living embodied person and the corpse, are loose and flowing, porous, and are comprised in fact of leaky spaces, not clear lines of demarcation” (2007: 236).⁸

Todo sobre mi madre marks the viral effects of pathogenic masculinities on the body—which is both the physical body, localized and represented through individual organ donation, and the larger social body, the connections forged between individuals on the basis of their vulnerability. In so doing, it exemplifies the slippage between representations of the vivified corpse (the “neo-morts” like Esteban), the body pathogenic, alive but symbolically propped up on the proximity of its death, and the healthy body, affected not by physical illness or death but by its

affective ties to those bodies that are. Something similar occurs in *Hable con ella*, where the vulnerability of the inert body also underscores the crumbling lines between life and death and masculinity and femininity. Unlike *Todo sobre mi madre*, however, *Hable con ella* makes masculinity porous in other ways—in proximity to the inert feminine body, in an emphasis on its seeping fluids, in the varied changes wrought by death. If the masculine body (an undoubtedly vexed term)⁹ is affecting pathogen in *Todo sobre mi madre*, it is affected/infected host in *Hable con ella*.

From its opening sequence, *Hable con ella* emphasizes the creational potential of mortality and illness, as well as the ways that our bodily vulnerability corresponds to personal interconnectedness. A theater curtain rises on a Pina Bausch production, *Café Müller*. The stage is filled with chairs. Two women dance with their eyes closed; sometimes moving quickly across the stage, sometimes falling, sometimes bumping into walls. A man scatters the chairs in front of them so they do not fall. The camera cuts to two men, Benigno (Javier Cámara) and Marco (Darío Grandinetti), seated next to each other and enthralled by the production. When Marco begins to weep, Benigno steals glances at him. Benigno, a nurse, will later recount the production of *Café Müller* while caring for his comatose charge, Alicia (Leonor Watling). Telling her that he has brought her a gift, he presents her with a signed photograph of Pina Bausch. The female dancers were “como dos sonámbulas” (like two sleepwalkers), he tells Alicia, and the man scattering chairs did so “con la cara tristísima. La cara más triste que he visto en mi vida” (with such a sad face. The saddest I’ve ever seen).

Reading this moment out of its linearity, his care for Alicia’s prone body, the unnamed man’s care for the two “sleepwalking” women of *Café Müller*, and Marco’s attending to his girlfriend Lydia (Rosario Flores), who will be gored by a bull during the film, are thus presented as commensurate acts. In all three scenarios the female body is debilitated or disabled and subsequently placed under the care of a man. This is not to be read as a misogynous act on the part of Almodóvar; if anything, the physical disabling of the women directly corresponds to the dependency their caretakers feel towards them. The man who runs after the women, flinging chairs to keep them from falling or harming themselves, is tethered to their vulnerability at the expense of his own well-being or happiness. Marco and Benigno (much more so the latter) are similarly tied to the demands of the deposed flesh, sublimating themselves to comatose lovers. The vulnerability of the comatose body underscores a larger vulnerability, that of the social body within the formation of interpersonal ties. In their one-sided interactions with Alicia and Lydia, who breathe but do not wake, who live but are not alive, Almodóvar emphasizes masculinity’s interaction with the liminal space that divides life from death. Masculinity brushes up against grief and death, altering and altered in that meeting.

In “Reinventing the Motherland,” Marsha Kinder groups *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella* with Almodóvar’s 1995 film *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* in a “brain-dead” trilogy, arguing that such a trope “enables names, plots, words, viruses

and other vital organs to pass fluidly from one body or text or nation to another, a process introduced through the recurring figure of the brain-dead youth" (2004–5: 14). Kinder reads loss and grief against the grain, as I have, underscoring the repeated images of comatose and brain-dead bodies as catalysts for a "trans-subjective intertextuality" (2004–5: 14) that "can potentially turn vengeful patriarchal nations into nurturing motherlands" (2004–5: 22). Her analysis of the intertextuality of the three films emphasizes how Almodóvar dismantles the border space between life and death, which by her account results in the creation of a supra-feminine, destabilized subject. In emphasizing the creational aspects of the (biological or sociocultural) transplant, however, and linking them to a clearly marked maternity, I would suggest that we lose the potential of a masculinity vivified in death. It is not that Lola or Benigno or Marco are simply incorporated into an ever-expansive femininity, but that the bounded concepts of femininity and masculinity themselves melt into something entirely different.

The end result is a queer amalgamation of gender that seems to ebb and flow freely amongst the characters of these films. *Hable con ella* first hints at such a recalibrated masculinity through the character of Benigno, who continually evades an easily categorized sexuality. His sidelong glance at Marco in the audience of *Café Müller* is veiled, and may potentially hint at an erotic subtext that is further bolstered when he describes Marco as "guapo" (handsome) to Alicia. In the moment that he says this, he is very carefully attending to her hands and nails. Despite his clearly coded effeminacy and these vaguely sexual remarks, it soon becomes clear that he is deeply devoted to Alicia. But even the nature of this attachment is probed: as the storyline progresses, the audience learns that he lived with his mother for fifteen years before she died, caring for her as he will care for Alicia. Upon his mother's death, he is free to actively pursue Alicia, whom he has watched from his window across from the dance studio where she rehearses. In doing so he finds out where she lives, and visits her psychiatrist father in an attempt to get closer to her. "Yo solo quería volver a ver a Alicia" (I just wanted to see Alicia again), he admits in voiceover, "pero ya que estaba allí y el padre era psiquiatra, aproveché para contarle que echaba de menos a mi madre" (but I was there and her father was a psychiatrist, so I decided to tell him I missed my mother). The father comes to the same conclusion the audience may have, prodding Benigno to reveal his "problem" and reading Benigno's uncommon affection for his mother as a stamp of a "special" masculinity. Rummaging through her things after his meeting with Dr. Roncero, Benigno startles a towel-clad Alicia emerging from the shower and flees the house. Soon afterward, she is hit by a car and left in a coma.

The father eventually confronts Benigno in the hospital, pointedly asking him about his sexual orientation. While massaging Alicia's inner thigh, Benigno confesses to Dr. Roncero that "me oriento más hacia los hombres" (I am oriented more towards men). He is quick to insist that he is fine now, though, and that he is no longer alone. Thus, even in admitting a theoretical attraction towards men, he implicitly cites Alicia as his new partner and throws doubt on the entire exchange. Indeed, in recounting the conversation to a co-worker he explains that he lied, and

notes Dr. Roncero's employment of the word "orientation": "Ha utilizado la forma americana, que es más fina" (He used the American expression, it's more subtle). This scene provides a resistance to a specific mode of sexual categorization, one that describes desire and love in terms of orientation towards a fixed gender. Benigno dismisses "orientation" as foreign, and in admitting the lie ("I like men") he nevertheless does not explicitly embrace heterosexuality, even in his relationship with Alicia. That is, the correlative truth to the lie may not be "I like women" but "I talk to Alicia and I am no longer alone." If the division itself is foreign to him, it would stand that his love for Alicia is not based on a generic system of normative sexuality but on a queered desire towards a specific love-object.

Kevin Ohi's interpretation of *Hable con ella* takes the suggestion of Benigno's queerness even further. Ohi tackles the thorny issue of Alicia's impregnation by suggesting that what is most often framed as rape may be a sort of immaculate conception of words. "In lieu of a rape, the film shows Benigno's retelling (to Alicia) of a film, his rendering, in narrative, of his experience of visual absorption. The narration seems in turn to bring into being Alicia's pregnancy" (2010: 525). This analysis is particularly suggestive, for rather than reading orientation and sexuality in terms of the psychiatrist who is quick to seize upon Benigno's relationship with his mother as a telling mark of repressed (homo)sexuality, it opens up the possibility for grids of desire to flow between the characters. That is, Benigno's love for Alicia is manifested in words, in storytelling, in speech, rather than as an easily categorizable sexuality; and in this, we hear the echo of Almodóvar's aphorism in the DVD's commentary track: "Whoever speaks, loves." In this way, conception is less about the domination and penetration of one by another and more about speech, about mutual absorption or barring this possibility, the giving up one's self through the basis of shared vulnerability, the melding of one into the other. Benigno finishes recounting the plot of the silent film, which ends with the shrinking man entering into his beloved's vagina in an act of complete and final absorption. There is a quick cut to a close-up of the lava lamp besides Alicia's bed. The camera is zoomed in tight as the audience watches the globules stretch towards each other, absorb one another, separate, form new connections, suggesting not only the biological process of conception but the final act of the lover, his becoming one with his sleeping beauty.

To speak of absorption in these terms is another instance of pathogenesis, a creative act that is produced in death, illness, and loss. In an earlier scene, Alicia's dance teacher Katerina (Geraldine Chaplin) visits the hospital. She describes a dance that she is choreographing, set in World War I and called *Trenches*. She needs a lot of male dancers, she explains, because the piece is mainly about soldiers. But "también hay bailarinas, porque mira, en el balet, cuando muere un soldado, emerge de su cuerpo su alma, su fantasma, y eso es una bailarina. Tutú largo . . . pero con mancha de sangre, rojo" (there are also ballerinas, because in the ballet, when a soldier dies, from his body emerges his soul, his ghost, and that's a ballerina. Long tutu . . . but with blood stain, red). In her vision of *Trenches*, "de la



Figure 10.2 Nothing is simple: Alicia's ballet teacher Katerina talks to Benigno and Alicia in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Miguel Bracho.

muerte emerge la vida, de lo masculino emerge lo femenino, de lo terreno emerge . . . lo etéreo" (from death emerges life, from the masculine emerges the feminine, and from the earth emerges . . . the ethereal). *Trenches* emphasizes this absorption of one into the other, but (as Katerina herself notes) it is never so one-sided, that the feminine that emerges does so stained with the blood of the soldier, and that life is made possible through death. The dynamic relational flows that characterize the bonds between Benigno, Alicia, Marco, and Lydia are born out of illness and mortality. Benigno's connection to Alicia is formed out of her convalescence and his pathologized masculinity—read as deviant, subnormal, pathetic. In a similar way, Marco and Benigno kindle a deep friendship with openly homoerotic notes out of their care for their comatose female lovers.

This is addressed most explicitly in the pair's meetings following Benigno's imprisonment for having raped Alicia. Seated across from one other and divided by a glass, they are doubled up on each other, the mirror image of one superimposed on the other by the angle of the camera lens. Benigno says that their time apart has not felt so distant because he has been thinking about Marco at night while reading the latter's travel guides. "Ha sido como viajar durante meses contigo a mi lado" (It was like traveling for months with you at my side), he says to his friend. Later, in their final meeting, Marco reaches out to touch the glass separating them. Benigno smiles and says, "Me gustaría poder darte un abrazo, Marco.

Pero para darte un abrazo, tendría que pedir un vis-à-vis. Y lo he tanteado, ¿sabes? Me han preguntado si eras mi novio. No atreví a decir que sí, por si a ti te molestaba” (I’d like to be able to hug you. But I’d have to ask for a vis-à-vis. I checked it out, you know? They asked if you were my boyfriend. I didn’t dare to say yes, in case it bothered you). Marco openly cries at this. He responds: “No me molesta en absoluto. Puedes decir lo que quieres” (It doesn’t bother me at all. You can say what you want). Benigno quietly states, by way of ending the conversation, “He abrazado a muy pocas personas en mi vida” (I’ve hugged very few people in my life). In the intimacy of this moment, the pair dismisses and dismantles the word “boyfriend” (*pareja*) together, as Benigno has done earlier with “orientation.” It is tossed aside, a word that imperfectly expresses devotion and desire for the presence of the other. What place does that word have in this moment, between these two men? The following scene cuts to Marco sleeping in Benigno’s bed, as he is now renting the other man’s apartment. Atop the sheets is the monogrammed handkerchief that Benigno embroidered for Alicia, and on the bedside table a photo of Lydia and a copy of Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*.¹⁰ The elaborate *mise en scène* connects the film’s cast intimately: Marco sharing Benigno’s bed, the unoccupied side marked by the absence of the other man yet flush with his symbolic remainder, the delicate white cloth of Alicia’s handkerchief lying on the bed, and Lydia’s silent gaze in the photo all speak to the unbounded couplings produced in absence, loss, and the disabling of the body.

The pathogenic masculinity that marks *Todo sobre mi madre* is taken further in *Hable con ella*, to the liminal space where communication with the brain-dead is not a fantasy but a necessity, where the trappings of everyday language become meaningless, and where gender and sexuality move fluidly. Seen as a larger comment on mortality and loss, these films deal with death squarely, in all its rawness and with all the ugly outcomes that it can produce. In doing so, in tarrying with loss and mourning, the characters of these films find themselves transformed and shaped. Redefining masculinity through the lens of death means that Almodóvar can recast gender and sexuality with a fluidity that they lack, in fantasy worlds that still have no correlative. In the creational birth and liberation from illness of the third Esteban at the end of *Todo sobre mi madre*, Almodóvar underscores the wonders that can be wrought even in death; it is paralleled with the loss of a child in *Hable con ella*, the miscarriage of the son that revives Alicia. There is something productive about reimagining death this way, something that scatters the shadows of loss and allows us to dwell in the dark.

Notes

- 1 A well-worn quote at this point, and oft-repeated by the director himself. In an interview with Strauss, he says: “My films were never anti-Franco. I simply didn’t even recognize his existence. In a way, it’s my revenge against Francoism. I want there to be no shadow or memory of him” (1996: 19).

- 2 Of these, perhaps *La mala educación* is the film most blatantly centered around the figure of the father. I would also place *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and, after a fashion, *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009) in this category.
- 3 In "The Rights of the Corpse," John Baglow notes that this is one of the more common approaches to positively describing the transplantation of organs; other discourses see it as a type of immortality and "a better fate than worms" (2007: 228). See Juan Carlos Ibañez's discussion in this volume (chapter 7) of Spain's government-run organ transplant organization as a model of efficacious political and moral action.
- 4 This scene has a very clear referent in an earlier film by Almodóvar, *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995). Not only does this film contain another donation training scene, but the woman playing the grieving relative is also named Manuela. See Marsha Kinder's analysis of these scenes in "Reinventing the Motherland: Almodóvar's Brain-Dead Trilogy" (2004–5).
- 5 *Precarious Life* also expressly defines the named "we" as communities of women and sexual minorities.
- 6 A form of Lola's complex resistance of gender makes itself most apparent through language, and most specifically, in the choice of a pronoun. I have chosen to explicitly reference her masculinity (as the film most often does) while maintaining the usage of the feminine pronoun for her. In that way, I recognize the transgressive and pathogenic nature of her masculinity while also acknowledging her somewhat conventional physical presentation of femininity.
- 7 One of the ways that the film further highlights the creational possibilities of loss is in its intertextual references to Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The story of Manuela and her husband Lola is to explicitly read as a reformulation of Stella and Stanley Kowalski, paralleled in violent misogyny and emotional abuse. Unlike any previous telling of the story, however, Manuela/Stella runs away from her husband in order to seek a new, better life; in that flight to Madrid and away from Lola, the loss of her husband and the giving up of a past, Manuela becomes defined by this past.
- 8 In "Missing a Beat: Syncopated Rhythms and Subterranean Subjects in the Spectral Economy of *Volter*", Stephen Marsh (2009) also makes a case for the ghostly presences at work in Almodóvar's films.
- 9 This may be a distinction that only works if one holds tight to the categories of masculinity/femininity or death/life and overlooks the deft reworking of mortality and gender that Almodóvar proffers. If masculinity and femininity are indeed made porous, if death and life go beyond issues of finite temporalities and physical mortality, then to make a claim for a distinct masculinity may seem somewhat crude. It is, nevertheless, a necessary crudeness, given that we have yet to find a system that has escaped such categorization. If I hold that Almodóvar slips his characters out of the constraints of normative gender roles by way of death, which I do, it may be an escape route that, for now, lies only in metaphor.
- 10 A placement that I do not to believe casual, given that Cunningham's story shares many narrative similarities. The most salient is that of the three primary characters, who are separated by time and space and yet interact, share experiences, and affect each other, after a fashion. That is, and as example: the book follows Virginia Woolf as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923, a woman who reads the novel in 1949 as she plans her husband's birthday party, and a third woman who relives a version of the story in

1998 while planning a party for a good friend and ex-lover who is dying of AIDS. The placement of this novel also suggests the emphasis on time in this and other films of Almodóvar—the nebulous time of the coma, the lost time between Benigno and Marco, and the time of and leading to death.

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Domesticating Violence in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar

Noelia Saenz

Almodóvar's films emerged in the 1980s as the product of a specific cultural movement—the *Movida*—and a specific cultural moment—a newly democratic post-Franco Spain. His early works combined explicit sexuality, drug use, and debauchery in reaction to the restrictions of Franco's dictatorship. Morality, as dictated by the Catholic Church, had no place in Almodóvar cinematic worlds of desire, passion, and excess. Examining the Almodóvar oeuvre in the context of the historical period of its production highlights an array of contradictions regarding the issue of violence. Initially his films show a propensity toward representations of gendered violence, including sexual abuse, pedophilia, domestic abuse, and rape. Yet, the portrayal of these violent acts in his later works demonstrates a shift away from visualizing violence and a determination to consider the psychological and emotional impact of gendered violence. Starting in the mid-1990s, his films treat such cases of rape, sexual abuse, and pedophilia as acts that have severe psychological and mental ramifications for their victims. The serious treatment of domestic violence in his latter works coincides with a societal shift toward the criminalization of gendered violence in Spain and its politicization as a human rights violation across the globe in the mid- to late 1990s.

From the start of his commercial career, Almodóvar has dealt with the themes of domestic violence and sexual abuse. The source of the difference between his early cinema and later works lies in the changes in patterns of representation of violence in his most recent films, as they mark a refusal to participate in the eroticization of visual violence. Similarly, these films demonstrate a decisive shift in portraying gender violence as a problem affecting Spanish society, treating the theme with reference to intergenerational differences and allusions to his earlier films as well as Hollywood cinema. Marsha Kinder examines this intertextual referencing as a form of retroseriality, in which the filmmaker “leads us to choose two earlier works from his canon to illuminate what a later film is doing and to redefine



Figure 11.1 The power of actresses and words: mother and daughter deal with the emotional consequences of violence in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

them as a trilogy through this act of retroserial rereading” (2009: 269). According to Kinder, the term “retroseriality” describes “both an aspect of Almodóvar’s films and a method of reading them” (2009: 269). The value of the strategy of retroseriality is that it affords us a way of viewing his serious consideration of gender violence in the mid-1990s not as a strict rupture with his previous works, but as the explicit manifestation of thematic concerns already central to his earlier films. In doing so, one begins to understand Almodóvar’s films not as a celebration or exploitation of gender violence, but as a body of work that critically engages with gender violence in all of its manifestations.

Upon the release of *Volver* in 2006, Jonathan Holland of *Variety* proclaimed that the film “signal[ed] a new, low-frills departure for a helmer whose recent work has been as much about style as substance.” The film’s “low-frills” quality stems from its more restrained sense of humor given its subject matter, but is also due to the absence of on-screen violence, which other critics noticed as well. In an interview for *Time Out London*, Ben Walters (2006) points out how in *Volver*, “the two major crises that propel the plot—one in the past, one in the present—are not seen but reported in extended accounts that bind us, the audience, to the emotional consequences of violence, rather than offering it up as spectacle.” This comment prompted Almodóvar to respond, “I have far more trust in the power of actresses and the power of words than in an act of violence” (Walters 2006).

However noticeable the absence of visual violence in *Volver*, it is a filmic strategy traceable through a number of his films. This essay will explore in detail the dynamics of this significant shift in the portrayal of gendered violence on-screen. In four of his films released in the 2000s, *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002), *La mala educación* / *Bad Education* (2004), *Volver* (2006), and *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* (2009), one sees a noticeable shift to a more serious consideration of the psychological and legal ramifications of gendered violence for both victims and perpetrators. Through the retroserial re-reading of his earlier films, however, one can also re-evaluate his oeuvre as being more conscientious of the complexities and gravity of gender violence as a social and psychological issue than previously considered.

For instance, in his canonical work on the early films of Pedro Almodóvar, Paul Julian Smith notes that Almodóvar “has been frequently accused of misogyny [and] of humiliating and fetishizing . . . women” (2000: 2–3). Smith ultimately defends the director, however, against these criticisms, citing the need for foreign critics to avoid imposing British and North American models of resistance, which ignore the Spanish context in understanding issues of gender and sexuality, specifically the Spanish libertarian belief in “the absolute freedom of the artist as an inevitable consequence of democracy” (Smith 2000: 5). Nevertheless, arguing for an analysis based on cultural specificity risks dismissing Almodóvar’s problematic representations of gendered violence as nothing more than an Anglophone preoccupation with gender and sexual politics that does not resonate within the Spanish national context. Similarly, Peter Evans, in his essay, “Acts of Violence in Almodóvar,” contends, “Almodóvar’s treatment of violence is not confined to a reflection of social patterns of abuse involving real-life violators and victims” (2009: 116). Evans argues that Almodóvar uses violence in these films as a means to explore the subversion of gender roles, desire, and “the changing roles of domination and submission” that characterize the spectrum of sexual pleasure (2009: 116). Along the same lines, O’Connor analyzes the violence in Almodóvar’s films as “the comic manifestation of desire and love” (2008: 222), ignoring the fact that gender violence in his films is not always humorous or easily dismissed. While most scholars tend to split along two contrasting lines of argument surrounding the issue of violent representation in these films, as either negative and misogynist or as a tool for understanding desire and sexual pleasure, this essay revisits Smith’s call to understand and situate Almodóvar’s films within the Spanish cultural context. Re-reading his cinema in the light of the mobilization of anti-gender violence activism within Spain since the late 1990s, which is concerned with eradicating the larger social patterns of domestic and sexual abuse, it calls for a re-grounding of representations of gendered violence in Almodóvar’s canon.

Although some scholars, such as Cristiana Moreiras Menor (2000) have seen a renewed fascination with violence in Spanish cultural production during the 1990s,¹ this period also spawned the development of movements against gendered violence. Several activists and scholars situate the contemporary mobilization of anti-gender violence activism as beginning in 1997 with the public outcry

over the death of Ana Orantes, a married woman who appeared on television to discuss her abusive husband.² Thirteen days later, her husband beat her, tied her to a chair, and burned her alive in retaliation. News of her gruesome death circulated heavily in the media and invoked public outcry, which led the Spanish government to initiate a national plan to protect women from their abusers by criminalizing various forms of domestic abuse and enhancing the network of support and protection for battered women (Medina-Ariza and Barberet 2003: 303–4).³ While Ana Orantes's death resulted in national legislation, it also establishes a key contradiction in discourse surrounding gendered violence in Spain as well as its depiction in Spanish cinema: the need to publicize and disclose instances of gendered violence and the tendency to take pleasure in the spectacle of violent imagery, as noted by the media's recounting of the incident.⁴

This propensity to revel in the spectacle of violent imagery fits into Moreiras Menor's description of 1990s Spanish cinema and culture, but also characterizes several cinematic genres, such as horror, psychological thrillers, slasher flicks, and exploitation pictures. The spectacle of violence within these genres becomes problematic when filmmakers try to use cinema to engage with the gravity of gendered violence as it occurs in daily life, although one should avoid the assumption that violence in the media causes violence in society, as a clear cause-and-effect process. Human rights and anti-gender violence activists in Spain and around the world, however, continue to believe that images of violence within cinema and the media serve to perpetuate a visual culture of violence that should be overturned, particularly in light of the increase in rates of gender violence in the country since 1997.⁵ A popular anti-violence strategy revolves around the substitution of images of mutilated and dead bodies with more neutral images or symbols as a reaction against the hyper-visibility of victimhood that serves to perpetuate a visual culture that eroticizes gendered violence.⁶

Given Almodóvar's practice of portraying instances of rape, incest, pedophilia, and domestic abuse as humorous, or worse, as something that women and children actually desire, he is perhaps not the perfect model of gender anti-violence activism. Nevertheless, his films show a definitive progression toward the elimination of visual representations of physical acts of violence that coincide with the attempt by activists to alter representations of gender violence in Spain since the mid-1990s. Rather than viewing his recent work as a direct break with the auteur's stylistic and thematic concerns, one can view the intertextual referencing of his earlier films within Almodóvar's later films as key to tracing the development of an anti-violence consciousness in his work. While this seems most noticeable in *Volver*, given its emphasis on words over images of violence, other films in Almodóvar's canon depict scenes of violence either off-screen or in the past, so that the cinematic narrative deals with the aftermath or consequences of these acts, such as in *Los abrazos rotos*, which recounts a story of domestic violence. As an alternate strategy, many of his films of the preceding decade rely on visual substitutions in lieu of depictions of physical violence, reminiscent of similar strategies used in classical

Hollywood cinema. For instance, in *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999), Manuela's (Cecilia Roth) abusive relationship is thematically revisited through the production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In *Hable con ella*, a showing of *El amante menguante* / *The Shrinking Lover*, a silent film-within-a-film, masked a rape scene, whereas child molestation remains largely hidden in *La mala educación*. On the surface, these depictions of violence often stand in opposition to the humor of his earlier films, but actually remain in dialogue with earlier works through the thematic concern with gender violence in spite of the changing representational strategies. Throughout his work, Almodóvar has explored cinema's power to influence spectators. As noted by Kinder in her reading of *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987), the filmmaker's ability to impact audiences is seen through the character of Antonio (Antonio Banderas), whose "heterosexuality is instantly destabilized and whose homoerotic imagination is inflamed" after viewing the opening film-within-a-film (2009: 284). This power to influence individuals through film as both a reflection and mediation of culture makes the absence of physical representations of gender violence in Almodóvar's films particularly noteworthy, especially when considering the controversy of some of his films.

For example, *Hable con ella*, while critically acclaimed, was controversial due to its sympathetic portrayal of a rapist and depiction of women as passive objects.⁷ Although the film positions spectators in such a way that they initially feel sympathy for Benigno (Javier Cámara), he is punished, narratively, for his crime. Benigno's actions cause him to lose his job, send him to jail, alienate him from the majority of his friends, and eventually lead to his suicide. In addition, as we noted above, Almodóvar refrains from depicting the violation visually and instead masks Benigno's behavior with the silent film-within-a-film. As shocking as the revelation of the rape is, Almodóvar's strategy treats the topic tactfully and refrains from participating in the visualization of gender violence. In a self-interview the director justifies this omission by stating, "I don't want to see it, nor do I want others to see it" (Strauss 2006: 219). In this case, Almodóvar refrains from showing gender violence to avoid inspiring similar actions among his spectators.

Updating the trope from *La ley del deseo* in which Antonio Banderas becomes moved to action after watching a film, *El amante menguante* provides the lens to understand, but not necessarily approve of, Benigno's behavior. The silent short is a story of love and, ultimately, self-sacrifice when the diminutive Alfredo, who has explored the landscape of his lover's body, decides to enter her vaginally in order to give her sexual pleasure in an act that ensures his death at the end of the film. Influenced by this outcome, Benigno's subsequent actions re-enact the film's ending, consummating his love for Alicia (Leonor Watling). Since she is in a coma, however, this love is unreciprocated. Benigno's failure to see that she must be a willing agent in their "relationship" clearly shows that he is mentally unstable. Endearing and seemingly harmless, Benigno complicates the idea of a rapist as a monster, who stands as an anomaly within society. Almodóvar's portrayal does not excuse Benigno's offense, but it does destabilize the idea that rapists and sex

offenders “look” and “behave” in a certain manner that marks them as outside of societal norms. In his essay on violence and gender representation, Bryan argues that the tendency to represent sexual offenders as “evil” “relegate[s] gender violence to the realm of the frequently inexplicable or wholly incomprehensible” (2008: 171). In this regard, the film forces spectators to rethink the vision of rapists as outside of societal norms, and instead, examine the reasons these acts occur from the perpetrator’s perspective.

The well-meaning, but ultimately violent protagonist, Benigno, calls to mind Almodóvar’s earlier and notoriously controversial film, *¡Átame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), which received criticism in the U.S. media for its depictions of physical and narrative violence. In this earlier film, Ricky (Antonio Banderas) holds ex-porn actress, Marina (Victoria Abril) captive until she reciprocates the love that he feels for her. Ricky stalks Marina, headbutts her when he forcibly enters her apartment, and then keeps her bound and gagged through most of the film. Ironically, through the course of events in the film, Marina does fall in love, thus vindicating the violent measures that Ricky undertakes in order to get the girl. In her analysis of *¡Átame!* Harmony Wu (2004) argues that the film destabilizes the generic codes of the horror genre, specifically the slasher horror film, and the romantic melodrama to critiques ideas of heterosexual romance. Wu discusses how the monstrous killer in slasher films murders because of his failure to inhabit hegemonic masculinity, whereas in *¡Átame!*, the male protagonist is driven to act out “hetero-patriarchal ‘normal’ desires that produce violence” (2004: 265). This desire to attain the societal norms of marriage and family that compels Ricky to act violently also holds true in *Hable con ella* for Benigno, whose demeanor, cosmetology skills, and choice of profession as a male nurse cause people to question his heterosexuality. In this regard, Benigno’s determination to marry Alicia also reaffirms his heterosexual status and desire for acceptance into broader society just as Ricky seeks to marry Marina in *¡Átame!* The two films, however, are strikingly different in their resolution and treatment of violence. While Ricky succeeds in getting the girl and suffers no repercussions for his aberrant deeds at the end of the film, as noted earlier Benigno receives punishment for his crime through imprisonment and ultimately death. Whereas *¡Átame!* justified gender violence by the heterosexual pairing at the end of the film, *Hable con ella* shows that gender violence has consequences for perpetrators, as well as victims.

Almodóvar’s next film, *La mala educación*, tells the story of two brothers, thereby recalling brotherly pairings in both *La ley del deseo* and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984). In her retroserial reading of these three films, Kinder examines the fratricidal impulse resulting from a rivalry between brothers who “encounter someone they both desire” (2009: 277). Expanding on this connection and Kinder’s essay, this section focuses on the serious treatment of childhood sexual abuse in *La mala educación* in comparison to these earlier films, which portray pedophilia comically or without concern for the gravity of the issue for its victims. For example, in *Qué he hecho yo*, the female protagonist,

Gloria (Carmen Maura), allows her adolescent gay son, Miguel, to live with a pedophile dentist because she cannot pay the dental bill. The son willingly goes with the older man as long as he meets his material needs and buys him art supplies. Played for comic effect, the shock of the scene largely stems from the mother's resignation to this exchange, since she cannot provide for her own son. Although Miguel is not averse to exchanging sexual favors with older men, his young age, at least in the American context, renders these exchanges as problematic and, in fact, illegal.

In *La ley del deseo*, Tina (Carmen Maura), a transsexual actress, had a sexual relationship as a young boy with the priest at her Catholic school and her father, who later persuaded her to have a sex-change operation and then abandoned her. Although she describes these incidents as relationships based on love, they are forms of sexual abuse. Tina's unwillingness to see them as such marks her refusal to be seen as a victim or cast blame on these men for their actions. In a key scene in the film, Tina re-introduces herself to her amnesiac brother, Pablo (Eusebio Poncela), by discussing her history of sexual abuse rather matter of factly as a willingly participant and without regard for the psychological ramifications of her victimization. She never blames her father and rationalizes their incestuous relationship because she loved him. Even when Pablo questions her decision to have a sex change, insinuating that their father pressured her, Tina quickly dissuades him from vilifying the man. While she refuses to be seen as a victim, these "relationships" had a profound effect on her emotionally, not just physically. Later in the scene, she describes feeling too ashamed to rejoin her mother and brother in Madrid after her father left her in Morocco for another woman and relief when she re-encountered Pablo and he accepted her unconditionally.

In a crucial scene from the film that inspires the storyline of *La mala educación*, Tina visits the chapel of the Catholic school she attended as a young boy and encounters the priest who abused her as a child. She states that she is condemned to solitude because the abandonment by the two men in her life produced a lack of trust in any other men, a common symptom of childhood sexual abuse. When Father Constantino tells her to escape from her memories as he has done, she defiantly exclaims, "I don't want to. My memories are the only thing I have left." Her inability to trust any man in a sexual relationship and refusal to forget her past abuses also signify her trauma in spite of her refusal to be seen as a victim. While the positioning of pedophilia in this film as an equal and legitimate relationship is problematic, Tina's confessions throughout the film reveal the repercussions of her childhood sexual abuse on her adult life. Furthermore, Almodóvar chooses to discuss sexual abuse rather than show it by treating it as something that occurred or will occur in the past or off-screen and in that capacity refuses to relish in the spectacle of this type of violence.

This strategy becomes even more apparent in *La mala educación*, which thematically addresses the problem of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. The film focuses on the lives of two men, Ignacio (Gael García Bernal) and Enrique (Fele Martínez), who met as young boys in a Catholic school, and the

effects of Ignacio's sexual abuse by Father Manolo (Daniel Giménez Cacho). Topically, the film coincides with public outcry over a growing number of molestation cases reported against Catholic clergy, although, as mentioned, this topic was also addressed in *La ley del deseo* and to a certain extent, in *Qué he hecho yo*. While Almodóvar treated pedophilia humorously in the earlier film, he treats the issue of priestly abuse quite differently in the later works. As in *La ley del deseo*, *La mala educación* shares a similar moment of encounter between the abused individual and a priest.

In a scene from the director Enrique's film-within-a-film, the transsexual Zahara (the former Ignacio) enters the church to confront Father Manolo, who is saying mass and reciting the *Confiteor*. Instead of following the protocol for the confessional prayer, Zahara "appropriates the language of the church and makes it her own" (Strauss 2006: 222) by altering the phrasing of the *mea culpa* from "mi" to "tu". In changing the words, Zahara holds Father Manolo accountable for his deeds, instead of allowing him absolution through prayer, and renders Zahara/Ignacio guiltless in the process. In contrast to the encounter in *La ley del deseo* and Tina's refusal to blame her abusers, this scene is far darker and conveys Zahara/Ignacio's anger over his abuse, which leads to his attempt to blackmail his abuser as a form of payback for the priest's actions.

While the narrative of *La mala educación* never punishes Father Manolo (subsequently Señor Berenguer) for his misdeeds, his actions do have serious psychological consequences for the real-life Ignacio in the flashback sequence that reveals Ignacio's sexual abuse. Almodóvar avoids showing the physical act of sexual abuse, which occurs behind a bush, but also keeps it hidden within the film through its retelling within the screenplay. This portrays the fictional film world as a safe space in which Ignacio can address his victimization. Through Almodóvar's framing, it is also a space that refuses to further victimize through the re-enactment of this form of violence. Instead, the scene portrays a day out in the country and intercuts a group of schoolboys jumping into a river in an idyllic slow motion sequence with shots of a young Ignacio and Father Manolo sitting behind a tall grassy shrub. Father Manolo plays the guitar as Ignacio sings a rewritten version of "Moon River" in Spanish. The reworking of the lyrics to "Moon River" provides a haunting score of what should be a pastoral and innocent time—boyhood—and instead re-inscribes the song to convey a moment of boyhood trauma—the beginnings of sexual abuse.

As Ignacio sings, the camera cuts to an image of young boys frolicking in the river and then to a shot of the shrub that masks Ignacio and Father Manolo. The camera slowly tracks forward as Ignacio sings, "What is hidden in the dark and you'll find it . . ." The music stops as Ignacio screams, "No!" The camera then pans abruptly to reveal Ignacio running from behind the bush, but he then trips and falls. Father Manolo runs behind him, adjusting his black robes. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Ignacio's face as he looks up at Father Manolo (and the camera/spectator). Blood drips down the center of his forehead and the image splits, revealing a close-up of Enrique's face as he reads the script. A voiceover

(of a young Ignacio) states, "A trickle of blood divided my forehead in two. I had a feeling the same thing would happen with my life. It would always be divided and I couldn't help it . . ." Strikingly visualized through the film's graphic design of splitting the image in half, this moment also evokes the experience of disassociation which is known to be a common symptom of childhood sexual abuse.

Although Ignacio never fully explains how this rupture expressed itself in his life, the trauma of sexual abuse continues to plague him in his adulthood, inspiring his semi-autobiographical screenplay and attempt to blackmail his real-life abuser, Father Manolo, as well as serving as a likely cause of the drug use that leads to his death. Although the real Ignacio only appears in the film briefly, in Señor Berenguer/Father Manolo's retelling of his death, his childhood story and trauma form a key narrative thread throughout the film. Having attended Catholic schools throughout his education, Almodóvar treats the subject of priestly abuse with gravity and suggests through the adult character of Ignacio, that it is a trauma with serious ramifications in adulthood.

Childhood sexual trauma also characterizes the narrative of *Volver*. In this film, as with the others produced in the past ten years, Almodóvar refrains from depicting violence directly and instead focuses on the aftermath and the relationship between a mother and daughter. By focusing on two mother-daughter relationships, the film highlights generational differences in dealing with the topic of incestuous rape and portrays a definitive rupture in the perpetuation of gender violence when Paula (Yohana Cobo), the daughter, defends herself against a sexual attack by her stepfather, stabbing him with a knife and killing him. This act breaks a cycle of gendered violence, since Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), Paula's mother, was herself abused by her father and became pregnant with Paula. This incestuous pairing suggests an intertextual reference to the film, *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), which similarly portrayed a mother-sister relationship caused by a father's sexual transgressions. In this version, however, the daughter-sister commits patricide in self-defense, the mother-daughter succeeds in protecting her from any social repercussions, and the original mother kills her spouse in retaliation for the original incestuous crime. In rewriting the *Chinatown* story, Almodóvar alters the misogynist undertones of the original story by emphasizing female agency against gender violence and dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence in a more somber tone.

Like Ignacio in *La mala educación*, childhood sexual trauma also marked Raimunda's adult life, which is most evident in the scene in which she refuses Paco's (Antonio del Torre) sexual advances. The camera position gives a bird's eye view of both Raimunda and Paco in bed. Paco initiates sex, but Raimunda refuses, justifying her disinterest because she must wake up to go to work early the next day. He continues to kiss her and then climbs on top of her, so that his back is facing the camera. Raimunda's facial expression shows a look of panic and she quickly pushes him off and turns her back to him. Unable to have sexual intercourse, Paco resorts to masturbation. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Raimunda's face. As she hears Paco's moans, she becomes upset and begins to cry. Raimunda's unusual



Figure 11.2 The kitchen as crime scene: Raimunda contemplates the bloody knife in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © Paola Ardizzioni y Emilio Pereda.

reaction to Paco's advances suggests an inability to feel at ease with sex due to her sexual abuse. Given her silence regarding her past, these looks not only provide an insight into her own state of mind, but also help explain her emotional detachment when she learns the reasons for Paco's death.

In this scene, Raimunda's reactions shift from shock to sadness, not because of Paco's death, but because of the behavior that led to his death. When Raimunda discovers her husband in a pool of blood, she screams in horror and demands to know what happened. Paula then confesses to having accidentally killed Paco, during an attempted rape, which he justified by telling her he was not her biological father. Raimunda begins to cry when she hears Paula's confession since it recalls her own experience with her father. Without hesitation, she accepts responsibility for his death. Raimunda's desire to protect her daughter stems from her own experience as a victim of sexual abuse and need to look after her daughter in a way her own mother, Irene (Carmen Maura), never did. In acting on her maternal instincts, she thus begins the process of her own psychic healing. Her mother did not protect her, but she could protect her daughter, and better yet, Paula could protect herself. Consequently, Raimunda approaches the crime scene to get rid of the evidence. She proceeds to clean up the bloody mess in the kitchen and removes the knife from Paco's body. Having previously washed the knife in the kitchen sink the night before, Raimunda stares in disbelief at the murder weapon and then goes to the kitchen sink to wash the dried blood from the blade.

Throughout this process, Raimunda is clearly upset over Paco's betrayal, which recalls the pain of her own past and her inability to protect herself from harm as her daughter has.

Raimunda finally achieves catharsis when, at the end of the film, she reconciles with her mother, who has "returned" from the dead in order to ask her for forgiveness. Their climactic reunion, which lasts over four minutes, relies heavily on dialogue rather than images to convey past events. Almodóvar strips the scene down to a two-person setup because Irene's monologue is so compelling that the words themselves serve as action. Through the act of disclosure, Irene breaks the years of silence and confesses to killing her spouse upon learning of her husband's rape of Raimunda. After setting fire to the little house where he slept with a lover, she went into hiding when people assumed that she died alongside her husband. Her actions and her subsequent existence in a "living purgatory" prove her love for Raimunda, who echoes this sentiment and then embraces her mother. By breaking the silence and acknowledging her victimization, Raimunda makes peace with her mother, her past, and Paco's death.

Because *Volver* emphasizes the maternal bonds among women, the film shifts its portrayal of sexuality to a more conservative or asexual representation. Part of the reason stems from the main character's history of sexual abuse, which has marked her sexuality and the sexualizing of adolescents as problematic. For example, while Raimunda is an attractive and voluptuous woman, as noted by the overhead shots of Penélope Cruz's cleavage and the shots of her padded rear, she is not a sexual agent in the film nor is the narrative constructed around the premise of her eventual domestic containment. As a result, the gaze of the camera focuses more on her curves in order to align them with iconic images of a maternal femininity.⁸ Additionally, Paco's prohibitive sexual gaze is kept to a minimum and eventually eliminated from the film altogether. At two key points in the film, Paco lecherously gazes at Paula's body when he looks up her skirt as she watches television and the camera then cuts to a close-up of her crotch, and then later, when he catches Paula undressing in her bedroom. In both instances, either Raimunda or Paula almost catches him in the act and he responds by either looking or moving away. These instances of an eroticized gaze in the film allude to the attempted rape that occurs later off-screen. Not only does he not show the attack, but Almodóvar also condemns this gaze by killing off its beholder. As mentioned previously, the absence of visualized violence in the film sparked inquiry, as it appears anti-Almodovarian. However, this film is in line with earlier films that emphasize words over action, such as *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), which is particularly noteworthy for its lack of physical action and reliance on dialogue to propel the narrative forward. *La flor de mi secreto* also introduced the narrative outline for the film, *Volver*, when the protagonist, Leo (Marisa Paredes), submits a dark novel in lieu of a romance novel to her publisher that tells of a woman who hides the body of her husband after her daughter kills him when he attempts to rape her.

In addition to inspiring its storyline, *Volver* shares similar plot points with *La flor de mi secreto* that unite both films thematically. Both are concerned with the relationship between mothers and daughters in the face of adversity and rely on the feminine world within the setting of the Manchegan village as a site that fosters these bonds. In the case of *La flor*, Leo and her mother's return to the village functions as a source of renewal, whereas in *Volver*, village life is more threatening due to its traditional and patriarchal conventions. Within this threat, however, there is also an opportunity for subversion, primarily through the feminine bonds and care-work performed by women that mark the village as a safe space. For example, Tía Paula (Chus Lampreave) cares for Raimunda when she leaves home after her abuse and provides a home for Irene after her supposed death. These feminine networks extend beyond familial ties to provide security and support, such as when Agustina, the neighbor, checks up on Tía Paula daily to ensure her well-being, a gesture that Irene reciprocates when she moves in to care for her at the end of the film. By emphasizing these relationships rather than scenes of physical violence, Almodóvar highlights the resilience of women in the aftermath of adversity rather than simply as victims of gender violence.

Although *Volver* focuses on healing and survival, his next feature, *Los abrazos rotos*, delves into the issue of domestic violence as a complex situation that is difficult to escape. In this regard, the film is one of his most overtly serious portrayals of domestic violence in all of its manifestations. The film portrays gender violence as both physical, as when Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez) pushes Lena (Penélope Cruz) down a staircase in order to prevent her from leaving, and psychological, as when Martel orders his son, Ernesto Jr. to film Lena while she is working on a film set as a mode of surveillance that keeps her under his control. While *Los abrazos rotos* portrays specific instances of the different forms of abuse that Lena endures, Almodóvar still avoids representing the physically violent scene that leaves Lena badly beaten and forces her to finally leave her abusive husband. Instead, he emphasizes the ways in which Martel's psychological control of Lena is much more sinister through the documentary film-within-a-film, which symbolically holds her captive through the all-encompassing gaze of the camera that follows her every movement. In a key scene, Lena attempts to destroy the camera and after some struggle with the cameraman, ultimately, confronts the camera by returning its gaze and directly addressing it and the elder Martel, who watches the footage every night. In her tirade, she affirms her love affair and determination to leave him, thus confirming Martel's worst fears. When she returns home to gather her things, he retaliates by pushing her down the stairs. Injured, she agrees to remain with him in exchange for her lover's artistic freedom while they complete their film production.

Lena's abusive relationship and sexual awakening recalls an earlier film, *Carne trémula* / *Live Flesh* (1997) that portrayed another woman, Clara (Angela Molina), in an abusive marriage. Like Lena in *Los abrazos rotos*, Clara rekindles her passion through an affair with a more sensitive, younger man (Javier Bardem) who stands

in contrast to her cop husband. This affair eventually gives her the strength to break from the cycle of violence and leave her husband. In the case of *Los abrazos rotos*, Lena finds love with a Spanish film director, who fulfills her dreams of becoming an actress and contrasts with her manipulative and abusive Chilean-born husband. While both women ultimately attempt to flee from their abusive partners, both end up dying violent deaths. Clara and her husband, Sancho (José Sancho), shoot themselves at the end of *Carne trémula* after she attempts to leave him, a final shootout scene reminiscent of the Hollywood classic, *Duel in the Sun* (Charles Vidor, 1946). After a violent altercation with Martel, who physically beats her off-screen, Lena flees her abusive marriage and eventually dies in an unrelated fatal car crash. The serious treatment of gendered violence in both of these films affirms Almodóvar's concern with this issue and demonstrates a significant shift in the portrayal of gendered violence over the course of his oeuvre through an engagement with differing conceptions of masculinity.

While *Carne trémula* focused on generational differences within masculinity in the post-Franco period, *Los abrazos rotos* engages with national differences in the post-1992 era. Sancho represented the violent and abusive male more reflective of the repressive Francoist regime than the post-Franco transitional period where the latter film configures the abuser as a ruthless businessman of Latin American origins. In both instances, the lover is representative of a sensitive and non-violent masculinity that idealizes the new, modern Spanish man and ignores the continuation of certain conditions of Spanish masculinity that lead to gender violence in Spain by displacing violent tendencies onto figures distanced (at least symbolically) in time and geography. As a businessman in the 1992 era, Martel also functions as a critique of the transnational model of global capitalism, which usurps female bodies as sites of labor and sources of pleasure.⁹ It is not a coincidence that Lena worked as Martel's secretary and needed to resume her sideline as a call girl out of financial necessity. Because of his wealth, Martel could provide the medical care that her ailing father required and thus secure Lena in exchange, a factor that emphasizes the threat of transnational forces to the national and gendered body.¹⁰ Lena's vulnerability stems from her subordinated position as a woman of limited financial means, which trumps any potential power she has over Martel as a Spanish national. In this regard, *Los abrazos rotos* offers a critique of the status of contemporary Spanish women and their continued susceptibility to gender violence.

Through his thematic engagement with the issue of gender violence and its effects, Almodóvar's films broaden discourse on gender violence and its representation within Spanish cinema. Since the mid-1990s, his films no longer dismiss the gravity of gendered violence and refuse to participate in the visualization of gendered violence without a consideration of the complexity of its various forms and the ramifications for perpetrators and/or victims. Through a retroserial re-reading of his cinema, we have seen that a concern for gender violence bridges much of his work and is often allied with social concerns affecting contemporary Spain. In this regard, Almodóvar "domesticates" violence in the triple sense of the word by



Figure 11.3 Ties that bind: Ernesto Martel embraces Lena in *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2009; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni y Emilio Pereda.

engaging with it thematically as a social issue that affects the home, Spanish society—the domestic homeland—and through a resistance to its visualization, which allies him with the strategies of anti-gender violence activists worldwide.

Notes

- 1 Through an analysis of novels and films of the period, Moreiras Menor notes a tendency of urban authors to portray acts of excessive violence, which she attributes to the cultural experience of a Spain that suddenly emerged within postmodernity (2000: 139). This Spain, according to Moreiras Menor is a “traumatized and defenseless society . . . illustrated by contemporary culture’s fascination with violence, pain, the tortured body, and a history in shock” (2000: 141).
- 2 News of Ana Orantes’s death appeared in media outlets in Spain and globally, such as *El País*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Times*. See Daly (1999), Rincón and Martín-Arroyo (2007), and San Cristobal Orea (2008). Her death is cited as instrumental to mobilization efforts against domestic violence in studies on domestic violence and activist organizations (Medina-Ariza and Barberet 2003; Socolovsky 2003). Victoria Iglesias, a spokesperson for gender anti-violence activism in Galicia, states that: “Aquella aparición televisiva de Ana Orantes animó a muchas víctimas a dar un paso decisivo y movió muchas conciencias, pero reclamamos un tratamiento digno en los

medios de este tipo de violencia que profundice en sus causas y ponga el foco en el maltratador, en lugar de rebuscar morbosamente en el entorno de la víctima” (The appearance of Ana Orantes inspired many victims to take a decisive step and moved many consciences, but we demand humane treatment in the media [in dealing with] ... this type of violence that deepens its causes and places the focus on the perpetrator, instead of focusing morbidly on the environment of the victim) (Cuinas and Obelleiro 2007).

- 3 A study by Medina-Ariza and Barberet discusses the effects of Ana Orantes’s death, which inspired the Spanish government to reform the criminal code and proceedings to “introduce systematic psychological abuse as a felony, ... the possibility of obtaining restraining orders, ... [and to] improve the network of shelters for battered women as well as different forms of social resources for the victims of abuse” (Medina-Ariza and Barberet 2003: 303–4). In addition, in 2003, the Spanish parliament unanimously passed the “Order for the Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence” which gave “battered women the option of getting a fast-track restraining order on a violent partner within a maximum of 72 hours” (Socolovsky 2003). Within the first few months of the law’s enforcement, 1,390 women sought protection under the order and some twenty women a day applied for the order in Madrid (Socolovsky 2003).
- 4 The prominence of violence in Spanish cinema has been discussed by scholars such as Peter Besas (1985), John Hopewell (1986), and Marsha Kinder (1993). In *Blood Cinema*, Kinder notes the excessive violence within the anti-Franco opposition cinema of the *dictablanda* in the 1970s. According to Kinder, the repression of the depiction of violence, sex, sacrilege, and politics under Franco’s dictatorship helps to understand why “the eroticized violence could be used so effectively ... to speak a political discourse, that is, to expose the legacy of brutality and torture that lay hidden behind the surface beauty of the Fascist and neo-Catholic aesthetics” (1993: 138). While violence in the opposition cinema of the 1970s functioned as political critique, Spanish cinema, like cinema worldwide, is not immune to genres that focus on violence for the sake of showing violence. In contrast, contemporary film, *Te doy mis ojos / Take My Eyes* (Icíar Bollain, 2003), explicitly aligns itself with gender anti-violence activism in its refusal to eroticize acts of physical violence and examination of the issue from the perpetrator’s perspective. Shot in a social-realist tradition, the feature-length film emerged out of an earlier short, based on some two years of research with a woman’s shelter in Toledo.
- 5 Statistics from the late 1990s and early 2000s inarguably demonstrate an increase of fatalities attributed to intimate partner violence. This has led to the labeling of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence as *terrorismo familiar*, familial terrorism, which emphasizes how domestic abuse is more than just a violent act, but a violent act whose goal is to intimidate its victim along ideological and psychological lines. Based on figures from the *Instituto de la Mujer*, *El mundo* reports that between 1999 and 2008, 635 women in Spain died resulting from violent acts caused by husbands, boyfriends, or ex-partners (Arroyo 2004). The high rate of gender violence during the late 1990s points to both the increase in reporting cases of violence and the possibility of a backlash from Spanish men, in an attempt to reassert a gendered status quo. Despite the increased legislation, gender violence remains a key issue that affects women in contemporary Spain.

- 6 For example, *Voces sin Eco*, a grassroots group in Juárez, Mexico, consisting of families of the murdered women, painted black crosses on pink backgrounds on electrical poles in lieu of images of the murdered victims as a form of protest against violent images (Fregoso 2003: 20). In her work on transborder activism surrounding the murder of women in Juárez, Fregoso argues that this strategy critiques the “violence of representation . . . [in which] the hypervisibility of the feminine body in audiovisual media, as in the commodification of gruesome photographs depicting tortured and dismembered bodies, heightens the invisibility of the disposable body” (2003: 22). Similarly, in Spain, this attempt to move beyond visualized victims of violence was invoked during the *Marcha Mundial das Mulleres* in Vigo, Galicia, in honor of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25, 2007. As part of this protest, sixty-nine white silhouettes, placed alongside the street, memorialized each woman who lost her life in 2007 due to gendered violence in Spain, six of which were from Galicia (Cuinas and Obelleiro 2007). In depicting a silhouette as opposed to the victim’s face or mutilated image, these efforts refrain from perpetuating a visual culture of gendered victimhood, a strategy used by anti-gender violence activists worldwide.
- 7 In an editorial printed in *El País*, Noval Clemente (2002) condemned the film for its portrayal of gender violence, reminding the director that “Lo que cuenta en su película desgraciadamente ha sucedido en la realidad en muchos hospitales; y también que la mayoría de hombres que maltratan a sus mujeres y después acaban asesínadolas alegan que lo hicieron porque las querían con desesperación” (What counts in his film, unfortunately, has actually occurred in many hospitals; and also that the majority of men who abuse their wives and then kill them claim that they did so because they desperately loved them). While Noval Clemente is right to point to the realities of gender violence that occur daily, her critique does not take into account how Benigno’s actions are punished and never sanctioned socially within the world of the film. The only person to stand by Benigno in the end was his friend, Marco, who also did not condone his actions.
- 8 Penélope’s padded rear was heavily discussed during the promotion of *Volver*. In an interview, Almodóvar related his idea of motherhood to a physicality that actresses, like Sophia Loren and Anna Magnani, assumed because of their voluptuousness. He stated, “I needed someone a little bit more worn out, heavier, more rooted to the earth. She [Penélope] walked a different way, having this weight” (Miller 2006). Thus, by emphasizing her cleavage and enhanced rear, Almodóvar envisioned an earth-mother figure.
- 9 1992 was a significant cultural and historical moment for post-Franco Spain, as the world celebrated the 500-year anniversary of the discovery of the Americas. That same year, Spain hosted the Olympics in Barcelona and a World Expo in Seville, and its capital, Madrid, received the designation as a cultural capital of Europe. The Spanish government used this celebration as an opportune time to re-imagine its centrality on the world stage through its colonial history. In addition to the numerous cultural events that Spain funded at home as well as abroad, the State also provided funds to preserve historical monuments in Latin America and the United States, as well as contributing developmental aid to Latin America, thus re-establishing itself as a neocolonial power in the region. The 1992 era, thus, is crucial to contemporary Spanish history as a moment in which it embraces the transnational on a large scale, even if its posturing left the country struggling economically in the aftermath.

- 10 *Los abrazos rotos* parallels anxieties about the vulnerability of Spanish women with anxieties about the Spanish film industry, which is also threatened by foreign encroachment throughout the film. Martel controls and manipulates Lena's physical body, but also her body of work, the film-within-a-film. Similarly, the Hollywood film industry usurps Spanish locales and labor for its productions which is evident when Spanish producer, Judit (Blanca Portillo), must accept work as a location scout with an unknown U.S. film company.

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La piel que habito

A Story of Imposed Gender and the Struggle for Identity¹

Francisco A. Zurian

La piel que habito / *The Skin I Live In* (2011) is an adaptation of Thierry Jonquet's 1984 novel, *Mygale* (*Tarantula*), but as in the case of Almodóvar's *Carne trémula* / *Live Flesh* (1997), loosely based on Ruth Rendell's *Live Flesh* (1986), the director has retained from the novel its main idea only to proceed to completely rework the plot, characters, setting, narrative temporality, and structure of events. Almodóvar invests his version with a clear narrative structure, composed of three distinct acts (including a surprising second act, studded with flashbacks) and a number of effective plot points. The flashbacks are skillfully managed so as to engage the spectator, and work to construct an escalating tension in preparation for the surprise ending. Such dexterous play with audience expectations was echoed in the careful dosing out of information on the film's contents in the pre-release publicity campaign conducted by Almodóvar's production company El Deseo.

It is never easy to summarize the plot of an Almodóvar film and the attempts to do so tend to result in a list of unreal and convoluted elements. In this case the story begins with Dr. Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), an eminent plastic surgeon who, following the suicide of his wife Gal due to the extensive burns suffered in an automobile accident, has invented a new form of skin using the techniques of transgenesis. We also encounter Vicente (Jan Cornet) who meets Ledgard's daughter Norma (Blanca Suárez) at a wedding. With Vicente under the effects of recreational drug use and Norma under the medication she takes for psychological problems, they have a sexual encounter that results in Vicente raping or nearly raping Norma. In avenging the attack on his daughter Dr. Ledgard kidnaps Vicente and uses him as a human guinea pig for his experiments; he also carries out a sex change on Vicente. As a result of the process Vera (Elena Anaya) is born. Despite the various forms of surgical intervention, medical mutilation, and humiliation to

which s/he is subject, Vera/Vicente maintains the will to survive. Imprisoned in her room, Vera spends the ensuing years under the watchful eye of Ledgard's faithful housekeeper, Marilia (Marisa Paredes). Nevertheless Vera never forgets her identity; Vera is Vicente and Ledgard will pay in tragedy for his madness.

With this film Almodóvar achieves another variation on his well-known capacity for reinterpreting a range of cinematic genres.² In this instance the virtuoso orchestration of genres is such that we pass from one to the other without interruption. Drawing on aspects of the thriller, *film noir*, science fiction in its medical version, and psychological terror, the film explores extremes of vengeance, abuse of power, madness, amorality, and unhealthy passion, expanding on themes introduced in much more attenuated form in *Matador* (1986) and *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987). When presenting the film at the Cannes Film Festival, the director affirmed,

This genre suits where I am in my life right now. When I started, I made mostly poppy comedies. I wanted to move into different film genres, even though I don't strictly follow all of their rules. I think I'll do more of them. And for this film, one of my influences was Fritz Lang (E. B. 2011).

The effect on the spectator watching the film is one of an increasing sense of terror, an experience that is rare in the Almodóvar filmography. What is familiar in the film are the marks of his typical authorial craftsmanship: the polished overall aesthetic and meticulous mise en scène; the use of color; emphasis on small details; and the place of wardrobe. New here is the creation of a world of disturbing psychological violence, the minimalist performance style (especially in the case of Antonio Banderas), the insatiable thirst for vengeance the film transmits, and the terror that results from the exercise of absolute power, unchecked by any type of moral or ethical counterweight. Almodóvar has never judged his characters, with the possible exception of the reality TV reporter Andrea Caracortada in *Kika* (1993) (Zurian 2005: 27), and he does not do so with Dr. Ledgard. This treatment invests the character with a perhaps greater cynicism before the camera. We regard his malignant acts and intentions in the absence of possible justifications, and while the spectator grasps repeatedly at some hope of justice, these desires are frustrated by the impunity of one who commands total power and control as judge, jury, and executioner, lacking in any capacity for empathy or remorse. That fact is the source of the terror communicated by the film. There is little visible blood, no acts of overt physical violence; everything is white, clean, aseptic, sterilized. All the resources of modern medical technology are marshaled in the service of singular will without questioning its ethical basis. The force of the scalpel and the madness of absolute power converge in the millimetrically precise actions of a brilliant mind with a will of steel.

In *La piel que habito* Almodóvar puts before our eyes an unrelenting vision of dark and brutal thoughts and feelings in a manner entirely new for him. The risks

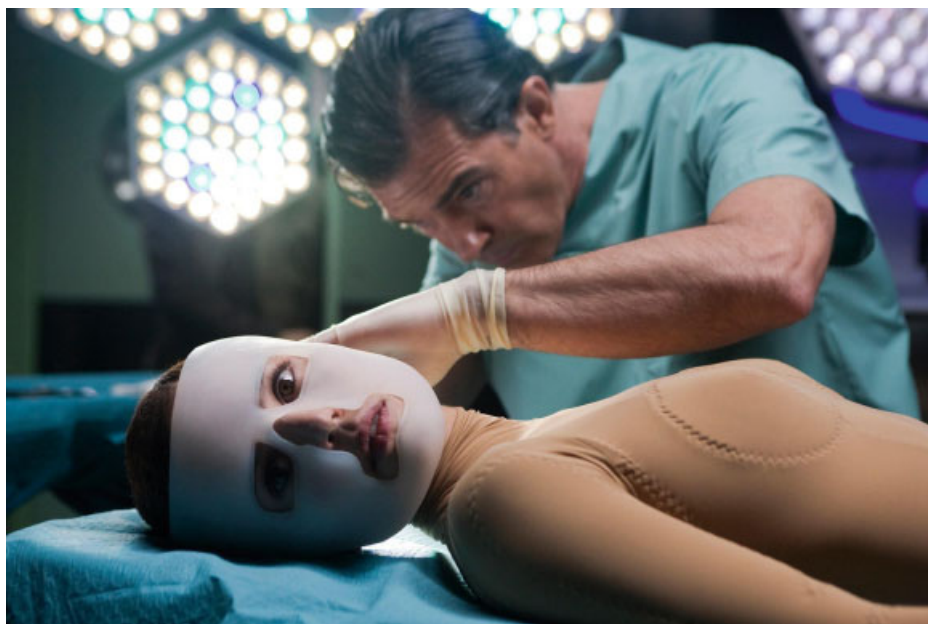


Figure 12.1 Modern medical technology at the service of a singular will: plastic surgeon Robert Ledgard and his patient in *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Lucía Faraig.

entailed by such a project are multiple, although the director has certainly dealt with critical incomprehension and rejection before. Yet in recent years he has enjoyed significant fan support and success at the box office. Elena Anaya alludes to this question in a conversation with writer Eduardo Mendicutti:

Hay que tener valor y decir: arriesgate. Y si el público no está preparado, que se prepare . . . Pedro ha sido muy valiente: seguramente no es la película que mucha gente podría esperar de él, pero no siempre hay que darle a la gente lo que espera de uno. (Mendicutti 2011: 25)

(Courage is necessary, you have to say: take a chance. And if the audience isn't prepared, it needs to prepare itself . . . Pedro has been quite brave: surely this is not the film many people would have expected of him but one should not always give people what they expect.)

One way *La piel* anticipates and undercuts the potential revulsion on the part of spectators is through its controlled and measured dramatic structure. Narrative and aesthetic coherence in the film are likewise well served by the work of cinematographer José Luis Alcaíne, winner of the Vulcain Prize for his photography for the film at Cannes, art director Antxon Gómez, editor Pepe Salcedo, composer Alberto Iglesias, and the sober and perfectly calibrated performances of the actors.



Figure 12.2 Comic relief: Zeca and Marilia in the kitchen of Ledgard's estate in *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © José Haro.

This stripped-down and almost anti-Almodovarian aesthetic dominates the film, except in certain moments. At first glance the appearance of Marilia's son Zeca (Roberto Álamo) in a tiger suit seems to offer a bit of comic relief in a scene borrowed from an earlier Almodóvar film. In fact the action is set during carnival and he is wearing a disguise (designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier) because he is fleeing the police. Nevertheless it becomes clear that the goal is to stress certain aspects of the relation between Ledgard and Marilia that otherwise would remain hidden. Theirs is a dysfunctional family although they would not characterize themselves as such. Marilia is Zeca's mother but she tells him categorically: "Tú no eres mi hijo. Yo sólo te parí." (You are not my son. I only gave birth to you.) And Marilia is also the mother of Robert, as she confesses to Vera.

Sí. Son hermanos, aunque ninguno lo sabe. Al menos yo no se lo dije. Los padres no podían ser más distintos, pero los dos nacieron locos. La culpa es mía, llevo la locura en mis entrañas.

(Yes. They are brothers, although no one knows it. At least I never told anyone. They couldn't be more different but both were born insane. It's my fault, I carry the madness in my entrails.)

As noted above, this is not the first reference to a tiger in Almodóvar's cinema. A real tiger appears briefly in *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) where it

represents fantasy, unreality, and the world of dreams. In this case Zeca does seem to have come from another world. Yet the tiger has other meanings, as made clear in the opening lines of the script for *La piel*, drawn from Elias Canetti, that evoke “. . . el ininterrumpido ir y venir del tigre ante los barrotes de su jaula para que no se le escape el único y brevísimo instante de la salvación” (. . . the uninterrupted pacing of a tiger behind the bars of its cage so that it won’t miss the single fleeting instant of its salvation) (Almodóvar 2011b: 1). This allusion works to create for the spectator a particular emotional state as preparation for the story we are about to experience. The tiger, a ferocious predator, is ready to pounce on its prey at the slightest opportunity. A similar scenario is reflected in the television program watched by Vera that shows a big cat on the prowl, then attacking its prey, biting into its victim mercilessly.³ Almodóvar notes that Vera, as well, “está en la actitud de espera de la que habla Canetti y, curiosamente, la primera vez que se abre la puerta de su cárcel es por alguien vestido de tigre” (is in the same situation of waiting and watching evoked by Canetti, and curiously the first time someone opens the door to her particular prison, he is wearing a tiger suit) (Almodóvar 2011d).

Zeca’s appearance and his subsequent rape of Vera are decisive elements in the plot. Both his exaggerated costume and accent (he speaks half in Brazilian Portuguese and half in Spanish) are liable to provoke laughter among spectators who are perhaps led to view him initially as a comedic character. But Zeca is no Paul Bazzo, Kika’s clownish rapist in the eponymous film. The sequence in which he appears is jarring, as is the film as a whole. Its effect on the audience is captured succinctly in the comments of writer and critic Juan Cruz:

salí de allí perturbado, como si alguien me hubiera dado un golpe en la barriga mientras esperaba un saludo. La película tiene el calor de la luz cenital, el ámbito perfecto y perturbador de un quirófano; y no es extraño, pues de quirófanos va; desde el inicio, el filme está marcado por los tonos de la amenaza y de la venganza, y del chantaje, que son fenómenos viejos que adoptan, en todos los tiempos, las sustancias mentirosas o falaces de cada época.

Cada movimiento de la cámara te lleva, indefectiblemente, a tus propios defectos, el de la venganza sobre todo, de modo que te revuelves en el asiento como si te estuvieran señalando con el dedo. Hasta que la pureza de los símbolos te señala tanto que tú dices, en ese mismo sitio, revuelto como estás contra ti mismo y contra el filme: “Ese no soy yo, eso no pasa.” (Cruz 2011)

(I left there [the screening] in a disturbed state, as if someone had given me a punch in the stomach when I was expecting a handshake. The film has the cold tonality of zenithal light, the perfect and perturbing atmosphere of an operating room, which is hardly strange since it involves operating rooms. From the beginning the film is marked by themes of threat and vengeance, and of blackmail: all of which are long familiar phenomena that cloak themselves in the false and deceptive form appropriate to their respective era.

Each movement of the camera brings you back to your own particular defects, that of vengeance above all, so you end up turning and twisting in your seat as if the film were pointing a finger directly at you. To the point that the purity of the symbols deployed in the film mark you out so many times that you say, right there and then, turning against the film and yourself: "That isn't me, this isn't happening.")

A story with this degree of complexity, beyond that of the original novel, requires a treatment adapted to its particular dimensions. In the pressbook for *La piel* Almodóvar enumerates his cinematic references in creating the proper tone for the film.

Una historia de estas características me hacía pensar en Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock, todos los Fritz Lang (desde el gótico al noir). Pensé también en la estética pop del terror de la Hammer, o en el más psicodélico y kitsch del giallo italiano (Dario Argento, Mario Bava, Umberto Lenzi, Lucio Fulci . . .) y por supuesto en el lirismo de Georges Franju en "Los ojos sin rostro" . . . Durante unos meses pensé seriamente hacer una película muda, en blanco y negro, con letreros donde aparecieran las descripciones y los diálogos. Y rendir tributo a Fritz Lang y a Murnau . . . Es imposible no pensar en "Frankenstein" de James Whale, o en "Vértigo" y "Rebecca" de Alfred Hitchcock . . . Para presentar la ciudad [Toledo, donde Ledgard tiene su casa/clínica] coloqué la cámara, previa información, en el mismo lugar en el que cuarenta años antes Luis Buñuel la había colocado en "Tristana" . . . Probablemente la primera referencia consciente fue "Los ojos sin rostro" de Georges Franju. Franju me llevó a "Judex", del cual sólo guardo un recuerdo fantasmagórico, al igual que de "Fantomas" interpretado por Jean Marais, y de "Diabolik", un cómic con héroe enmascarado que Mario Bava llevó al cine en los 60. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(A story of this nature made me think of Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock, all of Fritz Lang (from the gothic to *noir*). I also thought of the pop aesthetics of the Hammer horror films or the most psychedelic and kitsch aspects of Italian pulp fiction (Dario Argento, Mario Bava, Umberto Lenzi, Lucio Fulci . . .) and of course the lyricism of Georges Franju's *Eyes without a Face* . . . During a number of months I thought seriously about doing a silent film in black and white with title cards supplying the description and dialogue. That way I would have paid homage to Fritz Lang and Murnau . . . It's impossible not to think of James Whale's *Frankenstein*, or Hitchcock's *Vertigo* or *Rebecca* . . . In filming the establishing shot of the city [Toledo, where Ledgard's combination house/hospital is located], I placed the camera exactly where Buñuel had placed it for *Tristana* . . . Probably the first conscious reference was *Eyes without a Face* by Franju. The thought of Franju put me on to *Judex*, of which I only have a dreamlike memory, as well as *Fantomas*, with Jean Marais, and "Diabolik," a comic featuring a masked hero that Mario Bava adapted for film in the 1960s.)

With the notable exception of Juan Cruz in *El País*, in general Spanish critics have been unsympathetic toward the film. Writing following the screening of *La piel* at the Cannes Film Festival, Carlos Boyero, the chief film critic of *El País* and a long-time Almodóvar antagonist (see chapters 1 and 7, this volume), affirmed that

the film “pretende ser una tragedia y es involuntariamente cómica” (aspires to tragedy but is unintentionally comic) (Boyer 2011). In *La Vanguardia* Salvador Llopert writes that

como thriller, *La piel que habito* está falto de intensidad y de precisión. Como propuesta de ciencia ficción, es inocente, más propia de películas con *científico loco* dentro. Y respecto al horror, que es en lo que Almodóvar también pone el acento, bueno, lo mejor que se puede decir es que su horror es austero, concebido con un vago, ligero, forzado sentido de la opresión. En una atmósfera –apenas un caserón– abstracta, impersonal, sin humor. (Llopert 2011)

(As a thriller, *La piel que habito* is lacking in intensity and precision. As science fiction, it is too innocent and is more akin to films boasting a “mad scientist.” And as far as the horror genre, which is also stressed by Almodóvar, the best that can be said is that his horror is austere and conceived with a vague, superficial and forced sense of oppression, set in an atmosphere—it can hardly be said to be a haunted mansion—that is abstract, impersonal and humorless.)

In these critical responses it seems as if the authors are unable to locate the familiar Almodóvar subject matter and treatment in a film that is admittedly a departure in many respects. Nevertheless, at its core the film addresses a constant theme in Almodóvar’s oeuvre, the strength of individual identity. It recounts the story of someone who, despite all the violent and barbaric acts to which he is subjected in an attempt to erase who he once was, clings to his life in the only way possible, by refusing to forget who he is. The plastic surgeon’s scalpel can transform the body but it cannot touch an individual’s memory. The struggle to retain his identity will be Vicente’s weapon and his salvation, even with a body that is not his own, one that Ledger calls Vera. The name Vera, from *veritas*, truth, is in fact a lie; with skin that is not human, it is the face of falsity incarnate. Vera wears the face of Gal, Ledger’s dead wife, and may wear women’s clothing. The body stocking (also designed by Gaultier) she⁴ wears may serve to mold a woman’s body, but beneath it all lies Vicente.

Hay una enorme incógnita sobre hacia dónde nos lleva que el ser humano pueda poder determinar los elementos y las condiciones y las particularidades con las que va a nacer un nuevo ser. La ciencia nos va a poner en un abismo, pero el arte siempre va a estar para ayudarnos. (Almodóvar 2011c)

(There is an enormous mystery over where we are headed in view of the fact that human beings may be able to determine the elements, conditions and particular qualities that a new person will be born with. Science may be carrying us toward the abyss but art will always be there to help us.)

And art is the therapy embraced by Vicente. Thanks to yoga and art Vicente is able to survive captivity and the various operations performed on him. A prisoner

in a locked room and in a body that is not his own, Vicente has seen Ledgard take from him his freedom, his body, his genital sex, and his skin. Hence the title, *La piel que habito*, alluding to the fact that Vicente may inhabit the skin in question but it is not his skin. And over that false skin (the product of Ledgard's experiments with transgenesis, a melding of pig and human genome), Vera wears a body stocking-second skin.

A diferencia de los bañadores, el body-segunda-piel cubre todo el cuerpo, incluyendo las extremidades, pies, manos y sus dedos respectivos. Hay cremalleras invisibles en zonas clave del cuerpo: en las muñecas, los tobillos y la parte que más convenga del tronco, por fuera sólo se ve una línea muy fina. También se ven las costuras que unen las diversas partes que componen la prenda. El body hace que la mujer parezca un híbrido de robot o maniquí. (Almodóvar 2011a: 3)

(In contrast to a bathing suit or leotard, the body stocking-second skin covers the entire body, including the extremities, feet, hands, toes and fingers. There are invisible zippers in key areas of the body: the wrists, ankles, the most appropriate parts of the torso. From the outside only a fine line is noticeable. Also apparent are the seams that connect the different parts of the garment. The body stocking has the effect of making the woman look like a hybrid of a robot or a mannequin.)

Vicente lives on the verge of madness, unable to recognize the body that encloses him as his. He clings to the memory of his former face but it fades from his memory until late in the film, when a glimpse of his photograph in a newspaper sets in motion the final denouement. Ledgard too is obsessed with faces. The surveillance system installed in his home allows him to view his prisoner's every move and to manipulate and enlarge the image of Vera's body and face on a wall-sized screen. When speaking to a group of medical colleagues, he recalls his experience with facial transplants.

El rostro nos identifica, a través de él reflejamos nuestras emociones, nos relacionamos con los demás, compartimos sus vidas y hacemos que compartan la nuestra. El rostro no es, como se dice, el espejo del alma, sino el espejo de su humanidad.

(The face identifies who we are, through it we transmit our emotions, we relate to others, we share their lives and enable them to share ours. The face is not merely, as is said, the mirror of the soul, but the mirror of our humanity.)

Vicente's room contains a television that shows only three channels: one devoted to art; another to documentary programs; and a third to film, and these become a form of escape. It is thanks to one of these that he discovers yoga. As he declares in a scene eliminated from the final cut, "He conseguido meditar durante 40 minutos. 40 minutos fuera de aquí . . . Hoy he estado una hora. Una hora fuera" (I was able to meditate for 40 minutes. 40 minutes away from here . . . Today I managed an hour. An hour outside) (Almodóvar 2011a: 130).



Figure 12.3 A fragment from Vera/Vicente's wall diary in *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © José Haro.

When Ledger sends him a collection of makeup items, Vicente keeps two eye pencils and returns the rest, rejecting the doctor's efforts to acculturate him as a woman. He uses the pencils on the walls of his room, transforming them from instruments of his imprisonment to a canvas on which he creates a kind of mural (fig. 12.3) that incorporates a record of his days spent in captivity along with words ("respiro"/I breathe), phrases ("el arte es garantía de salud"/Art is a guarantee of health), and drawings.

Almodóvar observes in his notes for the pressbook:

Cuando el doctor Robert entra en la cocina y la ve, a través de las pantallas, escribiendo fechas, frenéticamente, sobre la pared, no entiende qué está haci-

endo. Vera no quiere perder ni uno sólo de los días que ha vivido, aunque muchos de ellos hayan sido en condiciones inhumanas. Recuperar el tiempo pasado es recuperar la memoria. La pared se convierte en su diario, aunque los días a veces estén representados por un simple palote vertical. “El tigre que espera en su jaula el brevísimo instante de su salvación” no quiere olvidar (si por fin llegara ese instante) la conciencia de sí mismo, ni del tiempo que ha vivido en cautiverio. Mientras siga teniendo memoria, seguirá siendo él mismo. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(When Robert enters the kitchen and sees her on the closed circuit television frenetically writing dates on the wall, he doesn’t understand what she is doing. Vera doesn’t want to lose a single day she has lived, although many of them have been in subhuman conditions. To recover time past is to recover her memory. The wall becomes her diary, although the days are sometimes recorded by a simple set of lines and traces. “The tiger that waits in its cell for the brief fleeting moment of its salvation” doesn’t want to forget [if finally that moment arrives] his awareness of himself, nor the time spent in captivity. While he retains his memory, he will continue to be himself.)

Part of this retention and cultivation of the memory of the self is expressed through art. Vera collects and reads art books and fixes on the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, whose lumpy, hand-sewn assemblages of human figures become models for her own efforts.⁵

Vicente has been subjected to a sex-change operation as the result of which he inhabits a skin, a body, a face, and even genitalia that are not his own. But his goal is to survive at all costs.

Aunque Vera haya cambiado de piel, no ha perdido su identidad . . . ella es una superviviente nata y, después de muchas vicisitudes, decide que “debe aprender a vivir dentro de la piel que habita”, aunque sea una piel impuesta por el doctor Robert. Una vez aceptada su segunda piel, Vera toma la segunda decisión más importante para sobrevivir: saber esperar. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(Although Vera has literally changed her skin, she hasn’t lost her identity . . . She is a born survivor and after everything that has happened she decides that “she should learn to live within the skin she inhabits,” although this skin was imposed on her by Dr. Robert. Once she has accepted her second skin, Vera makes the second most important decision for her survival: to know how to wait.)

Transsexuality here is imposed as a punishment, as an instrument of domination and revenge. Nevertheless we see echoes of the various survivor characters who traverse Almodóvar’s cinema: characters who out of passion, desire, or simple love of life have gone to extremes to survive, by taking control of the reins of their lives despite the adverse circumstances in which they find themselves. Witnessing the transformation of Vicente into Vera, it is difficult not to think of Tina (Carmen Maura) in *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987) or Agrado

(Antonia San Juan) and Lola (Tony Cantó) in *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999).⁶

In this case the surgery is carried out not in the cause of sexual reassignment to bring psyche and body into alignment but to transform Vicente into someone and something else: to erase his identity, and in doing so, produce a replacement for Ledgerd's deceased wife, Gal. A new sex and gender is imposed on Vicente, to be completed by means of the makeup and clothing Ledgerd sends to his patient/creation, Vera.

Una vez convertida en Vera, le manda vestidos ligeros, muy femeninos, para que vaya acostumbrándose. Es la única ocasión en que el personaje reacciona, brutalmente, contra el género impuesto por el cirujano. En la cama hay tres vestidos desplegados, auténticas figuras femeninas yacentes. Vera los contempla con odio, de un salto cae en la cama, como un felino, y ayudándose de manos y pies, o con los dientes, desgarrar furiosa los vestidos hasta reducirlos a un montón de trozos de tela. Lo hace como si estuviera despellejando a un animal. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(Once Vicente has been transformed into Vera, [Ledgard] sends her floaty, feminine dresses so she might become accustomed to her new identity. This is the only time the character reacts, brutally, against the gender imposed by the surgeon. Three dresses are displayed on the bed, as if they were female figures lying there. Vera contemplates them with hatred; she pounces on the bed like a wild cat, and using her hands and feet, and even her teeth, she furiously rips them to shreds until nothing but a heap of fabric remains. She does this as if she were skinning an animal.)

Ledgard projects the role of the quintessential patriarchal figure, the alpha male, who directs the actions and behaviors of those around him. He possesses all the attributes of traditional masculinity: strength, audacity, shrewdness, ambition, power. Vicente as transformed into Vera is an object in his hands, his creation and possession, a new incarnation of Adam's rib. Climbing onto a chair to capture the reflection of his post-operative lower body in a high window, Vicente reacts with horror to the sight of his missing genitals. Years of experiments and operations work to eliminate all traces of his former self, to replace him with another, an other or double of someone else.

El Doble como ejemplo de Unidad. O la "unicidad del doble". "Vértigo" nos lleva al doble, a la repetición, o la recreación del ser amado. Para el doctor Robert (eminente cirujano y científico brillante y amoral) es más propio recrear a su querida esposa Gal partiendo de un ser vivo (al igual que James Stewart) que haciendo un *patchwork* con la piel y los órganos de uno o varios muertos (como hace el doctor Frankenstein) . . . "El rostro no es el espejo del alma", dice en una de sus clases, "sino el de su humanidad". Esto simplemente demuestra que estamos ante un hombre familiarizado con la piel de los muertos y de los vivos, la piel es para el doctor Robert lo que el lienzo para un pintor. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(The Double as example of Unity. Or the “oneness of the double.” [Hitchcock’s] *Vertigo* brings us in contact with the double, to repetition, or the recreation of the beloved. For Doctor Ledgard (eminent surgeon and brilliant, amoral scientist) it is more fitting to recreate his lost wife Gal out of another living being (like James Stewart) than to produce a patchwork out of the skin and organs of one or more dead bodies (as Doctor Frankenstein does) . . . “The face is not the mirror of the soul,” he states in one of his classes, “but the mirror of humanity.” This simply demonstrates that we are dealing with a man who is familiar with the skin of the living and the dead. Skin is for Doctor Robert what the canvas is for the painter.)

The impasse that ensues when Ledgard recognizes that his work has finally been completed (Almodóvar 2011a, sequence 27: 27–8) is violently shattered by the appearance of Ledgard’s own polar opposite, Zeca, who completes the portrait of patriarchal masculinity in its most animal form. With his muscled physique, overpowering strength, and voracious sexual appetites, Zeca is unchecked by intellectual or moral concerns. Where Ledgard takes both aesthetic and libidinal satisfaction in the images of Vera transmitted by the omnipresent security cameras, Zeca would simply devour her. A male animal who acts on his urges, for food or sex, Zeca breaks into Vera’s room and rapes her. As Ledgard watches the scene on the security cameras in the kitchen he feels something unexpected and runs to save Vera/Gal. Having given Vera Gal’s face, Ledgard sees history repeating itself and fears losing her once again. As we subsequently learn, Gal had been having an affair with Zeca and he had been driving the car in which she was a passenger when the crash occurred. He kills Zeca and thereby frees Vera, opening the door to both her liberation and future vengeance. The drama here takes on the cast of tragedy, as the characters assume archetypal roles in a larger, and stranger, than life struggle.

With Zeca murdered, Marilia goes to work cleaning up the blood of her dead son. Marisa Paredes’s actions evoke a similar scene toward the end of *Todo sobre mi madre* in which her character, Human Rojo, performs a dramatic monologue from a Lorca play. Notes Almodóvar, “Marilia habla, como si le rezara a la sangre de su hijo que está limpiando. La bata se mancha de sangre hasta quedar empapada. Su monólogo evoca ecos lorquianos” (Marilia speaks as if she were praying to the blood of her son that she is cleaning up. Her uniform becomes soaked in blood. Her monologue evokes echoes of Lorca) (Almodóvar 2011a, sequence 57: 61). Later, with Vera beside her, Marilia recounts the hidden story of the births of Zeca and Robert. A series of dramatized flashbacks set in Brazil illustrate her voiceover narration. As both stare into a bonfire in the patio of the house, Robert returns from having disposed of Zeca’s body. This moment marks a change in his relation with Vera/Gal.

El Doctor Frankenstein no podía enamorarse del monstruo que creó, pero el doctor Robert sí. Y aquí el mito de Galatea, del escultor enamorado de su obra, desplaza a los otros mitos. (Almodóvar 2011b)

(Doctor Frankenstein could not fall in love with the monster he created but Doctor Robert could and does. And here the myth of Galtea, of the sculptor enamored of his creation, displaces the other myths.)

Ledgard lets down his guard. He forgets who Vera is, her origins, and the reasons for her presence in the house. He forgets that Vera is Vicente. This provides Vicente, who has never forgotten anything, with an opportunity.

Vera and Robert initiate a sexual relationship. As they lie together in bed another flashback sequence begins, as Vera's face in close-up looks directly at the remembered face of Vicente. Almodóvar's script describes the scene: "Vera continúa durmiendo. Y también sueña. El perfil de su rostro, en la base del fotograma se funde con sus sueños" (Vera continues to sleep. She also dreams. Her profile lingers as an underlying image as the vision of her dream develops on screen) (Almodóvar 2011a, sequence 78: 78).

Antonio Banderas's role in *La piel* evokes his previous film with the director, *¡Átame!*, some twenty years earlier. There he also carries out a kidnapping, out of love in that case, out of vengeance and hate that turns into love in the current film. In *¡Átame!* Marina Osorio (Victoria Abril) ends up falling in love with her captor, Ricky. In *La piel* Vera pretends that she has fallen in love with Ledgard, but unlike Marina, Vera/Vicente is unyielding and determined to preserve the core of who s/he is. Where Ricky's vulnerability was the key to breaking down Marina's resistance, Vera/Vicente regards Ledgard's sudden weakness as an opening.

ROBERT: Pero recuerda que me has hecho una promesa . . .

VERA: No lo olvido. Es lo único que tengo, Robert. Tu promesa y la mía. Sin ti no soy nadie.

. . .

VERA (CON DELICADEZA): *Tenemos que hablar. No quiero que haya dudas ni desconfianzas entre tú y yo . . . quiero que estés seguro y confíes en mí . . . !*

Vera lo dice con absoluta convicción. Y Robert la cree.

ROBERT: *No sé porqué, pero confío en ti.*

En el lenguaje de Robert es toda una declaración de amor.

(Almodóvar, 2011a, sequences 138 and 139: 135–6; en cursiva texto del diálogo no montado en la versión final de la película)

(ROBERT: But remember you made me a promise . . .

VERA: I haven't forgotten. It's the only thing I have, Robert. Your promise and my own. Without you I am no one.

. . .

VERA (DELICATELY): *We have to talk. I don't want there to be doubts or mistrust between us . . . I want you to be certain and to trust me . . . !*

Vera says this with absolute conviction. And Robert believes her.

ROBERT: *I don't know why but I trust you.*

In Robert's way of speaking those words represent a declaration of love.

[The words in italics were not included in the film's final cut])

The only character who seems unconvinced by Vera's change of heart is Marilia who seems to anticipate Vera's ultimate plan. But Robert is immune to the cold reason of her arguments. Vera catches sight of a photograph of Vicente in a newspaper article on young people who have disappeared: "Dos caras, dos cuerpos, dos sexos, pero la misma identidad" (Two faces, two bodies, two sexes but the same identity) (Almodóvar 2011b). The scene offers reaffirmation of who s/he really is and confirmation of the decision to reconquer his/her identity. As actress Elena Anaya tells writer Eduardo Mendicutti, "Como tabla de salvación siempre está la memoria. Vera lo sabe: si no olvidas nunca, si guardas tus recuerdos, ellos te salvarán" (Like a life raft to someone drowning, memory is always there. Vera knows it: if you never forget, if you hold on to your memories, they will save you) (Mendicutti 2011: 25).

ROBERT (JOCOSO): Creía que te habías ido.

VERA: Todavía no.

...

ROBERT: ¡Vamos, Vera! ¿Qué haces?

Vera saca la pistola del bolso y le apunta con ella.

VERA: Voy a matarte.

...

ROBERT: Es una broma, ¿verdad?

VERA: Llámalo como quieras ...

...

ROBERT: Pero... ¡me lo prometiste!

VERA: Te mentí.

(Almodóvar 2011a, sequence 153: 152–153)

(ROBERT [PLAYFUL]: I thought you had left.

VERA: Not yet.

...

ROBERT: Come on, Vera! What are you doing?

Vera takes a pistol from her purse and points it at him.

VERA: I'm going to kill you.

...

ROBERT: This is a joke, right?

VERA: Call it what you like.

...

ROBERT: But you promised!

VERA: I was lying.)

Killing him (and Marilia) Vera/Vicente is able to escape from the house that has served as his prison. Although encumbered by a body he has learned to live in but that does not represent his identity, his desire to reclaim his identity gives him the push he needs to begin the journey home, to his mother's shop, the place he had just left when he was kidnapped by Ledgard.

Entering the shop, Vera tries to put into words the story of the last several years to the salesperson Cristina (Barbara Lennie).

CRISTINA: ¿Qué desea?

VERA: No sé por dónde empezar, Cristina.

CRISTINA (ATÓNITA): ¿Me conoce?

VERA: Soy Vicente. Acabo de fugarme . . . Me raptaron . . . Me cambiaron de sexo . . . para huir he tenido que matar a dos personas. Tenéis que ayudarme.
(Almodóvar 2011a, sequence 153: 152–3)

(CRISTINA: Can I help you?

VERA: I don't know where to begin, Cristina.

CRISTINA (ASTONISHED): Do you know me?

VERA: I am Vicente. I just escaped . . . I was kidnapped . . . They changed my sex . . . to escape I had to kill two people. You need to help me).

Vera shows her the dress she is wearing, the same dress that Vicente asked Cristina to wear the night of the wedding that set the whole odyssey in motion. Both begin to cry. Noting the commotion, his mother (Susí Sánchez) enters the room. Standing before her, Vera repeats her declaration, "I am Vicente." With that the screen fades to black: an unexpectedly "happy" ending but one that sets in motion its own series of unsettling questions.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Part of the research for this essay has been carried out with the support of the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación for the Project FEM2009–07194.
- 2 For the further development of this point see Zurian (2005: 26–35).
- 3 The scene also anticipates Zeca's animalistic sexual attack on Vera as he tries to sink his teeth into her face and jaw.
- 4 As in several Almodóvar films, the simple use of personal pronouns is fraught with confusion. When speaking of Vera we will refer to she, her, and hers; when speaking of Vicente we will use masculine forms.
- 5 See the comment by Bourgeois: "Cojo un animal auténticamente masculino y para mofarme de él, le pongo unos pechos" (I take an originally male animal and in order to make fun of him, I put on breasts) in Marie-Laure Bernadac (1995), *Louise Bourgeois*, Paris: Flammarion, pp. 107–108, cited in Mayayo (2002: 47).

- 6 The violent, controlling (at least initially) asexuality of the doctor, Ledgerd, a failed husband and father, reminds us of the pseudo-asexual physician, also a researcher, Fernando Vivanco, of *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* (1982). Ledgerd thus reminds us, in one way or another, of all the husbands and fathers in the Almodóvar filmography. Marginal to the main story in most films, they are literally or effectively absent, self-involved, ineffectual, the shadowy projections of patriarchal power and prerogatives. Pepi's father is a voice on the end of a telephone line, the progenitor of the adolescent Bom is never mentioned, and Luci's husband is a violent abuser. Antonio in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) is the incarnation of the absent but violent husband and father invoked above. In *Matador*, the Antonio Banderas's character's father's abandonment of wife and son is shown as partially responsible for the pathologies of both. In *La ley del deseo*, Tina's father is charged with both incest and abandonment, not to mention forcing his son to undergo a sex-change operation. Antonio's father is a politician who also neglects his family. In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) Iván (Fernando Guillén) is portrayed as a feckless womanizer. In *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) the male protagonist Rickey's (Antonio Banderas) father is deceased and his son kidnaps and rapes the woman he loves. In *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991) Rebeca's (Victoria Abril) husband (Féodor Atkine) carries on an affair with his mother-in-law. In *Kika*, the men are voyeurs, rapists, and murderers. In *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995) the protagonist's husband betrays her with her best friend. In *Carne trémula* there is a wealth of male characters, including a naive ex-convict, a wife-abusing policeman, and the partner who sleeps with the latter's wife. In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the protagonist's ex-husband exhibits no less *machista* behavior for having become a woman. The nurturing male nurse of *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002) ends up raping the comatose woman under his care. The fathers of *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) are priests who prey on schoolboys and who resort to murder when threatened with exposure. Incest again rears its head in *Volver* (2006) where two generations of fathers rape or attempt to rape their daughters (or step-daughter). In *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009) the patriarch Ernesto Martel is a controlling capitalist titan who stops at nothing to get his way.

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PART IV

Re-readings

Re-voicements and Reverberations in Almodóvar's Macro-Melodrama

Marsha Kinder

Mastering Sound: Re-voicing the *Movida* and Macro-Melodrama

Anyone familiar with the films of Pedro Almodóvar is aware of the tremendous artistic growth he has undergone. Yet, the discussion of this dimension usually focuses on the increasing cultivation of lush visuals and the growing maturity and emotional depth of his engaging stories and characters. With the exception of Kathleen Vernon's perceptive writings on Almodóvar's use of music (2009), very little is said about his growing mastery over sound.

In Almodóvar's debut 16 mm feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* / *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), his audio design was merely a medley of comic bits related to sound: a cacophony of comical voices including the fast-paced, high-pitched screeches of a horny bearded wife; punkish songs, like "I love you because you're dirty," performed on stage by the sadistic lesbian Bom; verbal puns like the "General Erections" competition; and a vengeful gang disguised as zarzuela singers strolling the streets of Madrid. But over the next thirty years he would develop a sophisticated approach to sound design that enabled him to end *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* (2009) with a blind filmmaker re-editing his movie solely by ear.

Part of this growth trajectory can be attributed to advancements in sound technology and our increasing cultural awareness of sound design. Though we continue to call our period the age of visual culture, one can make a strong case for it being the era of audio culture. As Bill Whittington writes in his groundbreaking book on *Sound Design and Science Fiction*:

In this age of visual culture, it is important to remember that “sound is half the picture.” Since the 1960s, sound production, technology, and aesthetics have fundamentally changed contemporary Hollywood cinema and the film-going experience. In the field of audio technology, for instance, portable sound recorders have encouraged the collection of all types of “raw materials” used to produce innovative sound effects . . . digital audio workstations have allowed for the creation of multilayered montages of dialogue, music, and effects without any loss of quality or buildup of noise; and new exhibition formats from Dolby Stereo to Dolby Digital have expanded the dynamic range of the film soundtrack and allowed for multichannel (or surround sound) deployment in the majority of motion picture theaters today. More important though, a new attitude toward sound has arisen. In contrast to the classical period of Hollywood cinema, filmmakers and filmgoers today do not just hear movies in a new way; they *listen* to movies in a new way, and what they are listening to is sound design (Whittington 2007: 1).

The inferiority of sound technology in Spain is well known in film history, but ironically it led many Spanish filmmakers to experiment with a conceptual approach to sound design as a means of compensation. Frequently that resulted in their designing disjunctive relations between sound and image that violated the rules of Hollywood classical cinema. This was true not only of Almodóvar (who used such disjunctions as a source of shock and subversion) but also of earlier filmmakers like Buñuel (who, despite his deafness, credited himself with “sound design” in his most experimental films) and several auteurs in the art cinema of the opposition (including Juan Antonio Bardem, Carlos Saura, Víctor Erice, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, Jaime Armíñán, Pilar Miró, José Luis Guerín, and Bigas Luna) who frequently used a disjunctive soundtrack to get around the censors. But once the Francoist censorship rules were suspended and once Spain gained access to the kinds of technical advances Whittington describes, Spanish filmmakers were well positioned to leverage their legacy of conceptual sound design, as in more recent films like Julio Medem’s *Lucía y el sexo* / *Sex and Lucia* (2001), Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001) and *Mar adentro* / *The Sea Inside* (2004), and Carlos Molinero and Lola Salvador’s *La niebla en las palmeras* / *The Mist in the Palm Trees* (2006).

When Almodóvar made his first feature *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, he was aware his soundtrack was technically inferior, a situation he later mocks in *Los abrazos rotos*. To overcome this backwardness in audio technology, Almodóvar began relying on foreign sound professionals who had worked with other world-class auteurs—such as, German soundman Martin Muller in *Laberinto de pasiones* / *Labyrinth of Passions* (1982) and *Entre tinieblas* / *Dark Habits* (1983), known for his work with Werner Fassbinder and Wim Wenders; Jean-Paul Mugel on *Tacones lejanos* / *High Heels* (1991) and *Kika* (1993), known for working with Wim Wenders, Agnès Varda, and Michael Haneke; and Bernardo Menz on *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) and *Carne trémula* / *Live Flesh* (1997), known for his work with Chilean Patricio Guzmán on his documentary *The Battle of Chile* (1972–79). Almodóvar’s move from one soundman to another suggests he was personally in charge of conceptualizing

the design, yet less confident about the technology. But once he started using Dolby for his sound mix—first in *¡Átame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), then Dolby Stereo in *Kika*, and Dolby Digital in *Carne trémula*—only five years after it was first introduced into American movie theaters—he was no longer defensive. Starting with *Todo sobre mi madre / All About My Mother* (1999), he began working with Spanish soundman Miguel Rejas, with whom he has been collaborating ever since.

As Vernon (2009) has demonstrated, music always played a key role in Almodóvar's approach to sound design. From the beginning, what he found particularly appealing was the way music increasingly became more personalized at the same time it was increasingly going global. These dynamics were accelerated by the introduction of the iPod (in October 2001), whose sales quickly went viral worldwide and which helped transform the way all mass media (not just music, but also television and movies) are now distributed and consumed (a transition still in progress). Especially important for a Spanish auteur with global appeal who resisted the crossover to Hollywood, the iPod enabled individuals (including Almodóvar and his fans) to create their own database of musical numbers that could function as a soundtrack for their own personal narratives—a private archive that could house remixed songs from anywhere in the world. With this internalized database, they could challenge the hegemony of any nation or culture by linking these select sounds to their own local images, actions, and feelings, creating a new plurality of meanings. It is this internal process of remix that grows increasingly strong in his work.

In this essay, I explore Almodóvar's use of sound and its larger cultural and social reverberations, emphasizing key moments in five films that marked crucial transitions in his career. I am hoping this exploration reveals new insights not only about the work of Almodóvar but also more generally about sound-image relations in cinema and culture.

The fact that Almodóvar made his film debut within the *Movida*, the urban youth culture that emerged in post-Franco Spain during the late 1970s, rather than within the Spanish art cinema of the opposition, already predisposed him to rely on global pop music as a primary source of subversion. What immediately gave Almodóvar his distinctive edge was his ability to skillfully combine global voices—British punk, American pop, and other international underground movements—with local inflections and his own personal repertoire of inner voices he had acquired by consuming and remixing hundreds of movies, songs, and other popular narrative forms from all over the world. As he put it,

Pepi, Luci, Bom . . . could have taken place in any big city but the details belong to Madrid, the beginnings of the golden age of Madrid pop, punk, comics and general frivolity . . . *Pepi's* point of reference is late seventies New York trash culture, and *Labyrinth* has more to do with the frivolous London pop of the mid-sixties . . . In *Labyrinth of Passion* I continued immersed in the typically urban pop aesthetic, this time with a deliberately rosy tone (Almodóvar 1992: 125).

During this early period, Almodóvar was frequently called “the Spanish Andy Warhol,” a pioneer of postmodernism who celebrated not only transvestites and movie queens like Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor, and Audrey Hepburn, but also soup cans and other forms of commercial art. Although Almodóvar followed suit by including parodic television commercials in his first two films, he was more vocal than Warhol, relying both on image and sound to make his outrageous pop interventions. Performing as a singer as well as a writer and filmmaker, he claimed he was also influenced “by underground movements such as Fluxus, one of whose members was Yoko Ono”—whose Japanese nationality and intimate alliance both with pop star John Lennon and the international avant-garde, made her all the more appealing as a foreign audio icon (Strauss 1996). During this phase, Almodóvar took great pleasure in mashing up parodies of all popular and underground genres, creating a form of live cinematic performance in which he functioned like a human karaoke machine, personally voicing all the parts.

I attempted all genres in my films . . . The shoots always turned into a party . . . I’d make fake newsreels, fake adverts, then the main feature. Since all the films were silent—sound recording for *Super 8* is difficult and the results always unsatisfactory—I’d stand next to the projector and add the voice of each character. I’d also provide a running commentary and sometimes criticize the actors’ performances. And I’d also sing. I had a little tape recorder and would insert songs in the film. These were live shows and the audiences loved them (Strauss 1996: 2).

This passage reveals four strategies that were crucial to Almodóvar’s early approach to sound–image relations in cinema and eventually became more subversive when combined: (i) acknowledging the technical limitations of his own sound technology and finding conceptual means of overcoming them; (ii) combining parodies of several popular movie genres with their contrasting vernaculars and tones; (iii) transforming cinema into live performance, which enabled him to underscore the disjunction between sound and image as he ventriloquized all the roles; and (iv) using local inflections and his own inner material to re-voice foreign influences and re-inscribe them as his own.

According to Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, “re-voicement” is the act of combining “voices of authority” with “one’s own internally persuasive voice” (Bakhtin 1981). He considered re-voicement an important ideological strategy within his theory of dialogism, for such combinations weaken any mythical notion of a singular hegemonic truth. Thus, the subversive potential of this dialogic effect is greatly strengthened whenever some of these authoritative voices are foreign and whenever a mixture of genres is involved, which was certainly the case in Almodóvar. Though Bakhtin was describing how re-voicement functioned in satire and the novel rather than in cinema and music, he argued that in all intentional generic and stylistic hybrids the crucial activity is not so much the dialogizing of linguistic forms “as it is the collision between different points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms” and “the carving out of a living image of another language.”

This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages. It is this knowledge that will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language, based as it is on an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language (Bakhtin 1981: 369–70).

These arguments for the subversive nature of dialogism were particularly applicable to Spain where the Francoist government had historically used Castilian as a means of imposing a false unity on the nation and repressing other regional languages and cultures. Although Almodóvar had deliberately acted (especially early in his career) as if Franco had never existed, he boldly replaced those official voices with an outrageous cacophony of commentaries, speeches, and songs from his own subculture of the *Movida* and from other foreign underground movements, and eventually concocted a new subversive stereotype for post-Franco Spain that his movies popularized worldwide. In this way, he succeeded in “carving out a living image of another language” that relied both on sight and sound.

Another major factor in Almodóvar's emergence as an underground figure in Spain was his early commitment to macro-melodrama as his ultimate global genre. His global perspective enabled him to realize that not only could melodrama be found and understood in practically every culture in the world but it also could be hybridized with all other film genres—from comedy to tragedy, farce to *noir*, westerns to horror, musicals to porn. It was also a genre that could easily be combined with narrative forms outside of cinema—with opera and zarzuelas, radio and television, *churros* and soaps, telephones and games. And, as inscribed in its very name, there was always room for *melos* in melodrama, music that could be combined with extravagance of other kinds—in movement and gesture, in costuming and art design, in color and tone, in acting and plotting, in image and sound. It was a genre he would never outgrow and would never need to abandon, but one he could continually re-voice in new ways. With this emphasis on the genre's capacity for protean transformation, he hybridized it with comedy—creating a nimble comic melodrama capable of increasing depth.

This flexibility and unlimited potential for hybridity led me to dub Almodóvar's use of this genre *macro-melodrama*, a term close in meaning to Peter Brook's usage of melodrama as an adjective (“an abiding mode in the modern imagination” that is characterized by excess and cuts across many periods, cultures, and art forms, both of the high and low variety), rather than as a noun, a specific genre which has a narrower fixed history associated with the French Revolution and Italian opera (Brooks 1976). Almodóvar's all-accommodating form of macro-melodrama led him to treat all of his films as part of the same super-text, as an unfolding narrative network of melodramatic tales in a wide range of tones whose boundaries frequently dissolve and re-congeal into new patterns. These new combinations feature characters whose dialogue can be dubbed and re-voiced and whose *labyrinth of passions* always remain at least partially open ended. Given these roots in the *Movida* and macro-melodrama, Almodóvar's explorations of sound were intriguing from the start.

Musical Substitutions and Intertexts in *Laberinto de pasiones*

In *Laberinto de pasiones*, Almodóvar's first feature shot in 35 mm, his subversive re-enforcements of sound are primarily musical. Featuring a far-fetched love story—between Riza (Imanol Arias), a gay Iranian Royal hiding in Madrid, and Sexilia (Cecilia Roth), a Spanish nymphomaniac allergic to the sun—this comic melodrama leverages the sound of music to bring these unlikely lovers together. What results is a “sound design” that leads us to read even its most shocking events (on-screen incest, torture, and diarrhea) with humor and “a deliberately rosy tone.”

The film's most important musical sequence presents a series of three live performances in a club that caters to the *Movida*. Although we hear only the tail end of the first performance by Sexilia and her female band, it is immediately followed by a number performed in drag by Almodóvar and his real-life singing partner Fabio McNamara. Though merely a comic interlude (like Bom's song in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, and the taped tunes Almodóvar used to insert into the live performance of his 8 mm films), this number (“Suck it to me”) demonstrates that Pedro, as emcee and lyricist, is still controlling the sound design and tone. Their number warms up the audience—both in the club and in the cinema—for the crucial act that follows, which proves pivotal to the plot. For the third number (“Gran ganga”) imbues the Iranian Riza with local pop-star status in Madrid, as he fills in for the injured lead singer of the band. As if to underscore the difference between these two performances, the “Suck it to me” duet is interrupted by cutaways to the dressing room where Riza is being outfitted for his new starring role.

On the level of parody, Riza's performance re-envoices the traditional situation in a back-stage musical—when the star can't go on and the understudy gets to take her place. But, more important, this replacement unleashes a series of more radical substitutions that shape the rest of the melodrama. Sexilia is replaced by Queti (a shop girl who works at the dry cleaners), so that the former can fly away to Panama with her Prince Charming and the latter can escape from her sexually abusive father (who has been using her to fill in for his runaway wife). Once Queti becomes Sexilia, her incestuous relationship with her biological father is replaced by a more acceptable incestuous coupling with her new dad, which proves pleasurable to both parties. Riza's musical performance also triggers key transformations in the main lovers. During his number, Sexilia falls madly in love with Riza, which cures her nymphomania and converts him to heterosexuality. Ironically, these conversions become the minor comic miracles demanded by a “rosy” heterosexual romance.

In another key sequence, the film uses musical intertextuality to imbue the homegrown Sexilia with the global glamour of “italianicity” (to use Barthes's term), making her a more suitable international match for the Iranian prince. For she must compete with other foreigners who are hotly pursuing him: both his deposed father's ex-wife (Helga Liné) who wants him to impregnate her; and the

handsome young Islamic terrorist (Antonio Banderas) who picks him up on the street. On the morning after his singing debut, when Sexilia goes to visit Riza for their first private encounter, she rides on the metro, wearing an extravagant Felliniesque outfit (a long red cape and large plastic hoop earrings) which attracts the attention of the working-class passengers who look at her with disdain. Accompanying these images, we hear the same music that Fellini used in *La dolce vita* (1959) to convey the excitement of the Via Veneto as a world-class tourist attraction that draws thousands of ordinary people to come gawk at the decadent rich and famous. The music helps transfer that glamour not only from Anouk Aimée to Cecilia Roth, and from Federico to Pedro, but also from Rome to Madrid, as (to use Marvin D'Lugo's phrase) "the city of desire" (D'Lugo 1991). The same music was also used by Luchino Visconti in *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) to imbue Milan (rather than Rome) with a similar glamour, but this time as seen through the impoverished eyes of a provincial family coming to the big city for the first time—an experience with which Almodóvar could readily identify.

This musical intertextuality can fluidly bring to mind a specific sequence or an entire film from anywhere in the world, and even if the audience doesn't recognize the source, their emotional response may still be enriched by the link. Later, Almodóvar would use it to make connections between his films, particularly those that remix the same material from his own interior database. For example, in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) and *La ley del deseo / Law of Desire* (1987), he uses the same music to heighten the emotional resonance of a climactic reunion (between mother and son in the former, and lovers in the latter), a reunion that either prevents or precedes a suicide. As I have detailed elsewhere (Kinder 2009), although these films have radically different tones, this repetition of music reveals the deep emotional connection between these two family melodramas about brothers.

In *Laberinto's* metro scene, the musical intertextuality makes us think more about the setting—about the differences between Rome and Madrid. It brings to mind the film's opening sequence in El Rastro, Madrid's popular flea market where the contrast between Sexilia and the general public is not so striking. For, as the overhead shot of the huge crowd reveals, everyone (no matter how diverse or flamboyant) fits in. The close-ups of male crotches that follow (from both Sexilia's and Riza's converging points of view) are accompanied by music evoking the bullfight, which underscores the Spanish bravado of this sexy location and its blatant rites of cruising. While the focus is on members of the *Movida*, we see and *hear* dialogic clashes in language, sexuality, and lifestyle that came to define Almodóvar's re-envoicement of Madrid. But, only in retrospect do we realize—through the familiar Italian music from *La dolce vita* in the metro—that El Rastro has become Spain's Via Veneto.

To follow these erotic substitutions and recognize these musical intertexts, we need to keep track of the tone, which demands a good *ear*. Not a remarkable nose (like that of Banderas's Islamic terrorist which sniffs out Riza as his object of desire) or hyper-sensitive vision (like that of Sexilia who was blinded by the sun in an

earlier moment of passion). For it is our ear that enables us to understand the whole picture and how its toon-like characters should be read. Like Patty Diphusa, the transsexual porn star whose memoirs were written by Almodóvar but who is played in this film by his singing partner Fabio McNamara, *Laberinto's* characters are presented as avatars, who can be embodied or performed by more than one player. But what happens to sound when the characters become three-dimensional and the stories gain emotional depth?

Dubbing as Re-envoicement in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*

In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), the light comic melodrama that marked Almodóvar's crossover into mainstream global cinema, movies replace musical numbers as the database items being re-envoiced. The emphasis switches from singing to dubbing, a filmmaking process that reveals not only the separation of sound and image but also the constructedness of all cinema characters (jointly created by actors, dubbers, writers, editors, directors, sound mixers, cinematographers, costumers, and others). The unity of any performance is therefore acknowledged as an illusion that can easily be dismantled. Yet that also means these characters have a remarkable capacity for change. Perhaps this emphasis on dubbing and change is what made *Mujeres al borde* so adaptable—both by Almodóvar himself in *Los abrazos rotos*, and by others as a Broadway musical (2010),¹ which put him in the select company of modern European masters like Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman whose *8½* (1963) and *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), respectively, were also restaged as musicals.

From the very beginning of *Mujeres*, the audio track is blatantly separated from the visuals. In the opening titles we see bright blocks of primary colors exuding a cheerful modernity as we hear a woman's doleful voice singing the *ranchera* "Soy infeliz" (I am unhappy). In our first glimpse inside the narrative, we see the terrace of Pepa's apartment as we hear her disembodied voiceover describing the rural-urban hybridity she purposely cultivated in the décor.

Once we turn to the dubbing sequence that immediately follows, we cannot miss the privileging of the human voice within this disjunction. In fact, when Almodóvar started writing *Mujeres al borde*, he intended to make it an adaptation of Jean Cocteau's play, *The Human Voice* (which he had earlier adapted in a theatrical sequence in *La ley del deseo*, where Carmen Maura plays the Anna Magnani role and her little ward Ada lip-synchs Maysa Mataraso's version of "Ne me quitte pas"). But in *Mujeres al borde*, his desire for a mainstream audience moved him in another direction. In this instance the privileging of the human voice enabled him to challenge cinema's traditional subordination of sound within Hollywood classical cinema, particularly as theorized by Mary Ann Doane (1980).

In "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," Doane argues that synchronized sound is an ideological mechanism designed to smooth over the gaps between the three separate spaces that comprise cinema spectatorship: the two-dimensional screen (which is flat and silent); the diegetic world of the fiction (where three-dimensional space and sound are merely illusions); and the actual three-dimensional space of the theater (where spectators and audio track actually meet). By linking sounds to on-screen bodies, this synchronization uses embodied voices to draw us spectators into the fictional world of the story and to foster our emotional identification with the characters. In this way, we are more likely to ignore the gaps between the three spaces and between the sound and image tracks and to accept the illusion as reality (Doane 1980). Although the introduction of surround sound challenged this model by spatializing the way sound was heard within the theater and thereby creating stronger connections between the fictional and theatrical spaces, Doane's analysis enabled us to predict how such changes might enhance spectator identification and the fusion of sound and image.

In *Mujeres al borde*, which uses Ultra Stereo, a cinema surround-sound system developed in 1984 to rival the prevailing system of Dolby Stereo, Almodóvar strives for precisely the opposite effect. This dubbing sequence not only accentuates the separation between sound and image and between interior and exterior space, and thereby exposes the artificial construction of characters and plot, but it also shows us we are still emotionally moved nonetheless.

Significantly, the particular inset film being dubbed comes from Hollywood classical cinema (rather than the European art film or avant-garde). This choice demonstrates that even mainstream Hollywood classics are susceptible to ideological re-inscription through sound—a lesson Spaniards already learned during the Francoist era when censors used Castilian dubbing to alter dialogue they didn't approve of. By choosing Nicolas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), an edgy western-melodrama hybrid, and by exploring the subversive potential of its voice, Almodóvar shows that cultural re-inscription can move in both directions and that melodrama is ideally suited for such reciprocal movements, since it glides so readily across national and generic borders. Like *Mujeres*, *Johnny Guitar* could have it both ways.

In the first dubbing sequence Pepa (Carmen Maura) lies in her bed, dreaming in black and white of the serial infidelities of her live-in lover Iván (Fernando Guillén) with an array of beautiful women who embody national stereotypes from all over the world. This vision evokes the harem dream from Fellini's *8½*, where the sexy voice of a Scandinavian stewardess helped eroticize the setting. But here it's the philandering man whose sexy voice controls the scene. We follow Iván into the studio where he dubs the voice of Sterling Hayden in *Johnny Guitar*, a film whose flamboyance was more appreciated by French new wave directors (especially Truffaut and Godard) than by American critics who preferred classical model-Ford westerns. In this scene, Johnny declares his love for the protagonist Vienna (Joan Crawford), the ballsy modern woman who owns the local saloon.



Figure 13.1 Iván gives voice to Johnny Guitar's love for Joan Crawford in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Macusa Cores.

Undoubtedly, she's the film's most powerful character, though her lovers (both Johnny Guitar from the past and the Dancin' Kid from the present) occasionally exert their masculine muscle and provide the musical accompaniment acknowledged in their names. Yet while Pepa oversleeps, Vienna remains voiceless and powerless. It is Iván's voice (rather than the mute images of the women) that dominates the scene.

This continuing disjunction between sound and image during the dubbing sequences is echoed in the distance maintained between Pepa and Iván, who fail to cross paths in the studio and fail to be connected by phone. Rather, Iván uses a message left on an answering machine to dump her and to make new outrageous demands. These divisions underscore the "constructedness" of the narrative whose characters and shots are composed of modular fragments, which can easily be remixed. Significantly, Pepa's dream and Iván's dubbing session are both introduced by an extreme close-up of Iván's mouth poised at the microphone. This image accentuates not only the seductiveness of his voice and the fetishizing of his gendered acoustical instrument (which is as powerful as Johnny's guitar) but also the enormous gaps between what he says and what he does.

Augmented by the amplified ticking of many alarm clocks, these narrative disjunctions open a temporal gap between the two sides of the conversation in *Johnny Guitar*—a space that is filled with narrative threads that set this fast-paced, hyper-plotted film into motion. Before re-envoiing Joan Crawford, Pepa listens to Iván's

depressing message on the answering machine, sees a doctor who tells her she's pregnant, learns that Iván's going on a trip with his new mistress, trades insults with his ex-wife over the telephone, and dubs a wedding scene from another film. Yet, once Pepa puts on the head phones (her own receptive acoustical instrument), the stirring guitar music and her own inner feelings about Iván get her in the mood for her encounter with Johnny. What we see are not the images from *Johnny Guitar* but rather the pulsing, moody blue light from the projector moving across the room. This concrete image of projection helps us re-voice the conversation to suit the current crisis between Pepa and Iván—wishing that Iván would revive his love for her, and wishing she could be the one who tells him it's over. At the end of the dubbing scene, when Pepa faints, this action defines the film's primary challenge: she must be transformed into a strong independent woman like Vienna who can reject her unfaithful ex-lover with similar conviction.

The sequence leads us to ask: what do you learn by unhooking the voice from the image? Whereas Roland Barthes led us to expect this separation would restore the unlimited plurality of meanings to the image (once the accompanying words no longer anchored it to a single message), in Almodóvar's movies the separation also grants us access to the full plurality of meanings in the dialogue (Barthes 1977a). The conversation from *Johnny Guitar* acquires greater depth when it draws on Pepa's inner feelings and is applied to her romance with Iván—a dynamic enhanced by the accompanying abstract image of the flickering blue light. The separation also tells us something about the interplay between sound and image, which are potentially equal in their powers of expressiveness but are both enhanced when collaboratively engaged like partners in a dance. Yet Almodóvar chooses to emphasize sound because it has been underdeveloped, both in critical discourse and in cinematic practice.

Although *Mujeres* presents a cacophony of voices, many of which are comic as in *Laberinto*, some like Pepa's become fully humanized and have real depth. *Mujeres al borde* makes us ask: how can the re-voicement of a strong Hollywood star like Joan Crawford ("Mommy Dearest") help Pepa become a strong modern woman who can live without a man and thrive as a single mother? The closest model for Pepa from within Almodóvar's own work is the title character Pepi from his debut feature—a connection underscored by the similarity of their names and by the casting of Maura in both roles. With hindsight, we realize these were the first and last of Maura's collaborations with Almodóvar for some time. (They did not work together again until eighteen years later in *Volver* [2006].) So we might well ask, how does this film prepare Maura to continue on her own, with neither Iván nor Pedro?

This question of change also applies to Almodóvar. After having been such a strong force in the *Movida* and having achieved such notoriety and success at international festivals with darker, daring works like *Matador* (1986) and *La ley del deseo*, why was he now making his move to mainstream cinema with a lighter comic melodrama? Though he retained his artistic freedom in Spain and insisted he would never make the crossover to Hollywood, the dubbing sequence enabled

him to dialogue with edgy Hollywood classics like *Johnny Guitar*, favorites he might have to renounce (or at least subversively re-voice) if he was going to retain his own edge and go on to even greater heights (or depths). Like Pepa and Carmen, perhaps Pedro also needed to re-voice Vienna's renunciation of *Johnny Guitar*.

Mujeres al borde was not the first film in which Pedro dramatized the intertextual interaction with on-screen excerpts from other movies. He had done it before in his two previous darker films, *Matador* and *La ley del deseo*, which both reveal that spectator identification is a form of re-voicement that can destabilize our sexuality and seal our fate. While both sequences are *watched* in a movie theater, the inset excerpt from *La ley del deseo* is *set* within a studio where a porn film is being dubbed. In *Matador* he used another Hollywood western/melodrama hybrid, *Duel in the Sun* (Charles Vidor, 1946), whose notorious "lust in the dust" ending enabled Almodóvar's pair of serial killers to re-enact (rather than dub) their own erotic double suicide. In *La ley del deseo* the inset excerpt comes from a film contrived by Almodóvar rather than from a Hollywood classic like *Duel in the Sun* or *Johnny Guitar*, yet its position at the opening and its use of dubbing to create a radical separation between sound and image help trigger an equally extreme transformation in the spectator: a repressed right-wing heterosexual is instantly inflamed with homoerotic desire. Like *Mujeres*, *La ley del deseo* possesses strong reflexive elements, including characters involved in the film industry and a fetishized sonic instrument. The filmmaker's typewriter becomes a percussive instrument whose rhythmic tapping blends right into the bolero heard on the soundtrack, and, like Pepa's red phone, later becomes an object of displaced rage that is flung out the window. While *Mujeres* combined the re-voicement strategies used in both of these earlier radical films, they lost some of their ideological edge when applied to the mainstream content of this comic melodrama. Almodóvar would try again later in *Los abrazos rotos*, where *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* itself becomes the inset film being redubbed, but this time reframed in *noir*.

The Maternal Voice in *La flor de mi secreto*

In *La flor de mi secreto*, a film that marked a shift to a more somber tone and darker form of melodrama, there is a key moment when the protagonist, the fashionably lean writer Leo (Marisa Paredes), is on the verge of suicide, but at the very last moment hears the internalized voice of her mother (Chus Lampreave) which literally saves her life. Occasioning a trip back to their family village in La Mancha (the mythical birthplace of Don Quixote and Almodóvar), depicted as Spain's nurturing Motherland, this maternal intervention enables Leo to escape not only her erotic obsession with her philandering husband Paco (Imanol Arias, who also played Riza in *Labyrinth*) but also her constrictive writing contract that limits her to romance. Once her mother reminds her that she was once called "la gordita" (fatty), Leo

develops a newly expanded persona, which enables her to become an independent woman (like Pepa and Vienna) and a flowering artist like Almodóvar, capable of mastering new forms. Meanwhile, she passes on her old nom-de-plume to Ángel (Juan Echanove), her nurturing editor at *El País*, another “gordito” and fellow lover of words. Though he formerly wrote under the female pseudonym, Paqui Derma (a female variation on Paco as well as on Patty Diphusa), this androgynous writer agrees to take over Leo’s old contract and frees her to write whatever she wants.

Demonstrating the expansiveness of such freedom for a writer, *La flor* encourages us to re-read other films by Almodóvar in a new way (a dynamic I have called retro-seriality), for it encourages us to consider the intertextual resonance among these texts as another mode of re-voicement (Kinder 1997, 2004, 2009). For example, *La flor* was neither the first nor the last Almodóvar film to feature a mother’s voice as a source of grace in life-and-death situations. Yet, given he considers it a “neo-realist portrait of [his] own mother,” *La flor* treats this dynamic reflexively as a major step in his distinctive mastery over maternal melodrama. This dynamic recurs later in *Volver*, a film seriously addressing domestic abuse, where the maternal voice reverberates across three generations of victimized mothers and daughters. Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) is empowered by her song, which enables her to forgive her mother (Carmen Maura) for murdering her philandering husband and ignoring his sexual molestation of their daughter, and to aid her own daughter in covering up the patricide that prevented another case of incest. We also find this dynamic earlier in *Tacones lejanos*, where the mother Becky (Marisa Paredes) is an egocentric pop star who sings her heart out to atone for having earlier neglected her daughter Rebeca (Victoria Abril). As I have noted elsewhere (Kinder 1992, 1993, 1995), both mother and daughter pursue oracular professions—as a singer and television newscaster, respectively—using the airwaves to confess crimes against the father and strengthen their mutual identification with each other. Becky’s maternal voice performs miraculous interventions—when imitated by female impersonator Femme Lethal (Miguel Bosé) who impregnates Rebeca while still dressed as her mother, and when Becky falsely confesses to murder to save her daughter from prison.

As several critics have observed, this use of the mother’s voice in Almodóvar’s maternal melodramas is resonant with the feminist theorization of sound, particularly in the work of Kaja Silverman who emphasized its importance in subject formation. As Silverman observes in *The Acoustic Mirror*,

The mother performs a crucial role during the subject’s early history. She is traditionally the first language teacher, commentator, storyteller—the one who first organizes the world linguistically for the child and first presents it to the Other. The maternal voice also plays a crucial part during the mirror stage, defining and interpreting the reflected image, and “fitting” it to the child. Finally, it provides the acoustic mirror in which the child first hears “itself” . . . Indeed it would seem to be the maternal rather than the paternal voice that initially constituted the auditory sphere for most children, although it is clearly the latter which comes to predominate within the superego (Silverman 1988: 100).

These dynamics are brilliantly dramatized in *Tacones lejanos*, whose very title identifies the audio fetish that binds mother and daughter within the trans-subjective acoustic mirror. The percussive sound of high heels tapping on the pavement is introduced by Becky in stories of her childhood, which she tells to her daughter. As the child of impoverished janitors, Becky used to listen for the well-heeled feet of bourgeois passersby, which could be seen through the window of her humble basement flat. To Becky the images are as important as the sounds. But when Rebeca appropriates this story, she focuses only on the sound of the high heels tapping, transforming it into an audio fetish, which she uses when staying up late to wait for her mother's return. Through this re-voicement, she privileges sound over image, a reversal that acquires erotic associations with mother love and patricide. By fetishizing the maternal voice and by amplifying it through media transmission and hardware usually controlled by men, these women succeed in replacing "the unspoken Name-of-the-Father and the hollow voice of God" (Kinder 1993: 257).

It was the subordination of sound to image both in film history and production and its analogic relation to women's subordinate position under patriarchy, that first drew feminists to theorize the gendering of sound-image relations. Some like Amy Lawrence (1991) emphasized the historical complaints about the inherent inadequacy of the female voice for media transmission—because of its alleged shrillness, stridency, and weakness (qualities Almodóvar uses as a source of humor in his earlier films). Others like Doane and Silverman focused on showing how sound-image relations were gendered within Hollywood classical cinema (Doane 1980; Silverman 1988). As in Laura Mulvey's influential essay on the structure of the gaze and the way it was cut to the measure of male desire (Mulvey 1975), these feminist texts on sound revealed new dimensions of film language that could be used not only by feminists and queer theorists but by all those interested in the expressive powers of the medium. Thus, issues of gender and sexuality were perceived as expanding rather than narrowing our understanding of cinema and the way it produced meaning in the social field. According to Vernon, *La flor* also marks a broader shift in the way Almodóvar uses not only the maternal voice but also music and sound design.

Where the earliest films largely reflected the punk-pop idiom of the post-Francoist cultural phenomenon known as the *Movida* . . . the middle period, beginning with *Matador* (1986), featured a favored role of Latin American music and songs, the bolero in particular, and provided for the deepening emotional resonance of those films. Almodóvar's subsequent collaboration with composer Alberto Iglesias, starting with *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) and continuing through his most recent films, suggests a further development in his concepts of the role of music in film and arguably a new understanding of the relation between music and narrative and between songs and composed score" (Vernon 2009: 52–3).

In these later films, certain percussive sounds with symbolic resonance starkly stand out from the background ambience, just as individual songs stand out from the musical score, creating highly immersive sonic interludes. In *La flor* the most

memorable example occurs when, after having been sexually rejected by her husband, Leo shatters the glass frame that held the falsely romantic photograph of them as a married couple. The frame is suddenly dismantled into several translucent glass balls that noisily bounce onto the floor, rolling randomly in all directions. While the image functions as a witty visual pun for the devastating effects this break-up has on her sanity ("losing her marbles"), the percussive tapping of the glass balls evokes the tapping of Antonio's heels during one of his flamenco numbers (a sound that also accompanies the opening titles). Like her mother's intervening voice, this striking sound encourages Leo to accept the break-up with Paco and warns against entering a similar dead-end relationship with the ambitious young Antonio.

As I have written elsewhere (Kinder 2004), *La flor* also launched a brain-dead trilogy—three films that feature a comatose youth who is rendered brain dead in an accident. This brain-dead condition moves from being merely a symbolic image in *La flor* (from an inset instructional video on how to convince family members to donate vital organs), to a major pivot in the plot in *Todo sobre mi madre* (where the protagonist's son is run down in the street), to the central narrative situation in *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002) (where two young women are rendered comatose by a car accident and bullfight). Yet, only *La flor* emphasizes the resulting transplants, which become a bodily form of re-envoicement. Both the mother's voice emerging from within Leo, and the transfer of her literary persona to Ángel, also become symbolic transplants that make the trope all the more resonant.

Like the recurring maternal voice, this brain-dead trope refigures Spain as a motherland, generating a fascinating interplay between human voices and bodily gestures. It generates a fluid trans-subjectivity that runs within and across these texts that comprise Almodóvar's macro-melodrama.

Macro-Melodrama in *Hable con ella* and *Todo sobre mi madre*

Hable con ella contains a fascinating musical sequence where singer Caetano Veloso performs "Currucucú Paloma" on camera to an audience that includes not only important characters from this film but also Cecelia Roth and Marisa Paredes, actresses who played lead roles in *Todo sobre mi madre*. The choice of the Brazilian singer and Mexican song underscores Almodóvar's efforts to move across the national borders of Spanish-language cinema and across the boundaries between individual films—an erasure of boundaries that also works on the registers of gender and genre. Like the intertextual strategies we earlier traced between *La flor de mi secreto* and other works in Almodóvar's brain-dead trilogy and like the musical intertextuality between *Qué he hecho yo* and *La ley del deseo*, this musical fusion demonstrates that both of these Oscar-winning films belong to a single networked structure, an evolving macro-melodrama. According to Vernon:

The Brazilian singer's lovingly careful articulation of the Spanish lyrics, the slow tempo and unusual instrumentation—more characteristic of the modern Western art song than Cucurricucú's original identity as a mariachi-inflected *huapango*—works to strip away ethnic markers, transforming the song from folkloric kitsch into an anthem of globalized utopia for spectators and listeners both within and beyond the diegesis. . . . The sequence challenges the temporal and spatial coherence of the film's fictional world, expanding its boundaries to embrace the broader Almodovarian universe (Vernon 2009: 57).

Vernon observes that this is not the first time Almodóvar used the voice of Veloso; we also heard him singing “Tonada de luna llena” (“Song of the Full Moon”) over the credits in *La flor*, the film that launched the brain-dead trilogy as well as other intertextual connections and retro-serial readings within his own canon. One reason Almodóvar is so drawn to Veloso is that his adult falsetto evokes the kind of gender ambiguity that we heard in the transsexual Tina in *La ley del deseo*, who had been molested by his priest, and in the young boy in *La mala educación* / *Bad Education* (2004) whose rendition of “Moon River” (the song from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Blake Edwards, 1961) triggered a similar sexual violation. Both of these characters evoke Almodóvar himself, who tells Veloso in a fascinating exchange quoted by Vernon, “I had a voice that was sweet like yours.” But it is Veloso's reply that is most amazing, for it echoes Silverman's theorization of the role played by the internalized maternal voice in subject formation: “My feminine identification is my voice. I sing like my mother; I learned to sing with her and when I sing—I have a song that says, ‘My mother is my voice’—I feel that she is with me (Vernon 2009: 59).

Almodóvar is one of the few filmmakers who takes full advantage of the theoretical insights on the gendering of sound-image relations. He had always paid close attention to how the “grain of the voice” (Barthes's term) was gendered (Barthes 1977b). This is apparent even in his early memoirs of Patty Diphusa, where he adopts a literary voice that toggles between being a woman and a transsexual (Almodóvar 1992). Among transvestites and transsexuals, it is well known that the voice is frequently the giveaway—the trace of male identity that remains resistant to hormones and surgery—but Almodóvar values this trace as a sign of hybridity. We can see this dimension in *Todo sobre mi madre*, where the father (the original Esteban) is visually female and acoustically male—a sensory fusion that deliberately prevents us from identifying him as simply one or the other. Like Jesus (who was both human and divine) and the “holy ghost” (both animal and spirit), Esteban's dual identity makes his impregnation of the virginal Sister Rosa (Penélope Cruz) almost miraculous and their child—the third Esteban in the trinity—a miracle baby capable of conquering AIDS. In the secular realm, Almodóvar casts Marisa Paredes as his Spanish Joan Crawford, who (despite being middle-aged) has an androgynous body—slender and boyish—and, just as important, a deep sexy voice. This combination equips her to star as the pop diva in *Tacones lejanos* who is emulated by transvestites and desired by her own daughter, as the literary figure Leo in *La flor* who gives her voice to an androgynous male writer, and as the

lesbian thespian in *Todo sobre mi madre* who thrives in plays by world-class gay playwrights—from Tennessee Williams to Federico García Lorca.

In *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*, the interweaving of plots reaches a new level of complexity, one that is illuminated by musical metaphors and narratology. Instead of remaining comical as in *Laberinto de pasiones*, here Almodóvar's hyperplotting generates a series of harmonic lines, like different instruments orchestrated within a musical score. This is the way Lévi-Strauss used Wagner, once he realized the blending of lines across the vertical and horizontal planes, applied both to music and narrative (Lévi-Strauss 1969). And the way Barthes theorized narrative orchestration in *S/Z*—as the interweaving of five codes within the sequential and agglomerative spaces of the text (Barthes 1974). And it helps explain how a film like *Hable con ella* can be so harmonious, even when the criminal act of love at its center (the rape of a young brain-dead woman) is so disturbing.

The interweaving of stories occurs both within and between the two films. In *Hable con ella*, the love story of Benigno and Alicia alternates with the analogous tale of Marco and Lydia as theme and variation, as this film echoes the earlier two works in the brain-dead trilogy.

This is one reason why we see Marisa Paredes and Cecilia Roth in *Hable con ella*, as part of the audience listening to "Curcucucú Paloma," whose lyrics apply to all three movies. And why we don't have to see the accident that renders the dancing Alicia brain-dead because we already saw Esteban's similar accident in *Todo sobre mi madre*, which also occurred in the rain. The two parallel stories told by Benigno and Marco are interwoven seamlessly together like a classical pas de deux; they move fluidly both backwards and forwards in time, occasionally making arabesques to revisit earlier scenes where new details are artfully inserted within ellipses. Despite Benigno's strong desire for narrative closure, which helps drive him to suicide, the film creates the sense that the whole story can never be told. That's one of the reasons why it ends with the beginning of a new story, formalized in the title "Marco and Alicia." This new story is launched by two dance numbers in the theater where Marco and Alicia happen to meet. In the first, several men pass the body of a woman between them (an image that evokes both the opening from Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* (1978) and also the bullfighting scene in which Lydia's broken body was carried out of the *corrida*). The second expresses hope with the openness of its ending: a series of couples slow-dancing to a bolero. All of the actions in the film—whether massaging an inert body or facing a bull in the *corrida*—become choreographed movements in a dance.

Both films use other narrative forms to amplify and re-voice these interwoven tales: dance and silent cinema in *Hable con ella*, and television and theater in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Mediating between cinema and radio, television is a domestic medium that inspires a distracted form of spectatorship, which frequently is more attentive to sound than to image. With its diverse programming and serial repetitions, television enables us to appreciate Almodóvar's mimicry and mastery of tone, a form of ventriloquism that demands a good ear. Like music on the soundtrack, television can insert any intertext into the story, though perhaps not



Figure 13.2 Theme and variation: Benigno and Alicia and Marco and Lydia in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Miguel Bracho.

so fluidly as music. It introduces *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) into *Todo sobre mi madre*, preparing us for the introduction of Huma (Marisa Paredes), who named herself after Bette Davis. Yet, Huma is primarily identified with the theater, another medium, like television, that privileges the human voice and serial repetition. Theater enables understudies to read multiple parts, the way Almodóvar voices all the roles for his actors before they begin to shoot the film. By listening to a performance night after night, the understudy learns how to take over a part—the way Manuela (Cecilia Roth) takes over the role of Stella, which is a slight deviation from cinema, where Pepa (Carmen Maura) relies on dubbing to take over Crawford's role of Vienna in *Johnny Guitar*.

In *Hable con ella*, the intertexts focus on the body rather than the voice—whether they are the mute dances performed by Pina Bausch and her troupe on-stage, which strengthen Benigno's emotional bonds both with Marco and Alicia—or the silent science-fiction film (a parodic version of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* [Jack Arnold, 1957]), which leads Benigno to rape the brain-dead Alicia as an act of love. Yet these mute body genres alternate with long monologues. By listening to Benigno talk to the comatose dancer Alicia day after day, his friend Marco feels more comfortable replacing him as the nurturing love interest in her life, just as Manuela takes over the role of nurturing mother for Sister Rosa. In the process of weaving these two films together, Almodóvar amplifies his own interior database of characters and voices, through these personalized networks of vocalizations and re-voicements.

Retro-seriality in *Los abrazos rotos*: Reverberations in the Age of Audio Culture

In the final sequence of *Los abrazos rotos*, Almodóvar's first film devoted to a reflexive celebration of cinema, a blind filmmaker named Mateo Blanco (Lluís Homar) sits in front of a screen *listening* to footage he had shot when he still had his sight. Relying solely on his ear and aural memory to re-edit the film, he restores the version of his comedy, *Chicas y maletas*/*Girls and Suitcases*, that he had originally intended and discredits the sabotaged version that failed in the theaters. The "pirated" version had been produced by his villainous rival Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez), who owned the rights to the film and deliberately chose the worst takes. In this remix, Mateo reverses the usual meanings of the terms *authorized* and *pirated*, which normally rely on money and legal rights instead of the author's intentions. Thus, not only does this sequence demonstrate the crucial role of sound (particularly in comedy and *noir*), but it also validates the filmmaker's internalized voice as the privileged source of the authorized text.

These dynamics take on new meaning when we consider that the inset film, *Chicas y maletas*, is an adaptation of Almodóvar's own *Mujeres al borde*, the comic melodrama that used dubbing and sound design as a mode of artistic growth as he made his successful crossover into global mainstream cinema. As a world-class auteur with his own production company, Almodóvar never has to suffer the oedipal blinding and castration that are imposed on Mateo. Yet *Los abrazos rotos* reveals Almodóvar's nagging desire (so typical of writers in the digital age) to keep revisiting and improving what he has already done—a desire that explains his increasing fascination with "retro-seriality" and "macro-melodrama" (Kinder 2010).

Instead of blending the comedy and melodrama together as in *Mujeres*, *Los abrazos rotos* places an inset comedy within a *film noir* frame, risking a clash of tones that even worries Mateo. With its intricate flashback structure, the frame evokes



Figure 13.3 The disjunction between sound and image: Martel hires a lip-reader to provide the dialogue for Lena's affair with Mateo Blanco in *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2009; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni y Emilio Pereda.

Almodóvar's previous *film noir*, *La mala educación*, where Lluís Homar played a murderous pedophile instead of the protagonist. And the femme fatale performing multiple roles was played by a transgendered Gael García Bernal impersonating Sara Montiel instead of Penélope Cruz doing Audrey Hepburn. These connections encourage us to re-read these two earlier films by Almodóvar (*Mujeres al borde* and *La mala educación*) in light of *Los abrazos rotos* and to see all three as comprising another trilogy within his expanding macro-melodrama. As Barthes observed: "The one text is not an (inductive) access to a Model, but entrance into a network with a thousand entrances" (Barthes 1974).

Like *Mujeres*, *Los abrazos rotos* contains an important dubbing sequence, but here the reverberations are more compressed. Suspicious that his young mistress Lena (Penélope Cruz) is having an affair with her director Mateo, Martel forces his closeted gay son Ernesto Junior (Rubén Ochandiano) to document their movements on video. But given the inferior technical quality of Ernesto's sound equipment (which is as abysmal as Almodóvar's was on his first 16 mm feature, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*), Martel hires a deaf interpreter to lip-read the lines, for he cannot tolerate the disjunction between sound and image. During the dubbing, Lena bursts into the studio and breaks up with Martel in direct address, a confrontation that underscores the liberating effects of a disjunctive soundtrack.

While the movie relies on Ernesto Junior's pixilated digital images to document the car accident in which Mateo loses his eyesight and Lena her life, Almodóvar adds symbolic sounds that emerge out of the ambience, as if to compensate for the inadequacy of Ernesto's sonic equipment. The place where the fatal crash happens is marked by a giant mobile sculpture, whose spinning globes and wheels, and reflective surfaces and eerie sounds, seem to model the intricate structure of the narrative or of Almodóvar's macro-melodrama. Like the breaking-glass frame

in *La flor*, this striking sound is accompanied by strong images; together they have powerful reverberations that go beyond the narrative connections with the lovers' break-up. Challenging the assumption that sound is subordinate to image and temporarily breaking the disjunction between the audio and visual tracks, this fleeting combination reveals the dialectic power of sound-image fusion: where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Almodóvar's recasting of the roles in Mateo's remake of *Mujeres* is more complex than it at first appears. Not only is Carmen Maura's Pepa replaced by Penélope Cruz's Pina, but their Hollywood models shift from Joan Crawford to Audrey Hepburn. To demonstrate the inherent versatility of the original material, Almodóvar insists these are not merely replacements but a more complex narrative reshuffling, as if they were remixed items from his own internal database of pop culture.

In this new version . . . Pina isn't an adaptation of [Pepa] the role played by Carmen Maura, but rather of the role of her model friend Candela. The character also has echoes of Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the most modern ingénue of cinema and American literature, although the hairstyle is that of another character played by Audrey Hepburn, Sabrina (Almodóvar 2009).

Although Cruz's evocations of earlier stars are primarily visual, *Los abrazos rotos* also reveals the sensual power of aural memories, which Mateo relies on both in making films and making love. At one point he longs to hear Jeanne Moreau's sexy voice in Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), suggesting he is turned on by sound. This revelation should come as no surprise since his sexual performance with the sexy young blond in the opening sequence is driven by her verbal description of herself, which he has authorized.

Many of the intertextual re-voicements in *Los abrazos rotos* echo the sonic strategies already described from earlier stages of Almodóvar's career: the cacophony of comical voices, musical intertexts, disjunction of sound and image, inset performances, dramatic shifts in tone, orchestrated plots, internalized voices, and audio fetishes, all of which generate change. Almodóvar is quite explicit about these connections. When describing the hilarious monologue delivered by Carmen Machi, about her sexual adventures with a drug dealer, he claims he was trying to "recover that free, playful, very politically incorrect, irrepressible, crude tone of *Patty Diphusa* from the early 80s" (Almodóvar 2009).

By drawing on his entire canon to celebrate cinema's resilience, Almodóvar shows his films still can appeal to multiple generations—even to those who prefer television, digital video, the internet, and the iPod. And especially to the generation of Mateo's son Diego and his friends who work as DJs in a popular club and wear vintage "Suck it to me" tee-shirts, alluding to the punkish song Almodóvar and Fabio McNamara performed in *Laberinto de pasiones*.

In this age of audio culture, by demonstrating how a growing mastery of sound can intensify sensory pleasures, and how the disjunction between sound and image

can increase the plurality of meanings, and how an internalized soundtrack can echo subject formation and destabilize gender and genre identity, Almodóvar's films help explain the viral popularity of iPods, headphones, and other internalized acoustical instruments. For these acoustical instruments (especially cellphones and iPods) can function as audio fetishes that fill in for the missing companion, making it easier to be alone in public places. This dynamic is particularly useful for someone like Mateo who recently lost the love of his life, and for an auteur like Almodóvar who is totally dedicated to his career. These devices create an inner sonic world that contains not only inner speech and imagined dialogues (like those Benigno has with the comatose Alicia) but also a creative space for remixing memories, daydreams, and other narrative modules both from without and within—precisely the process that Mateo performs with such mastery at the end of *Los abrazos rotos*.

Note

- 1 For a study of the transplant of Almodóvar's 1988 film to Broadway, see Isolina Ballesteros, chapter 17, this volume.

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The Flower of His Secret

Carne trémula and the Mise en Scène of Desire

Celestino Deleyto

Spanish identity and history have occupied a central position in academic interpretations of Pedro Almodóvar's oeuvre. Originating in the effervescent crucible of the *Movida*, his films, more than those of any of his contemporaries, became the cinematic correlative of the drastic changes experienced by Spanish society during "la Transición" (the period of transition from dictatorship to democracy), arguably the most important moment in the country's recent history. By the time he came to general visibility as one of the foremost figures of world cinema, his work had already acquired the cultural importance that it has continued to enjoy among specialists of Spanish cinema and society. While this perspective has proved fruitful in many cases, it has also had the negative effect of downplaying the fundamental role of desire and sexual discourses in his filmic world.

The "cultural-historical" slant present in dominant analyses of Almodóvar has also brought about a generalized lack of attention to his rich use of mise en scène and the purely visual (and aural) fascination of his movies. As a consequence, a certain disjunction has come into existence between those elements of the filmmaker's art that have turned him into one of the top figures of contemporary cinema—his mastery of cinematic technique, and his personal approach to the representation of desire—and those aspects privileged by Almodóvar specialists within Film and Hispanic Studies—his status as icon of contemporary Spanish identity. An exception to the latter is Paul Julian Smith's 1994 monograph, aptly entitled *Desire Unlimited* in whose introduction he underlines the films' proximity to some of the positions of psychoanalytically inspired feminist film theory, and yet decries the critics' and audiences' neglect of mise en scène analysis (1994: 3–5). Considered in retrospect, Smith's hypotheses point to a different type of historicity

in Almodóvar's work: the confluence between his films and a certain moment in the history of western sexual discourses and film theory.

Carne trémula / *Live Flesh* (1997) can be seen as both exemplary of and a turning point from the perspective suggested above. Its multi-protagonist story of untrammelled desire and unsocialized passions continues the trend of many of his films of the 1980s and early 1990s. Its sophisticated cinematic style brings to fruition Almodóvar's growing interest in technique and inaugurates a new phase of visual virtuosity that may be seen as the culmination of his art, a phase which continued with the subsequent international success of *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999), *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002), and *Volver* (2006). Although earlier films like *Matador* (1986), *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987), *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), and, especially, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) had already offered the Almodóvar aficionado various visual articulations of his approach to intimacy and sexuality, *Carne trémula* may be said, perhaps for the first time, to fully transform the "law of desire" into a "mise en scène of desire." In this chapter I want to focus on this particular film as a space of convergence between earlier laws and later mise en scènes in order to better explore an aspect of his art that has been relatively neglected by scholarship.

The phrase "the mise en scène of desire" is taken here from Elizabeth Cowie's theory of fantasy and of the cinema as public fantasy. Writing in 1984, and using theories of Freud, Lacan, Laplanche and Pontalis and others, Cowie undertakes to counter what for her was the moralistic slant of much post-Mulveyan feminist film theory, a theory that, in its urge to debunk traditional patriarchal positions, condemned sexual fantasy, especially that promoted by mainstream cinema, as a form of sexist acculturation. For Cowie, fantasy originates in the primal scene and precedes socialization and, therefore, has no ideological content. Films, as public fantasies, reproduce unconscious fantasies in a multiplicity of scenarios in which, as in the original one, the important thing is not the achievement of a desired object, but, rather, an imagined scene, a setting out of desire, the pleasure being not in the consummation but in "the happening and the continuing to happen" (Cowie 1984: 80). As in the scenario described by Freud in "A Child is Being Beaten," the subject in this fantasy, which constitutes the origin of sexuality and is endlessly replicated in films and other public fantasies, occupies shifting positions and plays different roles, constantly changing identification and therefore sexual identity.

Other theorizations of sexuality of the time, such as Gaylyn Studlar's Deleuzian theory of a film aesthetic based on pre-oedipal masochism (1988), coincide in the affirmation of a multiplicity of positions for a spectator who had been shackled to sexual fixity by the theories of Laura Mulvey and her followers. The freedom to identify with a free-floating sexuality and with ever-shifting positions of desire when watching a film is very similar to Smith's description of Almodóvar's cinema as one that celebrates fluidity and performance and is hostile to fixed positions

(1994: 3). In my view, this is not so much a question of the Spanish director's constructions of desire proving the veracity of the theories of Cowie, Studlar, and others, but of their belonging to the same moment in the history of western cultural discourses. The sexual discourse that they share is one that stems partly from dissatisfaction with the relentless anti-libertarian backlash of the early 1980s (Seidman 1992: xi and *passim*) and with the increasingly stifling political correctness demanded by second-wave feminism. Sexuality, even heterosexuality, was beginning to be perceived by certain feminists not as a form of patriarchal oppression but as a form of pleasure to which women should claim their right; and the cinema, even classical Hollywood cinema, as an institution that made endless forms of pleasure and sexual fantasy available to everyone.

More than two decades later, certain voices hold feminism and its post-feminist children, along with the market's appropriation of sex, responsible for the blandness and trivialization of love in a world in which, according to Cristina Nehring, "every aspect of romance from meeting to mating has been streamlined, safety-checked, and emptied of spiritual consequence" (2009: 7). This best-selling author's desperate call for a love which is "ecstasy and injury, transcendence and danger, altruism and excess" (2009: 13) continues to find a sounding board in the films of Almodóvar and a few (very few) of his contemporaries. As Smith argues, it is this coincidence of visions between otherwise culturally distant historical actors that helped Almodóvar to transcend his national specificity and connect with spectators, film critics, and scholars all over the world.

There are, however, certain important differences between Cowie's *mise en scène* of desire and the way in which I wish to appropriate her concept to describe Almodóvar's films and, specifically, *Carne trémula*. As we have seen, Cowie refers to a fantasy which is deeply entrenched in our unconscious and which generates our whole sexual identity. Because of its centrality, it reappears constantly both in our conscious and our unconscious life. Also, although the concept and the theory stem from a very specific moment in the history of feminism, its own aspirations, like those of much psychoanalytic criticism, are ahistorical and universal: all subjects have the same fantasy, all films ultimately reproduce it. I have been arguing that Almodóvar's articulations of desire are very perceptibly inscribed in history, as much as psychoanalytic and feminist film theory and criticism are. They, in fact, belong to a very specific period of western discourses on sexuality and Spanish history. In this sense, as I will suggest, the historical frame provided by the beginning of *Carne trémula* in the 1970s is not so much a commentary on the political situation in Spain in that particular decade, as, for example, Acevedo-Muñoz asserts (2007: 170), but a strategy to historicize desire. On the other hand, *mise en scène* as a concept of film style and film analysis is not concerned with depths but with surfaces. This *mise en scène* is not so much a fantasized setting as primarily a series of visual and aural techniques which turn desire into cinema, affect into an aesthetic object. I want to argue that it is at this level that the singularity and the impact of Almodóvar's mature cinema resides. As Peter Brunette says about the

films of Wong Kar-wai, “his depth, and thus the real source of his power, can be found on the surface” (2005: xvi).¹

As with the Hong-Kong filmmaker, perhaps the closest one can find in the contemporary panorama to Almodóvar’s articulations of desire, the secret is all too visible, if only we stop to look and explore our responses to what we see. Although, at first sight, the explicitness and excess narrated in a film like *Carne trémula* is culturally light-years away from the restraint and indirectness to be found in the characters of, say, *In the Mood for Love* (2000), both directors share a view of human relationships and history in which sexuality is central.

Both often feature characters whose lives are ruled by strong passions, and both have succeeded in transferring the power of desire to the surface of their films. Both, therefore, share a cultural and cinematic space characterized by a deceptive superficiality. In his excellent monograph on *Mujeres*, Peter Evans laments Spanish critics’ “faint praise” of Almodóvar “as a director of brilliance rather than depth” (1996: 11), but these critics may be closer to the mark than they intend as, in these films, both terms, rather than contradictory, are closely intertwined. Like Wong Kar-wai’s cinema, *Carne trémula* demands that we stop at skin level and concentrate on what is most obviously on display—a collection of images and sounds structured around the primacy of desire in people’s lives.

The first of two prologues of *Carne trémula* offers Almodóvar’s irreverent version of the Nativity. It is Christmas 1970 and Franco’s government has declared the state of emergency as a consequence of the upheavals caused by the “Juicio de Burgos,” the trial of sixteen members of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) during the month of December in what for historians of contemporary Spain became one of the most significant events of the transition. The usually busy streets of the center of Madrid are uncharacteristically empty (although it may also be that it is very late at night) and an empty local bus stops in the middle of a side street. In an ostensibly symmetrical framing, which intensifies the symbolic significance of the moment, the camera slowly tracks in from a high angle shot until it stops just outside the bus, two of its windows framing a bizarre family: Isabel (Penélope Cruz), a prostitute, who has just given birth to a baby on her way to the hospital; Centro (Pilar Bardem), the owner of the brothel (Pensión Centro) where the former works; and the unnamed driver of the bus (Alex Angulo), who has just met them on his way back to the bus depot after a day’s work. In only a few minutes a warm intimacy, visually fixed here by the Christmas-card quality of the double framing, has grown between them, and the improbable group have endeared themselves to us as a new family model for the post-Franco era.

As the bus heads for the hospital where Isabel will be feted as a brave Christmas mother by the late totalitarian regime, the camera stays briefly on the now empty frame disclosing the graffiti on the wall: “Libertad. Abajo el estado de escepción [sic]” (Freedom. Down with the State of Exception). Most commentators of the film have in a sense stayed behind, too, and have interpreted *Carne trémula* as a commentary on contemporary Spanish politics, but the director himself, after

taunting us for a few seconds, prefers to leave the metaphorical Nativity scene and accompany the characters in their narrative future. In a subsequent shot, Centro proudly lifts the new-born baby in her arms and shows him Madrid, as the bus passes by the Puerta de Alcalá and the title of the film is superimposed on the screen. Víctor's flesh may indeed be "tremulous" as he takes in the first sights of his hometown but in the rest of the film the trembling of flesh will not be caused by traumatic birth or delicate infancy, and certainly not by political trauma, but rather by exposure to relentless and obsessive sexual desire.

After the pause provided by the NO-DO-like (the official Spanish newsreel under Francoism) sequence, the bus journey visually segues into Víctor's (Liberto Rabal) motorbike ride past the same Puerta de Alcalá twenty years later. At this point, his life is already driven by desire: he is hurrying to reunite with Elena (Francesca Neri), the wealthy and unstable daughter of an Italian consul with whom he had lost his virginity the previous week. The film's title, "*Carne trémula*," perfectly describes, according to José Arroyo, its emotional pitch: "raw, fearful, passionate, possibly deadly, but possibly delicious" (1998: 51). Víctor was born not only at a time of political restlessness and enduring dictatorship but also in a country in which, for many, the stringent and often absurd curtailment of sexual freedom was one of the most prominent everyday aspects of Francoist repression.

Twenty years later, one of the most visible symptoms of the vertiginous changes that had taken place in the country after the death of the dictator, was the achievement, however precarious, of a new sexual freedom. Almodóvar's films had become, by then, both an exuberant celebration and one of the prime signifiers of this new freedom. In a sense, then, the director was already in 1997 part of the history narrated in the film's prologue and a character like Víctor, driven only by desire, also the child of the new Spain that in no small measure he had contributed to construct.

Yet Víctor is not the only character whose life is governed by relentless passion. In the film's plot the lives of five different characters of similar narrative importance interlock in the streets of Madrid as their successive encounters change their destinies in drastic and unforeseeable ways: Clara (Ángela Molina) is married to Sancho (José Sancho), a police inspector, and is having an affair with David (Javier Bardem), Sancho's colleague and friend. When the two policemen break into Elena's apartment to save her from what looks like a rape attempt by Víctor, a pizza delivery boy, Elena falls in love with David, who is left paraplegic, apparently as a consequence of Víctor's gun shot. Six years later, David is married to Elena. Soon after coming out of jail, Víctor starts an affair with Clara. At the end, Clara and Sancho kill each other. Following a night of sex with Víctor, Elena leaves David and starts a life together with Víctor, by whom she gets pregnant. The film ends almost as it started with a baby about to be born in the center of Madrid.

In the course of the narrative, love has caused pain and joy, death and new life; couples have been formed and dissolved, passions have flourished and dwindled, characters have felt the exhilaration of fulfillment, the pangs of

unbearable jealousy, and the frustrations of rejection and indifference. Like a modern-day *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, love has taken unexpected turns and traveled down the road to marriage or away from it; it has been arbitrary and savage, and resisted domestication.

In the above summary of the film the concepts of love and desire have been used as synonyms. Characters love those that they desire sexually and fall in or out of love according to their sexual attraction. There may be different shades of passion in their affection or attraction towards one another but there is never any drastic separation between the two concepts as they are lived by the characters and constructed by the narrative. Many contemporary discourses of sexuality, however, are predicated on a more or less strict separation between love and desire and on their contradictory nature. These discourses go back to the separation in the Middle Ages between two morally polarized affects—uplifting spiritual love and destructive physical passion. These two later became integrated into the beneficial modern concept of romantic love as a combination of Christian devotion and sexual passion (Giddens 1992: 39) only to drift apart around the differentiated concepts of love and sex in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to gradually become fused again through the process that Steven Seidman has called “the sexualization of love” (a love therefore that before was not sexual) in the course of the last century (1991: 4–5).

This process culminated with the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s but since then a bifurcation of affects has once again gained ground in dominant intimate discourses. “Commonsense” statements like “Women want love, men want sex” probably remain untenable in sociological terms but retain much of their popular currency nowadays and continue to be perfectly understandable. When Cristina Nehring goes to the roots of the concept of romantic love and defines it as a “combination of physical arousal with spiritual, intellectual, and sentimental elevation” (2009: 31), she is calling for a return to a discourse she fears is in real danger of disappearing. For those who in the last decades have shared this anxiety, those which Seidman would label as libertarians (as opposed to romantics) in their attitude to intimate matters (1992: 187), a film like *Carne trémula* and, in general, Almodóvar’s attitude towards intimate matters come to the rescue.

In Almodóvar’s films there is no drastic separation between love and desire. This conflation is the direct consequence of the historically specific Spanish cultural context in which the texts appeared and that his libertarian discourse, to use Seidman’s terminology, connected with a then already residual but still powerful perspective on romantic love. Almodóvar’s characters live to love, love passionately, and the culmination of this passion is generally sexual. The two films from the previous decade that most clearly anticipate the sexual ideology of *Carne trémula*, *Matador*, and *La ley del deseo*, end with their protagonists fulfilling their passionate love for each other in a sexual climax which, in the tradition of *amour passion* (Giddens 1992: 37), coincides with their deaths. If in traditional

descriptions of romantic comedy love leads to marriage, in Almodóvar it inevitably leads to orgasm, and happiness, however short-lived, depends on its achievement. Even between parents and children incest is often an option which is explicitly alluded to, humorously or not, in many cases and hinted at in others. Almodóvar's intimate universe is almost exclusively sexual. In *Carne trémula* those characters whose main narrative drive is not desire are confined to the margins of the story, however sympathetic they may be, as in the case of Isabel and Centro who, important as they are in the first few minutes, never return to the screen once the main story gets under way. Since, however, the majority of contemporary cultural texts and discourses firmly adhere to the separation between both concepts, accounts of Almodóvar's films often reveal a conceptual discrepancy. For example, James Berardinelli, in his popular web page, describes the film's affective world in the following terms: "Obsessive sex opens the door to freedom. Almodóvar isn't denying the value of romance, but emphasizing the complexities of any love-based relationship and affirming that sex is far from irrelevant" (1998). This is a fair description of the film's ideology but it is based on the underlying premise that romance and sex are not only separate concepts but even opposites.

In Almodóvar's films in general and in *Carne trémula* in particular love does not seem ready to loosen its grip on people. It is erratic and it may fade, but only to be replaced by a stronger passion. Chance rules the film's emotional universe and sometimes it seems the most powerful ally of unruly desire. Elena falls in love with the policeman who came to rescue her from Víctor's apparent attack, but only a few seconds later David becomes paraplegic, which we can infer will turn Elena's initial passion into pity, frustration, and longing for something better, which she will find in Víctor. Her suddenly found affinity with her erstwhile assailant will stem from the sexual compatibility discovered during a fateful night of passion. David's adulterous relationship with his friend Sancho's wife will be, years later, followed by his own wife's affair with Víctor, which will condemn him to a future of loneliness and resignation. After her love for David has faded, Clara meets Víctor accidentally at the cemetery and falls in love with him, a feeling which is exclusively represented through their trysts in his humble pre-fab but is not reciprocated. Hard as they may try.

Almodóvar's characters cannot force themselves to love the "appropriate" person. Coincidence governs their passion and passion, however out of place, governs their lives. Within the filmic universe, they are better human beings for the strength and consistency of their feelings, no matter the costs. Even Sancho's aggressiveness and machismo are, although never condoned, explained as a consequence of his years-long frustration. His love for Clara can only express itself through violence but it is no less real for it. The text compassionately accepts and even, at certain points, admires it in its relentless purity and sheer force, as it admires Clara and David in the integrity of their love for Víctor and Elena, respectively, even in its hopelessness. In an Almodóvar film those who love passionately usually merit at least the spectator's compassion. As can be seen, various shades of romantic joy

and frustration are represented through the interconnected narratives of the characters' lives while none of them escape the logic of Almodóvar's universe.

The presence of a group of characters of comparable narrative importance and the proliferation of links and connections between them and their stories situate *Carne trémula* within the then burgeoning new genre of the multi-protagonist film, a type of movie that tells an assortment of stories with a wider group of characters without establishing a strict hierarchy among them (Azcona 2010: 2). In this genre, meaning derives not from the traditional, more or less linear, narrative arcs of the protagonists but rather from the accumulation of events and experiences across different plot lines. In this case the impact of desire on people's lives is multiplied through the series of echoes and reverberations that each character's vicissitudes have on those of the rest. At the same time the effects of the deployment of the conventions of the multi-protagonist genre go far beyond the sounding-board effect of the interlocked narratives. In its impregnation of the lives and identities of five characters, love also transcends their individual vicissitudes and is conveyed to the spectators not only through identification with their individual predicaments but also through a more disembodied presence that exceeds them. In her description of the conventions of the multi-protagonist film, Azcona refers to the frequent presence in these movies of a surplus of meaning, often difficult to pinpoint, which is often constructed through specific visual and aural strategies such as the music in the soundtrack, certain camera movements, slow motion, and patterns of editing at transitional points. At these points a sense of uncanniness and defamiliarization takes over and spectators are encouraged to look for a different logic beyond the immediately obvious (Azcona 2010: 42).

In *Carne trémula*, while the characters are constructed in a relatively classical way and meaning is articulated through the usual channels, including visual mechanisms, certain stylistic elements also acquire a life of their own, hinting at meanings that are not related to any character or event in particular. They remain, as it were, on a different level of signification and convey a more generalized attitude towards sexual desire, one which is textual before it applies to any of the characters or events. They talk to us through characters and events but speak with a different voice. They constitute, in both deep and superficial ways, the film's *mise en scène* of desire and go a long way towards explaining what is special and most fascinating in Almodóvar's cinema.

Carne trémula's second prologue, twenty years after the first one, immediately links the five protagonists in the Madrid night both narratively and spatially. It starts with Sancho and David driving past a fast-food establishment while Víctor is going inside after his last delivery of the night. The two policemen later appear to go past the window of Sancho and Clara's apartment, as Sancho telephones his wife, whom he has just beaten up. We see Víctor standing outside Elena's apartment and telephoning her before taking a whole round of Madrid on the bus and returning to the same place where he now sees her standing at her window. The section finishes with all of the principals together except for Clara, connected by a

(as we will later discover) not-so-accidental gunshot. In the course of this series of interconnections several emotions have started to emerge from the narrative incidents: childish obsession, jealousy, sexual guilt. For the moment, the specific feelings are less important than the overall high pitch of their manifestations.

Two musical themes have punctuated the various journeys and telephone conversations and have directed and started to shape our emotional response: the Andalusian song "Ay mi perro" (My Poor Dog) for the first part and Alberto Iglesias's Hitchcockian theme for the rest. The song is linked explicitly to the dialogue between the two policemen when Sancho identifies their police job with that of a sheepdog that protects the lambs from the wolves. More importantly, however, it situates the action in a typically Almodovarian universe of recycling and pastiching of the type of Spanish popular culture usually despised by the director's intellectual constituency. Increasingly, Almodóvar has taken these instances of debased folklore very seriously and has placed the emotional excess that he favors within the melodramatic register that they immediately evoke. "Ay mi perro" points the spectators towards the emotional register that will be required of them if they are to understand and enjoy the movie. The rest of the music in this section is of a very different nature: it harks back to Hitchcock and specifically to Bernard Herrman's score for *Vertigo* (1958) and its combination of longing and suspense.

Vertigo is a classical instance of a romance that is inseparable from sexual longing and a celebration of a disembodied mise en scène of desire, in which the experience of the affect is partly transmitted to us, as it were, directly, without the intervention of the protagonist. In Hitchcock's film desire is not just a matter of identification with the characters: it goes beyond their constructed feelings and jumps at us from the surface of the film, interpellating us in an Althusserian sense and constructing our identity around a purely romantic view of existence. Whatever the realities of our affective world are, to aspire to love in a less extreme way than Scottie does would demean us as human beings. In fact, our desiring position in the film transcends that of the character and, not least through the soundtrack, is expected to be every bit as intense and as uncompromising as his.

Something comparable is happening in the scene under analysis from *Carne trémula* and Iglesias's score at this point is demanding a similar type of response, even though the specific intimate discourses articulated in this film belong to a different cultural and historical background than those present in *Vertigo*. In this case, the fact that the scene puts into play the more or less hidden desires of five different characters with similar narrative importance contributes to this effect. For those familiar with *Vertigo* the music conveys the idea that these characters are driven by desire and, in spite of the historical-political overtones of the first prologue, so is the text as a whole. The proliferation of desiring characters suggests a universe where nothing else matters. The complex intertextual reverberation of Iglesias's score (which includes not only *Vertigo* but also *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, a film that had already referenced Hitchcock in an explicit way)² provides some of that surplus of meaning characteristic of multi-protagonist films but a number of visual strategies are equally suggestive.

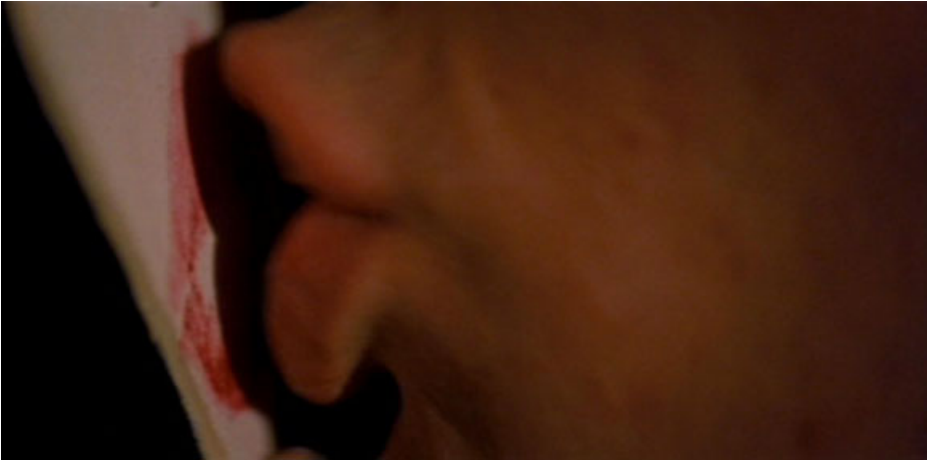


Figure 14.1 Token of desire: Victor kissing a beer mat bearing the imprint of Elena's lips in *Carne trémula* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1997; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

Continuing Almodóvar's increasing interest in the signifying potential of objects and the possibilities of the close-up beyond the human face, and reminiscent of similar moments in *La ley del deseo*, *Mujeres*, *La flor de mi secreto*, and others, a sequence of two shots stands out in this second prologue. After Sancho has confided to David that he thinks his wife is cheating on him, we see him take another swig from a whisky bottle. Then, as the Hitchcockian musical theme is reprised, the film cuts to a detail shot of a lighter being applied to a piece of tin foil with some heroin on top, which somebody is inhaling. Always at very close range, the camera moves slowly up from the lighter to the tin foil and then left to the lips. A graphic match now links the unidentified lips to a lipstick mark on a beer mat where the name Elena and a telephone number and an address have been written. Another pair of lips kisses the lipstick on the beer mat, this time from the right.

The next cut—a match on action to a medium shot of Víctor outside Elena's building—reveals that the second pair of lips are his. He is ringing her from a telephone booth but her number is engaged. The film now cuts to the inside of her apartment. We see the character for the first time speaking on the phone, holding an empty piece of tin foil and trying to secure some drugs. The ostensible aim of the lips sequence is to usher in the new character, but this is done in a rather displaced manner. For one thing, the music stops before Elena is visually introduced, and, although we may not be sure, the inhaling mouth of the previous shot does not seem to be hers.

This two-shot sequence has several functions. First, it works as an elegant and complex transition from one story and one set of characters to the next: we see two of the male protagonists in the last two shots before it and the other male protagonist in the next shot. Sancho and David are patrolling an area of Madrid rife with drug dealings and the new character, Elena, is first seen dealing drugs. Sancho has just spoken to his wife on the phone and Víctor is now trying to get through to Elena. Thus the symmetries and interconnections between the characters are emphasized

and/or anticipated. Secondly, the two-shot sequence works, more ambiguously, as a micro-narrative: there is a further symmetry between the inhaling lips on the left of the framing in the first shot and the kissing lips on the right in the next one. We know that the second mouth is Víctor's but are not quite sure whose the first one is. It is not even clear whether it belongs to a woman or a man. Further, within a purely narrative logic, when we see Elena for the first time she is indeed holding a piece of empty tin foil like the one we saw in the close-up but she does not look like somebody who has just inhaled some heroin. We soon find out, on the other hand, that the lipstick on the beer mat belongs to her and that Víctor is, therefore, kissing an imprint of her lips. We find ourselves, in the analysis of the scene, trying to narrativize the visual logic of the sequence, unable to make full sense of it.

As an introduction to the new character and her construction as a fascinating object of desire *à la* Hitchcock's Madeleine, the sequence is rather anti-climactic: the Hitchcockian music stops before we see her, and neither her disheveled appearance nor her attitude suggest a woman to produce the strong fascination that the music evokes. This is because, thirdly, the sequence also functions as an abstract, non-narrative embodiment of desire, a brief distillation, through closely observed mouths, charged objects, eroticized editing and camera movement, rhythms, and music, of the sexual meanings of the text. In this sense, it does not matter whose lips we are watching but their integration within a structure of desire which draws on narrative incidents but exceeds the logic of the plot. It is as if at this narratively important point the text is asking us to remember that there is more to it than the story it narrates, that there are other pleasures on offer, that the story that is now beginning and the characters that are being introduced are only part of what the film is about. In other words, this brief sequence is pure *mise en scène* as though seen through a magnifying glass. It is unnecessary to go beyond the surface and the immediate connotations of image and sound because that is where its meaning and its power reside. The body of the film in Almodóvar stands almost literally for the eroticized human body. Desire is represented as a suprahuman assemblage and people, in these moments, become mere points in the circulation of desire. As Felix Guattari has argued in a more theoretical context, this is a mode of subjectivation that is beyond individuality; in this case, the individuality of the film's various characters. Rather than exclusively through their separate subjectivities, we have access to the represented affects through a collective economy of desire (Guattari and Rolnik 2006: 40, 46).

Carne trémula has, therefore, brought its *mise en scène* closer to us for a few seconds in order to suggest where to look, but when the camera pulls out and "returns" to a safer distance and to the story proper the surplus of meaning, the text's suprahuman production of desire, is still everywhere to be seen. A few minutes later, when Víctor finally manages to go inside Elena's apartment, he finds himself in what to him looks like a different world. A subjective camera, as if from his point of view, pans between two classical paintings that cover two of the walls in the entrance. This is an unexpected decoration both for Víctor and for the

spectator. Aided by Iglesias's soundtrack, which has just resumed its mesmerizing Hitchcockian theme, the apartment is now constructed as a magic space, suffused with potential. In the next shot, as the male character walks towards the living-room, he stands for a couple of seconds on a circular rug. At this point Almodóvar uses an overhead shot of Víctor which serves no narrative purpose and does not appear to add to the construction of the character or to his specific predicament at this point. From a purely functional perspective, the shot seems gratuitous, except that high-angle shots abound in *Carne trémula*.

As in this case, in the course of the film, high-angle and overhead shots will be repeated frequently with no specific signifying purpose. The repetitiveness creates a pattern which becomes a stylistic feature of the text. In typical postmodern fashion, this type of shots generally tends to defamiliarize the action, making us aware of the presence of the camera and of the narrative instance and, therefore, calls our attention to the artificiality and self-consciousness of the text, yet this does not seem to be a discernible purpose of this particular film beyond its very general belonging to a specific period and tradition in the history of cinema. However, the narratively unjustified overhead shot does suggest a presence above the characters, one that could be related to the surplus of meaning, the unexplained presence that may also be felt in many other multi-protagonist films, as discussed above. Something is hanging above the characters and, in the reading proposed in this chapter, that something is the alternative layer that I have been discussing here. More than a realistic space, the text is constructing here a particular geometry, and in defamiliarizing the action it is asking us to take our attention away from purely realistic representation and towards its sexually charged shifting scenarios.

Additionally, in this particular shot, it is interesting that the camera stays on the empty frame for two seconds after the character has gone off-screen, momentarily focusing on the rug. This rug is made up of concentric rings of various warm colors including brown, orange and red, perhaps evoking the psychedelic drawings of the credit sequence from *Vertigo*. The visibility of the empty rug reinforces the prominence of the space in which various lives will cross in a few minutes with unforeseeable consequences for all of them. Yet it also shifts our attention away from the characters and towards the geometry and chromatic qualities of the *mise en scène*. Once again, it is not that this particular object conveys any specific meaning. Rather, the strategy employed by Almodóvar forces us to immerse ourselves in the charged space, discovering it and becoming permeated by its magic at the same time as the character, even if we do not necessarily identify with him.

The apartment, like the rug, is suffused in an intense orange light that colors walls, curtains, picture frames, and even the characters' skins. Within the same color range, orange replaces in this scene the red that has predominated so far and will continue to impregnate most of the film. In the previous scene in which the two policemen drive slowly past the fast-food restaurant in a street full of people,

the unrealistic red lighting, added to the color of clothes, motorbikes, buses, the door of the establishment and Víctor's work jacket, automatically distanced us from Sancho's dismissive description of the characters as human debris and made us focus on the surface of the film. These look like real people but in Almodóvar's stylized universe, they become fantastic figures that inhabit a world defined, as in the traditional connotations of the color red, by reckless passion and death. In Elena's apartment, the monochromatic tendency of the intense orange coloring continues to anticipate the uniformity of the passions on display and, to some extent, the interchangeability of the roles played by the different characters in the action. This is desire as atmosphere, as charged space that characters dip in and out of. The exaggerated consistency of the color scheme, both the orange in this scene and the red throughout the film, suggests once again a certain attitude towards desire, and underlines the homogeneity of the five protagonists' experience of it and also underplays narrative incident and even character consistency.

Two more elements need to be considered in this scene. The first is the film that is playing on Elena's television throughout the action: Luis Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen*/*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955). When she cannot get rid of Víctor, Elena goes into another room and comes out shortly afterwards pointing a gun at him. In the course of the ensuing argument he pushes her and she drops the loaded gun, which goes off accidentally. The bullet ricochets and ends up hitting the glass of a window. On the television screen of the movie-within-the-movie, a stray bullet comes through the window into a room where it kills a young woman as the protagonist, then a child, looks on thinking that he has caused her death, initiating the association between desire and death that is going to drive his adult life. The television character falls dead almost at the same time as Elena faints and falls on the floor. When she comes to sometime later, Víctor is comfortably sitting on the sofa watching the film. In the meantime, we have had the chance to enjoy, with him, a generous helping of the Mexican film. Most commentators of *Carne trémula* have interpreted the presence of *Ensayo de un crimen* within the context of their historical readings of Almodóvar's film. Marvin D'Lugo, for example, after acknowledging its reference to the centrality of the sexual body, follows earlier interpretations by Claudia Schaefer and Steven Marsh to conclude that the intertext emphasizes that this is a film "about looking back and fits into the broader patterns of Spanish national cultural recovery through cinema and narrative of the 1990s" (2006: 97).

It was only to be expected that the explicit presence of the most iconic Spanish filmmaker inside a film by the most prestigious contemporary director would give rise to interpretations and even comments on Almodóvar's own sense of himself as the successor of Buñuel. In a more literal sense, however, D'Lugo's suggestion about the sexual body is probably closer to the mark. *Ensayo de un crimen* is a comedy about sexual perversion and, without the complex approach to sexual morality offered by this and other Buñuel films, *Carne trémula* fits right into that tradition. In this scene there is a comic but complex transference between the two female characters: the Mexican nanny and Elena fall on the floor simultaneously as a

consequence of the shot and Elena's body becomes sexualized at the same time as the other one. The shot of the nanny's legs as she lies on the floor is later replaced by Elena's reclining body, and the shocked gaze of the child Archibaldo becomes Víctor's more composed look. In fact, when he is sitting on the sofa it is difficult to decide whether he is looking at the female dummy that Archibaldo is about to burn in Buñuel's story or at Elena's body, one functioning as the continuation of the mirror image of the other. Like the unstuck leg in the scene in *Ensayo de un crimen*, Almodóvar also depersonalizes bodies and body parts, looks and movements, and recuperates them as part of his alternative erotic universe.

The stray bullet from Elena's gun anticipates the not-so-stray one that will soon leave David paralyzed, but there is a further visual parallelism between the two moments: the use of slow motion. This is another strategy that the director uses generously to defamiliarize the action and to remind us that we are not (or not only) witnessing a realistic tale, but the second of these two moments is particularly striking visually and pivotal in narrative terms. When David and Sancho break into the house they confront Víctor who, panicking at the turn taken by the events, holds Elena while he points the gun at her forehead. David suddenly turns his gun against Sancho, who is making things worse with his threats and persuades Víctor to let go of the woman. Dazzled by the young policeman's poise and courage, Elena falls instantly in love with him. As he holds her hand and moves her gently away from her aggressor, her stunned look spells intense desire. The slow motion allows the spectator ample time to savor the moment, enhanced once again by the score which now slightly quickens its tempo to reinforce the urgency of the feelings on display. These feelings appear to be reciprocated by David: he looks back at Elena as she walks past him, momentarily diverting his eyes from the other two. The oversight proves fatal: Sancho takes this chance to jump on Víctor and, as a consequence of this and of the subsequent scuffle, David will be shot and left in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Love in Almodóvar often brings tragic consequences and, as had already been seen in this film, it is never very far away from death. It also brings jealousy and revenge: we later find out that it was Sancho who shot David because he knew that he was having an affair with his wife.

There is more, however, in the relation of this scene to the rest of the narrative. Elena, who for the first time has become a desiring subject, falls desperately in love with David here but that love is considerably cooler thereafter. In the final scene, when they have already split up, David explains that she had stayed with him out of compassion and that was what made her sad, and there is nothing to stop us from accepting his opinion, since now she seems to be happy with Víctor. We do not witness the moment in the story in which she falls out of love with her husband, nor do we notice a gradual cooling of her passion, her attitude towards him remaining constant right up to the last scene. We are to assume, therefore, that her passion for her husband was as short-lived as it was intense, and apart from indirectly provoking his undoing, it is not particularly relevant to the plot. This love does not carry the story forward in any relevant way and, given the *dénouement*, it



Figure 14.2 “Somos”: the abstract choreography of passion in *Carne trémula* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1997; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

is easily overshadowed by her desire for Víctor. And yet there is practically no comparable moment in the film in terms of stylistic emphasis. It could be argued that this excess of signification constitutes a fatal flaw in a text that privileges grand gestures over narrative consistency. On the other hand, the shot makes sense within the logic of the scenario and the artistic method outlined here. The sequence, rather than part of the narrative proper, becomes a powerful ingredient of the visualization of desire undertaken by the film and singles out Elena's look as a moment of pure passion, as powerful as it is inadequate.

For Almodóvar this is the way desire affects human beings and, once sufficiently underlined, the text loses interest in its narrative dimension. In a sense, what happens between these two characters later on is irrelevant. In this respect this sequence rhymes with the film's most famous moment: the second sexual encounter between Elena and Víctor. In this later scene we identify the characters and more or less understand her reasons to finally decide to sleep with him but what is important here is how the narrative incident is turned into an aestheticized object, a beautiful display of bodies in choreographed movement, and relatively independent from the story in which it is inserted. As again shown in slow motion and accompanied by the plaintive voice of Chavela Vargas singing the bolero “Somos,” the two grinding and softly undulating bodies become all but abstract renderings of the act of passionate love, of a sex which is for us still influenced by the narrative context but which has been isolated from social protocols and received morality. Even from sexual difference: in the most emblematic frame of the movie (the one used in the film's publicity poster) of stretched hands eagerly groping thighs, there is, unless we look very closely, no telling whose is whose, which is male and which is female, and, of course, it makes no difference. It is in this balletic composition, in this blend of

sighs, sweat and quivers, that we are to find the moral and the ideological center of the film, its main reason of being and its central intimate discourse.

As suggested by Cowie, the cinema, because of the unbridgeable distance between the spectator and the screen, evokes the scenario described by Freud in "A Child is Being Beaten" also in the sense that its images of sexuality do not, at least directly, reproduce sexual consummation but the setting up of the fantasy, even if the narrative drive may lead us towards the end. Sexually, we can never possess the beautiful figures on the screen: we look at them, we imagine ourselves in their skins, in their positions, we may shift from one to the other, and we change our perspective following the dictates of the stylistic strategies chosen by the filmmakers. Our experience of desire is one of being part of a choreography, of an arranged scenario. We may crave consummation but are left always wanting, forever desiring subjects. Although we are always tied to the chronology of the story, one part of our relationship to the film also exists in timeless space. Almodóvar, like Wong Kar-Wai and other directors, emphasizes this dimension of the spectatorial experience, and often gives us the impression that he uses the narrative as an excuse, as a sugared pill that will draw us towards the *mise en scène*, his characters becoming figures in his all-powerful scenarios of uncompromising desire.

Significantly, his employment in *Carne trémula* of some of the conventions of the multi-protagonist film contributes to the same outcome. Multi-protagonist movies feature echoes, reverberations, and constant reflections between different story events and characters. These are often emphasized by means of stylistic devices such as parallel montage, graphic matches and rhyming transitions and the consequence is a snowballing effect that lifts our interest away from the individual predicaments towards a more generalized view of whatever issue the individual film deals with. When the subject is, as is often the case, intimate matters, the impression is that there is a constant transference of desire from one story to another, from one relationship to the next, the problematic and often traumatic influence of romantic love on modern lives often being of greater importance than the linear narrative structure that Giddens associates with traditional understandings of the concept (1992: 44–5). *Carne trémula* extends this configuration, first, by reducing the narrative arc of each instance of desire, as we have seen with the case of David and Elena, and then by creating dual and triangular relationships to proliferate between the same five characters in a relentless dance, which leads not so much toward death (although that happens, too, in this and other Almodóvar melodramas) as toward the isolated but often repeated moment in which passion is forcefully expressed by means of the type of stylistic flourish analyzed here. Sexual passion dominates the film and various forms of it flow from one character to another in such a way that the characters become, as has been seen, provisional embodiments of the different forms of desire rather than the passions constituting character traits in a more classical form of narrative development.

Carne trémula is a pivotal text in Almodóvar's career. It consolidates the libertarian attitude towards intimate protocols and sexual behavior that he had almost

single-handedly introduced into Spanish cinema and had continued to celebrate film after film for almost two decades. At the same time, it culminates earlier attempts to find a stylistic idiom to translate his sexual ideology into filmic terms and it looks forward to the stunning beauty and visual originality of his later texts. From *Todo sobre mi madre* to the less successful *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), desire and sexuality, while still at the center of the director's concerns, begin to share narrative space with other affects and preoccupations. In this sense, *Carne trémula* may be unique in that in bringing together visual flair and an uncompromising attitude towards desire as the main driving force in people's lives, it offers us the purest articulation of Almodóvar's universe.

This universe is constructed through a combination of two strategies: the use of a multi-protagonist narrative that underplays traditional story arcs and character development and works instead through the accumulation of individual moments of passion and the transference of desire between storylines; and a focus on the surface of the film, where the *mise en scène* of desire is deployed not through narrative incident or psychological insight but through objects and object assemblages, through image and sound. In *Carne trémula* it is the surface, the trembling skin, that attracts and fascinates and it is there that we must look for its textual truth: romantic love is sexual love and both social propriety and moral considerations must finally surrender to its inexorable law.

In Almodóvar's discourse, love, however inappropriate, however dramatic its consequences, will not be interfered with. This discourse does not exist in a void but it is a distillation of historical circumstances, both nationally specific (the evolution of sexual discourses in Spain during the transition) and pertaining to western societies in general (the resilience of certain post-sexual-revolution libertarian discourses on sex during the backlash of the early 1980s). Since then, romantic love and sexual passion have been increasingly imbued with a sense of rationality. In the words of James Dowd and Nicole Pallotta, we now approach romance "in the way we would any rational market transaction" (2000: 569). "We have been pragmatic and pedestrian about our erotic lives for too long," concludes Cristina Nehring in her impassionate defense of love, but now "there is impatience in the air" (2009: 275). For those who feel that impatience Almodóvar's cinema continues to be a balm, an artifact that locates its deep-seated belief in the primacy of bodies and pleasures in the pleasurable body of the film.

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Notes

- 1 See chapter 21, this volume.
- 2 See the analysis of the Hitchcockian intertexts in Almodóvar's cinema in chapter 3, this volume.

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Scratching the Past on the Surface of the Skin

Embodied Intersubjectivity, Prosthetic Memory, and Witnessing in Almodóvar's *La mala educación*

Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla

Introduction

This chapter explores how *La mala educación*/*Bad Education* (2004) reflects on the way that cinema can function as a mode of witnessing and re-experiencing the traces of the traumatic past and of mediating between individual and collective experiences through a complex relationship between subjectivity, memory, and the ethics of the cinematic image. I am particularly interested in the manner in which Almodóvar's film manipulates the film medium as a generator of what has been defined by Alison Landsberg as "prosthetic memory" (2004). Such a strategy points to the way in which traumatic experiences and memories become fragmentarily embodied by and displaced onto those who may not even have lived them. This involves the self in relation to the bodies and memories of others who are affected by the pains of history, associated here with sexual violence and abuse, and political repression during the Franco regime. Individual and collective processes of mourning, abreaction, and healing were also consciously silenced during the political transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain, creating an enduring impact on our own subjectivity and material body.

Although I focus on the performativity of identity,¹ particularly in relation to the elusive character of Ángel/Juan/Ignacio/Zahara, this chapter pays attention less to the film's representation of bodies than to Almodóvar's emphasis on corporeality

in order to reflect on how the fragments of memory can be rethought in the present. In other words, *La mala educación* asks us to rethink the body as a material force which impacts the fragments of subjective and collective memory and history.² These are themselves produced in the visceral encounter as the relationship between the body and the fragments of subjective and collective memory. Through the film's obsession with embodiment,³ the subject may activate an engagement with fragments of subjective memory, associated here with the violence and abuse inflicted on the body and subjectivity of the fictional character Ignacio. On a parallel plane, subjective memory is aligned with collective memory and history, associated in the film with the aggression and repression that the Franco regime inflicted on the Spanish national body and psyche.

To some degree, my analysis of Almodóvar's film may suggest an allegorical reading of how individual traumatic experiences and memories, related here to death, loss, social shame, or, as mentioned above, sexual abuse perpetrated by representatives of the Catholic Church, can be displaced onto the collective history of the nation, a country scarred by the political repression of the Franco regime. Marvin D'Lugo rightly points out that *La mala educación* can be interpreted as a "self-conscious acknowledgement of where [Almodóvar] was in 1980 and how, through the evolution of a style and a conception of filmmaking, he has moved to a critique of his own past and the culture out of which his cinema has taken shape" (2009: 383). I agree with D'Lugo that this film is highly autobiographical and that it explicitly alludes to different historical contexts (to the late Franco regime in the 1960s and to two different years within the period of the Spanish transition from dictatorship to democracy, namely 1977 and 1980). Nonetheless, I am interested here in the mimetic properties of cinema, as well as in focusing on how the film articulates a self-referential discourse about the way in which cinema functions as a mediator of the traces of past traumatic experiences and as an embodied practice of witnessing the layers of memory that may even escape linguistic symbolization. D'Lugo explains that: "for a film that represents Almodóvar's first 'historical narrative,' in which all action is set in the clearly labeled 'historical' past, historical representation itself seems under continual siege by the film's [emphasis on] the enunciative apparatus" (2006: 120). D'Lugo's emphasis on the significance of the enunciative apparatus does not preclude the film's historiographical function. Following D'Lugo's line of thought, I will argue that *La mala educación* unfolds the traces of the vicissitudes and turbulence of the film characters' personal experiences, namely those of Ignacio, and of these particular moments in Spanish history less through a complete reconstruction of the past than through a complex translation of past traumatic experiences. Such a translation acts as a force that impinges on our mind and body. In this way, *La mala educación* problematizes the historical archive by unsettling its function as the exclusionary transmitter of the historical past.⁴

I focus primarily on three sequences in order to tease out my theoretical interpretation of Almodóvar's film from a visceral, bodily encounter,⁵ which involves a physical response to the work, and a close perceptual and cognitive engagement

with its textuality and materiality: the opening credits; Zahara's performance; and Enrique's and Ignacio's watching of Mario Camus's film *Esa mujer/That Woman* (1969) starring Sara Montiel. These three sequences contain three surfaces on which the traces of the fragments of memory and past traumatic experiences are inscribed, becoming visible and/or tangible in the process of scratching them in the present. The sequences in question find echoes, reverberations, permutations, and proliferations throughout the film, allegorically encapsulating the spectator's own bodily encounter and engagement with the poetics and ethics of the film. In the discussion that follows, my theoretical paradigm will emphasize the way in which the spectator's bodily and physical encounter with *La mala educación* as an event, instead of as a static text, becomes a requirement for the completion of the meaning of Almodóvar's film.

Torn Surfaces, Shattered Subjectivities

A black screen, which looks like a monochromatic black surface, contains the letters of Almodóvar's production company: *El Deseo*. This is followed by a continuous series of frames showing black screens: each one containing the name of one of the institutions that have contributed to the financing of the film. Another monochromatic black surface fills the cinematic screen. This surface has been scratched, giving the impression of an infinite number of graffiti-like images of faces, sexual organs, and texts, as though made by children. These may remind us of the kind of images that are scratched on the walls and doors of public bathrooms or on blackboards in school classrooms, as if such anonymous, subversive or illegal acts of vandalism, which involve a violent process of destruction of the surface, had become the only way of revealing or exorcizing our political views and/or sexual fantasies and anxieties. We listen to the soundtrack of the film, whose dark and somber tone may evoke, both aesthetically and subjectively, the enthralling riddle and the mystery underpinning the thematics of the film associated, as Kathleen Vernon suggests, with "moral and psychic ambiguity" (2009: 54). If the soundtrack articulates a sense of suspense—which may imply that the meaning of the film resides in the interstices of language—this is further enhanced by the complex layering of diegetic levels in the film (Kuhn 2009: 273).

This scratched surface contains a vertical white strip that disrupts the uniformity of the graphic images scratched on the black screen, further emphasizing the dislocations and obliterations of the field of representation. As we see the name of the director, his signature only visible through the cracks and fissures of this torn surface that is full of incident, a collage of fragmented photographs is formed into the shape of a crucifix.

Daniel Boyarin argues that the irreconcilable relationship between sexual and spiritual practices in Christianity (with its emphasis on the dichotomy between the



Figure 15.1 Graffiti-like scratched surfaces and photographic collage effects in the credit sequence of *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

body and spirit) contributed to the stigmatization of the hermeneutic practices of the rabbinic Jews who emphasized the importance of sexuality and reproduction as part of our corporeal existence: “Rabbinic Judaism invested significance in the body which in other formations was invested in the soul. That is, for rabbinic Jews, the human being was defined as a body animated, to be sure, by a soul” (1993: 5). Hence, for Boyarin, Judaism’s emphasis on the body allows us to recognize the existence of the human subject as being fundamentally corporeal (1993: 29). Following that same line of thought, and drawing on Spinoza’s monism, Elizabeth Grosz suggests that “the mind is the idea of the body to the exact degree that the body is an extension of the mind” (1994: 12). Though Almodóvar was nurtured in a culture that has been profoundly influenced by Catholicism, the juxtaposition of religion and sexuality that is made manifest in the opening credit graphic design, and which will become a central theme in the ensuing film, is already inherent in the poetics of the cinematic form.

The graphic design pattern that I have just described is repeated differently throughout the entire duration of the opening credits. Using red, white and black colors, each frame consists of a graphic image that looks like a poster that has been made out of disjointed, fragmented parts that cannot be sutured. Through the text’s peeling away of the different layers that comprise this visual leitmotif, akin to the painful process of peeling away or excavating subjective and collective traumatic experiences and memories, the film reveals a mosaic of images and texts that evoke different objects of desire: male bodies; narcissistic egos, female divas or retro style images of femininity; religious symbols, crucifixes; images evoking the use of drugs, such as syringes; and images evoking death itself, such as skulls. Paul Julian Smith has noted that in the film “seedy hotel rooms are transformed by rich red drapes and squalid apartments enlivened by eccentric mosaics” (2004: 17). Like

the façade of the Valencian apartment building where Juan and Ignacio live in 1977, which is shown repeatedly in the film, the opening credits are a visual and tactile “mosaic” made out of divergent registers on which resurface the intelligible and unintelligible, visible and invisible, tangible and intangible testimonies and/or premonitions of the pleasure and pain of the spectral memories and past traumatic experiences that will be revealed in the film that we are about to see. It seems as if the present time, associated with the non-diegetic space into which the section of the opening credits is inserted, inscribes individual and collective past traumatic experiences and memories through the thickness and thinness of these repeated mosaics. They thus emphasize Almodóvar’s concern with the way in which the technology of cinema functions ethically as both a mediation and an embodiment of the spectral past, present, and future.

The credit sequence ends as Almodóvar’s name appears once again on the cinematic screen. This compulsive insistence on imprinting his cinematic signature through this process of destruction and erasure of the field of representation, rather than making the director present in the film, has the opposite effect: it makes his elusive presence absent. The dialectical tension that is established here, then, is consistent with the textual process of elusive presences and absences, writing and its erasure that underpins the poetics and thematics of *La mala educación*.

The opening credits dissolve into a poster of a film “written and directed by Enrique Goded” hanging on the latter’s movie production office. In effect, the non-diegetic space of the credits collapses into the diegetic space of the film, thereby suspending the distance that exists between the fictional time of the characters and the “real” time of the spectator’s viewing of the film. Almodóvar’s conception of time in *La mala educación* foregrounds the film’s self-conscious theoretical dimension, affecting and transforming the perceptual and cognitive experience of the spectators. We listen to a voiceover narrator and, as the camera pulls back and pans to screen left, we realize that the voiceover belongs to [the on-screen voice of] Enrique Goded. He is reading aloud in his film production office a series of chilling stories that were published in the newspapers of the year 1980.

This “torn surface” finds resonances and disjunctions across and throughout the entire film. For instance, Goded visualizes his future film, which is based on an “auto-fictional”⁶ story called “La visita” (The Visit), written by Ignacio, his first lover during the years that he spent at a religious school. D’Lugo rightly notes that Enrique’s visualization of the film is also a “flashback to a fictionalized past that, ironically, is also the projection into the future of Enrique’s next film” (2009: 359). A shot of Enrique reading the manuscript dissolves into an objective shot showing an abandoned cinema, called Cine Olympo, located in the province of Valencia, as if the memories of the fragments of his past experiences are already being juxtaposed with the repertoire of cinematic images that Enrique has stored in his mental archive. Such juxtaposition self-referentially articulates the way in which in the film, as Marsha Kinder notes, “memories of earlier movies are frequently more important than historical events” (2009: 270). Another objective shot shows the letters of

frame of the film. Nonetheless, in line with Kinder's more complex reading of sexual mobility in the film, I suggest that transvestism could be read here as part of Almodóvar's allegorical conception of the *mise en scène* and as an anti-redemptive reformulation of the social stigmatization that is imposed upon it.

Leo Bersani's "non-assimilationist" queer propositions could provide another approach to the function of transvestism in the film which goes beyond a focus on positive or negative images of queer characters.⁸ He argues that "evil is not a crime against socially defined good, but a turning away from the theater of the good, characterized by the performance of the social mask, that is, a kind of meta-transgressive *dépassement* of the field of transgressive possibility itself" (1995: 163). Following Bersani's redefinition of the notion of evil, we can re-appropriate "stigma," which is always imposed by others, as a defiant inoculation against the depiction of hegemonic stereotypes. From this perspective, transvestism in the film may come to represent a refusal of a conformist ideology. It may thus be read as an aesthetic effect that implies the production of queerness within, to reiterate Vernon's concept, psychic and moral ambiguity.⁹ In other words, in *La mala educación*, in particular, and in Almodóvar's cinema, in general, to embrace moral and psychic ambiguity implies the celebration of anxieties and/or pleasures that are socially and psychically stigmatized by the dominant patriarchal and heteronormative society. Almodóvar's morally and psychically dubious characters, such as María Cardenal in *Matador* (1986), Ricky in *¡Átame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), or Benigno in *Hable con ella / Talk to Her* (2002), do not re-signify these socially and psychically marginal positions. Instead, they completely withdraw from conventional forms of sexuality and sociality, thereby embracing an ethics beyond good and evil which provokes in us a feeling of sympathy to their passions and actions.

To return to the torn surface, this one fills the entire cinematic screen, which gives a haptic quality to the perception of this iteration of the mosaic, ambivalently inscribing the dialectic between touch and sight as fundamental conditions of vision and perception. The sense of touch thus becomes an index of vision, a temporal imprint of looking (Fer 2004: 20). If perception and cognition require the functioning of the thinking mind and the acting body, *La mala educación* could be identified as a kind of affective imagery that promotes the bodily in the process of perceiving and understanding the film. In other words, if the subject is constituted through language, she/he is never outside her/his own phenomenological and bodily consciousness of "being-in-the-world," thereby bringing together sensory knowledge and logical reasoning to one's perception and understanding of phenomena. The dialectical tension between sight and touch here reveals the fragmentary and disorienting conditions of perception of a precarious and frayed subject whose contemplation and all-perceiving gaze disintegrates in the process of viewing the film (Fer 2004: 5–25).

As the camera zooms in, these layers of history that are inscribed on the torn surface become more and more unintelligible, forcing us to ask, "how far it is possible to go before one loses the symbolic matrix of representation" (Fer 2007: 80). The traces

of the fragments of history here seem to be left behind in the textuality of the unconscious or else imprinted on the materiality of our body, enacting what Briony Fer has identified as “the precarious coming into vision of pictorial [cinematic] representation” (2007: 80). In this process of rupturing the fabric of the film,¹⁰ which points to the tearing of the image screen, the fundamental oppositions between the represented figure and the background, the illusionistic space of representation and the two-dimensional surface break down.¹¹ Almodóvar’s concern with the pain of history, as it impinges on the body, is made manifest, for instance, when Zahara and her friend Paquita are placed on the steps of this abandoned cinema, as they plan their visit to Zahara’s former religious school. This abandoned cinema becomes a precarious experiential site that triggers both cinematic memories and memories of Zahara’s first sexual experiences with Enrique. The pain and pleasure of the spectral past that Ignacio/Zahara actualizes in her/his body and psyche prompts her to insert either narcotic substances or, earlier on, Enrique’s penis into her/his own body.

If my reading of the film lends itself to an allegorical reading, it is the linking of the body to individual and collective memories that I wish to foreground here. Hence, the relationship between personal and collective history and their lasting effects upon Zahara’s bodily memory in *La mala educación* allows us to think about the way in which, as Suely Rolnik argues in a different context, the totalitarian regime of Franco and its perverse association with the Catholic Church impinges not just upon concrete reality but also upon intangible reality (2008a: 155). For Rolnik, this can have lasting effects, and one may need to find strategies of protection by anaesthetizing the marks of the trauma in the affective circuit (2008a: 156). Nonetheless, Rolnik suggests that one should take into consideration the way in which the macro-political and the micro-political affect each other in order to provide a more mobile cartography. From this perspective, we might ask whether *La mala educación* points towards the intensification of individual and collective creativity and resistance, even in the face of a society that harbors the risk of unleashing micro- and macro-fascisms (Rolnik 2008a: 155).¹²

By means of the mise en scène of the abandoned movie theater and its mutilated posters, traces of the fragments of history float without any point of anchor, not appearing directly, but from an oblique perspective; the attempt to grasp them directly makes them vanish.¹³ Thus, the indelible indexical traces of the fragments and layers of history embodied in the mosaic of torn poster images had been made present through a dialectical relationship between visibility and invisibility that “operates beneath any mimetic logic of signification” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 144). It thereby contributes to what Hannah Feldman defines as an “as-yet-undefined” public discourse (2004: 95). At this point, the shot of the peeled posters on the walls of this abandoned cinema blends into that of an undefaced poster. The mise en scène reveals once again Almodóvar’s conception of time as moving in different directions between the present, the past, and the future. This undefaced poster announces the show of a burlesque company called *La bomba*, whose main star is the transvestite Zahara, to whom I shall return later on.

It is useful to relate the mosaic surfaces in the film to Georges Bataille's discussion of primitive art. In his essay "L'Art primitif" (Primitive Art) (1930), which was published in the dissident Surrealist magazine *Documents*, Bataille considers primitive art less as the work of form than of violence. Bataille articulates a kind of creative process that implies the destruction of phenonema by introducing the concept of *altération* (1930: 389–98). The latter can be applied to the creative methods used by artists informed by Bataille's concept, preoccupied as they are with the violent process of physical decomposition and disintegration that is implied in the process of representation (Krauss 1985). The physical dimension associated with Bataille's concept of *altération* is also made manifest in the process of producing the torn surfaces that appear throughout *La mala educación*. The torn surfaces could stand for the way in which cinema questions the cinematic medium's own destructive–creative process. Almodóvar's film makes us think of how the meaning of a work of art (or a film) is also expressed in the process of obliterating the work of art (the film). This self-referential discourse thus implies alteration and destruction. The chain of violent actions, which is implied in the process of creation, exorcizes repressed, irrational self-destructive impulses,¹⁴ thus re-enacting the return of trauma through compulsive repetition.¹⁵

If the film's thematic concern with trauma and memory is inherent in the poetics of the cinematic form, it is the linking of the repeated torn surfaces to trauma that I want to emphasize here. In this context, compulsive repetition is linked to the symptomatic, non-narrative performance of trauma. Hence, repetition, or the unconsciousness of representation, reveals the presence of trauma. The torn surfaces in Almodóvar's film thus illustrate the irruption of trauma by playing out on their "skin" the tension that is established between the experience of being unfinished and traumatic repetition by collapsing the boundaries between the inside and the outside. The torn surfaces here can be seen as wounds, as if the different layers that composed these graphic images created the effect of wounded flesh, resulting in an amorphous image that is stripped of its own identity by tearing away its own "flesh" from a formless body in which it is no longer possible to distinguish "flesh" from "skin." The torn surfaces in *La mala educación* suggest that matter is a method of articulating the pleasure or the pain caused by the memory of our individual and collective (traumatic) experiences. This relationship demonstrates Almodóvar's preoccupation with both matter and subject matter (Wilson 1995: 172–92).¹⁶

In this way, the torn surfaces in *La mala educación* make visible and tangible the experience of being unfinished¹⁷ or emotionally mutilated; they suggest that communication with and/or relation to the "self" or the "other" is achieved through ruptures, through violent narcissistic or physical injuries or, to use Andrew Asinbong's phrasing, as through a "bleeding kinship" (2009). This is graphically shown, for instance, in the pastoral scene at the swimming hole when the young Ignacio escapes from Father Manolo's attempt to sexually abuse him. Ignacio falls to the ground and hits his forehead on a rock. Resorting to digital technology, Almodóvar freezes the frame, as we see a close up of Ignacio's face with blood

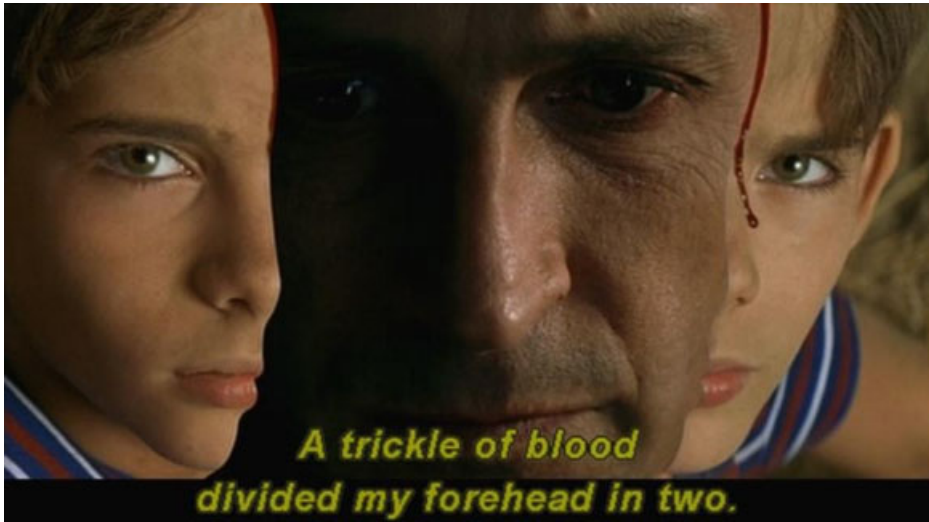


Figure 15.3 A split screen marks the split self of Ignacio in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

dripping down his forehead. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz notes how “the face is split open down the middle, into a split-screen that reveals the profound darkness inside, and that marks explicitly and melodramatically the turning point of Ignacio’s life” (2007: 271). The red line of blood tears both Ignacio’s face and the cinematic screen.

We listen to Ignacio’s voiceover saying that, like his torn face (and like the torn screen), his own subjectivity will always be shattered due to the abuse and violence inflicted on his body and psyche by representatives of the Catholic Church during the Franco regime. This graphically innovative image points to a mode of relating to others which is based less on social intelligibility than on the way in which the self is plunged, into non-meaning and self-shattering (Dasgupta 2009: 2). Asinbong points out that this traumatic shattering of subjectivity leads “to nothing but a sensation of radical despair, a despair felt as intensely by the spectator” (2009: 191). From this perspective, compulsive repetition in *La mala educación* symptomatically reveals that trauma returns violently into the symbolic beyond linguistic symbolization. Trauma thus uncovers the gap that is covered over by symbolic representation.

In psychoanalytic understandings of the catastrophic impact that the traumatic event has on the psyche and body of the victim, the incomprehensibility and temporal unlocatability of traumatic memories forces the subject to experience a sense of fragmentation that might cause psychic disorientation, destruction, and disintegration.¹⁸ The traumatic event produces the destruction of the cognitive mechanism in the psyche, precluding the articulation or the representation of the traumatic experience. This has the negative and painful effect of paralyzing the traumatized subject. The latter needs to resort to narrative in order to mediate the passage from witnessing a traumatic event to knowing or processing it. Through narrative, the

subject could come to terms or be partially or entirely released from an involuntary or compulsive repetition of reliving her/his traumas as belated experiences. My concern with trauma here does not focus on the way in which the subject might master such trauma through processes of integration and assimilation. I wish rather to emphasize how the torn surfaces in *La mala educación* are associated with the shattering of the subject, subverting the corporeal and psychic logic underlying the symbolic's representations through a deforming process. In this context, the belatedness and incomprehensibility at the core of trauma point to an ethical relation to trauma. As Griselda Pollock argues, "a certain compulsion or activity indexes both a presence of the unknown and unknowable and the subject's actions as the symptomatic site of its pressure and translation. Thus not content but gesture, what we would now name the performative process in artwork [or in cinema], that takes, and indexes, its own time and creates a new space of encounter, may become the place of a transformative registration" (2009: 42). Almodóvar's film points to trauma by moving beyond, as Pollock puts it, a phallic model of trauma which seeks its complete encapsulation or redemption "in narrative and representation to render it a closed past: memory" (2009: 46). The ethical potential of this transformative registration resides less in the linguistic mastery of trauma than in the acknowledgment of the impact of the non-narrative performance of the symptoms.

The Skin of the Dress

If the torn surfaces in *La mala educación* denote a tension between matter and subject matter, I shall now focus on another surface on which is also inscribed the materiality of the skin; the artifice of clothing and the expressiveness of the ephemeral gesture in the performativity and performance of bodily identity and subjectivity.¹⁹ This is to say, an "embodied intersubjectivity" and "prosthetic memory" correlated with the transportability of memories and experiences, in Almodóvar's film.

During their nightclub performance, after Paquita introduces her friend Zahara to an unsympathetic audience as a mixture of "desierto, casualidad y cafetería," (the desert, chance and a café) a close-up of Zahara's back emphasizes her tight, flesh-colored dress adorned with feathers and sequins. The camera lingers on Zahara's body, thereby accentuating her/his voluptuous androgynous body. When she/he turns round, we can perceive that the tight dress is adorned with the shape of a female pubis and, as the camera tilts up, we can also perceive the shape of female nipples on the dress and nails painted on Zahara's gloves.

Almodóvar himself has aptly described Zahara's dress as "flesh-colored, tight-fitted to the neck like a second skin, that gives the impression of total nudity. The ass, the tits, and the pubis are made with sequins and brown and pink glass beads and tones. The dress in itself represents false, naked femininity" (cited in D'Lugo 2006: 152). A close-up of Zahara's profile emphasizes Gael García Bernal's lip-synching of voice



Figure 15.4 The skin of the dress: Zahara performs in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

of Sara Montiel. The latter, who was considered a sex symbol for heterosexual men and an icon for transvestites during the Franco regime and the Spanish transition, is Ignacio's former object of desire, who has now been materially and artificially incorporated into her/his own body and subjectivity.²⁰ This sequence consists of crosscuts between shots of Zahara singing within the diegesis and shots of an attractive Enrique Serrano. Zahara mimetically reproduces feminine gestures which, as we will later learn, Juan/Ángel has mechanically incorporated into his body language by observing another Montiel impersonator. Though the surname is different, this Enrique is obviously a fantasy projection of Enrique Goded in this "film-within-the-film." This emphasizes the film's concern with the leitmotif of bodily substitutions: the collapse of one body onto another (Montiel's body onto that of Ignacio; that of Zahara or that of Montiel's impersonator). This process also includes non-material substitutions: one subjectivity collapsed into another (Ignacio's subjectivity into that of Juan/Ángel); one memory onto another (Ignacio's memories onto those of Juan/Ángel); life transformed into art, the sacred into the profane, the position of the victim into that of the victimizer, or the present into the past. *La mala educación* thus forms a kind of Moebius strip that generates a precarious space of coexistence between multiple, interchangeable and transmissible bodies, identities, subjectivities, memories, spaces, and times. As Víctor Fuentes suggests, "the duplicity and doubleness of the story and the characters contribute to a non-linear cinematic experience, full of flashbacks and flash-forwards to different times . . . and different places . . . , in which points of view proliferate and real and imagined events collide" (2009: 437).

It is useful to relate the skin-like effect of Zahara's dress to Didier Anzieu's psychoanalytic understanding of the significance of the skin in the constitution of subjectivity.²¹ According to Anzieu, "the skin, which is a system of several sense

organs (perceiving touch, pressure, pain, heat), is itself closely connected with the other organs of external sense (hearing, sight, smell, taste) and with the awareness of body movement and balance” (1989: 14). For Anzieu, the skin is not merely a bodily organ of sense, since it also fulfills several biological functions, such as breathing, perspiring, secreting, expelling, maintaining the tonus, stimulating respiration, circulation, digestion, excretion, or reproduction (1989: 15). In addition, the skin, while protecting us from external disruptions, Anzieu argues, it also becomes the surface onto which these disruptions can be marked. Hence, if the ego incorporates the other through the skin prior to its absorption by the mouth (1989: 19), the skin is integral to the formation of our subjectivity and to our recognition as embodied beings.

I suggest that the extravagant, flesh-like dress worn by Zahara can be read as a parodic signifier that connotes Zahara’s excessive investment in the performativity of feminine identity through the artifice of clothing and the expressiveness of the ephemeral gesture. As a non-verbal communicative method, the ephemeral gesture mediates the physical and emotional experiences at a moment when language seems to have failed. It also points simultaneously to the materiality of our body as, to use Anzieu’s terms, formative of the self.

Consequently, Zahara’s subjectivity, which already embodies the subjectivity and memory of his brother Ignacio, with whom Ángel/Juan shared the skin of their mother in their intra-uterine existence, points to the way in which “appearance, which is constantly on the point of passing itself as reality, must constantly reveal its profound unreality” (Sartre 1954: 10). For Sartre, as he discusses Genet’s *Les Bonnes* (1947), the fluid interchangeability between appearance and being problematizes the ontology of being, which already depends on non-being, so that the latter becomes being (1954: 30). In this way, Sartre provides us with a mode of ontological relatedness that depends on the way in which the one in the other or the other in the one already bears witness to one’s or the other’s impossibility of being oneself or the other. Although Sartre still focuses on the ontology of the subject, his problematization of the relationship between the realization and de-realization of being seems to undercut the western ontological tradition based on the metaphysics of presence.²²

Resonating with Genet’s characters in *Les Bonnes*, the figure of Zahara puts an emphasis on “the processes of the constant folding and unfolding of experience associated less with fixed centers than with bits and pieces constantly moving in and out of the folds to become intertwined with other surrounding unfoldings in a spiraling distributive process” (Hequembourg 2007: 158). Through the representation of Zahara, Almodóvar proposes a form of being and a mode of ontological relatedness that disrupts the metaphysics of presence by emphasizing, like the textual process described above, an ambivalent and interminable process of substitutions and supplements in which there is no originary stable center or telos, thus shifting endlessly from presence to absence, from closure to interruption, from identity to difference.²³ Similarly, Zahara’s embodiment of the subjectivity and memory of

Ignacio is inscribed in her/his subjectivity and on the “flesh” and “skin” of her/his material body, which functions as “a reminder of what has not been allowed to be forgotten. The ‘unforgettable’ is etched on the body itself” (Grosz 1994: 132). In other words, if the body functions as the receiver and transmitter of memories, the indelible physical and psychical traces of the fragments of memory are viscerally experienced and deeply felt by the body through affect and sensation.

From this perspective, Almodóvar’s representation of Ángel/Juan as an “imposter” who appropriates his brother’s subjectivity and memory for his own benefit has to be understood within his cinema’s moral and ethical universe. The latter has since its beginnings expanded and exceeded our own ethical and moral conventions, based on reductive preconceptions and clear-cut distinctions between and definitions of what is “right” and “wrong,” “true” and “false,” or “authentic” and “inauthentic.” In *Prosthetic Memory*, Landsberg explores the extent to which the technology of cinema has the capacity to transport us across different spaces and times, to emphasize experience as a mode of acquiring knowledge, or to make us empathically affected by experiences and memories which are not organically linked to us, even if they do have an impact on our body and psyche. According to Landsberg, cinema undercuts the polarity between subjective and collective memory, while recognizing that the memories and experiences of others cannot be reduced to our own self-consciousness. She suggests: “A practice of empathy is an essential part of taking on prosthetic memories, of finding ways to inhabit other people’s memories as other people’s memories and thereby respecting and recognizing difference” (2004: 24). The emphasis on the “portability of memory and identity” (2004: 43) opens up new possibilities of thinking about shared experiences and memories by dissociating identity from essentialist logic and debunking authenticity as the essential component of memory (2004: 46). “Prosthetic memory” thus becomes “the grounds for political alliances and the production of new, potentially counter-hegemonic public spheres” (2004: 34). Though Landsberg puts great emphasis on how the modern technologies of the mass media mediate and make available to us memories and experiences that were previously transmitted through more direct “embodied action,” to use Diana Taylor’s term, she still pays attention to the reliance on the visceral encounter, embodied “affect and experiential practices in fostering memory” (2004: 4).

Just as Ángel/Juan’s and Ignacio’s mother’s suffering from heart disease is paradoxically transferred to the body and psyche of their aunt,²⁴ through Zahara’s embodiment of the subjectivity and memory of Ignacio, Almodóvar proposes a form of “embodied intersubjectivity” that consists of our own capacity to carry the inscription of the traces of another’s traumatic experiences and memories in our own subjectivity and on our own material body. *La mala educación* forces us, as Pollock suggests, “to imagine not merely inter-subjective exchange and impacts but the subject as always a trans-subjective meeting point both in time and out of time, in her/his own immediate family history and beyond through what might be passed to and encrypted within her/him that already links others to others and

others to worlds, to traumas and events never known or knowable by him or her except as these transposed traces of otherness lodged within" (Pollock 2009: 49). As the film shows us, the emancipatory potential of this "embodied intersubjectivity" resides less in its redemptive power than in the intrinsic vulnerability of the self. This is a requirement to open up our psyche and material body to the affects, past traumatic experiences and fragments of memories coming through and materially transmitted by irreducible others.

Cinema as an Embodied Witnessing Practice

The final sequence we will focus on is the scene when the two children, Ignacio and Enrique, go to the cinema to watch Mario Camus's *Esa mujer* as a way of escaping from the repression and abuse that they suffer at the hands of the priests in their religious school in this "film-within-the-film." As I have argued throughout this chapter, the sexual abuse perpetrated by representatives of the Catholic Church can be symbolically associated with the political oppression and repression at the core of the Franco regime.²⁵ Although the year in which this meta-diegetic level of the film is inserted is 1964, Almodóvar decides to include a film made five years later. D'Lugo suggests that "the premise of the evoked past is not necessarily based on faulty history, but on faulty memory" (2009: 384). Such an anachronistic "blind-spot" produces a radical rupture in the system of meaning, thereby failing to bind the traces of memory, including its absences and uncertainties, into a unitary, coherent narrative. A tracking shot of the two boys walking along the street cuts to a long shot of a restored Cine Olympos advertising the screening of *Esa mujer*. Almodóvar cuts to a scene from Mario Camus's film, which we watch it as if this film intertext occupied the diegetic space of *La mala educación*, thus pointing to "the illusory dissolution of the boundary between the viewing subject and the projection screen, opening up a new psychological space for a more inclusive sensory environment" (Leighton 2008: 33). A shot from the point of view of the screen of the movie theater shows the two boys captivated by the cinematic experience, looking at each other and talking about Montiel's beauty. Their conversation is thus juxtaposed with the conversation of the female characters starring in *Esa mujer*. In staging the "film-within-the-film" in this manner, the sense of hearing momentarily displaces the primacy of sight and the mind to emphasize instead how the corporeal is fundamentally implicated in the process of perception and cognition.

As the film cuts to a shot of the backs of the two children, we can still glimpse Montiel's face on the cinematic screen in the background. When the camera tilts up, the film shows the two boys masturbating each other, thereby emphasizing the way in which cinema is an embodied experience that produces bodily sensations that may be divorced from any referents, frustrating the spectators' experience of the cinematic medium solely through linguistic signification or through a

rationalist epistemology. One needs to pay attention to how cinema is experienced through the materiality and psychical assemblage of the body of the film and of our own body.²⁶ As Jill Bennett argues in relation to affect, trauma, and contemporary art: “we need to examine how affect is produced within and through a work, and how it might be experienced by an audience coming to the work” (2005: 7).

Almodóvar’s emphasis on experiencing cinema via what Rolnik defines as “the resonant body”²⁷ is also made manifest when Father Manolo, who has now become, like the abandoned Cine Olympo, the physically and emotionally ravaged Señor Berenguer, narrates his testimony, which is indicated in the film by shifting from long subjective flashbacks to the year 1977 to shots showing Señor Berenguer interpellating Enrique as his interlocutor in the present-tense time of the film’s diegetic reality (1980). Sally Faulkner, in her discussion of Carlos Saura’s *La caza/The Hunt* (1966), signals how, “through medium shots and detailed close-ups, the camera picks out the characters’ scars, wrinkles and grey hair” (2006: 155). Señor Berenguer, who defines himself as “el malo de la película” (“the bad guy in the film”), shows the ageing and the fragility of his imperfect body. His testimonial presence thus emphasizes “not the drama of communication, but the tiredness of the body, the tiredness there is beneath the outcry, and which suggests to thought ‘something to incommunicate,’ the ‘unthought’ in life” (Deleuze 1989: 183). In this context, Almodóvar problematizes the relationship between the position of the victim and that of the oppressor. Indeed, a reductive polarization of these positions could perpetuate a dichotomy between passivity and agency. D’Lugo tells us that the “unexamined past, never fully repudiated within the culture of the transition, seemed presciently embodied in the very ambiguous figure of Berenguer” (2009: 303). Although Almodóvar seems to feel compassion to Father Manolo’s/ Señor Berenguer’s pedophile passions, the film is politically unsympathetic to those who were complicit with the Franco regime, such as the Catholic Church, epitomized by the figure of Father Manolo, or those who embodied, as D’Lugo suggests, the culture of oblivion and silence that characterized the transition, epitomized by Señor Berenguer. Nonetheless, Almodóvar puts pressure on our subjective disposition to listen to testimonies of those whose ideological and political positions may be antithetical to ours, thereby articulating a subjective ethical position, which is located beyond the moral and political level, in relation to the performative act of bearing witness to the other’s experiences. Jo Labanyi argues that “such an approach is not only helpful in dealing with the suffering of victims of injustice but also, I suggest, opens up a way to deal with the suffering of those whose politics we cannot condone” (2007: 112). The act of bearing witness opens up an intersubjective space which reconciles, or establishes productive tensions, between our incompatible subjective and collective experiences, without reducing or incorporating the other’s experiences into our own consciousness. One of the experiences narrated by Señor Berenguer in flashback emphasizes Almodóvar’s concern with the cinematic medium as an embodied practice that both produces knowledge and transmits memories.²⁸ I am referring to the sequence in which

Juan/Ángel has sex with Señor Berenguer on the couch in the Valencian apartment where the two brothers, Juan/Ángel and the “real” Ignacio, live, as they themselves film this “un-pleasurable” experience. Such an association of the cinematic image with bodily affect resonates with the sequence showing the two young boys masturbating each other in the cinema, described above, and could be interpreted as a similar and yet different belated re-enactment of the sexual experience that Father Manolo had with the young Ignacio, which comes in and out of time to haunt one’s and/or the other’s body and psyche in the present.

This sequence consists of crosscuts between subjective shots from the point of view of Juan/Ángel of Señor Berenguer having sex with Juan/Ángel and subjective shots from the point of view of Señor Berenguer of Juan/Ángel having sex with Señor Berenguer. Almodóvar shifts from these subjective shots to objective shots of this trans-generational couple having sex and back again. More importantly, these alternating subjective shots of the sex act are at some moments mediated through the Super-8 camera that they hold, which produces a trembling effect that seems to reflect in cinematic terms a kind of psychological and emotional disturbance and a physical fragility and disorientation. At other moments, their Super-8 camera does not mediate the perception of this sexual experience, even if Almodóvar’s camera already mediates our own cinematic encounter with the scene. Hence, this particular sequence emphasizes the film medium both as a mediator of subjective and collective experiences and as an embodied practice, thereby undercutting its implicitly voyeuristic position and the primacy of vision as the “organizing term which hierarchically subordinates the other senses (or bodily zones) under its direction and control” (Grosz 1994: 220). This leads us to think of the full participation of the bodily self in the cinematic experience. The subject now becomes situated at the center of the filmic space. This reconceptualization of the bodily self’s participation in the cinematic experience allows us to rethink the ontological and epistemological nature of the film medium itself, thereby problematizing the relationship between the representational image on the screen and the physical body of the subject. Such a reconceptualization of cinema as an embodied practice produces a disturbance in the field of vision. Goded narrates the story of a woman embracing an alligator as she is devoured by it, which stands metaphorically for the process of self-destruction at the core of his own emotional relationships and, to return to Bataille’s concept of *altération*, creative practices. Like the image of this woman attaining an impossible *jouissance*, such over-proximity to the field of representation contributes to the loss of self-control and the fragmentation of the rational self. Hence, Señor Berenguer’s narration, in particular, or the practice of testimony, in general, is associated in *La mala educación* with bodily affection, pointing to the way that language is inextricably linked to the materiality of the body as mediated through and embodied by the cinematic image. In this context, our subjectivities and bodies can actualize, as Rolnik suggests, the sensory mark or trace of the pervasive presence of the fragments of memory and past traumatic experiences that are perceptibly or imperceptibly inscribed in the body’s memory and in the psyche

in the present (Rolnik 2008b: 132–7). *La mala educación* makes us think of how cinema becomes an embodied witnessing practice. From this perspective, body and language point to the subjective and collective psychological process of enacting and/or abreacting, both psychologically and physically, our subjective and collective past traumatic experiences. As with the traces of Ignacio's death performed and traumatically enacted by his brother or imprinted on the last letter he wrote to Enrique, the fragments of memory and history endure in the present.

Conclusion

In *La mala educación* Almodóvar self-referentially articulates the ethical process of acting out or working through the traces of fragmented memories and past traumatic experiences through the mediation of, or as they are embodied in, the cinematic image. Like the “embodied intersubjectivity” of Ángel/Juan/Ignacio/Zahara which already depends on a tension between his/her interior consciousness and his/her external form of the self, as it is played out through the gestures and on the skin of the surface of the body, Almodóvar's film insists on a “double logic” juxtaposing conflicting and incompatible memories and past traumatic experiences that cannot be localized within a single point or an original center, as they are located in the folds, in the lines of flight, between different bodies and subjectivities. As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, Almodóvar's cinema keeps insisting on the tension that is established when a material surface yields to an endless series of bodily practices, subjective and collective experiences, affective memories, as they are displaced onto an “embodied being” that is already a “becoming being” by relating to an irreducible other in an undefined temporality and spatiality. In this undefined space, the past, present and future coexist, thereby collapsing the conventional ways of experiencing and understanding space and time.

I would like to conclude by noting the way in which the film ends. Almodóvar shows a long shot of the black gate of Goded's house, as we see Ángel/Juan and Enrique on the left side of the frame walking toward the door. This represents the moment in which Enrique literally closes the door to Juan/Ángel, thus symbolically cutting this “imposter” out of his life. The dark gate reminds us of the shape of a grid structure. Digitally produced, the panels composing this grid structure are maximized and recede back. Like vignette bubbles, the textual messages inside these panels inform us of the fate of the main characters (Juan/Ángel, Señor Berenguer, and Enrique Goded). Although this is the end of the film, this extra information implies that *La mala educación* extends the actions of the characters beyond the film's diegetic space and time closer to our present time.²⁹ If Almodóvar conceives time as moving in different directions between the past, the present, and the future, the *mise en scène* here makes the film become a flashback narrative from the time frame of *La mala educación*'s production. In one of these

panels, we are told that Enrique Goded continues to make films with the same initial passion as in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³⁰ The word “passion” swells against this black field that recalls the design of the opening credits to fill the screen (Smith 2004: 18) until it loses its intelligibility, even as it is glimpsed. Like Ángel/Juan/Ignacio who reduced his material body to become Zahara, these elastic and precarious forms of being encapsulate our precarious subjective constitution in relation to the bodies and memories of others who are affected by the pains of history and their enduring impact on our own subjectivity and material body.

If cinema can be incorporated into the archive, Almodóvar’s focus on cinema as an “embodied witnessing practice” constructs a kind of “counter-archive,” or what Taylor defines as a “repertoire” of shared affects, in which our traces of memories of past traumatic experiences cannot be captured by the archive. The latter, which is instrumental in constructing the history of the nation, is unable to register our own visceral, bodily encounters with the pains of history, as they are materially transmitted by and through other bodies and subjectivities in the present. In addition, the affective intensity that is produced by individual and shared traumatic experiences in *La mala educación* affects us before and beyond being rendered intelligible through referentiality and rational language. It thereby exceeds the emphasis on detached cognition or unreflective emotion in conventional cinematic recreations of the historical past in Spanish cinema.

In her Deleuzian concern with the relationship between cinema and “schizoanalysis,” Amy Herzog argues that the “arts occupy a privileged position, for while they are necessarily embedded within dominant political and economic systems [and powers], they nevertheless have the potential to deterritorialize, bursting open and expanding beyond the system to forge new alliances” (Herzog 2008: 65). In this context, Almodóvar’s potential to extend the process of being and becoming and to open up a space that mobilizes the transformative and expansive potential of bodies, subjectivities, and incompatible memories in an endless process of becoming remains an urgent and pressing concern in an era of “post-ideological disillusionment.”³¹ As with Señor Berenguer, literally returning to the film set, which is associated with the present of the diegetic reality of *La mala educación*, the present may symbolically succumb to the dark shadows of the elusive and spectral past. Perhaps, by expanding our repertoire of experiences, including those which are painful and traumatic, Almodóvar’s can thrust us forwards into a more satisfying future.

Notes

- 1 The concept of “performativity” implies that identity is articulated through iterative and imitative practices.
- 2 In this context, memory and history are entangled instead of in opposition to each other.
- 3 The concept of “embodiment” is defined as our consciousness of our bodily sense of “being-in-the-world.”

- 4 See Aleida Assmann's discussion of the relationship between the canon and the archive (2008).
- 5 This chapter proposes that the aesthetic experience, in general, the cinematic experience, in particular, and the meaning production derive from perception and cognition, as well as from affect and sensation. In his conversations with Frederic Strauss, Almodóvar himself defined his cinema as a "visceral cinema." Hence, Almodóvar implicitly thinks of the cinematic experience, in particular, and the aesthetic experience, in general, as immanent, as well as of the significance of the senses in this experience.
- 6 This is the term used by Almodóvar himself in an interview that is included in the extra features of the U.S. DVD copy of the film to explain that *La mala educación* is itself an "auto-fiction" of himself. See Víctor Fuentes for an association of the film with "fictional autobiography" and "meta-cinema" (2009).
- 7 The year 1977 was also a significant year for the Socialist Party, since it became consolidated as the most important political party of the opposition vis-à-vis the UCD, the political party to which the first democratically elected president of Spain after the end of the Franco dictatorship, Adolfo Suárez, belonged. The period of the transition was characterized in part by the reactivation of critical, social, and political forces that were emerging and operating in Spanish society at a macro- and micro-political level, even if their power has been eclipsed, somehow, by the historiographical emphasis that has been placed on the Moncloa pact, which led to the so-called Pacto del silencio (Pact of Silence and Oblivion) and the Constitution of 1978.
- 8 As is well known, the main purpose of gay politics has been to achieve social visibility, recognition, and assimilation into already constituted communities. By contrast, some strands within queer theory, including Bersani, propose notions of identity and modes of relation that resist any form of incorporation into the hegemonic social and symbolic order. Almodóvar's cinema arguably falls into the latter category.
- 9 See also Hanson (1999) for a queer reading of film characters beyond the common emphasis on positive and negative images.
- 10 A similar argument is put forward by Andrew Asinbong in his discussion of *La mala educación* (2009: 190).
- 11 Hal Foster articulates a similar point in his discussion of minimalist art (2004: 288).
- 12 Such creativity and resistance were epitomized by the "counter-cultural" phenomenon of the *Movida* to which Almodóvar belonged. For a fine historical and theoretical analysis of this "counter-cultural" movement, see Vilarós (1998). The reaction from the contrary forces of repression were not long in coming, culminating in the abortive military coup d'état led by General Tejero in February 1981.
- 13 For an excellent discussion of the connection between the real and the uncanny, see Dolar (1991).
- 14 For an association of writing with self-mutilation, see Dean (1986).
- 15 Marsha Kinder associates the compulsive repetition enacted in the film with what she terms "retroseriality" (2009).
- 16 For a queer theoretical reading of repetition and trauma in Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen* / *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), see Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008).
- 17 I am indebted to Parveen Adams's inspiring reading of Orlan's performance art. See Adams (1996).

- 18 See Caruth (1991: 181–92).
- 19 The crucial difference between “performativity” and “performance” is that the former cannot be defined as an intentional act, whereas the latter is defined as intentional. However, these two concepts are not mutually exclusive.
- 20 Coincidentally, Montiel comes from the same region in Spain—La Mancha—as Almodóvar. If Montiel was one of the few Spanish actresses to pursue a career in Hollywood, Almodóvar is one of the few Spanish filmmakers to have had any success in the almost impenetrable U.S. film market. Hence, the image of Montiel functions as a mirror in which the image of Almodóvar seems like a reflection of that of Montiel.
- 21 This is a theoretical issue unexplored in Spanish cinema studies, in general, and Almodóvar studies, in particular. In this respect, we need to account for these theoretical issues as a way of expanding our understanding of Almodóvar’s cinema, in general, and *La mala educación*, in particular.
- 22 As Heidegger explains: “historically, ‘to be’ has been understood as ‘to have presence in the moment that now is.’ Only insofar as it ‘now is’ has existence been considered ‘actual.’ Only insofar as an entity ‘presents’ itself has it been said that it truly ‘is.’ Being, then, has come to mean ‘presence’” (cited in Debevec Henning 1982: 231).
- 23 I am indebted to Sylvie Debevec Henning’s Derridean reading of Genet’s play (1982).
- 24 I extrapolate this point from the conversation their mother has with Enrique Goded when he goes to Galicia searching for the “true” identity and origins of Ángel/Ignacio. She says: “La que sufre de corazón soy yo, pero la que se asusta es ella . . .” (It is me who suffers from a heart disease, but it is she who gets scared ...).
- 25 The horror suffered during a great part of the almost forty years of Franco’s dictatorship was blocked in the national psyche as a way of exonerating those responsible for the atrocities and the nation itself from the collective shame and guilt that these deeds in history produced in Spain.
- 26 For a definition of Lucrecia Martel’s cinema as “corporeal cinema,” see Gutiérrez-Albilla (forthcoming).
- 27 Rolnik explains: “this concept designates the capacity of all sense organs to allow themselves to be affected by otherness. It indicates that the whole body has this power to resonate to the forces of the world” (2007: n. p.).
- 28 Diana Taylor analyzes performance as an embodied practice in her discussion of the archive and the repertoire (2003).
- 29 For a Deleuzian analysis of this scene, see Stewart (2006).
- 30 Since the film has been considered an “auto-fictional” narrative, this is one of the crucial moments in which we realize that Goded represents Almodóvar’s alter ego.
- 31 I am borrowing this term from Asinbong (2009: 185).

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Almodóvar's Stolen Images

Javier Herrera

"Soy más bien un ladrón. Algunas películas las utilizo como parte activa de mis guiones. Cuando una película sale en otra película mía no es un homenaje, es un robo y hago que forme parte de la historia que he escrito" (Pedro Almodóvar).¹

(In other words, I'm a thief. Some of the films I use as an active part of my scripts. When another filmmaker's film is included in one of my films, it's not an homage; it's poaching and I make it part of the film I'm writing.)

In interviews about *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* (2009), Almodóvar has insistently returned to his well-used argument to justify his use of images from films by other directors, claiming that this is an active, even calculated, move, perfectly integrated into his film's script. This boastful insistence on the theme of textual poaching or "thefts," is a demonstration of Almodóvar's cinephilia which, according to Román Gubern, is free from any pedantry (2005: 32), but rather represents an effort to transcend the tradition of films-within-films, marking his own expressive realm and distancing himself through his independence and originality from filmmakers of his own generation.

This obsession with cinematic kleptomania manifests itself in different ways. In *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), for example, in a single sequence he "uses" two scenes borrowed from Hitchcock, arguably the most plagiarized director in film history.² One occurs when Pepa (Carmen Maura) is seated on a bench in front of the apartment building of Iván (Fernando Guillén) viewing the open windows of the building when she spies a dancer going through her movements in a way that recalls a scene in *Rear Window* (1954) when Jeff (James Stewart) views another dancer. A little while later, when Pepa desperately tries to make a phone call from a telephone booth she is stunned by a sudden thump on the roof of the booth, evoking the scene in *The Birds* (1963), when Tippi Hedren is attacked by the birds crashing against another phone booth. In both instances, there is a clear effort to lift an element from Hitchcock, but also to modify it in some way: the suitcase dropped on the phone

booth is a comic substitution of Hitchcock's menacing birds; the bored photographer turned voyeur from *Rear Window* becomes the jealous and agitated Pepa. Yet, despite these modifications in plot, character, and staging, the central motif of action in Almodóvar's version is identical to the Hitchcock original, thus making the theft of images much more prominent. We shall call this type of theft implicit or undeclared. It is, however, not the only type of unauthorized borrowing in which Almodóvar has engaged.

Another type appears in *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997), in which fragments from the opening scene of Luis Buñuel's *Ensayo de un crimen/The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955) are seen on a television monitor in Elena's (Francesca Neri) apartment. This interpolation gives impetus to the game of random encounters, including ricocheted gunshots, that propels Almodóvar's plot. The peculiarity of this type of borrowing resides in the literalness of the chosen images to lift, as well as in the explicit manner in which the framing narrative mirrors certain aspects of what is now Buñuel's film-within-the-film. This device is carried to the extreme of repeating the stray gunshot that kills the governess in *Ensayo de un crimen* and the similar ricocheted bullet that is released from Elena's pistol in Almodóvar's narrative that will cripple Víctor (Liberto Rabal).

In both types of film we are dealing with a kind of violent excision of a scene from one film to be used in another; this is a strategy that abounds in Almodóvar's cinema. More than merely identifying those moments and the source of the robbery, this chapter will explore Almodóvar's conception of stolen images which is ironically the result of a very personal search on the director's part for his own cinematic style. That search will lead him not only to a complex mirroring of the films of other directors in his own work, but also a highly original and creative transvestism.

Cinematic Quotation as Theft

It was out of the cinematic practices of the French *Nouvelle vague* and contemporary film theorists like Christian Metz that the phrase "filmic quote" came into general usage (Metz 1998: 1). From those debates about textuality there arose two terms that are critical to the following discussion: the idea of a literal copy of a text and its insertion into another text. We are speaking of "framed fictions" and "fictional frames" (Pérez Bowie 2005: 123), but in cinematically specific contexts; this is the appropriation of shots or images and sequences taken literally or figuratively from one film and repositioned into another. Metz refers to "simple insertions" (1998: 3) of a fragment in the principal text which he calls an "enunciative intrusion" which can upset the logical development of the primary enunciative apparatus. It is therefore important that the fragment selected for insertion be one with which the audience is familiar so that its meaning in the new context be grasped.

In the case of Almodóvar's films, all the cinematic quotations we have considered for this discussion are of the simple insertion type. They are what might be termed explicit quotations, clearly linked to the principal narrative. Here we may consider the following examples in clips from King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) in *Matador* (1986), or of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) in *Mujeres . . .*; *The Prowler* (Joseph Losey, 1951) in *Kika* (1993); of *Ensayo de un crimen* in *Carne trémula*; of *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) in *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999); of *Esa mujer/That Woman* (Mario Camus, 1969) in *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004); of *Bellissima* (Luchino Visconti, 1951) in *Volver* (2006); and *Viaggio in Italia/Journey to Italy* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953) in *Los abrazos rotos*. In all of these instances, the framed fiction is fully integrated into the principal narrative or connected to the plot in ways that make abundant sense to the spectator upon viewing the sequences in question.

These clips, it should be noted, arise in the various films as every day, ordinary events, such as going to the movies as in the scene from *La mala educación* when Ignacio (Ignacio Pérez) and Enrique (Raúl García Forneiro) go to a local theater to see *Esa mujer* and masturbate each other as they view Sara Montiel on screen; for their part, María Cardenal (Assumpta Serna) and Diego Montes (Nacho Martínez) in *Matador*, view the final scene from *Duel in the Sun*. Despite these explicit interpolations, there are certain subtle variations in some of the interpolated clips that transcend their status as mere filmic quotations as they are transformed into another kind of textual poaching, to use de Certeau's (2000) term. These instances may be termed "visual metaphors" as they hold a special relation to the plot development of the larger works into which they are interpolated.

Visual Metaphors as Poaching

If, following Lakeoff and Johnson (1980), we consider metaphors as independent of their verbal forms but simply as an idea or concept expressed through another element, we may better appreciate the dynamics of Almodóvar's visual metaphors. These metaphors are expressed as images on screen but embrace a completely different meaning from their appearance depending on the manner in which they are treated, that is, in terms of framing, lighting, sound, and, in particular, editing, through which the mechanisms of substitution, parallel action, and other linkages are visually established. In effect, the visual metaphor may be said to generate a tension between objects and the manner in which they are filmed and edited. Here we may speak of the modes through which these metaphors are formed: either as "monomodal" or "multimodal," according to the level of complexity of the components of the metaphor (Ortiz 2008: 145).

In terms of Almodóvar's visual metaphors, the relation between the images selected and the form of their insertion into the particular film is significant. For example, in

one scene in *¡Átame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), on the door of the editing room where Máximo Espejo is editing his film, “Midnight Phantom,” we can see the publicity poster for Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), whose plot involves the invasion of extraterrestrial plants that take over the inhabitants of a town by cloning their bodies as they sleep. They replace their bodies but not their souls, thereby converting them into the living dead, an apt reflection of Almodóvar’s heroine, Marina, played by Victoria Abril whom Máximo (Francisco Rabal), in an allegorical scene in his first non-porno movie, tries to save. The plot-within-the plot of *¡Átame!* proposes a metaphorical relation to the “living dead.” But the metaphorical interplay does not end there. There is an allusion at the end of the editing scene to Elliot Silverstein’s film, *A Man Called Horse* (1970), in which the linguistic–cinematic interplay clusters the English word “horse” with the Spanish equivalent “caballo,” which colloquially also means heroin. Later, when Marina is bound and gagged in her apartment bedroom, she watches scenes from George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Thus, Almodóvar combines two variations of visual metaphors: visual-cinematic audiovisual in terms of the Siegel poster (multimodal) and then combines it further with the monomodal in terms of the George Romero clip, thereby folding back onto the main fictional line which is now enriched by the association of junkie=living dead.

A similar multimodal metaphor, but with a triple source of origin, occurs in *La mala educación* when, in the lobby of the movie theater where Berenguer and Juan have gone after having murdered Ignacio, we see the posters announcing the screening of various *film noir* classics: Jean Renoir’s *La bête humaine / The Human Beast* (1938), Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Marcel Carné’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1953). As they leave the theater, Berenguer comments: “It’s as if all of the films are talking about us.” In effect, the common feature of the three motion pictures advertised is the murder of one of the couples by the other partner’s lover with accompanying discord that leads to remorse by one of the survivors and the inevitable self-destructive tragic ending. These movie plots announce what will happen with the Berenguer–Juan duo with the Almodovarian twist of it being a gay passion.

A monomodal variant of the audiovisual-cinematic metaphor is to be found in *Carne trémula* with its interpolated clips from Buñuel’s *Ensayo de un crimen*. After the struggle between Víctor and Elena in which she shoots a pistol to scare Víctor and make him flee, she is exhausted and falls asleep on the sofa as he takes up a position in front of the television set where he watches the Buñuel film, at the very moment in the film when Archibaldo grabs the mannequin double of Lavinia (Miroslava) and drags it into his work area; as the mannequin’s body drags across the floor, its left leg comes loose. This is the precise moment when the camera picks up Víctor as he views the sleeping Elena, then looks back at the screen in time to see Archibaldo recover the leg and bring it with the mannequin to the table next to his kiln, followed by the famous image of Lavina’s double incinerating through the kiln window. At this point, Elena awakens. Through the actors’ movements and the editing Almodóvar establishes a clear metaphoric link between Archibaldo and the mannequin and Víctor and Elena. There is a significant “contiguity”, as Ortiz would put it (2008: 156), between the “source domain” (the mannequin’s leg) and the “target



Figure 16.1 “All the films are talking about us”: the *Semana de Cine Negro* in *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Diego López Calvín.

domain” (Elena’s leg); in other words, a juxtaposition of images that permits the viewer to enter Víctor’s imagination and view the process of his desire to possess and Archibaldo’s unconscious desires to mutilate and destroy.

In that same sequence from Buñuel’s film, at the moment of burning the mannequin in the oven, we have another example of juxtaposition (which is the principal source of such cinematic metaphors) which we might call “anticipation” since it prepares the spectators for the metaphors to come. In this instance, the cremation of the mannequin anticipates the kitchen fire in *Carne trémula* in which Clara (Angela Molina) leaves a frying pan on an open stove fire and is at the point of incinerating herself just after Víctor tells her that they should stop seeing each other for a while. This is the type of metaphor of anticipation that coincides with the inclusion of *Duel in the Sun* in *Matador* or *Viaggio in Italia* in *Los abrazos rotos*, instances in which the interpolated clip precedes the character’s tragic demise.

Plagiarism, Pastiche, and “Transvestism”

Up to this point, we have been considering Almodóvar’s use of metaphoric quotations that seek to connect two worlds, two spaces, and two time periods that otherwise have nothing in common other than their relation to the same cinematic

hypertext. In these instances, there is no question that such borrowings are what Almodóvar means when he speaks of poaching (“robos”). Added to these, however, is another operation in which Almodóvar, the inveterate reader of images, operates a form of “doubling” in which he first acts like a spectator, then a film director, as when he speaks of trying to capture in certain images “what I felt when I first discovered these films” (Ciment and Rouyer 2009: 11). These movie quotes might best be understood as personal autobiographical references that are insinuated into particular movie plots but which in no way should be considered plagiarism since they never lose their original status and are thus recognized as “borrowings”; they are perfectly recognizable as movie quotes and in one respect retain their status as bracketed by quotation marks, thereby distinguishing them from plagiarisms which hide their origin. Such doublings introduce a certain reflexive condition to Almodóvar’s filmmaking and folds back on the very nature of cinema (and on the status of the director himself whose effort to displace life by movies is thus on display).

We have just mentioned an essential difference between a movie quotation and a filched or plagiarized textual element; while the former is explicit and recognizable, the latter implies a certain fraudulent impulse. That is, for example, the definition that Umberto Eco proposes: “In producing object-b, which is a complete or partial copy of object-a, Author-b tries to hide the similarity between the two objects and does not attempt to establish its true identity” (¿Qué es el plagio, no date). For Genette and the theory of intertextuality, it is “an undeclared but literal copy” (1989: 10). Thus, for there to exist a plagiarism, besides the partial or complete and original copy of the other text, there has to be the intention of hiding or not announcing the condition of copy. In the case of cinema, the copy may be visual (an image, a sequence) and recognizable as a copy, for example in the cases mentioned earlier of *Rear Window* and *The Birds* in *Mujeres*. But it may also arise in the script-writing phase, as in the allusions to Brian de Palma’s *Carrie* (1976), in which the plagiarism is not so much visual as literary and even musical, in the form of musical themes that Almodóvar borrows from de Palma’s film, which Almodóvar notes, “but nobody notices” (Strauss 1995: 129), or *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991), taken from George Fenton’s score for *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, 1988). Despite these instances in which the plagiarism is literal and yet undeclared, it should be noted that Almodóvar usually makes no effort to hide his poaching habits. He even boasts about them after the premiere of his films in his public statements about each film and in interviews where he reveals the genres, directors, films, and actors who have inspired him.

Therefore, we need to acknowledge still other types of poaching Almodóvar practices involving copies that are less literal. One of these is pastiche, which the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy defines as a “plagiarism that consists of taking specific elements characteristic of the work of one or more artists and combining them in a form that appears as though it were an original work.” For his part, Genette speaks of a “weave of imitations” (1989: 98) whose author “most commonly arranges a plot or ‘theme’ invented or taken from others, that is reshaped into the

style of its model" (1989: 99). An eloquent example of this process from Almodóvar's own work is the brief interpolated silent movie, *El amanate menguante* / *The Shrinking Lover* from *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002) that combines elements from F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1928) and Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957).

Genette views pastiche in terms of what he calls "travestimiento," or transvestism, which is not an act of imitation but of transformation in which the author take control of a text and transforms it according to a formal rule of coercion or with a specific semantic intention and transposes it uniformly and mechanically into another style (1989: 100). As we shall see, Almodóvar's stolen images belong to that realm because in transvestism there is a dominant sense of appropriation derived from Michel de Certeau's sense of cinema as an "everyday practice" within which one does not view plagiarism as a form of illicit or illegal appropriation. It is in this sense that plagiarism becomes a means of resistance.³

The Search for Style

From the start of his filmmaking career, Almodóvar has tried to establish certain points of contact between his own work and the filmmakers and films that he reveres. It is in this context that not only has he built a defensive wall but also a network of prestige to justify and to lend a certain authority to his intertextual games. We need to see this practice not as something exclusive to Almodóvar, but as generational, coinciding, for example with the practice of David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino, among others. In this sense, intertextuality becomes a strategy rather than a tactic (De Certeau 2000: xlix).

It is possible to follow his use of textual poaching as a tactic of resistance through his early career up to the period of his acknowledged maturity—the period which includes *Volver*—during which time we may note a shift in his approach from that of a "consumer" of images to a producer of images, of voices as he becomes the "artist of speech," a filmmaker who becomes obsessed with the patterns of speech of his characters but also the creator of his own cinematic language. He says to Frédéric Strauss:

El papel del director is muy cercano a la idea de Dios, de aquel ser omnipotente, porque no hay mayor poder que el de representar las propias fantasías y hacerlas auténticas. Para mí la figura del director es una figura oral, o al menos yo soy un director absolutamente oral. El director es Dios en el sentido de que es el creador, no importa que sea un universo paralelo al real (1995: 88).

(The role of the director is close to the idea of God, that omnipotent being, because there is no greater power than that of representing one's own fantasies and to make them authentic, For me the figure of the director is an oral figure, or, at least, I am an absolutely oral director. The director is God in the sense that he is the creator; it doesn't matter that the world he creates is parallel to the real one.)

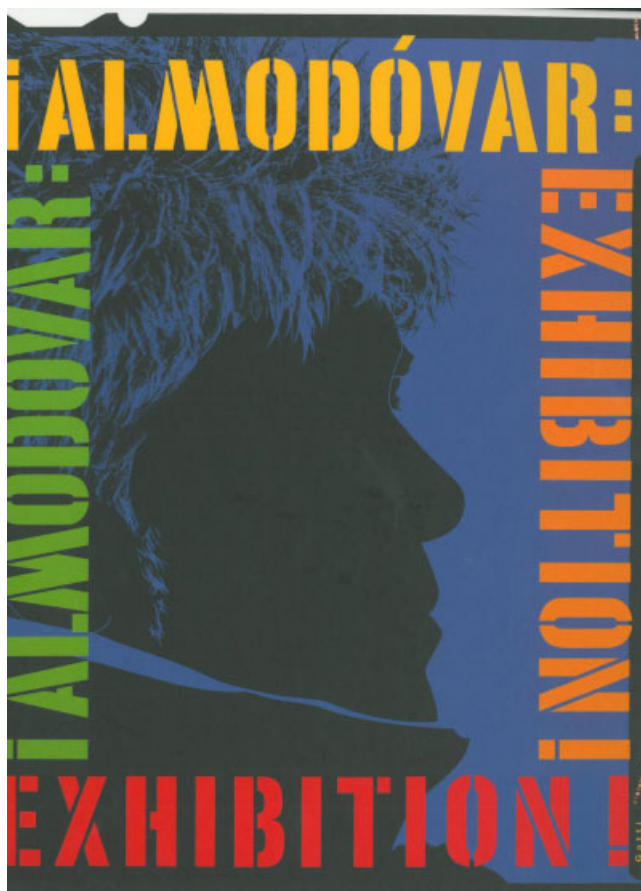


Figure 16.2 Cover for the catalogue of the 2006 Paris Cinématèque exhibit devoted to Almodóvar. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

This strategic vision achieves material form in the 2006 exposition that the Cinématèque Française dedicated to the Spanish auteur under the title *Almodóvar Exhibition!* the seventh part of which is titled “La Vie Spectacle” and dedicated to “all the films that appear in my films . . . all meticulously chosen” (Almodóvar 2006: n. p.). The films in question were projected between April 5 and May 16 of that year and, in the formal presentation titled “Carte blanche for Pedro Almodóvar,” he says that he chose these films because they had a “relation” to his film work, that they had been “points of reference while he wrote or shot particular films.” In that sense the word “appear” is used loosely. Above all, he notes, the selection reflects his own cinephilia and the process whereby, when he goes to the movies, the images become part of his own life, of his experience, even though he is nothing but an ordinary spectator to these works.

He goes on to review, one by one, his own films and the films that inspired them. In that enumeration, we find some interesting and unexpected revelations that help

us to better understand his films. These include the recognition of Michael Powell as one of his masters, and the effort of his director of photography in *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983), Ángel Luis Fernández, to imitate the "palette" of Jack Cardiff in *Black Narcissus* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947); the impact that Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) had on him and its connection to *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984); the influence of Albert Lewin's *The Legend* (1951) on *Matador*; and the parallelism between *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987) and Patrick Chéreau's *L'homme blessé/The Wounded Man* (1983), although he admits that at the time of the shooting he wasn't completely aware of it. He also cites the influence of the kidnap plot in William Wyler's *The Desperate Hours* (1955) for the script of *¡Átame!*; the connection between Becky del Páramo (Marisa Paredes) in *Tacones lejanos* and Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), another of his "essential" auteurs; the surprising lesson that he extracted from *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930) and the sequence in which Harpo Marx leaves a handful of girls unconscious with a spray gun for *Hable con ella*; or the inspiration for the ghost in *Volver* based on David Lean's 1945 *Blithe Spirit*; and the recognition that the best phantoms are those from Buñuel or Bergman because they appear without special effects.

Clear in these discussions of each film is the conscious effort by Almodóvar to avoid any form of chance or coincidence in the development of his scripts. His objective is to give the impression that his starting points in scriptwriting were in fact these very filmic citations. It is based on his conception of film itself as a product of everyday reality, in effect, to use his own words, "appropriating" these citations in the service of the story he is telling (Almodóvar 2006: 7). He has given the name "theft" to this process of selection and appropriation. Here, of course, he is once more playing with the concept of "image" and with the double of the spectator/director on one side and scriptwriter/director on the other. This is a game, as we shall see, that is apparent in the complexity of *Los abrazos rotos*.

In effect, the concept of "robo" cannot be limited exclusively to the "visual image" since it is a product of shooting the film, of editing it, and is shared not only with the spectator or spectator/director, but is also part of the mental image which is the product of imagination, which occurs during scriptwriting (as was evident in the case of the dialogues in *Johnny Guitar*), precisely the site where Almodóvar provides a literalness to his audiovisual transpositions. We need here to think of this act of composing, of "poaching," or lifting of material from other films as the filmmaker's "active participation" in such acts.

In the introduction to the 2006 catalogue for the Paris exhibition, he asserts that what he has done "are not homages to other filmmakers but 'complete thefts'." In that same text he distinguishes three different types of transtextual relations: explicit quotations; films not directly cited but which hold a certain similarity or parallel to his films; and the role of certain films in the text of the script or during the shooting and apparent in some specific passage or the general tone of the film or for a technical reason (Almodóvar 2006: n. p.).

From these observations, we may derive certain interesting conclusions. The first is that, although Almodóvar does not reach Goddard's level of "intertextual terrorist," his intertextual precociousness is notable: some thirty-seven specific instances covering his first seventeen films. It is, as Almodóvar himself has noted, a respectable indebtedness to other filmmakers. Secondly, such textual poaching abounds more in his later films than in his earlier ones and more strikingly; his use of intertextual citations is not so much to illuminate the art of making movies as it is to "filch" actual storylines and the genres in which these plots occur. In terms of genre, melodrama is the most emphatically represented, after which comes the thriller and, to a less degree, the comedy. Chronologically, the periods most markedly represented in his poaching are the 1940s and 1950s, the Golden Age of classical Hollywood cinema, a fact that seems to contradict his supposed avant-garde and experimental style, further modified by his penchant for autobiographical touches in the plotting which often explains the emphasis on film styles of the past. All of which is to say, a pastiche.

When he uses the term "inspired by" it is when he is revealing his intention to poach images, as is demonstrated in three instances: in *Qué he hecho yo...*, Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953); in *Todo sobre mi madre*, John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1977); and F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1928) in the *Shrinking Lover* sequence from *Hable con ella*. On other occasions, when he identifies the verbal quotes as in George Cukor's *Rich and Famous* (1981) in *La flor de mi secreto*/*The Flower of My Secret* (1995) or visual quotes as in the citations in *La mala educación* of Renoir's *La bête humaine*, *Thérèse Raquin*, and *Double Indemnity*, the acknowledgment appears right after the intertext.

Within Almodóvar's strategy of "transparency" we find a certain mechanism of cover-up in which he prefers not to reveal all of the creative maneuvering. This is probably part of an approach that simply reinforces his own status as a dominant source of power isolated in his own private space and insulated from the rest of the movie world. One index of this tendency to obscure the sources of his poaching is the discrepancy between his confessions of being a "good thief" and the detective work of film scholars and critics who have worked through his cinematic intertexts. There is even a gap between what the filmmaker acknowledges and what the critics have found. Of the thirty-seven "robos" Almodóvar acknowledges, only fifteen coincide with what critics have found, and these are in the realm of the most obvious borrowings: *The Desperate Hours* in *¡Átame!*; *Rich and Famous* in *La flor de mi secreto*; *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) and *Opening Night* in *Todo sobre mi madre*. All the rest coincide with Genette's canonical definition of "undeclared copy" but also what Jean-Claude Seguin terms "private jokes" (2009a: 37).

At the beginning of his professional career there is a discernible absence of plagiarism in the form of textual citations; in their place are *imitations* of the style of other filmmakers. We are dealing here, as Genette might argue, with pastiches: *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980) in the style of Warhol; *Laberinto de pasiones*/*Labyrinth of Passion* (1982) in the style of Richard Lester; *Qué he hecho yo. . .* inspired by Italian neorealism (Triana

1999: 227). In this regard, it is worth noting that as Almodóvar progressively adds cinematic quotations to his films, as noted by critics and scholars, he begins to speak of his search for his own film style. This is precisely the point in his career when he breaks free from the straight imitative phase of his trajectory. This move coincides with pivotal films like *Matador*, *La ley del deseo* (Smith 1994: 79–92), *Mujeres . . .* (Acevedo 2007: 95–134), *¡Átame!* and *Tacones lejanos*, films replete with stylistic imitations of other directors and genres. From our perspective, the pivotal films in this evolution are *Kika*, *La flor de mi secreto*, and *Carne trémula*, where the debt to his stylistic mentors is emphasized (Bremand 2002: 180–8). At the same time, however, curiously, we begin to discern a certain originality in his visual/narrative treatments that appears to distance his works from the accusation of mere pastiche while the concept of “travestismo” gains prominence, culminating in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Hable con ella*, two films in which Almodóvar achieves his definitive style, precisely as he engages in an intensification of intertextual poaching. This style will be consolidated in *La mala educación* and *Volver* and achieve a new synthesis in *Los abrazos rotos* which incorporates aspects of his entire filmography (Kinder 2010).

Textual Transvestism

The dynamics of intertextual appropriation in which Almodóvar engages during much of his professional career is a play of modulating the level of absorption of poached texts into his own films and, importantly, identifying or concealing the sources of these appropriations. In that process, as we have noted, there is a stage of dilution of the appropriated material, although the source is discernible in some manner. This latter process is, following Genette's usage, what I would call “transvestism” and which may involve matters of language and style. From Genette's identification of this process, it is “always a process involving one or various texts, but never a whole genre” (1989: 103).

We are dealing here with cues or clues that the filmmaker drops but which do not reveal his real intention which is nothing less than to change the appearance of the material he is poaching. It is, in a metaphoric sense, a transvestite's performance: just as the figure of the cross-dresser is a camouflage, the result of an effort to hide what the character really is, so too is the filched material presented in a partially disguised form. The product of this kind of “robo,” like that of the *travesti*, is doubleness of identity in a single body.

The first notable example of this transvestism is an instance that has gone unnoticed by the commentators of Almodóvar's work. It is the shot from *The Big Heat* which is used in *Qué he hecho yo . . .* and which Almodóvar describes this way:

For one shot in *¿Qué he hecho yo . . .?*, I took inspiration from the Fritz Lang jewel, the blackest of film noirs. It's the coffee advertisement inserted in the film in which a hot



Figure 16.3 Poaching from George Cukor's *Rich and Famous*: the final toast between friends Leo and Ángel in *La flor de mi secreto* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Jean Marie Leroy.

cup of coffee is thrown at Cecilia Roth's face. (Her lover has brought a cup of coffee to her in bed but accidentally trips on her slippers and the cup goes flying.) But in *¿Qué he hecho yo. . .?* this is no more than a joke, a parody of advertising that destroys the couple's intimate moments (Almodóvar 2006: n. p.).

This is, in effect, a parody of the coffee advertisement in terms of the content of the scene, but transvestism in terms of the Lang quotations which has been transformed into something else. It has the same narrative meaning but with a different accent. What was serious in the original has now been transformed into a gag; thus we have the first explicit definition of transvestism. The importance of the character's physical misstep, of course, depends on the context and the degree to which the director operates in respect to the original. As we shall see, transvestism does not always involve a radical change from seriousness to satire, although parody, closely aligned with transvestism for Genette, is in fact aligned with satire (1989: 40).

The following and fundamental example of transvestism refers to the poaching from George Cukor's film *Rich and Famous* for *La flor de mi secreto*, one of the films in which Almodóvar's obfuscation best operates and in which characters with double identities predominate (Strauss 1995: 183–4). Besides the filmic borrowings that Almodóvar acknowledges, there are others, "discovered" by commentators, from Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960) (Acevedo 2007: 160) and Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) (D'Lugo 2006: 89; Acevedo 2007: 168). Almodóvar describes it this way:

At the end of *La flor de mi secreto* . . . after the process of feminization of Leo's friend (Juan Echanove), who hinted that he could be much more, Marisa Paredes refers to *Rich and Famous*. As in the Cukor film, they are seated in front of a fireplace, drinking; they're two writers and they have just made their peace with each other. The two versions of *Rich and Famous* are magnificent. I particularly remember Cukor's version: women, friends, novelists. The conjunction of these three elements interests me a lot (Almodóvar 2006: n. p.).

Finally, Almodóvar reaches something of a virtuoso transvestism in the scene of the car accident in which Esteban (Eloy Azorín) is hit by a taxi in *Todo sobre mi madre*. Besides the explicit quote from *All About Eve* that seems to overshadow the entire film from its very title, the accident sequence is an obvious poaching of a similar scene from John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* in which seventeen-year-old Nancy is waiting outside a theater for her favorite actress, Gena Rowlands, to come out so she may ask her for an autograph. After making room through the crowds waiting at the stage door, Nancy manages to get close to the star who is in a car. It is raining torrentially and Nancy is plastered against the car window, when the actress's car pulls away and another car runs Nancy over. In Almodóvar's film, the protagonist Manuela's (Cecilia Roth) son, Esteban, who is the same age as Nancy, after waiting at the stage door exit for his favorite actress, Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes) to sign an autograph, is also run over by a car. Nonetheless—and here is the distinctive Almodóvar touch—despite the coincidence of the plot details (the admiration of the two young people for the theater actress, the effort to get her autograph at the theater entrance, their age, the rain, the night, the car accident)—Almodóvar introduces two variants to camouflage the source of the poaching and to make this scene his own. He describes that authorial signature gesture this way:

In *Opening Night* the scene is shot from eye-level . . . The fan who asks for the autograph of Gena Rowlands is on her knees before the actress and she is very direct. She goes toward the car and speaks to her . . . But in my film, the scene deals with a mother and son who are waiting outside the theater for the actors to come out and they're in a kind of empty time of anticipation (waiting). The two exchange the most important words of their life . . . My scene thus has another meaning altogether . . . But in Cassavetes's film, the actress who Gena Rowlands plays, understands what has happened in the accident; she wants to know what has happened to her young admirer. I prefer that Marisa Paredes, who plays the role of the actress Huma Rojo, disappear without knowing what has happened. And for the accident itself, I placed the camera in the place of Esteban's eyes (Strauss 1999: 39).⁴

This is a typical instance of one of Almodóvar's poached sequences which is, at the same time, a transvestite sequence because, despite the fact that he has changed the camera's point of view—what Poyato calls “la mirada del muriente” (the dying person's perspective) (2007: 92–95)—he adds one more character to wait for the arrival of the famous actress and in this case the fictional star knows nothing about

the car accident. We are thus dealing here with circumstantial elements which Almodóvar uses to his own advantage, but which really don't alter the meaning of the original sequence. That original meaning is quite clear: to show how mere chance can in an instant cut short the life of a person on what is possibly the happiest day of his life: when he approaches the actress he idolizes. From the height of happiness to the fatalism of death, this is a truly poetic idea: the impossibility of fully partaking of the sublime in art.

Los abrazos rotos, or the Synthesis of Almodovarian Transvestism and Pastiche

In *Todo sobre mi madre* Almodóvar at last achieves a distinctive personal style. He does so in a paradoxical way, by means of combinations and mixtures of a variety of styles and genres and, above all, through the transformation of shots and sequences which he avails himself of as a spectator. In effect, he merges what critics and others had called his tendency toward pastiche with the parallel tendency toward intertextual transvestism, combining these into a new aesthetic that will quickly be identified with his cinema as "the Almodóvar style." In his very next film, *Hable con ella*, he merges these seemingly contrary elements together in a brief silent film interpolated into the principal narrative, *El amante menguante*. This short is built upon the Jack Arnold B film science-fiction cult classic of the 1950s, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957). At the same time, according to his own confession, the silent film was inspired by the last great silent classic, *Sunrise*: "Of all the silent films that I had seen before confronting *The Shrinking Lover*, it was *Sunrise* that best coincided with what I had in mind. Even the intertitle lettering inspired me" (Almodóvar 2006: n. p.). All of which is to say that there is on the one hand a clear stylistic imitation, the Murnau silent film, and on the other, the Arnold film, but both are integrated within a work that in turn would be considered an unacknowledged poaching of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) according to Bremard (2003: 248), and Law (2010: 120), in large measure owing to the abundance of details that the two films share.⁵

The "formula for success," that is, the combination of filmic quotes of every kind, visual metaphors, transvestisms, and more or less literal poachings, reach a crescendo in *Los abrazos rotos*. In terms of Almodóvar's output of three decades, the film represents what Metz attributed to Fellini in *8½* (1963). It is not only that there is a reference to the legendary Italian film, and suggestions of his admiration for the Italian filmmaker, but *Los abrazos rotos* constitutes a kind of meditation on the filmmaker's art expressed as a sustained retrospective look at the filmic citations of his own earlier work (Kinder 2010). Despite this ambitious meta-cinematic project, the film remains a coherent narrative, even providing plot lines related precisely to the poaching of cinematic images.

This is the story of Mateo Blanco and his transformation into Harry Caine (Lluís Homar), alter-ego of Almodóvar himself. The plot centers on the theft of a film, *Chicas y maletas* (*Girls and Suitcases*) produced by Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez) in order to mutilate it. This act is motivated as revenge for Harry's adulterous affair with Martel's wife, Lena (Penélope Cruz), culminating in the adulterous couple's fleeing to the island of Lanzarote where Lena is killed in an automobile crash. This is the story of thefts that ironically are shaped by a cinematic theft, that of a photograph that appears to poach a moment from Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*. This meta-cinematic theft-within-the-theft of a film thereby becomes a metaphor for the film we are viewing. More than any of his previous works, *Los abrazos rotos* reflects Almodóvar's passionate cinephilia and his personal life as it holds together a series of images that are for him as real as life itself (Seguin 2009b: 180). Commenting on the conception of the film, Almodóvar says:

En este caso, esa primera línea viene de una foto que hice hace nueve años en Lanzarote y de la oscuridad en la que yo vivía en ese momento. De ahí viene también lo del director ciego. La segunda línea me la tengo que inventar, y ese es el juego que me atrae, porque primero debo descubrirla, y no la quiero descubrir en la realidad. Prefiero descubrirla en la imaginación. (Heredero and Reviriego 2009: 9–10)

(In this instance, that first line of the script comes from a photograph I took nine years ago in Lanzarote and of the shadows in which I lived at that moment. From that condition the idea of the blind filmmaker sprung up. The second line of the script I had to invent myself, and that game that attracted me, because first I have to discover it and I don't want to discover it, in reality. I prefer to discover it in my imagination.)

There is an entire poetics of chance, in the Surrealist sense very much connected to Barthes's theories about photography as *punctum* (1982), the indicator of death, like a frozen reality of "what has been" right there before the camera's eye at that precise moment (the discovery, according to Almodóvar's own account, of a couple which he failed to notice originally when he shot the photo on the beach at Lanzarote). Thus the film comes out of Almodóvar's own personal experience on the black volcanic landscape at a point in his own life which was equally black (his mother's recent death): "Las fotos captan cosas que el ojo no ve a primera vista. Las fotos adquieren una densidad y expresividad que multiplican con mucho la emoción y la realidad del momento en que se hizo" (Photographs capture things that the eye does not at first see. Photographs acquire a density and expressiveness that multiples the emotion and the reality in which they were first taken) (Sardá 2009), he tells an interviewer as he describes the origin of *Los abrazos rotos*. In other words, we begin with the photographic image which is a freezing of time, darkness and death, but which is also the magical revelation of the invisible—it is impossible here not to see this as the allusion to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966)—and a metaphoric state of

blindness of the separation from the visible that is represented by Harry Caine in the plot. A story needs to be invented about the two lovers on the beach. What happens is that Almodóvar's imagination is full of the images, reminiscences, and recollections from other films that "salen como un elemento dramático del guión, casi como un personaje del que me sirvo" (come out like dramatic elements in the movie script, almost like the character I am developing) (Heredero and Reviriego 2009: 10).

For Almodóvar, then, to invent a character from his imagination presupposes, even more than in *Los abrazos rotos*, to pass from death to life, from darkness to light, but an interior light that serves to illuminate for him the various elements of the cinematic puzzle of the plot he is constructing: to make a film built on another film; to construct his cinema out of cinema. It is here, where, in large measure, the complex originality of his films resides but where the Spanish critical establishment has read Almodóvar's approach in negative terms. Simply put, his is a metaphoric kinship with the most genuine tradition of the drag queen, precisely a textual equivalent of the cross-dresser or transvestite (young male actors who represented women when females were not allowed on stage) or the woman dressed as a man in Spanish Golden Age theater.

Yet, the figure of the transvestite also has a voyeuristic drive that manifests itself in the abundant images of photographs, eyes, keyholes, and camera lenses in so many of his films. In them the camera is transformed into a corporeal eye as a means of conquering reality but also as a means by which the transvestite comes to be seen in an interior view that is extremalized over the course of the film. It is no coincidence that Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) is the most frequently referenced cinematic intertext for Almodóvar's films from *Kika* through *Los abrazos rotos*. An obsession persists in these films to memorialize the fleeting moment, to symbolically "kill" the loved object.

"El ojo del fotógrafo siempre está como redoblando las imágenes [se refiere a *Kika*], desdoblando los sentidos (The camera's eye always reinforces the images [referring to *Kika*] reduplicating the senses) (Seguin 2009b: 194). In effect, cinema is the territory of these doubles. As he notes, in his films "hay un reflejo mío, pero en ninguno hay demasiados datos biográficos" (there is a reflection of myself but none of them contain many biographical notes) (Heredero and Reviriego 2009: 8).

But in *Los abrazos rotos* we find an example of doubling, not only as the filmmaker, but also as the scriptwriter in his double life as Mateo Blanco/Harry Caine and even with the character of Ernesto Martel, his producer and rival for the Penélope Cruz character, Lena. Along with them there is another series of duplications/duplicities that pull us further into the realm of transvestism in which nothing is what it appears and everything is transformed by whim: the performance of Penélope Cruz as both Lena in the film and Pina in the film-within-the-film (*Chicas y maletas*); with the video shots of the actors when they are off-screen at the shoot; the function of Ernesto Martel Jr., who duplicates

the conduct of his father during the shooting of the interpolated film. These off-camera scenes are paired with the title sequence of *Los abrazos rotos*; they offer us another set of video images of actors who will shortly appear in the film, thereby providing the audience with a second degree of representation of the cinematic story. Following that same line, Ernesto Martel Sr. is shown viewing the video scenes his son has shot of Mateo/Harry listening to the playback from *Chicas y maletas*; this parallel suggests that both men have been blinded by their unbridled passion for Lena.

Along with all of these elements of doubling, apart from the important interpolated clip from *Viaggio in Italia*, we must add the following cases of literal plagiarism, such as the scene in which Ernesto Martel throws Lena down a circular staircase, causing her to break her leg, inspired by Stanley Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* (1955), or Lena's walking on crutches which recalls Catherine Deneuve in Buñuel's *Tristana* (1970). Beyond these quotes, José Arroyo identifies several more: the double reference to Orson Welles by means of Mateo's name after he becomes blind—Harry Caine—as it blends two of Welles's master roles, that of Harry Lime in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) and his own invention, Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane* (1942); the visual quotes from photographs hanging on the walls of the characters' rooms, including Cary Grant in Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), Fellini's *8½* (1963), and Antonioni's *La notte* (1960); auditory quotes from Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud/Elevator to the Gallows* (1958) when Harry Caine asks his son to put on the DVD of the film in order to be able to hear the voice of Jeanne Moreau; the transvestism of *Peeping Tom* which is composed of the video that Matel's son, Ernesto Jr., is shooting at his father's instigation to spy on Lena and Mateo; and, of course, the mise en abyme of the inclusion of a scene from Harry's fictitious comedy, *Chicas y maletas*, which turns out to be a self-plagiarism of *Mujeres*.

As we have seen, the logic of the pastiche is built around the combination of disparate elements, each one from a different source. At the same time, however, Almodóvar's idiosyncratic talent leads him to transform other elements according to the logic Genette has identified with textual transvestism (1989: 146). We thus come to the essence of Almodóvar's signature style which is based on transvestism in terms of a series of transformations of an endless series of images but involves a dazzling pastiche of imitations of personal styles of other filmmakers and of genres as well. The special singularity of Almodóvar's style lies in his combinations of different amounts and proportions of those styles, thus constituting a collage. In terms of the specific cinematic editing of *Los abrazos rotos*, one of his protagonists speaks of "la propia construcción del relato . . . Al principio aparece una imagen robada: nos dice ya que está hablando de cine, de imágenes a veces hurtadas y de narraciones no siempre permitidas" (the particular construction of the plot: At the beginning there appear a stolen image, it tells us that he is speaking about cinema, of images that are at times poached and of narrations that are not always permitted) (Heredero and Reviriego 2009: 7).

Notes

- 1 Frédéric Strauss (1995: 61). All subsequent quotations from Strauss's interviews with Almodóvar come from this book, the first published version of their "conversations."
- 2 For a detailed analysis of Almodóvar's indebtedness to Hitchcock, see chapter 3, this volume.
- 3 Noteworthy here is the fact that Almodóvar's films themselves have become the source of citations or parody for other directors. Thus, for example, *Mujeres . . .* appears in *Home for the Holidays* (1995) by Jodie Foster and in *Goldfish Memory* (2003) by the Irish director Elizabeth Gill. There are references to *Matador* in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoven, 1992), *Film Geek* (James Westby, 2005), and the Chinese film *Man yan* (2004) by Jianjun He which also cites *Tacones lejanos*, *Carne trémula* and *Todo sobre mi madre* and includes a fragment from *¡Átame!*. *¡Átame!* also figures in Westby's film and is cited in *Le divorce* (2003) by James Ivory and in the Chilean-German production *En la cama* (Matias Bize, 2005). *Tacones lejanos* appears in *Full Frontal* (2003) by Steven Soderbergh and is parodied in *Spanish Movie* (2009) by Javier Ruiz Caldera, which also includes a parody of *Todo sobre mi madre*. The latter is the film most often alluded to, with citations in *All Over the Guy* (2001) by Julie Davis, González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003), and *Miao Miao* (2008) by the Taiwanese director Hsiao-tse Cheng. For its part, *La mala educación* figures in *Caché* (2005) by Michael Haneke.
- 4 Translation by the author.
- 5 These include a similar thematic, publicity posters, and other visual coincidences. Gubern (2005: 49) has also pointed to the inspiration in Perrault's version of *Sleeping Beauty*.

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PART V

Global Almodóvar

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown

From Madrid (1988) to New York (2010)

Isolina Ballesteros

Like other Spanish filmmakers, Pedro Almodóvar has had his films released in the United States. But unlike any other director, only Almodóvar has had the good fortune to see all his films not only released but also widely distributed, included in festivals and special tributes, nominated for and awarded Academy Awards, and lavished with constant intellectual attention and academic publications. My personal connection with Almodóvar's cinema began with the commercial release of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) in New York in the fall of 1988 after it had been selected to open the 26th New York Film Festival on September 23 of that year. My "Almodovarian education" thus occurred retrospectively when his earlier films were commercially released after the success of *Mujeres al borde*.¹ Since then, I closely followed each subsequent film with the nostalgic spirit of the expatriate who craves a return, albeit virtual, to the cultural world she left behind. In many ways Almodóvar sustained my academic career as a film scholar working on Spanish cinema in New York: I incorporated his films into my courses, wrote academic articles about them, and participated in some of the tributes and conferences dedicated to his work. Thus, as I sat in the Belasco Theater on Broadway in the fall of 2010 witnessing the theatrical adaptation of *Mujeres al borde*, I realized I had come full circle. My enjoyment of Almodóvar's films, however, always a way to reconnect with my cultural and linguistic roots, has not helped me determine which filmic elements had captured the attention of New York audiences or to understand how one of his films could have made it to the institution of Broadway.

In his review of *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004), David Denby articulated my same concern: “How could a director working out of what appears to be a gay-cabaret sensibility achieve such renown?” His answer to his own question points out the unprecedented nature of the Almodóvar phenomenon: “Surely there has never been a world-famous director whose work is essentially camp” (2004: 85). He concludes, along with other New York cultural critics, such as A. O. Scott and Daniel Mendelsohn, that his fame is due largely to the common humanity he invests in his characters: “His characters may be strange, but they express common emotions—sexual obsession, love, the pain of loss, compassion” (2004: 87).

It could also be argued that the essence of Almodóvar’s success resides in what Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki refer to as “doubleness of purpose,” an oscillation between “playing to the mainstream and provoking its sensibilities” (2009: 15). If we follow the chronology of his filmic productions, Almodóvar’s declared goal in his earlier films was indeed to provoke the mainstream sensibility and support marginal practices and desires. Thus he created a “promiscuous cinema” that normalized sexual fluidity (Morgan 1992: 28), populated his films with marginal and multi-sexual characters, “unfreaking freaks” (Denby 2004: 85), and “advanced a sense of transgression without overt political attitudinizing” and a “nonjudgmental take on sexuality, desire, affect, and emotion” (Epps and Kakoudaki 2009: 11). The various emotional connections with Almodóvar’s characters and situations are in one way or another determined by the “consistency of sexual desire” (Bersani and Dutoit 2009: 246).

Many critics, regardless of nationality, have also stressed that one of Almodóvar’s trademarks, and probably the key to his success, resides in his power to move audiences through sensual stimulation and elaborated mise en scènes that elegantly translate raw emotion and passion to the screen (Strauss 2006: x), even amidst intricate and improbable plots. Besides his ability to captivate audiences by aesthetically striking the emotional chord, his institutional success both with the U.S. Academy of Motion Pictures and among scholars and academics in the fields of Spanish cultural studies and film studies is linked precisely to the narrative complexity and the visual exuberance of his films. As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit put it: “In Almodóvar’s work, psychic implausibility does not make for narrative chaos. Part of the fun in making up these wild stories may well have been in not allowing for any loose narrative threads, in making compatible the multidirectional story with compositional tightness” (2009: 246).

Almodóvar gradually evolved from being the central experimental voice of the Spanish *Movida*—a provocateur, iconoclast, punk, and queer—to an auteur with a sober and more cautious stance towards social, moral and emotional issues, and universal themes. With *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), Almodóvar won the respect of the international gay community. As Daniel Mendelsohn said in his review of *Volver* (2006) for the *New York Review of Books*, “[Almodóvar’s] earliest champions in this country were to be found among urban gay men, who, during the mid- and late 1980s, were also enjoying a newfound sense of political power

and social visibility—and, of course, were feeling no little anxiety as well” (2007: 1). *La ley del deseo* became a cult film among gay communities who had never seen a commercial filmic representation of gay characters exuberantly displaying themselves in public and maintaining their relationships far from marginalized spaces and practices. For that very reason, those who revered him precisely for cultivating and celebrating the non-normative, would express nostalgia for that sense of provocation that became restrained in his later films. Mendelsohn considers that the new sensibility in Almodóvar’s films since the release of *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) has to do with his new perception of women as “real women” rather than only “over-the-top hysterics.”² He notes: “The newfound emotional subtlety and technical restraint that you get in these films seems connected to a deeper appreciation of women than was previously evident—women not as camp harpies or hysterics or vamps (which is to say women as drag icons), but as something closer to the women of real life” (Mendelsohn 2007: 1). He considers *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999) to be the film that initiates a new sensibility that shifts from the world of gay men to the world of straight women and “abandons melodrama for something at once subtler and more emotionally profound.” Straight women who, without men, thrive as they “rely on each other” (Mendelsohn 2007: 2).³

Even before the successful reception of *Todo sobre mi madre*, which won the Best Director’s award at Cannes, and the Golden Globe and Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1999⁴—audiences would already find in *Mujeres* the aforementioned aspects that would reappear in future Almodóvar’s films and would be the key to his worldwide success:⁵ his preference for female characters and their ways of dealing with common emotions and affects; compositional and visual exuberance; and disregard for generic orthodoxy and tone uniformity. Despite his unorthodox approach to movie genres, *Mujeres* is nonetheless one of the most solid films in terms of comedic consistency, inspired by Hollywood screwball comedies and then transplanted to the Madrid of the late 1980s. Audiences, native and international, related both to the film’s structure, style, and rhythm “that imitate so many American comedies” (Almodóvar 2010: 2) and to the light version of the universal trope of the abandoned woman, which will keep reappearing, mostly in (melo)dramatic forms, in Almodóvar’s subsequent films. Spectators apparently appreciated the opportunity to have a good laugh, albeit a laugh that masked “a subtle reflection on female solitude and the insanity that threatens every woman who has been abandoned,” as well as “the spontaneous female solidarity that arises at moments of crisis” (Almodóvar 2010: 2). Part of the film’s box-office success resulted from the way it merged the traditions of both Hollywood and Spanish cinema, which was underlined in approving reviews from prominent New York film critics, including Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* (1988), David Denby of *The New York Times Magazine* (1988) and Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* (1989). Adapted to the new era of Spanish liberties and contrasting with the austere tones of auterist filmmakers (Saura, Erice, Borau), which reflected the

gloom of the Franco years (Evans 1996: 21), *Mujeres* works as a “Billy Wilder-type of comedy” (Vidal 1990: 266). Combining typical comedic resources, such as screwball fast dialogues and frenetic rhythm inherent to the urban environment that escalates near the ending, the rapid-fire succession of images and farcical actions, and the throwing of objects out of the window, Almodóvar effectively parodies the patriarchal preconception of “feminine hysteria.” Similar to a comedy of manners, he includes easily recognizable prototypes, like the Don Juan figure, and the gossip receptionist and doorwoman, while deconstructing others, like the “mambo taxi driver.” His use of comic coincidences and a conjunction of improbabilities provoke laughter, instead of tears. Moreover, the unconventional use of close-up, low angles, and reduced framing serve to comically aggrandize the objects that symbolically represent the source of these women’s obsessions and anxieties, namely, extreme close-ups of Iván’s mouth and microphone (which render and amplify his voice, the main source of his treacherous seduction); the telephone and answering machine (means of frustration instead of communication); and low-angle shots of Pepa’s and Candela’s walking and running shoes (carriers of impatience and panic).⁶

Hollywood screwball comedies appeared in the 1930s in an attempt to comically counteract the moral conventions and sexual restraints of the new comedies that followed the Production Code. The films that established the genre were female-driven with independent and strong-willed characters who challenged the dominant gender codes of society, usually in a tougher and more efficient way than their male counterparts. As divorce rates kept increasing throughout the following decades, screwball comedies sought to restore the confidence of American audiences by reaffirming the possibility of romance and marriage. Traditional gender roles could be challenged but ultimately reinforced, “rules of behavior could be shattered but not irreparably,” and romantic order would be typically restored in the end (Sikov 1989: 106). As Wes Gehring put it, there is a difference between screwball and romantic comedy; the former being a parody of the latter, a satire of the traditional love story, with “an eccentrically comic battle of the sexes” (2002: 4) and “the ritualistic humiliation of the male” (2002: 43), who would still attempt to reassert his authority and bring the woman back into the dominant patriarchal code. Romantic comedy’s earnestness regarding love is entirely absent from screwball comedies. The latter prioritize the silly over the sentimental, becoming “in essence voyages of self-discovery” (Sikov 1989: 3), in which the leading male and female learn something about themselves as a result of their relationship, which helps them to resolve the conflicts of the film.⁷

Simultaneously following and subverting the American model, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* is a female-driven screwball comedy that parodies romantic comedy without its traditional patriarchal restoration outcome. The efficient and strong-willed Pepa (Carmen Maura) leads over the invisible and elusive Iván (Fernando Guillén) who, departing from convention, is exposed and humiliated but never rehabilitated in the end. The film never provides the happy restoration



Figure 17.1 The view from the terrace in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*: a fantastic space that shelters women's liberation (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.) © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Macusa Cores.

of romantic love whose special quality is questioned (Evans 1996: 71). Contrary to the ideology of Hollywood screwball comedies and adapted to the liberating codes of post-Franco Spain, traditional gender roles are not conventionally re-established and relationships and the role women play in them are in the process of being redefined.

A strong graphic design element permeating all Almodóvar's films also finds its inspiration in the type of superficial design and visual pleasure that befits classical comedy (Allinson 2001: 177). In an interview with Joel Siegel for the *Washington Post*, Almodóvar declared that he was trying to follow the spirit of *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953) "with elegant, well-dressed women talking about

men in a fantastic penthouse with artificial views of the town [New York]" (Evans 1996: 74). As was the case in *The Women* (George Cuckor, 1939) and *How to Marry a Millionaire*, Pepa's penthouse in *Mujeres* is the feminine space that was "once the site of desire . . . and that requires reconstruction before Pepa can reclaim her self-respect" (Evans 1996: 27). In it, the terrace overlooking an artificial view of Madrid, instead of New York, is the fantastic space that shelters the women's liberation in the end as men have been eliminated from the diegesis and from their lives.

Beyond replicating the interior decoration and urban setting of its American models, everything is stylized in *Mujeres*, where femininity is defined through artifice and imagery. Almodóvar transcends traditional screwball paradigms and utilizes the genre's conventions to make a parody of femininity as social construction. Through masquerade or impersonation, Lucía escapes the stigma of invisibility and achieves power. The verbalization of her craziness, the pretense of sanity, her desire to know, and her agency take her character out of hysteria, defined as the deprivation of knowledge and independence. Pepa's strict control of her wardrobe is also a way to gain agency. For both characters fashion design is perceived as strength and a form to retain control (Evans 1996: 70; Ballesteros 2001: 81–82).

Considering the cinematic sources that inspired *Mujeres*, it made sense to assume that the adaptation of the film to a Broadway musical in 2010 would relocate its "on the verge" female characters in the contemporary and still frenetic city of New York. Yet, surprisingly for both critics and audiences, the musical creators decided to make an exact replica of the film in terms of plot and characterization, time period (the late 1980s), and location (Madrid). On the occasion of its release, celebrated radio host and author John Schaefer wrote that Almodóvar's female characters reproduce what has been a recurrent musical pattern in songs, that of the female heroine telling "her tale of abandonment and woe" (2010: 8). His cinematic tragic-comic heroines and their melodramatic actions and reactions are determined and accompanied in and out of the diegesis by songs that dub their emotional problems. Thereby the conversion of the film into a Broadway musical allows for the baroque amalgamation of sentimental music and female sentiment, and the interconnection of music, song, performance, and filmic (self-)reference in Almodóvar's oeuvre; the rendition of the panoply of female reactions to male abandonment (affliction, hysteria, revenge, solidarity) is replicated in a theatrical genre defined by the musical interpretation, and sometimes substitution, of dialogue.

The fact that the film was turned into a musical is not in itself surprising; Broadway musicals are frequently based on films nowadays, which seems to be a reversal of what had been the previous pattern of turning successful musicals into Hollywood films. Indeed, historically, there has been a close interrelationship between the Broadway musical comedy—as it was called until the 1940s—and Hollywood cinema. The most important and successful musicals of each decade from the 1920s to the 1970s were adapted to the screen, some of them even having

more than one filmic version. In what is considered the Golden Age of the American musical (1943–64), film adaptations (movie musicals) were made with the musical's original cast, and as early as the 1950s television series such as *Musical Comedy Times*, *Studio One*, *Playhouse 90*, and *Play of the Week* presented televised versions of current and recent Broadway plays and musicals, often live.

In the 1950s, movie musicals would follow the release of the Broadway musical comedies in a matter of only a few years, capturing in some cases the hearts of the public in a much more profound way than the Broadway musical, as exhibited in the film versions of *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Loewe, 1956), made in 1964 and *West Side Story* (Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents, 1957) made in 1961.⁸ The 1970s were characterized by rock musicals and shows “that rejected the optimism of earlier decades revealing the feelings of rage and loss that pervaded America in the era of Vietnam and Watergate” (Miller 2007: 116). The 1970s were also noteworthy for the formation of a gradual and significant black audience, which started to diversify the mainly white, middle-aged, and middle-class audiences that had attended Broadway shows since World War II, when ticket prices skyrocketed, making Broadway audiences more elitist than in previous decades when prices had been so low that even people of very modest means could afford to attend regularly (Jones 2003: 3).

In the 1980s, Broadway musicals were getting more and more expensive adapting to the tastes of national and foreign tourists (who did not speak English) who became, and still are, a sizeable chunk of Broadway audiences (Miller 2007: 268). Since the 1990s, Broadway musicals have been affected by the overall “Disneyfication” of New York City, turning into costly mega-productions in order to adapt to the tastes of touristic audiences more familiar with, and therefore more attracted to, a successful film than a musical or play. As such, the trend of adapting musicals to films has been reversed. Many musicals are now adaptations of feature and animated films and movie musicals of previous decades (some examples are *The Producers*, adapted by Mel Brooks and Thomas Meehan from Brooks's 1968 film; Robert Jess Roth's *Beauty and the Beast*, 1994, and Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*, 1997, each adapted from the 1991 and 1994 Disney animated films, respectively; *The Full Monty*, 2000, by Terrence McNally, adapted from the British film by Peter Cattaneo, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, 2005, adapted from the 1988 film by Frank Oz).

What is even more extraordinary within this current status quo is that a foreign film (albeit an internationally successful one) set in Madrid in the 1980s would be the source of a 2010 Broadway musical that faithfully replicated the narrative and aesthetic design of the original film (script, characterization, setting, costumes and makeup, and even the publicity poster designed by Juan Gatti).⁹ Indeed, Almodóvar was deeply involved in the creation of the show, helping the creative team to strike a balance between the women's oversized emotions and fortitude.

As the musical's director, Bartlett Sher, put it: “The more we understood it [the film's cultural and aesthetic context], the more interesting the dialogue and lyrics



Figure 17.2 Almodóvar before the Broadway marquee of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

became, and the more resilient the women became” (Healy 2010: 1). In order to clarify the moods and reactions of female characters in the film, reviewer Patrick Healy explains, “Almodóvar invited the creative team to his room at the Peninsula Hotel in Midtown to watch the movie again, frame by frame. For four hours, through an interpreter, Mr. Almodóvar described the choices that went into each scene, each color, even each dress of the 90-minute film. The purpose of the gathering was not to dictate changes; rather, the creators recalled, he wanted them to strive for sharper authenticity in the language and actions of modern Spanish women as he knew them” (Healy 2010: 1).

Almodóvar’s intervention in the musical, seeking to clarify its cultural and aesthetic contexts, can also be identified within the filmmaker’s overall tendency toward strategic repetition and evocation of earlier works (both his own and intertexts of others)—which Marsha Kinder has called the “dynamics of retroseriality”—thereby encouraging a “retroserial rereading” (2009: 268–9). As Kinder argues, in Almodóvar’s oeuvre, “new works influence old works just as old works influence new ones, for new variations lead us to reread older works in new ways” (2009: 269). In that sense, as knowledge of and familiarity with the 1988 original film impacts the audience’s perception and connection with the 2010 Broadway musical, watching the musical as a serial repetition of the film may allow for a re-reading of the film in light of its adaptation. Guiding the creators of

the show to reinvest in the language authenticity of the characters presents another layer of (self)-citation as it underscores the relevance of the voice and dialogue/monologue that characterizes the film's primary intertext: *The Human Voice* (1930) by Jean Cocteau—a telephone monologue in which a desperate woman tries to win back the lover who is leaving her and which Almodóvar had already incorporated (and had it performed by the same actress, Carmen Maura) in his previous film, *La ley del deseo*. Almodóvar's pervasive reworking of the Cocteau play runs from the literal and melodramatic insertion of Cocteau's play in *La ley del deseo*, to the farcical universe of *Mujeres*—where the self-pitying Cocteau character gives way to the bracing Pepa—and finally to his alert input into the dialogue and lyrics of the Broadway show.¹⁰

Regardless of the fidelity of the musical to the film, and as the Healy article ("Of a Big Broadway Gamble") anticipated as the show was set to start previews, the project was risky not only because "it opened without the traditional out-of-town tryout used by every other musical now on Broadway to test material and make corrections," but primarily because it was "based on a foreign film from two decades ago that is probably not widely known among the tourists who are the backbone of Broadway box offices" (Healy 2010: 1). The reasons the creators offered for choosing *Mujeres* for their musical adaptation over other Almodóvar or European films was its theatricality and passionate characters. Almodóvar added that he had long imagined *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* as a musical. Emphasizing the film's theatricality, he said he "wrote the script of the film thinking that it would seem like a film adaptation of a nonexistent play" (Healy 2010: 2). The film indeed worked as a play, mostly in scenes that took place at Pepa's penthouse. In turn, the Broadway musical is a mix of play and musical, combining theatrical dialogues with fifteen original songs. Its closeness to the film is unmistakable; beyond accurately capturing the atmosphere of the 1988 film, in the numerous cinematic references, both the lyrics and staging remind the audience of its filmic origin.

One of Almodóvar's trademarks is the inclusion of Latin American sentimental music, and the bolero more than any other genre, to provide a narrative and musical counterpoint to the storyline of his films.¹¹ He has repeatedly declared boleros to be the songs that "fit quite naturally into the world of [his] films" and which better "speak of his characters" (Strauss 2006: 113). *Mujeres al borde* opened with two boleros: "Soy infeliz" (I am unhappy), which foreshadowed Pepa's—and the other female characters'—emotional state, and ended with "Teatro" (Theater), which replicates Iván's—and other male characters'—deceitfulness.¹² Similarly, the music and lyrics of the musical, composed by David Yazbek, closely match the characters' rhythms and emotions conveyed in the book by Jeffrey Lane:¹³ fast pace, anxiety, lovesickness, nostalgia for time past, and euphoria. Blending Latin and pop music, the score retains a Spanish flavor through arrangements with acoustic guitar and hand-clapping, and Latin American lyrical genres such as the ballad and Cha, Cha, Cha.

After an Allegro and suspenseful orchestral overture, the first number, “Madrid is my Mama,” is a rock-and-roll homage to the sizzling atmosphere of the city of Madrid from the mambo taxi driver’s perspective. The lyrics’ play with words Mama/Madrid reworks the *Movida* motto “Madrid me mata” (Madrid kills me), capturing the exuberance and hedonism of the city in the 1980s and presented as both nurturing and the source of tears and drama: “I love her madly even when I hate her.” This song also provides the first reference in the musical to its cinematic source: “Technicolor, wide screen Cinerama—Life is a movie and, Oh God, I am glad I’m in it.”¹⁴ While it is accurate to say, as Frank Rich has pointed out, that the score of *Women on the Verge* “owes more to the Almodóvar/Madrid spirit—and to the romantic soundtracks of vintage Hollywood—than it does to other Broadway musicals,” the signature song, “Lie to me,” sung by Rene Scott (Pepa) and Stokes Mitchell (Iván), and reprised twice, belongs to the purest tradition of Broadway melodramatic melodies. Moreover, the lyrics match the melodramatic score, reproducing a hypothetical conversation between Pepa and Iván remembering their happy times together, and refer to the dialogue in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954)—whose lines Pepa and Iván are dubbing in the film: “Dime que me quieres aunque sea mentira” (Tell me you love me even if it is a lie).

The feeling of nostalgia for happier times that characterizes Lucía’s behavior and aesthetics is reinforced in “Time Stood Still.” As Lucía goes through a trunk full of memories, she listens to an old record of 1960s music that replicates the style of 1960s bands such as The Beatles and The Beach Boys, and perfectly matches her dated and campy outfits. When she returns to reality, the melody from “Lie to me,” previously sung by Pepa, is repeated, thus connecting the two women as victims of Iván’s lies. The lyrics of “Model Behavior” provide the exact replica of the scenes in the film where Candela tries to reach Pepa to tell her about her troubles with a lover who turned out to be a terrorist and leaves dozens of frantic messages on Pepa’s answering machine. The music matches the subject matter including elements of Arab (Candela’s Shiite terrorists) and Spanish music, with a fast rhythm that comically reproduces Candela’s panic of being charged for complicity in her lover’s activities.

As Pepa reminisces about her life with Iván in “Island,” a Latin ballad with winds arrangement and percussion follows; and a Cha, Cha, Cha accompanies the number “The Microphone,” where a conversation between Iván and his son Carlos (absent from the film where father and son never talk directly) takes place so the father can give his son a lesson on how to “communicate” with (lie to) women. The lyrics once again reinforce Iván’s manipulating control of his seductive voice, underscoring the prominence of the microphone in the film: “Voice is a precious stone,” as well as the vulnerability of women to its power: “this world made of women with hungry hearts and thirsty ears.” Pepa’s dream in the opening sequences of the film—in which Iván with the help of clichéd lines and through a phony microphone addresses a parade of women without voice and individuality, identifiable only by a wardrobe that signals their nationality or profession—is

reproduced here: Iván's empty lines in the film are translated into the lyrics as "blah, blah, blah" and transferred to Carlos as they sing a duet. As the female characters' disparate lives and stories come together and they start to fall apart, the number that closes Act One ("On the Verge") underlines the women's shared emotional state with lyrics and syncopated fast rhythm: "Welcome to the verge, to the cusp, to the edge, to the end of the line, to the start of something really scary"—and reinforce the fact that, in spite of the madness, their glamorous appearance remains intact: "You are looking in the mirror, baby"; "you walk the wire, it's no mean feat in those high heels"; "can she cope?, she's out of rope, but her lipstick's straight."

Following the progression of the film, Act Two provides some of the missing clues about Iván's seduction patterns initially provoking jealousy but leading to solidarity between the women. Outrageous coincidences keep accumulating and the spiked gazpacho and the chase to stop Lucía from taking revenge on Iván are replicated exactly in the same order as in the film. Interestingly, some of the numbers in this Act modify (or soften) the film characterization of Paulina and Lucía, who are vindicated in their shared condition as victims of Iván's calculations. In "Yesterday, Tomorrow and Today" we witness Iván's seduction of Paulina as he exerts his voice and philosophy of eternal love: "I love them all and I love forever," "someday soon we will meet discretely, you'll take my hand and will ask me sweetly, 'Is love eternal?', I'll say completely". Although Paulina tries to resist his advances: "We both know this can't happen," she ends up falling prey (like all the other women) to Iván's seduction tricks which are again sarcastically reduced to "blah, blah, blah." This addition humanizes and somehow redeems Paulina's character, depicted in the film as the nasty pseudo-feminist lawyer who represented Lucía in her divorce case and betrayed her by starting an affair with her husband, and is still unable to show any solidarity with her current female clients, Pepa and Candela. In "Invisible," Lucía retains the dignity already conferred to her by Almodóvar as she recalls Iván's abandonment—"and then one morning he was gone," "he was gone but still was there, but totally invisible"—and all the years she passed at the mental residence and making herself literally invisible to the world: "Where did it go, I don't understand, the life I had wanted, the life I was promised, the life I had planned? Then I realized it, it was invisible."

The film's airport scene, after a crazy chase in the mambo taxi, in which Paulina shoots Iván and Pepa saves him, shifts to a courthouse scene where Lucía makes her case against Iván. Although her petition is dismissed by the magistrates, this relocation of the scene makes Lucía even more of a victim not only of Iván's emotional terrorism but also of an actual terrorist plot to bomb the courthouse carried out by Candela's terrorist lover, Malik. As the chase ends at the courthouse and Pepa arrives in time to warn Iván, Lucía's gunshot providentially wounds Malik instead, turning Lucía into a national heroine ("Island Reprise"). As in the film, Pepa rejects Iván's proposal to resume their relationship, and as she returns home to be greeted by a supportive concierge who has been praying for

her all day, the women gather and joyfully look to the future in “Shoes from Heaven.” The lyrics underscore the relevance of fashion design for these women to keep their dignity in spite of life’s past and future hurdles, a vital factor in the film: “No matter where this road will lead me, maybe into his arms or into hell, I’ll walk the road with shoes from heaven.” The finale’s chorus reinforces the women’s camaraderie and seems to anticipate the title of another Almodóvar film, *Hable con ella*/ *Talk to Her* (2002): “take my hand and talk to me.”

The musical numbers containing situations and dialogues absent in the film, such as the exchange between Iván and Carlos (“The Microphone”) and between Iván and Paulina (“Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”), as well as Lucía’s dramatic solo (“Invisible”) and her intervention at the courthouse (“Island Reprise”), not only help to clarify the plot for a non-Spanish audience, but actualize and add nuances to the characters’ impulses and behavior. Above all, they give luster to actors Patti Lupone and Bryan Stokes Mitchell, well-known singer-actors widely recognized and revered among Broadway audiences, who accepted the non-leading roles out of trust in the project and its Latin flavor. The two actors had previously performed Latino characters on Broadway: Patti Lupone played the role of Evita in the original Lloyd Weber musical (1979) and Brian Stokes Mitchell played the political activist, Valentín, in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), the musical version of Manuel Puig’s novel, and one of the first musicals that made a conscious effort to put Latino characters front and center in a Broadway musical. In spite of the creators’ efforts to highlight their roles without betraying the nature of their characters in the film, reviewers of the musical could not help but mention, always in critical terms, the fact that these two leading actors were not given more prominent roles. For example, Scott Brown from *New York Magazine* wrote: “Lupone ought to be the feathered centerpiece in the middle of this diva smorgasbord . . . but her simmering Lucía is so contained, so dangerously bottled and theatrically muted, she barely registers” (Brown 2010).

As *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich writes in the Introduction to the cast recording booklet, “Sher and his design team recreated in stage terms the filmmaker’s inimitable cinematic mélange of retro Hollywood screwball farce, Technicolor hues, histrionic passions and high-style graphic playfulness” (Rich 2011: 4). Similarities between film and musical go beyond genre and plot and are even more striking in terms of stage design, makeup, and costumes. Prominently located on the Belasco Theater’s marquee, the Broadway promotional poster relaunched the original designed by Gatti for the film.

A still shot of the full cast on the theater’s front showcase shows the startling resemblance between the film and Broadway actors, carefully achieved through the departments of costumes (Catherine Zuber), wigs (Charles Lapointe), and makeup (Dick Page). The resemblance (strong facial features) between actress Nikka Graf Lanzarone and Spanish actress Rossy de Palma (both playing Marisa) is especially remarkable. As soon as the show starts, it is amazing to note that the collection of outfits worn by every cast member as well as their movements and



Figure 17.3 *Women on the Verge* takes its place among the Broadway natives. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

poses reproduce impeccably those designed for Almodóvar's cast. The Broadway production grants special relevance to the mambo taxi, which drives on and off the stage in various numbers (highlighting the recurrent and comic coincidences established in the film), and to the spiked gazpacho, the recipe for which is not only printed in the program but also projected onto a scrim. These two elements are underscored in the musical as comic reminders of the madcap essence and popular nature of the film, and as a wink to the New York audience, most probably unaware of the ingredients that comprise the typical Spanish cold soup.

It is clear that in order to offset the foreignness of the film's location and period, theatricality, style and female passion were expected to be the main connectors to audiences. In essence, those elements had been the key to the immense international success of the film. Even the Broadway diva Patti Lupone, who played the role of Lucía, acknowledged that she accepted the non-leading role against her agent's advice, because it is a "Mediterranean piece" (let's not forget that she is Italian): "Most of all it's a story of big emotions and bright colors, and a chance for a bunch of great Broadway women to sing their hearts out. It's something we don't see nearly enough of—this wild world of women" (Healy 2010: 2). This was one of the few musicals ever led by an ensemble of female theater stars. But although a female ensemble of formidable actresses performing intense roles of passion and female solidarity has been the recipe for Almodóvar's success, it was not enough to guarantee a Broadway hit. Perhaps the musical creators overestimated the appeal

that women's issues would hold for popular U.S. audiences. Certainly they did not anticipate the overall negative reviews that followed its premiere. The *New York Times* theater reviewer, Ben Brantley, did not appreciate either the translation of the film's hysteric rhythm into the musical—declaring it “hopelessly distracted from beginning to end” and plagued by “attention-deficit-disorder”—or its effort to recreate the colorful aesthetics of the film, branding the show as “overdesigned,” “upstaged,” and yet “unfocused” (Brantley 2010).

Having approached the Broadway adaptation of *Women on the Verge* with the reserve and critical eye of a Spanish cinema historian and critic and an ardent fan of the film, I suspect that Brantley's negative review was motivated by some of the same arguments expressed by the predictable detractors of Almodóvar's films. I am speaking of the critics who branded his early *Movida* films as superficial, banal, and empty, and some of his women's films, such as *Mujeres, ¡Átame!* / *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *Kika* (1993), and *La flor de mi secreto* (1995), as misogynist and anti-feminist. It must be pointed out that those making such charges failed to understand the contradictions inherent to the restrictive sentimental education of women of previous generations in general, and of women who entered the Spanish transition to democracy as adults in particular.¹⁵ In Brantley's criticism condemning the hysterical and unfocused nature of the show (which faithfully reproduced the feelings and rhythms of the film characters), I detect a certain masculine impatience and disdain toward the disposition and temperament of its female characters—constantly being on the verge of a nervous breakdown regardless of the generations they belong to and their experience in life. One could say that the emotional hurdles that block the complete emotional emancipation of these “women on the verge” are strictly tied to the social and sexual roles they were taught to play in Spain. Let us not forget that the film was released in the late 1980s and therefore all its characters had been affected in one way or another by the sexual and emotional restrictions imposed on women during the Franco era. In that sense, young female North American spectators could easily disengage themselves from that behavior and claim that the insecurities and emotional mishaps of these characters have nothing to do with them and rather reflect the situation of women who belong to a less advanced society, or perhaps to their grandmothers' generation. Such an easy dismissal, however, would seem difficult to sustain in light of the immense popular success of the recent television series, and subsequent films, *Sex and the City*, where a cast of professionally successful women experience some of the same dissatisfactions with the other sex, yet set in the city of New York (the supposed capital of sexual liberation) in the 2000s.

Arguably, the fact that *Sex and the City* was a continuing television series set in twenty-first century New York contributed to its success as much as the faithfulness to the original film, set in the late 1980s, damaged the reception of the Broadway *Women on the Verge*. Terry Teachout's review for the *Wall Street Journal* bashed the musical, like Ben Brantley, for being “scatty and unfocused,” adding that in Act Two, “nothing ever stops moving long enough for you to figure out which way to

look,” and failing again to understand that unstoppable movement is the essence of the film and therefore of the intended homage that the musical pays to it. The homage nature of the musical is precisely the core of Teachout’s major criticism: “Instead of breaking new creative ground, Mr. Lane’s book tracks Mr. Almodóvar’s setting and plot slavishly” (2010); “Michael Yeargan’s sets and Catherine Zuber’s costumes do little more than mirror the candy-colored Madrid of the film.” The temporal dislocation from the late 1980s to the late 2010s as well as the reallocation of urban setting from Madrid to New York, was probably one of the factors that shortened the life of the musical. It was conceived as a limited engagement that opened on Broadway on November 4, 2010, with previews starting October 8, and was scheduled to end on January 23, 2011. Due to low ticket sales, it closed early on January 2, 2011. At the time of closing the show had played thirty previews and sixty-nine performances (Hetrick 2010). As a way to attest to the inability of certain audiences to relate to the emotional contradictions of its female characters, Teachout offered a female friend’s opinion of the play: “Why should I care about any of these crazy people?” Evidently, this female New Yorker of the twenty-first century could only see inexplicable craziness in these women’s reactions and missed the careful agency and dignity that the musical conferred to them. Widely criticized by reviewers of the musical were also Yazbek’s score and lyrics. Both Teachout’s review and Elysa Gardner’s from *USA Today* branded the music “forgettable as Muzak in a noisy restaurant” (Teachout 2010) and “Latin flavor Muzak” (Gardner 2010). How then to reconcile these negative reviews that pinpointed the “faltering” (McNulty 2010) and bland nature of the score with the Tony Nomination for David Yazbek in the category of Best Original Score?

My own assessment of the musical is inseparable from my cultural proximity to Almodóvar’s film; like Almodóvar himself, I can only see the play “from a film point of view” (Kearney 2010). From that perspective the significance of the show resides precisely in the meticulous transplant of the Spanish film to the New York stage, in the intertextual play between both works, which provide an expansion of Almodóvar’s authorial discourse. From other points of view less interested in cinematic auterism, remote from Almodóvar’s retroserial and cultural universe and more concerned with the Broadway musical’s originality, director and producers erred mainly for deciding to remain so tightly Almodovarian, even to the point of having the non-Spanish actors act and sing with Spanish accents. Although some of the reviews considered this linguistic practice unfortunate, it is nothing surprising and a very common convention (indeed unfortunate) in Hollywood films. My personal vision coincides more with Erik Haagensen’s moderate review—“These artists clearly love Almodóvar’s film and want to do right by him. But they’ve gotten caught up in the quest to put his unique sensibility on stage without bringing their own point of view to the material” (Haagensen 2010: n. p.)—than the less than moderate critique by Mark Kennedy in which he compares the musical version to “a faded copy of Almodóvar’s singular vision, like a photocopy of a photocopy that has lost its crispness” (Kennedy 2010: n. p.).

In spite of the negative reviews, the response of the audience, composed of mostly women and gay men (traditional audiences of Almodóvar's films), was enthusiastic and the show was somehow vindicated by the American Theatre Wing and The Broadway League, the two institutions that organize the annual Tony Award for Excellence in Theater, with three nominations: Best Score for Yazbek and Best Featured Actress in a musical for Laura Benanti (Candela) and Patti Lupone (Lucía).

The appreciation of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: The Musical* comes largely from the knowledge and enjoyment of the film, which is a groundbreaking reference critical to Almodóvar's national and international success and almost a cult film representing the early Almodovarian comedic essence that vanished progressively as his oeuvre became more and more melodramatic. It can be comparable to the eagerness and pleasure experienced by spectators when seeing a film adaptation of a piece of literature that they have read and enjoyed, and which provides them with the advantageous position of assessing its similarities and differences to the source, the "truthfulness" or betrayal captured by the adaptation. In that sense, New York spectators who throughout the years have enjoyed and followed Almodóvar's oeuvre, among whose number I include myself, could only welcome Broadway's tribute to Almodóvar's overall talent and constant presence in the New York film scene, and be undoubtedly moved by the creators' successful effort to honor the passionate female characters and aesthetic spirit of the original 1988 film *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*.

Notes

- 1 Almodóvar's first films enjoyed the unconditional love of liberated and radical New York audiences "that associated the sensibilities of the 'King of Kink' with the aesthetics and ideologies of the East Village and Wigstock" (Gooch 1994: 53). As his control of production resources increased, favoring the aesthetic quality and sophistication of his films, he also became a familiar presence in the New York Film Festival: since *Women on the Verge* was selected to open the 26th New York Film Festival, many of his films were featured in opening or closing nights. This solid continuity in the prestigious New York event was an essential factor in the widespread release of his films in movie theaters in New York and in other cities in the United States, which in turn increased his chances of being recognized out of the Festival circuit by wider audiences.
- 2 The "new sensibility" had already been noted and analyzed in terms of aesthetic sophistication and narrative sobriety by Paul Julian Smith (2003).
- 3 He forgets to mention Almodóvar's first incursion into real-life women in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* / *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) and also the fact that the plot of *Volver* (2006) is a "return" to that one in which another working-class cleaning lady kills her husband in self-defense and whose crime stays unpunished. Moreover, he ignores the fact that the character of Irene, the ghost mother who returns and who was responsible for her own self-defense murders in the past is played by the same actress, Carmen Maura, who played the murderous wife in *Qué he hecho yo*, and who was

Almodóvar's muse in his early period. To both of them, director and actress, her role in *Volver* is another fundamental "return" act.

- 4 His following film, *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2002), won the 2002 Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, 2003 Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and 2003 Award for Best Director from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, and was considered the best film of the decade by *Time* magazine.
- 5 In Spain, *Mujeres* won five Goya Awards including Best Film and Best Actress in a Leading Role for Carmen Maura. It also won Best Script and Best Actress (Carmen Maura) awards at the Venice Film Festival, and was nominated in 1989 for the Academy Award and Golden Globe Award in the category of Best Foreign Film.
- 6 See Almodóvar's comments about the film's mix of comedic and tragic elements and the un-comedic use of extreme close-ups in Strauss (2006: 82). See also Allinson (2001: 130–3).
- 7 See studies by Gehring (2002) and Sikov (1989); also Gehring's overview (2012) "Screwball: Relationships and Gender."
- 8 *Show Boat* (1927) by Kern and Hammerstein had three film versions: 1929, 1936, and 1951. *Anything Goes* (1934) by Cole Porter was adapted in 1936 and 1956 and *Oklahoma* (1943) by Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1955 (Zinnemann) and in 1979 (Benning). *Guys and Dolls* (1950) was made into a film in 1955; *The King and I* (1951) by Rodgers and Hammerstein in 1956. In the 1970s some emblematic musicals like *Grease* (1972) and *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973) were soon adapted to film (*Grease*, 1978 and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975) making some of the most successful movie films of all times, while others like *Chicago* (1975) by Bob Fosse, *Evita* (1979) by Lloyd Weber, and *Sweeney Todd* (1979) by Sondheim would see their film versions more than two decades later, in 2002 (Rob Marshall), 1996 (Alan Parker), and 2007 (Tim Robbins), respectively. See Miller (2007).
- 9 Broadway musical by Bartlett Sher (director), Jeffrey Lane (book), and David Yazbek (music and lyrics), with sets by Michael Yeargan and costumes by Catherine Zuber. The cast included Sherie Rene Scott (Pepa), Patti LuPone (Lucía), Brian Stokes Mitchell (Iván), Laura Benanti (Candela), De'Adre Aziza (Paulina) and Nikka Graff Lanzarone (Marisa), Danny Burstein (Taxi Driver), Justin Guarini (Carlos), Mary Beth Peil (Concierge).
- 10 I thank Marvin D'Lugo for suggesting this interpretation.
- 11 Kathleen Vernon has studied in two consecutive essays the role of music and song in Almodóvar's films from "the punk pop idioms of the post-Francoist cultural phenomenon known as the *Movida*," and "the middle period, beginning with *Matador* (1986), that featured a favored role for Latin American music and songs, the bolero in particular, and provided for the deepening emotional resonance of those films," to the most recent films' "new understanding of the relation between music and narrative and between songs and composed score" (Vernon 2009: 52–3). See also Vernon (2005).
- 12 In the same interview he explained that bolero singer La Lupe, who sang "Teatro," became famous in Spain after the film's release, and he reiterates the fact that: "this is the case with almost all singers in my films . . . I am very happy to have helped this singer to be recognized artistically and commercially. People look at a singer of bolero in a different way now" (Strauss 2006: 112).
- 13 Yazbek was also the composer-lyricist of *The Full Monty* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. The latter's book was written by Jeffrey Lane.

- 14 For lyrics and summary of the book, see the Booklet included in the *Broadway Cast Recording* (2011).
- 15 For a more elaborate discussion on this topic, see my “Feminidad almodovariana o la deformación grotesca del sistema patriarcal” and the section on *¡Átame!* in “El cuerpo entregado: la sexualidad femenina como espectáculo en el cine de los 90” (2001).

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Almodóvar's Global Musical Marketplace

Kathleen M. Vernon

On December 11, 2007 Pedro Almodóvar convened a news conference at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid to celebrate the release of the double CD *B.S.O. Almodóvar* (Banda Sonora Original, original film score) during which he also announced the beginning of shooting for his seventeenth feature film, *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009). Lest his audience fail to have noted the consistent imbrication of music and cinema, song and story in his body of work, the director called attention to this linkage in his words of introduction: “Las canciones en mis películas son parte esencial del guión . . . [T]ienen una función dramática y narrativa, son tan descriptivas como los colores, la luz, los decorados, o los diálogos” (The songs in my films are an essential part of the script. They have a dramatic and narrative function; they are as descriptive as the use of color, lighting, scenery or dialogue) (Almodóvar 2007). Rather than attempting to illustrate the accuracy of these comments, the goal of this chapter is to explore the global contours of the texts and contexts of the larger Almodovarian creative universe, focusing less on the films themselves than on what we might call the Almodóvar discography. Thus the Almodóvar I propose to study is not the film director contemporary of a Lars von Trier, Quentin Tarantino or Gus Van Sant but instead the musician-producer-transcultural impresario whose fellow practitioners are Ry Cooder, Paul Simon and David Byrne or even Almodóvar’s own collaborator, Caetano Veloso. This model of the cultural entrepreneur also recalls the longstanding comparisons between Almodóvar and Andy Warhol, who in his multiple roles of “painter and sculptor, rock promoter, film producer, advertiser, starmaker and stargazer” is described by Juan A. Suárez as a “version of what Walter Benjamin called the ‘author as producer’: a cultural worker who acts not only on artistic content but on the cultural means of production” (2006: 217).¹

B.S.O. Almodóvar was, in fact, the third installment in the director’s discographic corpus, initiated in 1997 with *Las canciones de Almodóvar* (Hispavox) and followed in



Figure 18.1 Cover of the CD *B.S.O. Almodóvar*. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

2002 by *Viva la tristeza* (Editions Milan Music). Not included in this list are the “official” soundtrack album releases that beginning with Ennio Morricone’s score for *¡Átame! / Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990) have garnered rising sales and since *La flor de mi secreto / The Flower of My Secret* (1995), the first collaboration between Almodóvar and composer Alberto Iglesias, positive critical attention and multiple award nominations for the latter.² In contrast to those “single-author” instrumental film scores, Almodóvar’s three CDs present compilations of songs heard in his films or otherwise suggestive of their affective soundscape. The first, *Las canciones de Almodóvar*, is a collection of some twenty-three songs featured in the director’s first twelve films, up to and including *La flor de mi secreto*; *B.S.O. Almodóvar* reproduces much of the material from *Canciones*, supplementing it with a selection that emphasizes songs from the more recent films through *Volver* (2006).

Viva la tristeza, in contrast, proposes a collection of thirteen songs from multiple sources and languages, only one of which, Caetano Veloso’s rendition of “Cucurrucucú paloma,” appears in his films. Almodóvar explains its contents as originating in the songs that “accompanied” him as he wrote the script for *Hable con ella / Talk to Her* (2002), coming to constitute, in his words, a kind of “secret, alternative soundtrack of *Talk to Her*” (Almodóvar 2002).

Such compilations or anthologies of songs or musical selections are not unknown in the recording industry and market, from the Billboard Top 40 from this or that decade of fond memory to the best loved romantic themes of all times—“not available in any store”—usually hawked on cable channels or via

infomercials. In such cases the arguments for grouping songs or pieces together are grounded in matters of chronological contiguity or thematic and/or generic similarities. In the case of the Almodóvar recordings, however, these criteria are absent. The rationale and appeal of his CDs depend instead on the eclectic character of the selections, their diverse generic and geographic origins and genealogies. From Miguel de Molina and Los Panchos to El Duo Dinámico and Chavela Vargas, Almodóvar and McNamara to Zarah Leander and Bola de Nieve or Alberto Pla and Estrella Morente, this musical diversity reflects in turn the analogous eclecticism of his filmic sources, a form of creative osmosis key to his visual and narrative invention that has become an identifying feature or trademark.³ It is this capacity for transforming disparate intertexts and influences into a singular artistic vision that seems to provide the justification for the release of song collections under the director's authorial signature when the music in question is neither the property of Almodóvar nor original to him.

Various critics have commented on the scope and function of songs and music in his films. Mark Allinson explores different aspects of the "eclectic bricolage" of Almodóvar's soundtracks (2001: 194–205). Alejandro Yarza has related the use of songs from different periods and sources to the director's kitsch or camp sensibility, classifying the Latin American boleros and Spanish pop numbers from the 1960s and 1970s deployed by the director as cultural remnants, "desechos de la historia" (bits of historical refuse), available for resignification in his cinema (1999: 69). Alberto Mira speaks, in contrast, to the historical potency of a repertory of Spanish-language song—cuplés, coplas, and boleros—closely identified with a gay subculture of the Francoist and immediate post-Franco periods that found in its rhythms and lyrics a means to express "la vida secreta de las emociones" (the secret life of emotions) (Mira 2004). Almodóvar's own comments stress instead the role of subjective taste and personal preferences over and above any kind of collective cultural (or sexual) identity: "Yo soy totalmente ecléctico. Tanto puedo usar un rock de última hora como un bolero, una canción de los Panchos, o un fragmento de música clásica. Es como un collage que coincide conmigo mismo, es muy sincero porque refleja la variedad de cosas que yo oigo durante todo el día" (I am completely eclectic. I can just as well use a contemporary rock song as a bolero by Los Panchos or a fragment of classical music. It's like a collage that coincides with who I am, it's very sincere because it reflects the variety of things I listen to all day long) (Vidal 1988: 105–6). Indeed, for Almodóvar, sincerity and intimacy seem to function as the key words, and values, in his use of music, held out as a promise of access to an interior world, both that of his characters and of the director himself. In this conception music provides a privileged entryway offered to spectators and listeners through songs that function as "una especie de voz en off musical que explica, desvela secretos" (a kind of musical voiceover that explains and reveals secrets) (Almodóvar 2007) or, in the case of *Viva la tristeza*, that "suited me and accompanied me with the efficiency and intensity of a secret lover" (Almodóvar 2002).

For all its relevance in biographical terms, this vision of music and song is decidedly partial, intended, it seems, to extricate music from its rootedness in external realities and/or the interference of extrinsic forces. In the same liner notes to *B.S.O.* Almodóvar establishes a strict contrast between his use of song in films and that of other directors more focused on the bottom line: “Aborrezco el modo con que frecuentemente se utilizan las canciones en el cine americano, meros elementos de marketing que no afectan ni intervienen en absoluto en la trama” (I hate the way American films frequently use songs as mere elements of marketing that don’t affect or intervene in the story in any substantive way) (2007). In denouncing the subordination of personal and artistic choice to commercial interests the director fails to acknowledge the role of the market in determining which songs a person will have the opportunity or occasion to hear “all day long.” Almodóvar cannot, though he may wish it, disconnect from those market forces that pre-select for us, shaping and directing the exercise of individual choice and personal taste.

All About World Music

In what follows I want to look at a series of specific musical selections and strategies deployed by Almodóvar in an attempt to understand the competing forces at play in both the production and reception of his films and his role as cultural producer. In a previous study I analyzed the privileged role granted to Latin American music and especially the bolero in his cinema (2005). Here I propose to consider the nature and function of his song repertoire more broadly with respect to another frame of reference, namely the phenomenon and corpus of “world music,” taken as a matrix and proxy for the workings of the current global and globalizing cultural marketplace in which Almodóvar’s films and recordings are produced and consumed. This desire to establish a wider critical context comes in response to the convergence of two significant developments in his creative practice: on the one hand, the expansion of Almodóvar’s customary thematic and textual geography in recent films such as *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999), *Volver* (2006), and *La piel que habito* / *The Skin I Live In* (2011); and on the other, the pursuit of personally and commercially productive collaborations with three pan—or what we might term global—Latin singer/performers, Chavela Vargas, Caetano Veloso, and Concha Buika.

With regard to the films, a number of critics have remarked on what Marvin D’Lugo (2006: 100) terms the “geocultural realignments” prompted by *Todo sobre mi madre* in which the main action moves from the director’s home city and habitual film setting of Madrid to Barcelona and the characters’ destinies trace an extended narrative arc that embraces Galicia, Argentina, and Paris. A further expansion of the film’s geographic and affective orbit is signaled by the appearance of one of the Almodóvar discography’s greatest hits, “Tajabone” by Senegalese musician Ismaël Lô. In her reading of the film’s transnational thematics, Linda Craig (2010) links

the song to other visible manifestations of the African (or Afro-Caribbean) immigrant presence, as in the scene in a Barcelona square highlighted by Almodóvar for its "vitality . . . where twenty-five Dominican or African little girls are jumping rope" (Altares 1999: 140), which serves as background for the conversation between two of the protagonists.

In *Volver* the movement between the central family's origins in a Manchegan village and the multicultural Madrid neighborhood that is home to the protagonist Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) structures the narrative while the film's emotional core is anchored by another musical centerpiece, the Gardel-LePera tango "Volver." As performed by Penélope Cruz with the voice of Estrella Morente the scene harkens back to Almodóvar's earlier love for lip-sync versions and adaptations, while the song itself effects a stylistic migration from the Argentine idiom of tango to flamenco-inflected bulerías. The song's music and lyrics thematize the re-encounter with a personal past as well as with a pan-Hispanic auditory culture that is the product of the longstanding circulation of mass-media entertainment forms across the Spanish-speaking world (D'Lugo 2008: 80).

For its part, *La piel que habito* incorporates a Brazilian subplot reminiscent of a soap opera involving the protagonist Robert Ledgard's (Antonio Banderas) family origins—illegitimate half brothers, a mother who passes for a housekeeper—that injects moments of anarchic energy to a clinically calibrated tale of revenge. Another song, in this case the Brazilian melody, "Pelo amor de amar" (For the love of loving; Jean Manzon and José Toledo), plays a key role; sung by Ledgard's young daughter (Ana Mena as the child Norma), it precipitates her mother's death and is subsequently reprised in Spanish by Concha Buika just before Norma's (Blanca Suárez) near rape.

Almodóvar's on- and off-screen musical alliances with Chavela Vargas and Caetano Veloso pre-date the introduction of these global, if largely Latin American, narrative subtexts in his films. Vargas is first heard in *Kika* (1993) singing "Luz de luna" (Alvaro Carrillo). Her bolero repertoire echoes through *Tacones lejanos* / *High Heels* (1991) in the version of the Agustín Lara's "Piensa en mí" voiced by Luz Casal and performed by Marisa Paredes. The director comments that he had the Spanish rock singer Casal model her performance on that of Vargas: "'Piensa en mí' is a very rhythmical song, but when Chavela sang it she took out all the rhythm and turned it into a *fado*, a genuine lament. That's the version I copied for *High Heels*" (Strauss 2006: 112). Vargas is featured in a television performance included in *La flor de mi secreto* where she sings one of her signature numbers, "El último trago" (José Alfredo Jiménez) to the emotionally bereft protagonist, Leo (Marisa Paredes). A third song, "Somos" (Mario Clavell) presides over the extended love scene between Víctor (Liberto Rabal) and Elena (Francesca Neri) in *Carne trémula* / *Live Flesh* (1997).

Caetano Veloso's collaborations with the director follow a similar pattern, with his voice preceeding his on-screen appearance in the Almodóvar filmography. Veloso's haunting falsetto version of "Tonada de luna llena" (Simón Díaz), drawn



Figure 18.2 Caetano Veloso, with Jaques Morelenbaum on cello, performs “Cucurrucú paloma” in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Miguel Bracho.

from his 1994 CD of Spanish standards, *Fina estampa*, introduces and lingers over the final credits of *La flor*. His “live” performance of “Cucurrucú paloma” (Tomás Méndez, Mexico, 1954), also featured on a later live version of *Fina estampa*, is the focus of a highly self-referential sequence in *Hable con ella* where the singer performs in the patio of a country house before a mixed audience composed of characters from the film and denizens of the larger, extratextual Almodóvar universe, including actresses Cecilia Roth and Marisa Paredes and the singer Martirio.

The newest member of the trio, who goes professionally by the single name Buika, was born in Mallorca of Equatorial Guinean parents and boasts a career and musical repertoire that spans American R&B, the Spanish copla, flamenco fusion, boleros, and Latin jazz. She makes her Almodóvar film debut in *La piel que habito* with the on-screen performance of fragments of two songs, the bolero “Se me hizo fácil” (Agustín Lara), and the Spanish version of the above-mentioned Brazilian song, “Por el amor de amar,” set in the context of wedding reception attended by Ledgard and his daughter.

It is these alliances and collaborations, grounded, as we shall, see in complex relationships of mutual identification and cross-promotion, emotional and economic affinities and artistic symbiosis, that distinguishes Almodóvar’s cultivation of Latin artists and music from what performance artist and cultural

critic Guillermo Gómez Peña wryly terms the “Buena Vista Social Club syndrome,” referring to the practice by western musicians and promoters of seeking out new (or rediscovering old) and unusual musical sounds and traditions in order to repackage them for contemporary mainstream audiences (Taylor 2007: 126).

Indeed, such charges have frequently been made against the category of world music viewed as a commercial strategy and a form of cultural neo-colonialism. They are apparent in the definition offered by Deborah Pacini-Hernández of world music as:

a marketing term describing the products of musical cross- fertilization between the north—the US and Western Europe—and the south—primarily Africa and the Caribbean basin—which began appearing on the popular music landscape in the early 1980s [via] the emergence of new, interlocking commercial infrastructures established specifically to cultivate and nurture the appetites of First World listeners for exotic new sounds from the Third World (1993: 48–50).

Arguably, Almodóvar's most direct encounter with the broader world music corpus comes, as we have noted, in his inclusion of Ismaël Lô's “Tajabone” in the scene in *Todo sobre mi madre* in which the sorrowful mother Manuela (Cecilia Roth) arrives in Barcelona in search of her former husband and father of her dead son. Although we suppose at the beginning of the film that Manuela has spent many years settled in Madrid, her life is later shown to have been marked by a series of journeys, from her native Buenos Aires, to Barcelona and then Madrid, and from the Spanish capital to Galicia on the trail of her son's transplanted heart and then back to Barcelona. In this context it is useful to consider as well the itinerary followed by Lô's song before its arrival in Almodóvar's film. Largely unknown to Anglo-American audiences before *Todo sobre mi madre*, Lô had already garnered considerable success in France, especially following the 1990 release of his sixth album that included the single “Tajabone.” Indeed, Lô's professional biography, characterized by regular travel back and forth between Senegal and France and the musical fusion of Senegalese M'balax with elements of North American folk and blues that resulted in his being hailed as the “Senegalese Bob Dylan,” closely corresponds with the general understanding of the category of world music and world musicians.⁴ That combination of exoticism and familiarity is increasingly seen as necessary to produce the right note of “hybridity” which, Timothy Taylor notes, has become for western listeners the new guarantee of “authenticity” (2007: 140–1).

In contrast to the Latin American or even Italian, Portuguese, French, or English-language songs heard in Almodóvar's films, the meaning of the words to “Tajabone,” written in Wolof, is lost on the spectator-listener.⁵ Nevertheless, there are advantages for those who would make use of foreign musical traditions for their own ends, or so we are told by scholars who study the use of faux world music, choral pieces composed of made-up nonsense syllables in advertising spots

(Taylor 2007: 185). In the case of “Tajabone” in *Todo sobre mi madre* one could argue that the affective meaning of the song is transmitted without linguistic or cultural interference. Almodóvar confirms its efficacy in his notes to *Viva la tristeza*: “I didn’t know what the lyrics meant but from the moment I heard it, I knew that that song was the perfect cloak with which the city of Barcelona would cover and protect the broken woman played by Cecilia Roth” (2002). His comments stress its expressive role not only with respect to the grief-stricken Manuela but Barcelona itself. He continues: “When we were doing location work, I’d put that song on the cassette in the car and ask my assistant: ‘Look out the windows. Does this song suit this city?’ And it suited it very well” (Almodóvar 2002).

The association of the song with the city is telling. In his contribution to the Oxford Very Short Introduction series devoted to *World Music*, Phillip Bohlman signals the key role played by the city as a kind of cultural “entrepôt,” a depository or storage place but also marketplace or bazaar, the most “natural” and propitious setting for “the encounters with world music in a postmodern world” (2002: 133). While *Todo sobre mi madre* opens up the Almodóvar universe to an explicitly wider world beyond the Madrid–provincial town axis that structures the biographies of so many of his characters, it also seems to announce, belatedly, the full incorporation of Spain into a global circuit of people, products, capital, and culture. For the first time in an Almodóvar film, not only do we take measure of the immigrant presence in Spain, we hear its voices—even if we may not understand what they are saying. At the same time, as Almodóvar notes, the song “Tajabone” lends itself to the emotional needs of the film’s protagonist, covering and soothing the rough edges of her broken heart. This capacity, according to Taylor, is characteristic of “our globalized world” and its music: “[It] softens the edges of difference, making Others and their cultural forms desirable in new ways” (2007: 126). For Taylor, this cultural proximity and promiscuity is the product of our current media marketplace that makes a seemingly all-encompassing body of cultural offerings immediately and always available. It is that marketplace that has shaped Almodóvar’s exposure to this musical corpus and that he negotiates with increasing mastery in his role as cultural producer.

In analyzing the Almodóvar song corpus, however, the schematic geographical divide sketched in Pacini-Hernández’s definition requires a certain qualification. As John Connell and Chris Gibson, editors of the collection, *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, suggest, in practice the classification of world music also depends on “the social, political and demographic position of certain minority groups in a particular country” (2003: 153). Thus they explain that reggae is rarely characterized as world music and that in the United States, with its significant Latino population, salsa is not considered world music whereas in the United Kingdom it is. In Spain, the status of the bolero, canción ranchera, or tango reflects not only the presence of recent immigrants but also the history of intercultural exchange with the nation’s former colonies. In the 1995 Spanish edition of Almodóvar’s interviews with Frédéric Strauss, Almodóvar perhaps surprisingly

emphasizes the unfamiliar if not foreign character of the Latin American songs heard in his films, while alluding to the historical and cultural asymmetries that have shaped musical relations between Spain and Latin America. The lack of knowledge of this corpus, he notes:

Es un poco injusto porque todos, desde Los Panchos en *La ley del deseo*, hasta Lucho Gatica en *Entre tinieblas*, Los hermanos Rosario en *Tacones lejanos*, o Chavela Vargas en las últimas, son autores de nuestra misma lengua y, aunque son de Hispanoamérica, deberían ser más conocidos aquí. Hay una especie de prejuicio contra ese tipo de música, que ha sido considerada durante mucho tiempo como antigua y demasiado sentimental. A mí es una música que me apasiona y estoy muy contento, además, de haber ayudado a que todos estos artistas hayan sido editados con bastante éxito. Ahora, en España, el bolero se mira de otro modo, incluso se ha puesto un poco de moda. España es muy injusta con los países de habla hispana, siente una especie de superioridad poca solidaria. En la celebración del quinto centenario del descubrimiento de América había mucha hipocresía. Las cosas las descubro de modo sentimental y es muy agradable ver después que eso funciona en el mercado, porque me parece que restablece la justicia (Strauss 1995: 126).⁶

(It's a little unfair because all of these artists, from Los Panchos in *The Law of Desire*, to Lucho Gatica in *Dark Habits*, Los Hermanos Rosario in *High Heels*, or Chavela Vargas in the more recent films, sing in our same language, and even if they are from Spanish America they should be better known here. There is a kind of prejudice against this type of music that for a long time has been considered old-fashioned and overly sentimental. For me it's a music that I'm passionate about and I'm very happy to have helped so that the work of all these artists has been reissued with some success. These days the bolero is seen in different way in Spain, it's even become somewhat fashionable. Spain is very unjust with Spanish-speaking countries, it feels a kind of superiority that is not very supportive. In the celebration of the 500 year anniversary of the discovery of America there was a good deal of hypocrisy. My discoveries come about in a sentimental way and it's good to see later that they function in the market because it seems that justice is reestablished.)

Almodóvar's comments are revealing on many levels. At first glance, the apparent amnesia regarding the longstanding presence of Latin American popular song in the twentieth-century Spanish cultural imaginary is striking. In their essays and personal testimonies writers such as Carmen Martín Gaité (1978; 1987) and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1971; 2000) have documented the role of Latin American romantic ballads in the sentimental education of Spaniards under Franco. Studying the circulation and reception of Latin American music in Spain from Lorca to Almodóvar, Christopher Laferl affirms: "Ningún otro país ha incorporado la música latinoamericana en su propia cultura popular de una manera tan intensa como España, sin contar los países latinoamericanos mismos" (No other country has incorporated Latin American music in its own popular culture to such an intense degree as Spain, with the exception of Latin American

countries themselves) (2007: 139). One suspects that Almodóvar would express himself differently today, more than fifteen years after his declarations to Strauss. For the director who vowed to make films as if Franco never existed, perhaps this musical inheritance of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s was part of what needed to be forgotten but can now be recovered and acknowledged. His musical reconciliation with this auditory legacy is allegorized in *Volver*, in the scene mentioned earlier in which Raimunda decides to sing for the first time in many years, performing a version of the Gardel tango her mother taught her as a child. Thus is the history of Latin American music in Spain reinscribed into the intricate fabric of familial and popular memory.

Equally relevant for our discussion are the references to the broader political context. While denouncing anti-Latin American attitudes in Spain, Almodóvar once again seeks to disassociate his own motivations from external factors, in this case, the official observance of the Columbus centenary which highlighted Spain's continuing attempts to rewrite its five-century history with Latin America at a moment of increased Spanish economic investment in the region. Tellingly, the politically loaded word "discovery" recurs in a reference to the European "discovery" of America and his own discoveries of the corpus of Latin American song. Almodóvar once again stresses the personal and sentimental basis for his artistic choices but here the market is invoked as the potential source of a kind of justice or reparation for what is just the latest in a series of historical wrongs.

Caetano Veloso: Hearts, Minds, and Market Share

In moving to explore in greater depth the origins and development of Almodóvar's three key film and discographic collaborations for the insights they provide into the workings of his global musical imaginary I begin with Caetano Veloso. Certainly this particular case of cultural contact and exchange interjects its own destabilizing challenge to the unequal north-south axis postulated by Pacini-Hernández, while the career of the multifaceted Brazilian musician, composer, activist, and former political prisoner proposes a kind of counter-model to the geocultural paradigm evinced in the world music concept. Veloso's musical project is supported not only by his leading role in the 1960s Tropicália movement with its cosmopolitan fusion of Afro-Brazilian, European, and North American sources but also by Tropicália's links to the earlier avant-garde "antropofágica" tradition that calls for the assimilation and transformation of foreign influences and cultural artifacts, thus inverting the hegemonic dynamic of colonial cultural relations. In his study of the movement Christopher Dunn defines Veloso's role, along with that of fellow *tropicalista*, Gilberto Gil, as a "cultural mediator" (2001: 74), between the traditional left and the counterculture as well as African-centric movements inside and outside the country. Robert Stam goes further still in his evaluation of

Veloso's career, hailing the latter (and Gil) as "Orphic intellectuals," playing on Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, "who write books in one moment and lead dancing crowds in another . . . [as] not only the performers of popular culture but also its theoreticians" (2008: 223).

Although no one would pretend to make similarly exalted claims for Almodóvar's role in recent Spanish cultural history, there are parallelisms and certain paradigmatic attitudes and practices shared by Veloso and Almodóvar that are worth exploring. These include: the ability to absorb and transform multiple cultural sources into highly personal forms of expressions; the delight in the role of showman and provocateur (one might compare Veloso's 1960s onstage persona, as a bushy-haired Brazilian Mick Jagger, with Almodóvar's performances in quilted bathrobe and fishnet stockings in the 1970s and early 1980s in his punk duo with Fanny McNamara); the insistent embrace of high and low—with high culture literary and musical references coming to predominate in recent years; a protean capacity for artistic and personal reinvention carried out in public over several decades; and the continued cultivation of fluid gender roles ("Caetano Veloso is the performing artist of his generation who most effectively articulated the complex construction of sexuality and gender presentation" [Braga-Pinto 2002: 197]). The mutual attractions and affinities seem clear. For Almodóvar Veloso's career provides a trajectory and a model to aspire to, of how to manage popular and commercial success (and the sometimes harsh criticism his very visible profile has engendered) while being taken seriously as a public figure. Indeed, if Warhol provided the inspiration for the punk/pop Almodóvar of the 1980s, Veloso seems to offer a more congenial and culturally compatible model for the more "serious" but equally daring Almodóvar of the mid-1990s on. And one should not underestimate the appeal of Brazil, not only in marketing terms, but also as a country whose history and culture fall outside the more troubled colonial-post-colonial narrative of Spain and Spanish-speaking America. Finally, another not negligible asset is the ability of each to open doors and grant cultural legitimacy to the other in their respective countries and national markets.

It is thus not surprising that Veloso makes his first "appearance" in an Almodóvar film in the wake of the 1994 release of his first Spanish-language CD, *Fina estampa*. The album was enormously successful—in a headline proclaiming "Brazil goes Latino," *Billboard* evoked a return to the 1940s when the tango and bolero were popular in Brazil and noted that the album had sold faster than any other release in Veloso's career (1994: 56)—and it led to a subsequent worldwide tour of the same name as well as a second CD, *Fina estampa ao vivo* (1995). Asked during the tour about the motivation behind his decision to sing in Spanish, Veloso offers a provocatively candid response: "I sing in Spanish to feel what it's like to be in someone else's skin. Or, as my manager says, to expand market share" (Solvik 2001: 96).

Veloso's crossover hit offers both similarities and differences with Almodóvar's own incursions into the repertoire. While centered on a similar nucleus of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican and Argentine boleros, tangos and rumbas from the 1930s,

1940s and 1950s, Veloso's CD takes its pan-Hispanic vocation perhaps more seriously, also including songs from Peru, Paraguay and Venezuela. Furthermore, the arrangements by cellist and producer Jaques Morelenbaum lend an art-music sensibility to the performances. What the efforts of both artists do seem to share is an elastic logic of artistic creation that sees no contradiction between music viewed as sincere personal expression and means of access to an interior state and as a bid for market success.

By his own testimony Almodóvar's relation to Brazilian culture is mediated by his friendship with Veloso: "La idea de Brazil va unida a la casa de Caetano, a ese ritmo tan agradable que tiene la vida a su alrededor. Yo me siento como un hermano más con Caetano, como si fuera mi hermano mayor" (The idea of Brazil for me is linked to Caetano's house, to that wonderful rhythm that life around him possesses. I feel like just another of his brothers, as if he were my older brother) (Almodovar fala sobre Caetano Veloso: undated). And yet when asked by Strauss about the relation between his friendship with Caetano and the inclusion of his live performance of "Cucurrucucú paloma" (which, we might recall, also appears on both *Fina estampa ao vivo* and *Viva la tristeza*) in *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar demurs: "had [the] work not been full of meaning for me I wouldn't have used [it]. The condition for me to include [it] in the film was that I be the first to cry . . . as I did the first time I heard Caetano's version of 'Cucurrucucú paloma.' It's a song of such moving tenderness that it almost becomes violent and it loses all relation to the version everybody knows" (Strauss 2006: 222–3). The collateral benefits of cross-promotion are in no way mutually exclusive with the goal of creating a deeply emotional experience rooted in the song performance that director and musician seek to reproduce in the spectator/listeners, and which Almodóvar paradoxically describes, erasing the traces of commercial or technological mediation, as a form of contact, "de corazón a corazón, de piel a piel, es decir, de ser humano a ser humano" (heart to heart, skin to skin, that is, human being to human being) (Almodóvar fala sobre Caetano Veloso: undated).

Chavela Vargas: Icon and Muse

A fundamental characteristic of the performances and performers that capture Almodóvar's attention, providing a common basis for the artistic and emotional synergies that link him to Veloso as well as to Chavela Vargas and Buika, is the practice of creating new and striking versions of familiar songs, or what we might call, borrowing from Marsha Kinder's chapter for this volume, "re-envoicements." Almodóvar elaborates on this phenomenon in his blog:

I'm a great believer in versions, when they're performed by inspired, independent artists who consider them as new creations and adapt the original song to their own

gut feelings. . . . Songs travel an oblique, fortuitous road until they fit into my films. At times they've had to become the opposite of what they originally were in order for me to connect with them. That's the case with "Tonada de luna llena." "Tonada" is a Venezuelan cowboy song, a kind of indigenous country music by Simón Díaz, which would never have had any connection with my stories had it not been for the arrangements by Morelenbaum and the voice of Caetano Veloso [that] transmuted the original, making it into a kind of dark, surreal lullaby (Almodóvar 2008).

We noted earlier Almodóvar's appreciation of Vargas's unique form of musical alchemy when referring to her inspiration for the version of Agustín Lara's "Piensa en mí" heard in *Tacones lejanos*. Born in Costa Rica in 1919, Vargas first came to prominence in the 1950s in Mexico specializing in the classic national repertoire of composers Lara, José Alfredo Jiménez, Cuco Sánchez, and Tomás Méndez. Although very much attracted by the Mexican popular music of the time, the boisterous mariachi-based canción ranchera and the bohemian bolero with its stories of amorous suffering, Vargas early on demonstrated an ability to make the songs her own. Taking the stage in an androgynous wardrobe of ponchos and woven leather sandals and accompanied by a single guitar, her performances shocked traditionalists while attracting a diverse group of admirers from the high and low of Mexican society.⁷ Speaking of the impact of her performance style, Carlos Monsiváis notes: "No sólo fue su apariencia la que se saltaba las reglas establecidas, sino que musicalmente prescindió del mariachi, con lo que eliminó de las rancheras su carácter de fiesta y mostró al desnudo su profunda desolación" (It wasn't only her appearance that went against established practices but that she eliminated the mariachi accompaniment, which stripped the *rancheras* of their festive character and showed the profound desolation they contain in all its nakedness) (Rojo 2001: n. p.).

Like her onetime lover, the German-Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, the Costa Rican Vargas adopted a stylized version of folkloric Mexican dress in proposing a new way of embodying and expressing Mexican culture and identity through her persona and her art. In remaking national traditions via such personal stylings, the artist likewise opens those traditions to associations and affinities that render her work potentially more accessible to international audiences. As Monsiváis observes, "En este mundo globalizado . . . Chavela Vargas ha sabido expresar la desolación de las rancheras con la radical desnudez del *blues* (In this globalized world Chavela Vargas has been able to express the desolation of the *rancheras* with the radical nakedness of the blues) (Rojo 2001: n. p.). Invoking a similarly cross-cultural frame of comparison, Almodóvar compares Vargas to Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf (Strauss 2006: 112), not only because all three possess a unique and unmistakable style and sound but also, one surmises, for their seeming authenticity that invests each song with a form of emotional authority that leads listeners to believe that although they are singing the words of others they are always speaking about themselves, their tumultuous love lives and problems with alcohol.

That presumed autobiographical subtext also informs Vargas's on- and off-screen incorporation into the Almodóvar creative universe, via a notable convergence of two mythmaking tales of artistic failure and success. In their professional and personal journeys from the periphery (Costa Rica, La Mancha) to the cultural center (Mexico City, Madrid), their sexual dissidence and capacity for self-invention, Vargas and Almodóvar draw on similar archetypal tropes in molding and promoting their work and careers. It is thus only fitting that both would come to assume a starring role in each other's respective artistic biography.

Colm Tóibín's essay on Almodóvar, first published in *Vanity Fair* and subsequently included in his collection of essays, *Love in a Dark Time and Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (2001), offers an extended and poetically enhanced version of what has become a widely circulating narrative of Chavela Vargas's alcohol-fueled eclipse and subsequent re-emergence onto the international stage with Pedro Almodóvar cast in the role of her rediscoverer and redeemer. At the same time, the singer is recruited to play the role of elusive soul mate and muse in a coming-of-age tale of the filmmaker-to-be.⁸ As Tóibín tells it, Almodóvar's first encounter with Vargas's music coincided with his own arrival in Madrid:

There was a singer he came across then, on record and on the radio; he knew she lived in the city, and there was something about her gravelly voice, a raw, melodramatic energy, a sense of pain and hurt and infinite loss, that he wanted badly . . . The sheer force of her pride and solitude and sadness meant everything to this adolescent boy new in the city. The singer's name was Chavela Vargas and Pedro went everywhere in search of her, he asked everybody where she was, but she had gone. . . . Haunted by her songs, he kept looking for her but she had disappeared (2001: 234).

Forward thirty years, at a party for *le tout* Madrid, Tóibín goes looking for Pedro and finds him talking to the very woman "whose voice haunted him when he was a kid" (2001: 238):

[Chavela] gave up singing for twenty-five years during which she lived it up and lived it down in Mexico. . . . And then the woman whom Pedro calls the higher priestess of pain came back to Madrid. This was the only time, he says, when his fame was useful. He set about making Chavela famous all over again. He went with her to the smallest venues, introduced her, cajoled people to listen to her. He used her in his films, *Kika* and *Flower of My Secret*. Her voice is as expressive and precise as ever. Her face, Pedro says, is the face of a primitive god. And if you go into a music shop in Madrid now you will find all her old work re-issued and all her new work on sale. She is a star (2001: 238).

Other, Spanish-language sources offer equally hyperbolic accounts of Vargas's rediscovery and "resurrection" (Ponsford 1997: n. p.)—*Fue redescubierta por el cineasta español Pedro Almodóvar, en 1990, y resurgió como el Ave Fénix, (She was rediscovered by the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar in 1990 and was*

reborn like the Phoenix) (Le Franc 2009: 29)—at the hands of Almodóvar, while the director himself has never made such claims. So widespread were such accounts that Vargas is moved to correct the record in her autobiography: “A veces la prensa y el público son injustos, y suponen que fue Pedro Almodóvar—mi Pedrito, a quien adoro—el que me llevó a España y el que me abrió de nuevo las puertas de Europa. No es verdad” (Sometimes the press and public are unjust and they imagine it was Pedro Almodóvar—my little Pedro, whom I adore—who brought me to Spain and reopened the doors of Europe to me. It is not true) (Vargas 2001: 39). Instead that role belonged to Manuel Arroyo, the Spanish editor and founder in the early 1970s of the anti-Francoist, English-language Turner bookstore in Madrid. It was Arroyo who convinced Vargas, who had stopped drinking by the early 1990s and was performing in a small venue on the outskirts of Mexico City, to return to Spain, where she had appeared briefly in 1970, and in 1993 she performed at the Sala Caracol in Madrid and later at the Lope de Vega Theater in Seville (Vargas 2001: 239–51). Despite the actual facts, the joined rebirth—redeemer myths clearly have more purchase both in Spain and across the Americas when attached to the dual celebrity of Vargas and Almodóvar. In this case, the starmaker role works both ways as Almodóvar lends his particular ultra modern cachet to the then octogenarian singer, aiding her to attract new audiences wherever the director's films are seen and heard, while Vargas and her music grant a kind of timeless emotional authenticity and gravitas to his work.

With so much attention devoted to the public narrative of mutual affection and admiration, it runs the risk of overshadowing the nature and impact of the singer's performances themselves. Interviewed in a 2002 filmed biography of Vargas, both Arroyo and Monsiváis return to the potency of her repertoire, as filtered through her particular interpretive genius. Monsiváis observes: “Ella mezcla boleros, canciones rancheras. De la mezcla surge algo que es su repertorio, muy muy espectacular en esa sensación de intimidad. Lo de Chavela ocurre a puertas adentro, cámara adentro” (She mixes boleros, canciones rancheras. Out of that mixture comes something that is her repertoire, something very very spectacular in the sensation of intimacy it produces. What Chavela does occurs in interiors, with the doors closed” (*Biografía* 2002). Characterizing Vargas's impact on younger Spanish audiences Arroyo also alludes to the emotive power (“la manera conmovedora”) of what he terms one of the most extraordinary repertoires in twentieth-century popular music, that she “lleva a un estadio más alto de interpretación” (carries to a higher level of interpretation) (*Biografía* 2002). Almodóvar's remarks in the film also echo this sense of private communication, of direct and personal address. When Chavela sings, he observes, “está cantando a ti, sólo a ti, y te está cantando sólo tu historia” (she is singing to you, only to you, and she is singing your personal history) (*Biografía* 2002). Almodóvar dramatizes this scenario of intimate communion between singer and listener in *La flor de mi secreto* when the desperate Leo, emerging from her apartment following a failed suicide attempt, takes temporary refuge in a neighborhood bar. As the owner switches channels on the

television set over the counter, the image of Vargas in her signature poncho, arms outstretched, singing “El último trago,” fills the screen. Grasping her glass of cognac, Leo lifts her head, recognizing her own condition in the words of the song. At once lover and fellow sufferer, Vargas speaks directly to Leo (“Tómate esta botella conmigo”/Share this bottle with me), giving voice to a ritual of solidarity in the face of recurring emotional hurt: “Nada me ha enseñado los años/siempre caigo en los mismos errores/Otra vez a brindar con extraños/y llorar por los mismos dolores” (The years have taught me nothing/I always fall into the same mistakes. Once again I end up drinking with strangers/and crying over the same sorrows). Regretting nothing, à la Piaf, while acknowledging the depths of her despair, Vargas’s performance functions as both an exorcism of pain and a shared exhortation to end a self-destructive love affair. As with Veloso’s performance in *Hable con ella* the message and meaning transcend the medium, or in this case, various media, establishing a form of immediate and personal connection.

At the heart of the unique interpretations and creative “versions” of a Vargas, or a Veloso or Buika, are their distinctive vocal style and character. From Bola de Nieve, heard at the end of *La ley del deseo*, to the boy sopranos of *La mala educación*/*Bad Education* (2004), Chavela Vargas to Nina Simone, included on *Viva la tristeza*, Almodóvar has always gravitated to uncanny and androgynous voices with the power to move and unsettle the listener. After responding with tears to Veloso’s performance of “Cucurrucucú paloma” in *Hable con ella* Marco (Darío Grandinetti) tells his lover Lydia (Rosario Flores), “that Caetano really makes my hair stand on end.” In register and texture, Vargas’s voice occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from that of Veloso, at least the Veloso of *Fina estampa* and Almodóvar’s films.⁹ Various characterized as raw and gravelly, gritty, hoarse, raspy or “aguardentosa” (the result of drinking *aguardiente*, what in English is called a whiskey voice), Vargas’s voice exemplifies Roland Barthes’s notion of a voice with “grain,” defined as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (1977: 182). In contrast to the conventional and learned codes and styles of musical performance, destined toward the expression and representation of inherited cultural value, grain conveys a form of surplus meaning and *jouissance* (Barthes 1977: 182–3). If the former are borne along on the flowing stream of the singer’s breath, the pleasure produced by a singer (and song) with grain is generated by physical organs of the mouth and throat, “the place where the phonic metal hardens . . . and explodes” (Barthes 1977: 183). In focusing on classical singing and opera, however, Barthes overlooks the cultural roots and connotations of the vocal styles practiced by singers such as Vargas and celebrated by Almodóvar in his films and recordings. Among singers of boleros, jazz and flamenco, for example, hybrid musical idioms that draw broadly on African, European and American traditions, the most prized voices give evidence of qualities that Néstor Leal associates with “voces mulatas” (mulatto voices): “cálidas, nasales, roncadas, pastosas” (warm, nasal, gravelly, mellow) (1992: 24). As Theo van Leeuwen reminds us, more generally, rough and gritty voices are taken to evoke not only a sense of materiality (and

sexuality) but also personal history as evidence of the toll taken by hard living, adversity or the simple effects of old age and as such function as bearers of a certain cultural and emotional authenticity (2009: 429).

In 2010, Chavela Vargas and Buika were chosen by the U.S. public radio network, NPR, as two of the world's "50 Great Voices," singers, the NPR website explains, "who've made their mark internationally and across history" (Blair 2010). The pairing of Vargas with a singer some fifty years her junior, in a diverse list ranging from Maria Callas and Nat King Cole to Celia Cruz and Youssou N'Dour (All 50 Great Voices 2011), is no coincidence. The NPR program segment devoted to "Buika: The Voice of Freedom," while stressing the origins of her distinctive voice in her singular life story, also highlights her relation with Vargas, cemented in the younger singer's 2009 CD, *El último trago*, largely devoted to covers of the former's work. In addition to the NPR piece, other articles call attention to Vargas's mentoring role. A 2010 feature in the *New York Times* on the occasion of the Spanish singer's U.S. tour cites Vargas, who speaks approvingly of her would-be protégée: "Buika has really developed as a singer. . . . She's added the influences of flamenco and other genres to my songs but the raspy roughness in her voice when she sings reminds me of myself" (Rohter 2010). Beyond the musical affinities, Vargas, with her open lesbian sexuality and outsider's success in her adopted culture, offers a reference point for the declaredly bisexual and ultra "cosmopolitan" Buika (Byram 2010) in the projection of a new paradigm of global Latin musical sensibility.

Buika: Synthesis and Synergies

Only the third singer to appear on-screen as herself in an Almodóvar film, following Vargas and Veloso, Buika performs two songs in *La piel que habito* that both allude to her own career trajectory, showcasing her versatility, while anchoring a key moment that brings together various strands in the plot. The setting is a wedding in Galicia attended by Dr. Ledgard together with his now twenty-year-old daughter, Norma, still recuperating years later from the effects of her mother's violent death. The singer's first number is a version of the Lara *ranchera*, "Se me hizo fácil," another touchstone of Chavela Vargas's repertoire, given an up-tempo remake as a Latin jazz dance number.

The original lyrics with their emphatic rejection of an unfaithful female lover ("Se me hizo fácil/borrar de mi memoria/a esa mujer a quien yo amaba tanto"—It was easy for me/to erase from my memory/that woman I loved so much) serve the gender-bending public images of both Vargas and Buika, who included this version in her 2009 CD. With its extended dance coda, the song performance brings the wedding guests to their feet, providing distraction and cover for Norma's exit to the garden where she will be raped, or nearly raped, by Vicente (Jan Cornet), thus putting in motion Ledgard's plan for surgical revenge.



Figure 18.3 Buika performs her version of Lara's "Se me hizo fácil" in the wedding scene from *La piel que habito* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

It is followed by a simple, unadorned version of the song "Por el amor de amar," with solo piano accompaniment, last heard in Portuguese sung by the child Norma. As recounted in flashback by the housekeeper Marilia (Marisa Paredes), the girl's mother jumped to her death when the song, which the mother had taught her daughter in earlier, happier times, awakened her from a drug-induced sleep as she recuperated from severe burns suffered in a car crash. Although neither Ledgard nor Norma seem to acknowledge its link to their past, the song reminds the spectator of the family's tragic history and alerts us to the girl's still fragile state. It also references the film's Brazilian connection, this time in musical form. Similar to the case of "Volver," the song interweaves family genealogy with broader cultural histories. First introduced in the 1961 film *Os Bandeirantes/The Pioneers*, by the French director Marcel Camus, best known for *Orfeu negro/Black Orpheus* (1959), the song, sung by Ellen de Lima, became a hit at the time.¹⁰ Buika's version preserves the childlike lyricism of the minor key melody. With its wistful, introspective tone and affect it seems an unlikely choice for a wedding reception and appears more directed toward the spectators than the on-screen guests.

As in the cases of Veloso and Vargas, Buika's collaborations with Almodóvar extend beyond the textual frame. Her first engagement with the director's song corpus dates to September 13, 2008 during the Madrid "Noche en blanco" event devoted to "Canciones para Pedro" (Songs for Pedro). Organized by the Culture office of the Madrid city government, the "Noche en blanco" is an all-night cultural festival modeled on the original 2002 Parisian "Nuit blanche" that has subsequently spread under European Union sponsorship throughout the continent. Almodóvar reports he was delighted when city officials contacted him with the idea of a public

concert featuring his music and he insisted on the participation of Buika and Miguel Poveda (whose interpretation of the Concha Piquer classic, "A ciegas," is heard over the final credits of *Los abrazos rotos*). Held at the Matadero performance space, the first half of the concert featured selections from Alberto Iglesias's scores for Almodóvar's films performed by the Orquesta Nacional de España while the second half focused on songs by Buika and Poveda, including "Soy infeliz" (Ventura Romero) and "Puro teatro" (Catalino Curet Alonso), originally heard over the opening and closing scenes of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) as sung by Lola Beltrán and La Lupe, respectively, "Luz de luna," and "Se nos rompió el amor," the latter written for onetime Spanish child star Rocío Durcal and heard in a version by flamenco singers Bernarda and Fernanda de Utrera in *Kika* (Almodóvar 2008).

Although by the time of her 2010 U.S. tour, and following the release of *El último trago*, Buika's name had come to be associated with Almodóvar's in various publicity materials and publications, there were no claims for his having "discovered" or rediscovered her. Nevertheless, the Almodóvar brand coupled with her own eventful biography clearly added to her allure. Initially promoted, and self-promoting, as the standard bearer for a new, multicultural Spanish social and cultural reality (see her bilingual composition, "New Afro Spanish Generation," from her first album, *Buika*, 2006), following an earlier stretch working in Las Vegas as a Tina Turner imitator, Buika's career was taken in hand by celebrated producer/arranger Javier Limón. Limón is perhaps best known for the 2004 CD *Lagrimas negras* with flamenco singer Diego El Cigala and Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés, hailed by the PopMatters website as a "world music hit" (Levin 2008). Her second and third CDs, *Mi niña Lola* (2007) and *Niña de fuego* (2008), featuring pianist Chucho Valdés, son of Bebo, meld the corpus and style of flamenco-inflected copla—drawing on the singer's real-life roots growing up in a gypsy neighborhood of Palma de Mallorca—with the rhythms and instrumentation of Afro-Cuban jazz.

Extending their reach further into the pan-Latin repertoire, Buika and Limón turned next to the bolero and Chavela Vargas in a 2009 CD titled *El último trago*. Although the chronology is not clear, an article in the *New York Times* gives Almodóvar credit for the idea, with Buika praising the director's "astute career advice" and "exquisite taste of a great painter" (Rohter 2010). The director returns the favor, and then some, in his contribution to the liner notes:

Since the very first time, listening to Buika awakened a commotion with me, a mixture of intensity, emotion and wetness; a reaction close to the one Chavela Vargas inspires in me. . . . Buika is what the flamencos used to call a "long" singer. She can tackle any style while still be unique and moving. . . . Much like Chavela, Concha is able to make her audience feel completely exposed. Her songs transport us to a place where we are left face to face with our own love history, one in which our failures stand out the most. And, what's more, after listening to her sing, one is determined to keep making the same mistakes, because there are no rules, common sense, caution or regret in passion. . . . However, Concha Buika takes after many

artists besides Chavela and brings other sources of inspiration to her completely authentic Chavelian repertoire. Her voice reminds us of La Lupe's frenzy with sometimes a hint of Olga Guillot. She also flutters her hands and stands erect in front of the microphone like the great Lola Flores (Almodóvar 2009).

Almodóvar's characterization of Buika highlights the qualities he requires of all his musical inspirations: the ability to communicate intense emotion and a sense of authenticity while constructing an unique artistic signature from a range of multiple sources. This eclecticism and hybridity reaches its apotheosis in the case of Buika, her own multicultural origins and influences contributing to a performance that achieves a "rare fusion that honors all its sources" (Pareles 2007: n. p.). In her wide-ranging synthesis of earlier singers and traditions, the young Afro-Spanish singer offers a forward-looking model of musical authorship much in tune with Almodóvar's own creative practice and ambitions as both filmmaker and cultural producer.

Whatever the singer may have learned from her musician models and mentors, Tina Turner, Chavela Vargas and Javier Limón, it seems to be Almodóvar who has schooled her in the art of cross-promotion. In September 2011, coinciding with the worldwide distribution of the director's nineteenth feature, *La piel que habito*, Buika released her sixth CD, a two-disk anthology of greatest hits, titled *En mi piel*. Opening with "Por el amor de amar" and "Se me hizo fácil," the CD has been promoted by a "Making of" video on YouTube made up of footage, featuring Almodóvar, of the filming of the wedding performance scene from the film (2011). With Buika, Almodóvar's model of artistic collaboration points beyond the old technologies of musical recording and film to the multiplatform reality of the present-day global cultural marketplace.

Conclusions

In his role as cultural producer, as we have seen, Almodóvar does not shun the marketplace, as much as he might try to disavow its impact on his own artistic choices. Indeed the market itself, in the sense of a cosmopolitan setting for cultural encounter and exchange, evoked earlier in this essay by Phillip Bohlman, might serve as an overall metaphor for his film and discographic work. As a point of convergence for a host of geographically, culturally and generically diverse sounds, images, stories and discourses, Almodóvar's cinema and song collections refigure the marketplace as a kind of traditional "agora," at once bazaar and public square. In film and on record Almodóvar enlists the emotional potency of song and singers to mediate between the public and collective space made available by his cinema and the capacity for intimate communication and personal address. Songs travel, as the director himself observes, transported, in the first instance, along the

pathways established by what Pacini-Hernández (1993) describes as the commercial infrastructure of the contemporary music industry. But music also responds to the gravitational pull of personal biography (whether Almodóvar's and that of his artist collaborators, or our own) as a counter force, as Arjun Appadurai notes (1994: 83), that enables objects to move in and out of the commodity state.

Finally, in exploring this extra-filmic dimension of Almodóvar's creative oeuvre we also see evidence of the broader impact of his work very much along the lines of Benjamin's "author as producer," whose "products" transcend "their character as works" and have "an organizing function" marked by the ability "to induce other producers to produce" (1986: 233). In this regard Almodóvar might be said to function as a kind of global matrix figure, like Foucault's founders of discourse (1977: 131–2), whose influence derives not merely from the films he has directed but equally from his ability to enable the production of other varied authorial discourses.¹¹

Notes

- 1 In a 2012 lecture, Paul Julian Smith explores Almodóvar's and El Deseo's incursions into other media, including book publishing, television and the licensing of theatrical adaptations, in terms that would not be foreign to Warhol, as an instance of "brand extension."
- 2 Early scores by Movida cohort Bernardo Bonnezzi for *Laberinto de pasiones / Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Matador* (1986) and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios / Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) have been released as Bernardo Bonezzi, *Almodóvar Early Films*, Karonte, 2004. See also Ennio Morricone, *Atame*, BMG Ariola, 1989; and Ryuichi Sakamoto, *High Heels*, Polygram, 1992.
- 3 See the exploration of this range of cinematic sources in chapter 16, this volume.
- 4 In this regard the song also potentially references the Parisian experience of Esteban / Lola. On the broader cultural context and history of African music and musicians in Paris, see Winders (2006).
- 5 Allinson (2001: 98) and Craig (2010: 170–1) offer contrasting accounts of the meaning of the lyrics and context of the song in Senegalese Muslim culture but such arguments would seem to have limited relevance given the fact that neither Almodóvar nor the film's spectators have knowledge of those referents.
- 6 In this passage the English version of the Strauss book, which I include at the end of this note, eliminates some of Almodóvar's reflections on the historical and cultural dynamics of the relation between Spain and its former American colonies as well as the intersection of personal and artistic identifications and market factors, a key focus of this chapter. The English translation also shades some meanings in ways that do not reflect the spirit, if not the letter, of the Spanish. The translation in the main text is my own. What follows is the quotation from the English version of the book: "It's a little unfair because Los Panchos in *Law of Desire*, Lucho Gatica in *Dark Habits*, Los Hermanos Rosario in *High Heels* and Chavela Vargas in *Kika* all sing in Spanish and even

- if these singers come from Spanish America they should have been discovered earlier. But there's a real prejudice against this type of music. In Spain, it's long been considered old-fashioned and over-sentimental. I'm happy to have helped these singers to be recognized artistically and commercially. People look at a singer of boleros in a different way now" (Strauss 2006: 112).
- 7 See the account of this period in Vargas's autobiography, published in Spain (2002).
 - 8 Tóibín's account closely follows the retrospective logic of the gay (and not) artist's autobiography analyzed by Alberto Mira, chapter 4, this volume.
 - 9 On Veloso's "feminine" voice, see Vernon (2009: 58–9).
 - 10 An article in the Brazilian paper *O Globo* recounts that Brazilian singer Fernanda Cabral, long resident in Spain, was invited by composer Alberto Iglesias to teach the actress playing the child Norma, Ana Mena, to sing the song in Portuguese (Viana 2011). With regard to the affinities between Almodóvar and the director of *Black Orpheus*, some might argue that *La piel* indulges in a similarly exploitative projection of exotic Brazil in art cinema guise to an avid European and North American audience.
 - 11 It is significant that Almodóvar is not the only Spanish film director to play the role of musical impresario. His contemporary Fernando Trueba, both through his films, the documentary *Calle 54* (2000) and the animated feature *Chico y Rita* (2010), and the production of some ten CDs, including the above-mentioned *Lágrimas negras*, has become deeply involved in the promotion of a similar pan-Latin (flamenco fusion, Afro-Caribbean dance music and jazz) repertoire. In concluding I would like to thank to Marvin D'Lugo for his thoughtful suggestions on this essay and for many conversations over the years on our shared obsessions with the acoustic imaginaries of Spanish-language cinema.

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Almodóvar and Latin America

The Making of a Transnational Aesthetic in *Volver*

Marvin D'Lugo

Mapping Cultural Affinities

Volver (2006) holds a crucial position in the expanding global vision of Almodóvar's cinema. Though obviously a Spanish film in terms of its setting, actors, and subject-matter, the film's presumed "Spanishness" (Triana-Toribio 2007: 160) also exemplifies what Néstor García Canclini describes as the co-production of a transnational Hispanic identity (1995: 130). The most explicit textual expression of that condition is to be found in the pivotal musical number that gives the film its title. As the following discussion will demonstrate, this is more than simply another in the series of musical interludes common in Almodóvar's movies; rather, it serves as the axis of dramatic and cultural scenarios that break down the borders that conventionally have defined Spanish national cinema, repositioning it as a trans-territorial Hispanic film.

The objective of this essay is two-fold: first to probe the implications of the strategy through which *Volver* stabilizes a mode of address directed to both Spanish and Latin American audiences, especially in its construction of collective memory; secondly, to interrogate the relation between the increasing emphasis on Latin American cultural tropes and the co-productions with Latin American auteurs in which Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo, engages beginning in 2000. El Deseo's collaborations with filmmakers from the region build on a cultural mode of production that highlights the power of auteur cinema to transcend the confining limits of national cinema. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden in fact argue that the "auteur" as representative and bearer of national and/or ethnic identity has been central to the international reception and reputation of filmmakers (2006: 3).

Volver comes out of a cycle that begins to take form with *Todo sobre mi madre*/*All About My Mother* (1999) and includes *Hable con ella*/*Talk to Her* (2002) and *La mala educación*/*Bad Education* (2004), all three of which involve themes and motifs that fold back on the history of migration, both literal and metaphoric, between Spain and Latin America. By the late 1990s, El Deseo had succeeded in cultivating an enviable set of international connections with European distributor CIBY 2000 and Sony Picture Classics in the United States. Less well established, yet, ironically more resonant with Almodóvar's own artistic sensibilities was the limited market of his films in Latin America, owing to the "national fragmentation" that impeded smooth circulation of films across the region (Hoefert de Turégano 2004: 17). This has resulted in Latin America, with potentially the strongest potential affinity to some of Almodóvar's films, being commercially the least well-represented in El Deseo's portfolio.

In this light, comments by Agustín Almodóvar, co-founder of El Deseo, seem especially noteworthy. He explains to an interviewer the rationale for one of the company's earliest Latin American collaborations, *La fiebre del loco*/*Loco Fever* (2001) with Chilean filmmaker Andrés Wood and the Mexican production company Tequila Gang, calling that film "un encuentro maravilloso de sensibilidades distantes pero muy cercanas" (a marvelous encounter of distant but very closely aligned sensibilities," (Meyero 2001: 83).¹ We may understand the ways in which that vision of shared sensibilities translates into cinematic practice as we observe the intensified integration of Latin American elements in Almodóvar own films that are produced concurrently with El Deseo's Latin American co-productions.

In *Todo sobre mi madre*, preceding the earliest of these collaborations, Almodóvar gives the leading role to an Argentine actress, Cecilia Roth. Though Roth had appeared in some of his earlier films dating back to a brief cameo in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980), and even had one of the lead roles in his second feature, *Laberinto de pasiones*/*Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *Todo sobre mi madre* is different, nonetheless. Here she plays an Argentine. As well, the back story that brings her to Spain is that of Argentina's "Dirty War" of the late 1970s as referenced at key moments in the dialogue. Especially noteworthy is the film's plotting which involves in the latter sections the birth of the baby Esteban, the child of the Argentine transsexual Lola (Toni Cantó) and the Spanish nun Rosa (Penélope Cruz). In broadly allegorical terms, the narrative points to a future shaped by the erasure of political borders and union of Spaniards and Latin Americans.²

A similar, though less politically pointed amorous coupling of an Argentine and a Spaniard occurs with the appearance of Argentine actor, Darío Grandinetti, playing the character Marco, one of the leads in Almodóvar's next film, *Hable con ella*. His pairing with Lidia, the Spanish female bullfighter (Rosario Flores), again provides an allegorical nod toward a Latin American/Spanish union. A striking feature of this film is the participation of Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso in a theatricalized appearance singing the Mexican ballad "Cucurucucú paloma."

Though Veloso's voice had been heard in the earlier Almodóvar film *La flor de mi secreto*/*The Flower of My Secret* (1995), his physical presence is striking in *Hable con ella* in that it becomes the impetus for a flashback that disrupts the narrow Spanish *mise en scène* in the same way that the musical performance defies Latin American linguistic and cultural borders (a Brazilian singer singing a Mexican song in a Spanish film).

In his next film, *La mala educación*, Almodóvar casts two Mexican actors in lead roles: heartthrob Gael García Bernal as an ambitious actor Juan, and Daniel Giménez Cacho as the pedophile priest. Though the film does not highlight Latin American plots as in the case of its two predecessors, it again contains a key critical musical number rooted in a Latin American musical imaginary, this time involving the iconic figure of Sara Montiel, whose star turns in Spanish, Mexican, and Hollywood films historically embodied a literal border-crossing and a recycling of cultural identity. By the 1970s the Spanish actress and singer had been resurrected in drag performances that connected her to the marginal life of Spanish gays during the first post-Franco decade. Tellingly, Montiel is marked as a bridge figure between Hispanic cultures through the film's double articulation of a nostalgic musical turn—the spectacularly staged performance by female impersonator Zahara of a Montiel recording of the Cuban ballad “Quizás, Quizás, Quizás” (D'Lugo 2009: 372–3)—and the evocation at other moments in the film of the biographical Montiel.³ This cycle of films in fact serves simply as a preamble to *Volver* in which a more complete contextualization of the Latin American connections assumes dramatic and cultural centrality.

Tango and Communal Memory

Penélope Cruz in the role of Raimunda, the melodramatic heroine of *Volver*, performs the film's title song, a standard of the tango repertory, at a party for a film crew shooting in her working-class Madrid barrio on the periphery of the city. The tango, of course, has been a musical refrain in Almodóvar's films going back twenty years to *La ley del deseo*/*Law of Desire* (1987) (Ochoa 2003: 99),⁴ but not until *Volver* has it assumed such a strategic and self-conscious position at the center of narrative and emotional gravity. Though Raimunda's performance appears similar to staged musical numbers in earlier Almodóvar films, upon closer inspection we note that the tango has been raised here to a more prominent textual position as it strategically underscores the film's principal narrative and further serves as a catalyst for action and the transposition of the protagonists' identities within broader social and even political scenarios.

As Raimunda prepares to sing, her sister, Sole (Lola Dueñas), explains to Raimunda's daughter, Paula (Yohana Cobo), that this is a song the child's grandmother taught her to perform at the tryouts for a singing competition.

Unbeknownst to Raimunda, her mother, Irene (Carmen Maura), presumed dead, observes and listens to the performance from a car parked nearby. For as much as this sequence marks the point of convergence of three generations of Spanish women, reiterating one of Almodóvar's perennial themes of female solidarity, the musical interlude is staged in such a way as to uproot the plot's apparent Spanish specificity and transpose the Madrid-based action into a hybrid *mise en scène* filled with Latin American motifs (sultry nights, mojitos, and tango). The sequence suggests a borderless cultural style that no longer treats the Latin American materials as either foreign or discontinuous from Spanish popular cultural forms.

These details of staging are part of a strategy that brings the spectator to an awareness of how this rendition of the tango transcends the story that frames it. Not only do the revelers spill out into the restaurant's open-air patio, but the positioning of Irene on the street adjacent to the patio underscores the ways in which musical sounds serve as a "phonic bridge" (Thibaud 2003: 333), traversing otherwise bordered spaces, uniting seemingly distanced audiences. The version of "Volver" Cruz sings⁵ is a flamenco rebranding of the Argentine song of the 1930s that comes to embody the empirical reality of a deterritorialized Hispanic community that has taken shape most notably in Madrid's "pequeño Caribe," the enclave of Caribbeans in the city's Tetuán neighborhood. That contemporary demographic is now fashioned into the symbolic space of a transnational community quite similar to the way Kathleen M. Vernon describes Caetano Veloso's performance of "Cucurucucú paloma" as enacting "a moment of idyllic community and musical enchantment whose effects and appreciation extend beyond the fictional frame" (2009: 58).

As part of this staging of the deterritorialization of musical sound, Sole's comments to her niece underscore the way in which the song embodies a more expansive formulation of social memory as it functions to reposition individuals within broader cultural networks of community. "Social memory" is here understood as the "trans-generational transmissions of experience" connected to cultural artifacts that take the form of personally adapted versions of the past (Welzer 2008: 286–7). As in the case of the popular tango, transferred from one medium to another—sound recording to radio to motion pictures—it is a mass-mediated cultural product continuously adapted to the individual's recollections of the past in ways that are not intrinsic to the actual song. As a negotiation between the individual and collective experience of social events, the performance demonstrates Almodóvar's effort to reinforce through auditory culture a powerful memory-making fiction about the shared and reciprocal cultural ethos of diverse Hispanic communities.

In this way, Raimunda's performance further underscores García Canclini's assertion of a Latin American transnational identity: "Ya no podemos considerar a los miembros de cada sociedad como perteneciendo a una sola cultura homogénea y teniendo por lo tanto una única identidad distintiva y coherente" (We can no longer consider individuals as pertaining exclusively to one homogenous culture

and therefore having a single distinctive and coherent identity) (1995: 184). While individuals are members of national populations, he argues, they are also part of transnational and intercultural communities as well.

The tango Raimunda sings embodies that cultural principle. Closely identified with the figure of the legendary tanguero, Carlos Gardel, the song's musical circulation within the Spanish-speaking world and its association with the Argentine singer open up a cluster of intermedial connections in recorded music, staged performances, and motion pictures that constitute a collective cultural archive that valorizes García Canclini's sense of the "transnationalization of economy and of symbols" (1995: 184). "Volver" is, in effect, an example of an earlier age's version of the same transnationalism that now shapes Almodóvar's film.

Composed for inclusion in a Spanish-language movie produced by Paramount Pictures in New York, the song was first performed by Gardel in John Rheinhardt's, *El día que me Quieras / The Day You Love Me* (1935). Paramount was, in fact, grooming Gardel, as they had earlier done with Maurice Chevalier, to become a transnational singing personality to mirror and echo the film company's big star, Bing Crosby (Barsky and Barsky 2004: 631). The song had been commissioned by Paramount from Alfredo Le Pera; the producers wanted lyrics that could provide "un castellano despojado de matices locales, que pudiera ser comprendido en todos los países hispanohablantes, dentro de un marco sentimental donde Buenos Aires sólo apareciera como una referencia de lejanía, como el sitio del que alguna vez se había partido" (a formal Spanish cleansed of any localist shadings, a type of speech that could be understood in any Spanish-speaking country, and a sentimental evocation of Buenos Aires that appeared only as a distanced point of reference) (Salas 1986: 165), thereby producing for Paramount a universally comprehensible Gardelian text.

The Gardel film and the recordings of the tango constitute a self-referential memory text: a song about remembering a personal past and circulated through the mediatized circuits of sound reproduction—radio and motion pictures—that aim to "construct nostalgia" in its listeners. Precisely because the recording and film were designed to circulate internationally, they were able to affirm the emotional bonds uniting a diasporic Hispanic community.⁶ Subsequent generations also embraced "Volver," rebranding it, as, for instance Pino Solanas did in his 1986 film, *Tango: El exilio de Gardel / Tango: The Exile of Gardel*, casting the tango into the political discourse of exile culture.

Recycled and refigured in Almodóvar's film, the Gardelian tango holds an additional narrative privilege. Its suggestive lyrics serve to promote in its listeners and performers identification with the motif of personal displacement and migration, most recently updated in the narratives of political and economic exile in both Spanish and Latin American cinemas. From this perspective, we may better appreciate how the complex story that frames the song in *Volver* works as a confirmation on the personal level of a cultural narrative of modern Hispanic

society that has undergone the traumas of separation and dislocation and the euphoria of re-encounter. In no small way, its status is as a popular cultural anthem—as Almodóvar’s plot suggests—taught by mothers to their daughters, circulated and rearranged musically, re-recorded and absorbed by listeners who might otherwise seem disconnected.

Constructing a New Geocultural Imaginary

Raimunda’s performance points self-referentially to the function of mass media to intervene in and shape collective identification with a virtual borderless imagined Hispanic transnational community. As part of this process, Almodóvar underscores Raimunda’s location within a refigured urban space. Her positioning on the social and geographic margins of Madrid reflects the larger evolution of narrative space in his films. Exploring Almodóvar’s evolving depictions of Madrid, Ignacio Oliva underscores the way in which in his more recent work the filmmaker has “turned inward from the street” (2009: 396), identifying *Volver* as a developmental turning point in the filmmaker’s trajectory (2009: 393). Following Oliva’s argument, we may note just how the city from this point onward in Almodóvar’s work appears less connected with his personal biography than with broader cultural scenarios. Unlike the Madrid of the *Movida*, or of Almodóvar’s films of the 1990s, with their high-concept visions of the capital of a “new” Spain defined by its monumental past and equally monumental projections into the future—one thinks here of the highly legible images of the Puerta de Alcalá and the Torres Kio that bracket the action of *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (1997)—this is a space that implies a geocultural break from Eurocentric modernity. Prominence is given instead to the urban peripheries that serve as a contact zone between Spaniards arriving from the provinces and undocumented Latin Americans for whom the bonds of community, language, class, custom, and gender are more important than those of legal citizenship.

These are spaces of marginality: spaces occupied by the socially marginal but they are also the geographic borders of the commercial and cultural center of the nation. Such locations are characterized diegetically by their essential instability as reflected in the perpetual state of movement of the characters who temporarily occupy them. Two Madrid barrios in particular—Vallecas and Tetuán—are key sites of filming that highlight the urban narratives of migration in *Volver*. These enclaves encapsulate the migratory history of Madrid which has received large influxes of migrants, first from the Spanish provinces and then, in later decades, from Latin America. Through this strategic construction of *mise en scène* Almodóvar naturalized a version of the city in which the traditional narratives of rootedness in the past cede to what Ann Marie Stock calls in the context of recent Latin American cinema “migrancy” (2006: 161); that is, narratives of characters



Figure 19.1 A multicultural Madrid in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

displaced from their communities of origin by political or economic forces who are now depicted as moving toward an as yet undefined future.

The Madrid of *Volver* in fact has been transformed from a destination for characters into a creative cultural crossroads; many of its inhabitants will now find themselves en route to some other real or symbolic location. We observe this shifting demographic at certain key moments when Raimunda is shown walking through crowded city streets amidst a diverse ethnic array of people who are similarly in movement.

Even her mother, Irene, assumes the convenient mask of a Russian immigrant whose story need not even be verbalized since the clients in her daughter's illegal hair salon are familiar with the migratory narrative. This human backdrop to the action of *Volver* suggests the forging of a different cultural paradigm of location and identity and, as well, the geopolitical repositioning of Spain in a new network of cultural contacts with Eastern Europe and Africa, but more importantly with Latin America.

Central to this remapped cityscape is Almodóvar's conception of Raimunda as occupying an interstitial position between tradition and modernity; she is conceived as a hybrid character who embodies both Spanish and Latin American popular culture. Having escaped from the physical trauma of incest in the tradition-laden village of her birth to the modernity of the city, she is shown, for instance, as a cleaning attendant at the Santiago Calatrava-designed terminal at the Barajas



Figure 19.2 Blurring the borders between village and city in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

Airport. Yet that image of modernity is illusory as the plot twists invoke that trauma now returned in the details of Paco's attempted rape of her daughter Paula.

The tenuous separation of the past from the present, of the village from the city, is expressed through images and plot elements that at first appear unrelated to the incest narrative. Having secured the job of preparing a midday meal for the members of a film crew shooting in the neighborhood, Raimunda needs to make the appropriate purchases of food. A cut from a public market to what appears to be the adjacent street shows her laden with grocery bags, trudging up a dusty street.

For a moment, the image is jolting as it suggests perhaps her return to the space of the village. Only as the scene progresses do we recognize that she is in the same Madrid working-class barrio of the preceding scene. As the editing of this

sequence makes clear, Raimunda is in fact suspended between the rural world she has left and the urban world in which she tries to survive (Hernández Les 2010: 268).⁷

These audiovisual details bring into focus Raimunda's position within what Beatriz Sarlo terms "peripheral modernity" (*una modernidad periférica*). Writing about the historical context of Argentine urban space of the early decades of the twentieth century, but which might well describe the plight of subjects in other settings, Sarlo describes a space in which "han llegado las herramientas de la modernidad pero donde todavía persisten los hábitos mentales y perspectivas de la cultura tradicional. Es una cultura de mezcla" (the tools of modernization have arrived but the mental habits and outlooks of traditional culture still persist. It is a hybrid culture) (1988: 28).⁸ Underpinning this, of course, is the sense that for as much as Spanish social history is rooted in its geopolitical connections to Europe, there are equally powerful connections to Spain's earlier position on the social and economic periphery, more closely tied to Latin America. Almodóvar openly plays with this imaginative realignment.

There is a particular intertextual density to Raimunda's character, not easily reducible to a simple historical or demographic formula. Updating the displaced Gloria from *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto! / What Have I done to Deserve This?* (1984) with whom she shares many of the same melodramatic features, she even repeats Gloria's patricidal role when she takes responsibility for Paco's murder.⁹ To dispose of the body, Raimunda, with Paula's help, drags the corpse to the freezer case of her friend's restaurant. Raimunda's actions effectively mirror a crucial intertextual link with *La flor de mi secreto / The Flower of My Secret* (1995) and the character Leo, another girl from a village in La Mancha. Like Gloria, Leo has apparently moved beyond the working-class immigrant community and is a successful author of Harlequin-type romances. One of her commissioned novels, is *La cámara frigorífica (The Refrigerator Murder)*, not the escapist romance her editors want, but a bizarre love story involving hiding a corpse in a freezer case. Leo explains that her fiction is based on a true story, taken from a news report from Puerto Rico. In this way, Raimunda's melodramatic itinerary mirrors a grim detail of Latin American social reality. Tellingly, when she needs to make her definitive dissolution of Paco's body, she enlists the Cuban prostitute, Regina (María Isabel Díaz), to help her transport the body and to bury it in the Manchegan countryside. This seemingly minor detail suggests the collaboration between these parallel migrants in the forging of an emerging heterogeneous Hispanic cultural narrative.

The presence of Penélope Cruz is key to the transnational conception of the film. On one level, she represents the Spanish tradition of the earthy woman of the pueblo, sexy but also maternal. We should recall that in her two previous appearances in Almodóvar films, *Carne trémula* and *Todo sobre mi madre*, Cruz embodied the mother as martyr, thereby refiguring the Spanish tradition in markedly universal terms. At the same time, as a publicity icon, Cruz has developed another international career that has effectively refigured her Spanish qualities into international Mediterranean Latina features.¹⁰

This rare combination of opposing features—folksy and cosmopolitan, Spanish and international—helps to reinforce Raimunda's identity as an interstitial figure in the cultural transition toward modernity, yet deeply imbued with the traditional values of the village. She moves naturally between urban and rural milieus without any awareness of the essential contradiction between the two outlooks embodied in these spaces. Still affectively rooted in her provincial past, as embodied in family and friends from the village, she is, nonetheless, accepting of the broader world of the city and modernity, again represented in figures like Regina, with whom she identifies.

An Auditory Imaginary

Building on his earlier use of Latin American musical performances, now emphasizing the auditory dynamic of social memory, Almodóvar creates a more sustained hybridized vernacular style of narration in order to assert a connection between Spanish and Latin American cultures. This is what Jean-Paul Thibaud has called “phonic deterritorialization” (2003: 333) in which the sonic identity of places is neutralized and an auditory continuity is established independent of the places traveled through (2003: 333–4). As we examine the multiple uses of sound in both voice and song, we may better appreciate how the spatial and sonic elements that converge in *Volver* are used to elide seemingly separate Spanish-language cultural communities into a seamless continuity.

Even before the film begins, the various panels and logos indicating the film's multiple co-producers (the regional government of Castilla-La Mancha, Televisión Española), we hear monaural sounds of an old Spanish recording: Conchita Panadés, accompanied by a female chorus singing “Las espigadoras” (The Poppy Gatherers) from the zarzuela, *La rosa del azafrán* / *The Saffron Rose* (Jacinto Guerrero, 1931). The image then cuts to the curious folkloric ritual of the women of the village of Alcanfor de las Infantas cleaning the tombs of their departed family members as the fierce southern wind blows against their faces and scatters leaves. The camera then pans laterally to reveal in bold letters superimposed over these images the film's principal producer, El Deseo, and the authorial rubric: “Un film de ALMODÓVAR,” finally tracking to the back of a tombstone which bears the title letters: *Volver*. This visual design recalls in more modest form the credit sequence of Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939),¹¹ alluding to the function of mass media as the filter through which the characters and eventually the audience are brought to understand their world.

This simple prologue to the story reveals various layers of intertextual allusions, underscoring for audience as well as characters the mise en scène of the graveyard as an allegorical “*lieu de mémoire*” (site of memory), to use Pierre Nora's formulation. Not only are the music and credit titles suggestive of pastness, but the zarzuela

chorus, with its euphoric paean to country life offers an historically specific memory of the Francoist culture of the immediate Spanish post-Civil War period which promoted zarzuela music on Spanish radio as a autochthonous form of “*música con enjundia*” (music with substance) (Vázquez Montalbán 2003: 45). The women’s ritual cleaning of the graves of family reflects a society in which mnemonic practices (repeating the ritual in an effort to remember the deceased), attached to oral performances, negate both print and even image culture.

Almodóvar includes a letter from writer Juan José Millás as a prologue to the Spanish published version of the film script of *Volver* that makes note of the similarity of the film’s spectral rural world and the folkloric rural space of Juan Rulfo’s Mexican masterpiece, *Pedro Páramo* (Almodóvar 2009: 9). The association with the Rulfo novel is especially significant in that it draws our attention to the soundscape as a crucial component of Almodóvar’s narrative. The acoustic force of the wind, the “*viento solano*” to which Raimunda refers at one point, and which frames the filmic narrative at both beginning and end, provides an uncanny aura to the narrative as it alludes to the fantastic “ghost story” about Irene with which Almodóvar continually teases his audience (Marsh 2009: 339).

The association of the wind with the supernatural finds its logic in another aspect of the trauma of technological modernization which frames the filmic narrative. Sarlo tells us that early radio transmissions in Latin America functioned as a bridge between traditional society and modernization: its appeal was its fantastic condition as wireless, suggesting something of the marvelous, as one is able to “*comunicarse con lo que no se ve, superar los límites de la materialidad corporal de los sentidos, algo que en la imaginación colectiva se vinculaba a lo para-normal*” (to communicate with what you cannot see, to transcend the limits of the material world, something therefore connected in the popular imagination with the para-normal’ (1992: 115). The opening sequence of *Volver*, with its preponderance of disembodied sounds and “echoes” of the past, alludes precisely to the auditory culture which, as the film insists, was an integral part of pre-modern, rural culture—Spanish as well as Latin American—where audiences are often separated by no more than one or two generations from their provincial roots. This further buttresses the sense of a trans-territorial Hispanic culture rooted in a shared sense of the past.

Out of this recognition of the auditory culture that shapes the old women of the community, a special privilege is given to melodramatic narratives as recounted in radionovelas. Though we never see a radio set in the film, nor the dramatization of the act of listening to a radio program, radio effectively becomes the implicit mediation of the female voice in *Volver*. We hear a fairly continuous flow of voices of actresses shaped by the style and substance of dialogues from radio soap operas and similar genre programs, especially at those moments in the action when the women confess family secrets that require detailed plot descriptions.

Of the various audiovisual strains of melodrama, Jesús Martín-Barbero identifies one in particular, what he calls “the melodrama of reencounter” that occupies a

central place in the film's plot. He describes this genre-within-a-genre as providing the formula for a prodigious number of Latin American telenovelas: "Del hijo por el padre o del padre por el hijo, lo que mueve la trama es siempre el desconocimiento de una identidad y la lucha contra los maleficios, las apariencias, contra todo lo que oculta y disfraza una lucha por hacerse reconocer" (The re-encounter of the son by the father or the father by the son, what moves the plot forward is always the non-recognition of identity of one's family members and the struggle against evil, false appearances, against everything that hides or disguises the struggle for self-identity) (1995: 59).

Almodóvar's version of the narrative of re-encounter emphasizes the continuity between rural and urban scenarios, framing these so that the rural erupts in the urban milieu as traumatic memories of the past that still haunt the characters after they have abandoned the village for the city. This plotline, which is laden with Spanish cultural specificity (immigration narrative, working-class culture in Madrid), masks a familiar trope of Latin American cinematic melodrama as well that dates back to the early sound period: the story of the country girl who has been seduced and abandoned and must escape her shame in the rural community by taking refuge in the sinful city. This hoary plot device is recalled in numerous Mexican brothel melodramas like Antonio Moreno's *Santa* (1931) and Arcady Boytler's *La mujer del puerto* / *The Woman of the Port* (1933); these works narrativize the traditionalist cultural view of the country as the place of purity and the city as the locus of sin.

Melodrama is intimately related to this transformative expansion of popular auditory culture. Reynaldo González has observed the powerful transnational circulation of radio soap operas within the Spanish-speaking world, even prior to the contemporary telenovela craze. These "auditory spectacles" (1988: 13), as he explains, have seldom respected national borders (1988: 41) and have involved complex chains of cross-fertilization between Spanish scripts and rebranded Latin American texts within which local referentiality was largely played down (1988: 69). The radionovela and the telenovela historically found their appeal in the voice dramas of depoliticized borderless melodrama. There may in fact be little recognition by Spanish-language audiences of the extent to which borderless cultural flows are crucial in Almodóvar's treatment of his plot and characters; yet they play an important part in advancing the integration of overlapping and adjacent cultures.

Radio, in fact, is the apparatus that has been internalized by the characters: listening becomes more significant than seeing, as noted, for instance, in the blind Tía Paula's having the television on so that she can hear news reports. We witness a mass-mediated verbal style in the villagers' interpersonal social discourse during the scene of Tía Paula's wake in the village. Raimunda's friend Agustina (Blanca Portillo) recounts to the local women assembled in the house how the supposed ghost of Irene spoke to her to announce Paula's death, inviting Agustina to enter the house to find the deceased's body. This scene pointedly evokes the tradition of

the radio transmission of gothic ghost stories with an emphasis on the power of Agustina's voice to manipulate the emotions of the assembled audience of village women (Almodóvar 2006: 71).

The wake scene dramatizes the impact of the auditory experience of mass-mediated programming on the everyday rituals of the closed community in which imagination takes precedence over any lived or observed experience. In this way, the film underscores certain connections between the audience, literally the "listeners," and the radio story. From the perspective of popular auditory culture, it coincides perfectly with the belief system of the village in which the women take more stock in what they hear than in what they see. Tellingly, it was the deceased Aunt Paula who, owing to her blindness, best embodied the belief in the superiority of the auditory over the visible world.

In this milieu, the figure of the ghost is significant in that it overdetermines those disembodied sounds that inform and confirm the belief system of the borderless community. It is no coincidence that the blurring of the lines between the dead and the living that is so central to the plot of *Volver* is replicated in the film's blurring of other borders, those of past and present, rural and urban, finally, the geopolitical borders of the transnational Hispanic community itself. Indeed, the cumulative effect of the multiple auditory intertexts in *Volver* is to confirm for Almodóvar's transnational audience a profound sense of community through a pluralization of personal histories. This is what Birgit Neumann, speaking of the literary representation of memory, notes as one of the fundamental privileges of fictional texts: their power "to integrate culturally separate memory versions by means of mutual perspectivization" (2008: 339). By proposing multiple and hybrid renderings of the past that cut across time and space, as Neumann argues, the text conjures up "echoes and undertones of a community's past" (2008: 339), thereby laying the foundation for the affirmation of a contemporary sense of a community of common background and shared history. This strategy enables Almodóvar to destabilize the presumed national specificities related to his characters so he may realign them under the rubric of a common transnational discourse.

Co-Producing a Cinematic Latin America

While *Volver* is clearly the product of Almodóvar's own creative itinerary, the timing of its production—precisely at the midpoint of the prodigious decade of El Deseo's engagement with Latin American co-productions—invites us to consider the transnational affinities to which Agustín Almodóvar alluded. The decision to support the production and distribution of films by a small but significant group of Latin American directors may appear at first merely a replication of the strategy to expand the market for Spanish films adopted by

producers since the mid-1980s (Hoefert de Turégano 2004: 18–19; Pardo 2007: 92–97). To some degree this may also have been motivated by more immediate financial concerns. As Núria Triana-Toribio observes, over recent decades it has become increasingly more difficult for Spanish production companies to recoup investment with national audiences alone, thus leading to joint-venture projects with Latin American producers (2007: 156).

Yet, as Agustín Almodóvar explains in public and private interviews,¹² the goal of *El Deseo* in terms of these Latin American projects is less about box-office profit than about the expenditure of cultural capital to promote promising Latin American filmmakers. He claims that *El Deseo*'s interest in Latin American co-productions is built around the "desire to communicate with those similar to us" through what he calls "una red de confianza," a network of trust in people Pedro knows and whose professional judgment he respects.¹³

Given the varied nature of these collaborations, involving productions in four countries with five different filmmakers, it is difficult to speak of a common praxis that might suggest an "El Deseo" house style. Agustín has in fact argued that in such collaborations the company affords other filmmakers with whom they work the same degree of freedom that Pedro enjoys (Rodríguez 2006: 31). This assertion of authorial creative freedom notwithstanding, it is clear that the kinds of Latin American films that bear the *El Deseo* imprimatur do in fact share a series of common features. The most prominent of these involves a reordering of cinematic and social space. This fluid conception of location and space that we have discerned in *Volver* finds its corollary if not its roots in specific film practices related to the authorial geography that emerges in the films in which *El Deseo* has engaged in co-productions: Wood's *La fiebre del loco*; two works by Mexican directors Guillermo del Toro, *El espinazo del Diablo* / *The Devil's Backbone* (2000), and Paul Leduc, *Cobrador: In God We Trust* (2007); and three Argentine productions, Julia Solomonoff's *El último verano de la Boyita* / *Boyita's Last Summer* (2010) and Lucrecia Martel's *La niña santa* / *The Holy Girl* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* / *The Headless Woman* (2008), the former title produced by Lita Stantic. With fair consistency, these films exploit mise en scène in which rural settings predominate, emphasizing something of a generic Latin American geopolitical space, imbuing these locales with an intra-historical cluster of motifs and connotations that suggestively connect with broader themes related to the social and personal instabilities associated with peripheral modernity. Luisela Alvarý has recently argued that the variations of Latin American co-productions in fact have a specific transformative effect on the way Latin American audiences view their own self-representation through the more globalized filter, "relocalizing our imaginary associations to regional and cultural practices and experiences" (2011: 72).

As Rosalind Galt astutely observes "What is at stake is the production of cartographic authority: who draws the maps and what relationship is articulated between image and reality" (2006: 88). In effect, the sustained interventions of *El*

Deseo in valorizing a particular type of Latin American space points to two key points: first, a post-colonial narrative in which the common cultural logic is expressed through a spatial adjacency between Latin America and Spain; secondly, the specificity of that narrative as it is enunciated through a shared experience of the social periphery.

In this fluid sense of “relocalizing” and reimagining national cultural experience it is useful to recall the earliest of El Deseo’s Latin American collaborations, Guillermo del Toro’s *El espinazo del Diablo*, as a work that exemplifies the ways in which these films more generally destabilize the conventional notions of narrative setting and locale. The film, which precedes *Volver* by six years, is significant in that Del Toro had originally constructed his narrative around culturally specific material related to the Mexican Revolution (Lerman 1997: 52). In order to gain the support of El Deseo, he agreed to shift the action to a parallel context of national conflict, the Spanish Civil War, and to film the work in Spain (the first and only instance of one of El Deseo’s co-productions to be shot in Spain) with a Spanish production crew and Spanish lead actors; these were joined by Federico Luppi, the Argentine actor who had appeared in Del Toro’s earlier film, *Cronos* (1993). The production design effectively dislodged the story from its original Latin American historical specificity and relocated it to the final days of the Spanish Civil War, presumably a more recognizable, therefore more potentially marketable Spanish transnational narrative trope. The narrative is then resemanticized as a horror suspense film through gothic genre conventions (*noir* lighting and suspenseful music, ghosts, etc.). Set in an arid, flat terrain that could just as easily be a stand-in for northern Mexico as the Spanish central plateau, the action continually jumps from brightly lit exteriors to a second generic space, the interior of an orphanage replete with shadowy spaces and further stylized through the use of off-screen voices to suggest the stereotypical ghosts of gothic horror narratives. This doubling of genre style (historical narrative and ghost story) thus enabled the filmmaker to create a *mise en scène* congruent with both regional and international audience expectations.

Speaking of the shift of locale, Bertha Navarro, Del Toro’s Mexican co-producer and a key figure in some subsequent Latin American co-productions with El Deseo, says: “Para Guillermo del Toro, para mí y para muchos mexicanos la vivencia de la Guerra civil española está muy presente. Recuerdo haber cantado las canciones republicanas de niña, porque tenía amiguitos o maestros republicanos. Hay una vivencia muy fuerte al respecto” (For Guillermo, for me, and for many Mexicans, the experience remains with us in memories. I recall having sung Republican songs as a child because I had friends or teachers who were Republicans. It remains a powerful memory) (Cruz 2008: 50).

Such a praxis in fact speaks to the broader issue of what Caren Kaplan characterizes as a postmodern cultural geography in which nationalisms are destabilized; that is, where borders, maps, location, and space assume new



Figure 19.3 Poster for *El espinazo del Diablo* (Guillermo del Toro, 2001; prod. Tequila Gang), El Deseo's first venture at co-producing Latin American space. © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U.

meanings and in which “the transnationalization of culture as well as industry brings with it profound possibilities for forging new alliance and identities” (1996: 145). In what amounts to the erasure of borders, as Kaplan argues, questions are inevitably raised about national and ethnic identities (1996: 158), at once delegitimizing the national and replacing it with new identities. This process of geographic erasure joined with the narratives of placement/displacement is one of the principal axes that moves the narrative of *Volver*.

In this insistence on a trans-territorial geographical imaginary rooted in traditional rural societal practices and perceptions, it is worth noting the paradigmatic case of Lucrecia Martel's cinema and her preferred space, her native Argentine province of Salta. Its barren landscapes lend themselves to more global readings of her films as expressions of communities on the margins

than is often the case with Argentine films that are set in the geographically recognizable cityscape of Buenos Aires. Almodóvar has himself commented on the significant rural space of Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza*, underscoring the ways that the film offers a heightened sense of the class conflict all but absent in his own films (2008: 8).

Aesthetic choices that produce the erasure of the rigid markings of national, ethnic, or political borders are common throughout all of El Deseo's Latin American collaborations. The focus in these films is, instead, on a more universal profile of characters on the margins of society, be they the exploited fishermen and dockworkers in *La fiebre del loco*, the sexually marginalized heroine of *El último verano de la Boyita*, or the otherwise "invisible" indigenous characters who shatter the psychological equilibrium of the title character of Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza*.

We may in fact look to Raimunda as crystallizing a feature common to many of the characters in these co-productions; that is the manner in which she embodies the psychological wounds of peripheral modernity and thereby is able to reflect in her actions and outlook a point of commonality with audiences similarly unbound from the localism of their geographic confines. Like Raimunda, the characters of El Deseo's Latin American co-productions inhabit a landscape of social marginality which equates with invisibility. Through the intervention of the movie camera, however, they are made visible, and, at times, also provided with a striking auditory presence by means of off-screen sounds. Speaking in praise of Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza* Almodóvar has noted, for instance, the Argentine filmmaker's ability to "colocar la cámara y llenar la pantalla con sonidos" (to position the camera and to fill the screen with sounds) (2008: 8). In this way these auteurist co-productions share a heightened audiovisual sense of the presence of marginalized communities who have traditionally been left off-screen and out-of-frame in Latin American cinema.

Finally, what we may discern beneath the surface of El Deseo's engagement in Latin American co-productions is a deeper conceptual project involving the cinematic emphasis on cultivating a deterritorialized sensibility that dislodges films from their exclusively local environments and addresses broader audiences. In that model, questions of the geographic imaginary weigh heavily, as does a conception of authorial legibility as the voice of community. In this regard, *Volver* may be viewed as crystallizing some of the essential elements of that shared cultural experiences of language, song, and sound: the struggle of individuals who recognize themselves as trapped in that peripheral modernity. While not all El Deseo co-productions fully adhere to this cluster of elements in all ways, collectively they do provide a basis for understanding the conceptualization of broader transnational cinematic rhetoric aimed at communicating with Latin American audiences as these become affectively joined to Spanish audiences through an aesthetics that, more than transnational, is post-national.

Notes

- 1 Some of the production politics of these incursions are described in chapter 5, this volume. There are, as well, more subjective connections that lead to the integration of Latin American material in Almodóvar's films, some of which are also detailed in chapter 7, this volume, that further point to the special status of *Volver* as an interstitial work.
- 2 For a further elaboration of the political back story surrounding the film and the particular connection to Cecilia Roth see chapter 7, this volume.
- 3 The two child protagonists at one point go to the movies to see a Sara Montiel film, Mario Camus's *Esa mujer/That Woman* (1969).
- 4 Pedro Ochoa specifically notes the inclusion of tango melodies in *La ley del deseo*, *¡Átame!/(Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!)* (1990), *Kika* (1993), and *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999). See Ochoa (2006: 99–100).
- 5 The song is actually a dubbing of Cruz's voice by that of Flamenco star Estrella Morente.
- 6 *El día que me quieras* needs to be identified within a very specific cultural and historical framework. With the advent of sound motion pictures in the late 1920s, various Hollywood studios sought ways to maintain their overseas markets through multilingual films; that is, versions of English-language Hollywood productions reshot in various European languages. Given the size and importance of the Spanish-language market, Spanish-language films, sometimes called "Films Hispanos," were developed, but with relatively little success. One notable exception were the nine Gardel features produced by Paramount and shot either in their Paris or New York Studios. Unlike many Films Hispanos, these were not remakes of English-language films, but based on original scripts and designed to capitalize on Gardel's star status. For a detailed account of the multilingual productions see Natasa Durivicová (1992); for a discussion of Gardel's Films Hispanos, see Simon Collier (2003).
- 7 One recalls a similar editing strategy in a scene in *Qué he hecho yo* in which Gloria's son Toni and his grandmother rummage through debris in a barren open field suggesting rural space only to have the camera reveal in reverse shot the imposing apartment block of their Madrid neighborhood.
- 8 Jesús Martín-Barbero speaks of the same phenomenon, calling it "una modernidad contemporánea" (a contemporary modernity) (1987: 165) where the individual suffers discontinuities from the past which, despite all the outward dressing of modernity, still reveals that he or she remains trapped in the past.
- 9 Critics have often noted that the film's title may also refer meta-cinematically to the "return" of Carmen Maura to Almodóvar's cinema after an absence of nearly twenty years. That return is made more textually explicit by the reworking in the patricidal narrative thread in *Volver* that alludes to one of Maura's most memorable roles as Gloria.
- 10 This comes through most notably in some of her Hollywood productions: *All the Pretty Horses* (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000), *Blow* (Ted Demme, 2001), *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), and most recently with Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Strange Tides* (Rob Marshall, 2011), and, paired with Mexican Salma Hayek in Luc Besson's Latina comedy, *Bandidas* (2006), made the same year as Isabel Coixet's *Elegy* in which Cruz plays a Cuban American.

- 11 It may also be a parody of the opening scene of Douglas Sirk's tearjerker, *Written on the Wind* (1956).
- 12 Personal conversation with the producer in Madrid, January, 2011.
- 13 The logic has been detailed in chapter 5, this volume.

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Is there a French Almodóvar?

Jean-Claude Seguin

To formulate the question, is there a French Almodóvar?, is already to accept the idea in principle that a film can have multiple meanings that vary from country to country, that each country or culture can have a different reading of the films of its neighbors. The corollary to this inquiry is the fact that we cannot simply dismiss the related question: Is there a Spanish Almodóvar? Despite the seemingly obvious response it should be clear that not everything we consider Almodovarian is Spanish. To carry this line of conjecture to its logical conclusion, we might also want to ask if the Spanish Almodóvar might also, in part, be a French Almodóvar.

These very same questions might also be posed in regard to other directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, John Ford, or Almodóvar's fellow Spaniard and sometimes muse, Luis García Berlanga. What is certain is that Pedro Almodóvar's cinema has an indisputable international dimension just as, in another time, the cinema of Luis Buñuel did. The current importance of Almodóvar has been growing from year to year, not only in Spain, but also in countries that have discovered his work. Among these, there is no doubt that France is, if not the first, then one of the first to pay serious attention to this auteur. Many questions arise then around the distribution and reception of the Spanish director in France, and also about his filmography. This chapter will deal specifically with these questions.

Distribution and Reception of Almodóvar's Films in France

We need to distinguish between the distribution of Almodóvar's films in the 1980s, the first decade of his career, and current patterns of circulation. Distribution models have changed in very marked ways in France as elsewhere. We have witnessed a progressive modification of the patterns of exhibition of all commercial films, passing from a relatively eclectic model—the “major distributors,” independent or art cinemas, cine clubs, film festivals—to a concentration of

Table 20.1 Release dates for films in Spain and France

Film	Spain	France
<i>Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón</i> [<i>Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom</i>]	October 28, 1980	October 31, 1990
<i>Laberinto de pasiones</i> [<i>Labyrinth of Passions</i>]	September 29, 1982	March 20, 1991
<i>Entre tinieblas</i> [<i>Dark Habits</i>]	October 3, 1983	November 23, 1988
<i>¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!</i> [<i>What Have I Done to Deserve This?</i>]	October 25, 1984	June 3, 1987
<i>Trailer para amantes de lo prohibido</i> [<i>Trailer for Lovers of the Prohibited</i>]	April 22, 1992	Not released in France
<i>Matador</i>	March 3, 1986	April 28, 1988
<i>La Ley del deseo</i> [<i>Law of Desire</i>]	February 6, 1987	March 16, 1988
<i>Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios</i> [<i>Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown</i>]	March 23, 1988	February 1, 1989
<i>¡Átame!</i> [<i>Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!</i>]	January 22, 1990	June 20, 1990
<i>Tacones lejanos</i> [<i>High Heels</i>]	October 23, 1991	January 15, 1992
<i>Kika</i>	October 29, 1993	January 19, 1994
<i>La Flor de mi secreto</i> [<i>The Flower of My Secret</i>]	September 22, 1995	September 27, 1995
<i>Carne trémula</i> [<i>Live Flesh</i>]	October 1, 1997	October 29, 1997
<i>Todo sobre mi madre</i> [<i>All About My Mother</i>]	April 16, 1999	May 19, 1999
<i>Hable con ella</i> [<i>Talk to Her</i>]	March 14, 2002	April 10, 2002
<i>La mala educación</i> [<i>Bad Education</i>]	March 19, 2004	May 12, 2004
<i>Volver</i>	March 17, 2006	May 17, 2006
<i>Los abrazos rotos</i> [<i>Broken Embraces</i>]	March 18, 2009	May 20, 2009

distribution outlets owing in large measure to the rise of multiplexes. This has been accompanied by the almost total disappearance of cine clubs, while the art cinemas have survived only as circuits for special screenings. These general features of distribution have a direct effect on the circulation both of Almodóvar's films and those of other directors. One also needs to consider alternative modes of distribution: cable television, video, DVD, and the web. These outlets have contributed increasingly to the diversification of film distribution, thereby supplanting the now "classical" mode of film exhibition.

Keeping in mind the factors mentioned above, it is evident that a certain randomness in the order of distribution of Almodóvar's films to foreign markets, regardless of their original date of production, has interfered with the ability of spectators outside Spain to appreciate the director's evolution. In Table 20.1, we note the discrepancies between the distribution of Almodóvar's first eighteen films in Spain and in France.

If we consider the initial distribution of Almodóvar's films, we may note that the first film released in France was *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* and in fact the chronology of distribution only normalizes with *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. From this point onward, the French premieres follow the same order of their original production. The first point that one needs to consider is that the audience, still very limited, is introduced to Almodóvar's work through a really

atypical production, a film very far removed from the concerns of the *Movida* of those early years. In addition, it arrives in France with a two and half year delay, which exacerbates the decontextualization of the film. *Qué he hecho yo*, which, over time, has come to be considered one of Almodóvar's masterpieces,¹ appeared on movie screens without French audiences even knowing that the director had previously made three other films.

With the exception of Frédéric Strauss (1987: 57) who, from the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,² provided a very positive assessment of the film, the French press generally viewed Almodóvar's work quite negatively. As one example, we cite the review by Jacques Valot in *La saison cinématographique 1987*.

De toute évidence, Pedro Almodóvar aime le misérabilisme glauque, déteste les bons sentiments et n'affectionne les poncifs que pour les dynamiter. "Plus sordide que toi tu meurs" semble être son seul credo. À côté, les films de Mehdi Charef ont l'air de gentilles bluettes en forme de fictions de gauche bien-pensantes . . . Bien sûr, c'est plutôt du côté de John Waters que louche résolument ce pastiche de roman-photo prolétarien. Hélas, Almodovar n'a pas trouvé sa Divine, et l'on regrette que l'ensemble manque singulièrement de la verve et de la stylisation qu'appelait son projet parodique. S'abritant derrière le principe bien commode du "c'est moche mais c'est fait exprès", le cinéaste confond trop souvent le mauvais goût délibéré et l'absence de mise en scène, la dérision à tout crin et le laisser-aller formel. Dommage (Valot 1987: 125).

(Evidently Pedro Almodóvar adores the drearily sordid aspects of life, detests the finer feelings and affects clichés only to dynamite them. "The more sordid the better" seems to be his credo. Next to his film, the works of Mehdi Charef [Algerian born French director known for his novels and films portraying life in the immigrant suburbs] seem like amiable trifles in the form of right-thinking left-wing fictions . . . Of course this [Almodóvar's] pastiche of proletarian *fonovelas* leans decidedly more in the direction of John Waters. Sadly, Almodóvar has not found his Divine [the transvestite performer, born Harris Glen Milstead, who starred in several of Waters's most celebrated films] and one regrets that the production is singularly lacking in the verve and stylization that such a parodic project calls for. Taking refuge behind the comfortable excuse that "it looks shoddy but this is the intention" the director too often confuses deliberate bad taste with a faulty mise en scène and unbridled mockery with formal sloppiness. A pity.)

The lack of comprehension of Pedro Almodóvar's world is almost total and the references to the New York *underground* that one might apply more appropriately to *Pepi, Luci, Bom* are not relevant here. The world of *Qué he hecho yo* is incomprehensible to the French spectator of the 1980s. Characters like Gloria, Antonio, Cristal, etc., defined within the microcosm of the working-class Madrid Barrio de la Concepción and the M-30 urban beltway, are simply unknown to the French spectator.

Beginning with *La ley del deseo*, distribution becomes stabilized, with the French openings scheduled closer and closer to the Spanish premieres, at times only a few

days later. 1988 was, in fact, a pivotal year, with the exhibition of three films, with both *Entre tinieblas* and *Matador* benefiting from the good press for *La ley del deseo*. The relative success of this latter film in France, a success that mirrored the response in New York's gay community, positioned Almodóvar as a gay filmmaker. In this instance, the situation was not exactly the same, and despite the Spanishness of *La ley del deseo*, the film's main plot, focusing on the figure of a gay writer, connected directly to a French cognate community that devoured genre films and took another one to its heart. We may thus speak here of a transnational gay response. If in 1988, one spoke of a French Almodóvar, it was also a gay Almodóvar. It is clear that while *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* did not open in France till one full year after its Spanish debut, this delay allowed for the recognition of Almodóvar in ways that are mirrored in Raphaël Bassan's review in *La saison cinématographique* in 1989:

Avec ce film, relativement classique, Almodóvar se débarrasse des stigmates d'une révolte un peu trop visible (Voir *Matador* ou *La loi du désir*) qui le rattachait, peut-être malgré lui, à la tradition espagnole du refoulement, du sang, des larmes et de la croix. Ici, finies les allégories, les métaphores, l'infantilisation sexuelle. À quelques connotations spécifiques près, *Femmes au bord de la crise de nerfs* aurait pu être signé par Billy Wilder. Tous les ingrédients de la comédie sophistiquée américaine sont au rendez-vous: la femme abandonnée, le bellâtre volage, la famille encombrante, un background social mis à plat et envisagé au second degré . . . Les peines de cœur, le terrorisme devenu un cliché . . . , ces éléments témoignent, par leur « décripation », pour une nouvelle Espagne démocratique (Bassan 1989: 47).

(With this relatively classic film, Almodóvar casts off the stigmata of a rather too visible rebellion (see *Matador* or *La ley del deseo*) that connects him, perhaps despite himself, to a Spanish tradition of repression, blood, tears, and the cross. In this film the allegories, metaphors, and infantile sexuality are gone. A handful of references aside, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* could have been directed by Billy Wilder. All the ingredients of the sophisticated Hollywood comedy are on display: the women wronged, the fickle swain, the cumbersome family ties, the social background relegated to a secondary role . . . The heartbreak, the question of terrorism reduced to a cliché . . . , these elements, defused of seriousness, bear witness to a new democratic Spain.)

As one may readily see, the review of the film in the same journal is much more positive than two years earlier with *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* In the earlier instance, the critics could not avoid their habitual clichés about “blood,” “the cross,” or repression to characterize Spanish culture; in truth, Spanish culture beyond those stereotypes was not well known in France at the time. Almodóvar's films thus will become known in France not because of any recognition of Spanish culture, but rather due to the cinephile parallels. The reference to Billy Wilder, although limited, is what bridges the cultural gulf between the film and the French critics. Thus, after the gay Almodóvar, it is the cinephile Almodóvar that enables French audiences and critics to connect with the Manchegan filmmaker.

Beginning in the 1990s, and with *¡Átame!*, the situation in terms of critical response changes radically. Almodóvar's films have their French premieres much closer to the Spanish openings, which corresponds to the increased expectations of French audiences for the next Almodóvar film, thereby transforming Almodóvar into one of the preferred cineastes not only for gay and cinephile audiences, but for a larger and more varied audience in general. This brief summary of the distribution history of just how Almodóvar comes to inhabit the French cinematic landscape leads us back to the underlying question of whether there is, in fact, a French Almodóvar.

From the Untranslatable to the Genuine

The increasing acceptance of Almodóvar's work in France leads us to ask just what is and is not translatable in the creative act. Some masterpieces of Spanish cinema have never traveled beyond Spain simply because what they convey is beyond the reach of the foreign viewer. This is quite noticeable in the dark comedies (Berlanga's *Plácido* [1961]; Fernán Gómez's *El extraño viaje* / *The Strange Journey* [1963]), but it is also evident in documentaries (Patino's *Canciones para después de una guerra* / *Songs for after a War* [1971]) because the cultural content is not translatable. For there to exist real communication with a foreign audience it is essential that either the culturally specific material be reduced to the minimum to produce a more standardized product, what at times is called the "American model," or else that the culture of one country be understood in another. How can one appreciate a Chinese or a Japanese film without some idea of those cultures? Unless, of course, the directors have eliminated to the extreme "untransferable" culturally specific material, as is the case in martial arts or kung-fu films. In Almodóvar's cinema, we can discern the double movement in which Almodóvar Americanizes his films at the same time that Spanish culture itself has become much better known than it was in the 1960s. This circumstance leads us to the question of cultural resistance on the one hand and the porousness of Almodóvar's films on the other.

Locating the culturally based, non-transferable material of a film is a delicate task and implies that there is such a thing as a typical spectator when, in fact, the variety of spectators is almost infinite. Nonetheless, there remain areas in a culture of strong resistance to translatability since there are no adequate equivalents in other cultures to these elements. In the following discussion we will limit ourselves to two that seem the most significant in terms of such resistance to communication with another culture: those of voice and gesture. When we speak of voice, we do not mean words and dialogue in themselves since equivalents may be found for them through subtitles, as approximate as these may be, or dubbing, but rather tone, rhythm, accent and so on. Everything, in short, that requires that a passage of dialogue be expressed by a *Spanish* body. In a film like *Mujeres al borde*

de un ataque de nervios, the variety of accents is very noticeable, from the Madrid voices of many of the characters to the more highly idiosyncratic forms of speech, such as that of Almodóvar's mother or that of Candela (María Barranco). It is precisely this latter actress who combines the character's endless sobs and sighs with an Andalusian accent or, to be more specific, a Malagueño accent. Something unique comes out of this combination that would have been lost if Candela spoke, for instance, with a Basque accent. At the moment the film moves to another culture, such as France, the only thing that can be done by subtitlers or dubbers is to find the speech equivalent that will produce something like an echo of the original for the French audience. Of course to produce an Andalusian accent in French would not sound Andalusian at all but rather "Spanish." For Candela's speech in the dubbed version of the film, the voice that is chosen is Parisian, which would be the French equivalent of a Madrid accent. The local speech difference between the Andalusian and the Madrid accent is inevitably lost and the (colorful) distinctions between regional accents are transformed into what amounts to a standard accent. French tends to neutralize accents that are often the object of gags so that a neutral form of speech dominates.

Only in very few cases has a regional accent been tolerated, even in the case of the cherished French actor Fernandel, or the films of Marcel Pagnol and, more recently, the film *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis / Welcome to the North* (Danny Boon, 2008). In this category one would also have to include the accent of the ethnic urban enclaves strongly influenced by the immigrants from the Magreb and sub-Saharan Africa. But all of this does not constitute more than a limited "sector of tolerance." For that reason, in a film like *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* all the accents have been neutralized. Something similar occurs with Penélope Cruz's accent in *Volver* which has been eliminated completely in the French-dubbed version.

Another case is that of dubbing Spanish actresses who have become known in the French film market. Attracted by their performances in Spanish-language productions, French directors have put Victoria Abril and Carmen Maura into lead roles in their films. In the case of Abril, one year after shooting *¡Átame!*, which premiered in France in 1990, she appeared in *Une époque formidable / Wonderful Times* (Gérard Jugnot, 1991) in which she played the role of a businessman's wife who, owing to the financial crisis, suffers a gradual economic, physical, and moral decline. By way of homage to Almodóvar, we find a bathtub sequence which includes the miniature snorkel man with which Marina played in *¡Átame!* The nod to Almodóvar is obvious; Victoria Abril plays the role of Juliette and she speaks with her own voice but with an unmistakable Spanish accent.

Something similar occurs with Carmen Maura who appears in Étienne Chatiliez's commercial hit *Le bonheur est dans le pré / Happiness is in the Field* (1995). Here again, as in the earlier instance of Victoria Abril, Maura speaks with her own voice and with a Spanish accent as she plays the role of Dolores. A decade later, however, Maura will be dubbed in the French version of *Volver*. In effect, when performing in French films, the actresses' voices are a feature of their identity as



Figure 20.1 The snorkel in *¡Atame!* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1990; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).



Figure 20.2 Gérard Jugnot in *Une époque formidable* (Gérard Jugnot, 1991; prod. CIBY 2000).

they play Spanish characters. In Spanish films dubbed into French, in contrast, to maintain the original voices of the actresses speaking French would disrupt the films' coherence and would not be acceptable to the French audience. There of course remains the possibility of the original version with subtitles, but that would not resolve the real problem either.

Like the voice, gestures are part of culture and in certain cases are simply not translatable to other cultures.³ Of course there are a great number of gestures that have very little special meaning or whose meaning is easily transferable to another culture: "involuntary" gestures (those produced by movement, the swinging of

arms, a character's gait) and gestural "affect" (which operate to express outwardly a person's emotional state). Less transferable are those gestures that come into play in social interaction such as an embrace or shaking someone's hand. For instance, the salutary embrace, as it is practiced by Spaniards is completely unknown in France where it is replaced by a firm handshake.⁴ Although the meaning of this gesture is not completely translatable—the connotations differ from one culture to another—it becomes understood as a gesture of endearment or affection by a Spaniard in public. But it is those gestures we might term "illustrative" that best denote a sense of the genuine: these are gestures that habitually accompany certain words and thus are often redundant, to the extent that the gesture may also communicate its meaning without the support of words.

Bodies in Almodóvar's cinema are silhouettes in continuous movement; there also exists a state of passionate excitement that at times takes over the characters of his films. It is as if the director were trying continuously to capture movement as though it were the only way to ward off immobility and death. One element that is an integral part of this tendency is the category of illustrative gestures, the richest of all gestures, and the most elusive ones to translate into another culture. All cultures have a great variety of illustrative gestures but Latin cultures use these with such intensity in the act of non-verbal communication that it is often said that "these people talk with their hands." One of the achievements of Almodóvar's cinema is the director's ability to capture the Spanish essence as much on the verbal level in his dialogues, which are extremely expressive and "cultural," as on the non-verbal. Almodóvar's characters succeed in making their bodies the expressive complement to their words. There is a corporeal expressiveness that tends to capture what words do not communicate. The question of movement is written right into the very titles of a good number of Almodóvar's films: *Laberinto de pasiones*; *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*; *¡Átame!*; *Carne trémula*; *Hable con ella*; *Volver*. Almodóvarian bodies inscribe themselves in a continuous flow in which they are in a continual state of flux.

His films tend to introduce all manner of interpolated materials, resulting in a strategy that produces breaks in the narrative, creating a kind of pause, often devoted to a musical number, or an inserted theatrical scene, or a dance; also included are parodies of television commercials in films beginning with his first, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, up to *¡Átame!*; or even the introduction of clips from films, as in *Volver*. In each case, he exaggerates the gestural qualities associated with that particular medium. In the case of television, we find examples of non-verbal communication as in *La ley del deseo* or *Volver*. The almost grotesque mimetic gestuality of the programs parodied in these films is a satire directed against the medium of television. The dance sequences in *La flor de mi secreto* and *Hable con ella* also offer their own forms of gesture associated with the dance medium. Among these interpolated mini-texts those that are of most interest involving non-verbal communication are the musical numbers. They are not always involved in Hispanic culture, but there are some significant examples where these elements are joined. The first



Figure 20.3 Lolés León gesturing “amor” in *¡Átame!* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1990; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

Table 20.2 Examples of correspondence between words and gestures in “Canción del alma”

Lyric	Gesture
Yo sé (I know)	Hands open facing her body
Que tú comprendes (That you understand)	Both index fingers pointing toward her temples
La pena que hay en mí (The pain that is in me)	Her hands embracing her own body
Estando yo a tu lado (Standing at your side)	Index finger gesturing toward the person at her side
Se acaba (It’s over)	Palms of her hands extended outward
Mi sufrir (My suffering)	Her hands against her body

is from *¡Átame!* and occurs at a pause in the shooting of the film-within-the-film when Lola (Lolés León) begins to dance following the rhythm of “Canción del alma” (A Song from the Heart). The gestures of the singing group that includes Almodóvar’s own mother, function as a hyperbolic expression of the song’s lyrics. This gestural redundancy, of a minimalist nature, operates as a kind of correspondence between words and gestures (see Table 20.2).

Gestures operate on the basis of stylized codes that may be considered a language of gesture and may be decoded in other cultures. A French viewer also perceives the triangular game: I, the emitter/“my body” object/message/“you” the recipient, and with the help of the lyrics to the song “Canción del alma,” he or she may associate the verbal cue with the non-verbal cue, thus “to think” is paired with fingers gesturing to the temples. As one may appreciate, this is minimalist non-verbal communication and it is repeated with some frequency in Almodóvar’s films in those interpolated sequences. If we pay attention to this scene, we can see how the

Table 20.3 Examples of correspondence between words and gestures in “Un año de amor”

<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Gesture</i>
Y de noche (Every night)	Hands uncovering her eyes
Y de noche	Hands moved from face to reveal the eyes
Por no (So as not)	Signaling “No” with movement of her index finger
Sentirte solo (To feel alone)	Hand on the opposite shoulder
Recordarás (You will remember)	Finger pointing to the temple
Nuestros días felices (Our days of happiness)	Palms of the hands moving upward
El sabor de mis besos (The taste of my kisses)	Opening hands rubbing against her cheeks
Y entenderás (And you’ll understand)	Two fingers on the temple
En un solo (In one)	Two index fingers pointing upward
Momento (Moment)	Hands against the body, palms in upward position
Que significa (The meaning of)	Hands crossed on the breast with the thumb and the index finger forming an “O”
Un año (A year)	Index finger pointing upward
De amor (Of love)	Hands caressing her own body

**Figure 20.4** Femme Letal (Miguel Bosé) performing “Un año de amor” in *Tacones lejanos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1991; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

essence of meanings is easily transferable and that the gestures are essentially redundant so a French viewer can understand them without any difficulty.

Two years later, in *Tacones lejanos*—one of Almodóvar’s most commercially successful films in France—we find a similar situation with the interpretation of “Un año de amor,” although the parodic nature, already present in Lolés León’s performance, is accentuated here (Table 20.3). We are confronted with a much more elaborate and complex gesture unit in which the gestures may be understood in an “autonomous” manner, without reliance on the song lyrics: the “no” gesture

made with the index finger is a movement that can be understood in a variety of European cultures. Other gestures, by contrast, may not be understood without reliance on the lyrics, although the semantic field may be understood: the finger pointing to the temple implies a relation between gesture and the site of human thought, of reflection, and of memory. Finally, other gestures require the help of the lyrics: the hand on the singer's opposite shoulder, for instance, cannot be understood without the accompaniment of the lyric "*sentirse solo*" (to feel alone).

The interpretative gestures of "*Un año de amor*" are mirrored within the film's diegesis as *Femme Letal*'s gestures are repeated in a parody form by the cross-dresser's fans, "*Las Diabéticas Aceleradas*" (The Accelerated Diabetics). If we compare this musical scene with the one from *¡Átame!*, we may note the persistence of certain illustrative gestures to express similar meanings. Thus, in both examples, the verb for "to understand" ("*entender*" or "*comprender*") are synchronized with both index fingers pointing to the singer's temple, while "to remember" (*recordar*) in the second example is aligned with only one index finger raised to the temple. We may appreciate as well how, in the realm of sentiments, pain or love may actually be expressed with the same gesture, that is, with the singer's hands caressing her body. Nonetheless, in other instances, the relationship between gesture and meaning is much more tenuous. Why then is "*one moment*" (*un momento*) signed with hands against the body, with the palms facing upward? Only the actual song lyrics allow us to understand the meaning being conveyed.

These examples are located in particular contexts in which the "illustrative" gesture is staged and plays a part in the performance which, from a particular perspective, intensifies the gesture and is considered an essential part of particular scenes. The association of the song lyrics with the gesture makes the comprehension of meaning immediate, even for a foreign spectator. It is also important to note that not all of the illustrative gestures I have pointed out may be considered cultural gestures since they specifically depend on the song lyrics for their explicit meaning. If, for example, we take the illustrative gesture from both French as well as Spanish from "*Un año de amor*" for "*noche*" (night), meaning does not exist for the isolated word. There is a category of self-sufficient signs within a specific cultural framework and some of these are also present in the examples provided. This category of mimetic gesture is a way of capturing "*lo hispano*" in Almodóvar's films which may also be noted in the dialogue from these films, things like folk sayings, Spanish idiomatic expressions etc. We may even say that, just as fixed expressions exist, we also have fixed gestural elements that emphasize the verbal strain which may actually have its own autonomous existence. The point here is that Almodóvar uses his actors' bodies to integrate into his films a cultural dimension which transforms these illustrative gestures into bodily expression.

The category of illustrative gesture analyzed from a cultural perspective encompasses a wide range of situations. We might reduce these to four basic categories: the first is when the illustrative gesture is understood in the same manner in different cultures, such as the manner in which "*one*" is gestured with

the finger.⁵ The second is when the gesture exists in various cultures but its meaning changes from culture to culture. The third category is composed of gestures that are not understood but which are, nonetheless, identified as illustrative gestures. Finally, there is type of illustrative gesture which is not perceived as a gesture. Let us examine some relevant examples to see how these operate in Almodóvar's films.

In *Volver*, Almodóvar includes a situation which is essential although it appears only to have a comic function. Irene (Carmen Maura) has come to live with her daughter Sole (Lola Dueñas) who runs a beauty salon in her apartment. Irene, whom everyone had thought dead, pretends to be a recently arrived undocumented Russian who, of course, speaks no Spanish. The scene offers a variety of examples of illustrative gestures and is constructed in two parts. The first involves two clients, Sole and Irene; the second has Irene engaging with one of the clients. Three signs are involved in the scene and belong to the category of what may be called transcultural illustrative signs: the index finger and the two signs to express the clients' "no" in the second one. The first sign is autonomous and is not accompanied by any verbal cues although one might add "this lady." In the two following shots, the lateral movement of the index finger is a sign in many cultures used as a negative to the particular action referred to; it is a gesture that circulates easily from one culture to another.

Another gesture has a more explicit, less illustrative function and occurs when Sole gestures to Irene on how to wash a client's hair as if saying "to wash the hair." Here it's a matter of what is for a foreigner an absolutely incomprehensible verbal expression which requires gestures in order for it to be understood. In this sense we may speak of gestural transcultural mimicry. In that delightful gestural exchange between Irene and the client—keep in mind here that we are referring to Spanish-language gestures, even though the client presumes that Irene is Russian—we find a series of gestures that allude to "hot" and "cold" even though it is a question really of "lukewarm" and "not too cold." In this exchange, the gestures imply social contexts of usage as though the character were saying "like this," phrasing and gestures that would also be understandable to a French audience.

There are two more gestures in the sequence which, despite their illustrative nature, have no mimetic dimension, thus transforming them into very subtle interpretive acts once they are separated from their contexts. The first is when the client, to build up some chatter with Irene, tries to illustrate the expression "People are taking advantage of you" and the second is when Irene tries to express the sentiment that she understands what the client is saying. Neither gesture has a precise autonomous meaning, even within Spanish culture, and may acquire a variety of meanings according to the contexts in which they are used. This sequence in *Volver* is especially rich because it involves a reflection on non-verbal communication which is omnipresent throughout Almodóvar's cinema.

To round out the questions related to these mimetic gestures, let us consider another example. The Spanish noun "cara" (face), besides its immediate and



Figure 20.5 Carmen Maura in *Volver*: hot (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).



Figure 20.6 Carmen Maura in *Volver*: cold (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).



Figure 20.7 Carmen Maura in *Volver*: lukewarm (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

physical referent, is frequently employed figuratively in a number of Spanish expressions that relate to sentiments or comportment: “Caérsele a uno la cara de vergüenza” (literally, to have one’s face fall in shame); “dar la cara” (to face the consequences); “cruzar la cara” (to slap someone’s face); “echar en cara,” (to reproach); “tener cara” (to be brazen). In Almodóvar’s cinema we find two examples—there may well be more—that have to do with mimetic gesturing in which the face plays an important role. The first one appears in *Kika* in a conversation that Kika (Verónica Forqué) has with her neighbor and friend Amparo. Kika has heard someone in the apartment above hers, that of Nicolás Pierce (Peter Coyote) and has supposed it to be Amparo. We note Kika’s use of the expression of menace to her friend “¡Que te cruzo la cara! (I’ll slap you in the face!). The illustrative gesture that accompanies the expression, although culturally rooted, has sufficient meaning as to be understood without recourse to the verbal expression. A French spectator, certainly, could understand the violence that is manifest in the gesture. The mimicking gesture—note Kika’s menacing facial expression—has something to do with a physical threat. Other gestures are associated with this expression, but they always use the hand in an upward movement with the back of the hand facing the other person. In this case, the expression has a concrete value and the hand appears simply as the weapon with which to achieve the menace.

Although it involves a cultural dimension, the illustrative gesture seems by virtue of its very materiality as one easily understood by foreigners. This is less the case in another example from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. We have already noted the manner in which the gestures of affect so often accompany the characters’ words and dialogue. Among the numerous gestures that illustrate the expression “dar la cara” (to face up to something or to face the consequences), this one has a figurative meaning, unlike “partir la cara” (literally, split someone’s face) which involves a metaphor that is not always comprehensible outside of Spanish culture. Nonetheless, in this instance, there is a French equivalent: “faire face.” It has the advantage of retaining the relation to the face. So, the question then becomes: Why, in the dubbed and subtitled versions of the film that circulate in France, have they rejected this direct translation? The reason is purely phonetic. Since Pepa and the concierge (Chus Lampreave) are talking about Iván, they would have to conjugate the expression in the third person: “Qu’il fasse face!” (Let him face up to that). The French homonyms “fasse” and “face” make this translation unacceptable in the dubbed or subtitled version. Since they can’t retain what would have been the most accurate translation, they have chosen two different solutions to the problem of translation. For the subtitled version, they have chosen “s’il ose” (if he dares) which perfectly corresponds to the sentiment expressed in the original Spanish; however, the metaphoric use of “face” disappears. The same process occurs in the dubbed version in which the phrase “s’il en a le courage” (if he has the courage) is used. The meanings in both French versions are practically identical, but the result produces an enigmatic illustrative gesture by Pepa, which, in turn, is



Figure 20.8 On the face of things: Carmen Maura and Chus Lampreave in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).



Figure 20.9 Chus Lampreave and Fernando Guillén in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.).

mimicked by the concierge. A foreign spectator with a lot of imagination might be able to decipher the gesture of the back of the hand. But for the majority of foreign audiences this will prove to be a totally hermetic gesture.

These examples suggest just how the question of the transmission/circulation of one culture to another is really a highly complex element and the variability of expression may be immense. In order to understand if there truly exists a French Almodóvar, it is first necessary to know in what measure a genuinely Spanish Almodóvar can move from one culture to another. We have seen, in fact, that there are strong zones of resistance that impede that transfer. Only a small part of Almodóvar's work can be truly said to be translatable to other cultures; that is to say, only the part that can be genuinely communicated.

Towards Translatability: The Global

Almodóvar's work arises at a particular Spanish historical moment in which, after the years of the Franco dictatorship, Spain opens up to Europe and the world. Above all, the rise of Almodóvar is indebted to political change in Spain. Well into the 1970s Spain remained a vacation destination for millions of French who crowded onto the Mediterranean coast and couldn't have been less interested in what was happening in the country politically. In addition, French intellectuals refused to consider what was taking place on the other side of the Pyrenees in terms of culture, as if Spain had not already suffered enough and deserved to be punished with this new and unjust ostracism. Another fundamental factor—although not usually considered important because in the French educational system Spanish remains a minority language—is that French school children learn nothing about Spanish culture. Although this situation deserves a more detailed analysis, its effect is simply that the Almodóvar phenomenon could not be understood or accepted during the 1970s or early 1980s. These are, in fact, years marked by political change in both countries. In France François Mitterand won the presidency in May 1981 while in Spain the following year the Socialists won the general elections with a wide margin. This new set of conditions made it possible for a rapprochement between the two countries. The progressive recognition of the “new” Spain that would come to prominence in the latter part of the 1980s would make Spain the “in” place for the rest of the world, but most particularly for France. Spanish music erupted on the French cultural scene with figures such as Alaska and the Pegamoides and the major success of “Bailando.” We need to keep in mind that a phenomenon like Almodóvar could only come about through a democratic Spain or a Spain in the process of democratization.

Not everything can be explained by reference to the socio-political context and clearly Almodóvar's films also have a communicative capacity in relation to other cultures. In other words, in the face of what is genuine—and sometimes

transferable—and the global—Almodóvar manages to follow a creative avenue that is halfway between insufferable localism and equally intolerable foreignness. If, as we have seen, his work connected initially to gay culture and cinephiles, there also exists a deep influence of pop culture in his early productions. Almodóvar appeared in the context of the early 1980s as an underground filmmaker, a label, of course, that recalls the creative freedom of people like John Waters or Andy Warhol. The *Movida* and its creative freedom seemed to condense within a very short period of time all the material of recent decades, everything that had been repressed. To this we would have to add the election of François Mitterand, which also ushered in a new stage in the French Fifth Republic, much freer and more open, with the disappearance of the death penalty and a broader range of press and radio freedom. These were in a sense the pre-conditions for the positive French reception of Almodóvar's cinema in France.

An analysis of Almodóvar's productions clearly demonstrates that his cinema is born out of a certain frivolousness, of humor, even of the black humor tradition of the "esperpento," or grotesque theater, and becomes more serene, more tragic, and at so many junctures, more melodramatic. Humor generally does not travel well, especially in the case of verbal or linguistic-based comedy. How, for instance, can one translate temporal shifts. Take as a very clear example, for instance, in the scene from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* in which Candela, emotionally distraught after her amorous failures with her Shiite lover, and abandoned by everyone, tries to jump off the balcony of Pepa's apartment: "¿Se va a tirar! ¡Que se tira! ¡Que se ha tirado!" (She's going to jump! She's jumping. She jumped). Although you can literally translate this exclamation into French, it won't have the same impact since French, unlike English, lacks a progressive tense. From this example we may begin to understand the difficulties that Almodóvar's films have had in jumping linguistic barriers. Nonetheless, from a foreign perspective, one can fully understand and appreciate situational humor: the recurrence of the mambo taxi driver; the multiple coincidences that punctuate the plot of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. There are abundant examples of this kind of situational humor. Yet, the resistance to verbal or gestural humor remains a form of resistance in communication. We have tried to demonstrate the difference in reactions of Spanish and French audiences in the case of *Volver*, above all, in the comic scenes. In the previously discussed scene of Irene as the Russian hairdresser's assistant, the French audience doesn't laugh with her hand gesture of "templada" (lukewarm), nor even when Raimunda's friend Agustina dispenses her noisy kisses.

For that reason, the most recent stage of Almodóvar's development—let us say, his films from *Tacones lejanos* onward—is characterized by a new type of reception in France and elsewhere. It is clear that production conditions for this latter film determined its distribution in France. It is here, therefore, that we return to our initial question of whether there actually exists a "French Almodóvar." The success in penetrating the local market is one of the essential factors in evaluating a film's reception. *Tacones lejanos* was the first of four Almodóvar co-productions with

CIBY 2000, the producer Francis Bouygues, who began producing films in France in 1990. CIBY 2000 also was one of the co-producers of three subsequent Almodóvar titles: *Kika*; *La flor de mi secreto*, and, finally, *Carne trémula*. This was not the only change. Along with a new producer came new distribution arrangements.⁶ *Tacones lejanos* was shown in the UGC movie chain—one of the major French film distributors. This fact should not be ignored in assessing the impact of Almodóvar's films in France. Recent distribution of his films in France has been taken over by Pathé Distribution, the largest film distributor and exhibitor in France. This new context goes far in explaining the success that *Tacones lejanos* had in France, where it ranked ninth in the list of most viewed films for the year of its release.

But *Tacones lejanos* managed to connect with the French public for other reasons as well. It is a melodrama whose visual and narrative codes are easily transferable from one culture to another. Some genres travel well; others do not. Thus, Almodóvar's cinema was able to break out of a small niche market in France and move into a broader mainstream market where, among other attractive features, it had an appealing soundtrack for the French audience with songs like "Un año de amor" and "Piensa en mí" (Think of Me), both sung by Luz Casal. If we review Almodóvar's filmography, we may note that the songs included in films up to but not including *Tacones lejanos* are boleros or coplas, with one or two exceptions. It is true that in *La ley del deseo* Almodóvar did include Jacques Brel's popular, "Ne me quitte pas," but that was more by way of an homage to the Belgian singer who had died a decade earlier, and it had very little impact on the French audience. With *Tacones lejanos*, we have a completely different situation, especially in terms of "Un año de amor" which was popular with French audiences. The song was an adaptation of Nino Ferrer's ballad "C'est irréparable" (1963) which was recorded in 1965 by the singer Dalida.

Nonetheless, this song was not destined to remain in the public memory for long since it had been released on side B of the best-selling album "Pour oublier qu'on s'est aimé." Curiously, when *Tacones lejanos* opened, the adaptation of the two Luz Casal songs did make a stir with audiences although not at all connected to the earlier version of "C'est irréparable"; it was more a matter of the melody and the singer, all but unknown in France at that point. It is thus no surprise that *Tacones lejanos* won a César, the French equivalent of the Spanish Goya award, as Best Foreign Film of 1993.⁷

Just Another filmmaker (or almost)

In considering the way Almodóvar's cinema has become integrated in the French cinematic landscape, it is useful to speak of a double movement to better understand his evolution for French audiences. His initial body of films, deeply inscribed in a Hispano-Peninsular cultural space, set up barriers to comprehension for foreign audiences. On the denotative level spectators were shocked by their



Figure 20.10 Advertisement for the restaurant “Femmes au bord de la crise de nerfs” (*Le Petit Paumé*, Lyon, 1991/92).

provocative nature while the connotative dimension was inaccessible to the French public. To this fact one should add that postmodern aesthetics have had little repercussion among French filmmakers, with Bertrand Blier as perhaps an example of one of the most postmodern of Gallic directors. In other words, Almodóvar’s first films were simply incomprehensible in France and if this “Spanish John Waters” sparked a certain interest among French critics that interest was for the most part negative. The chaotic style of films like *Pepi*, *Luci*, *Bom* or *Laberinto de pasiones* was simply beyond the ken of the French general public during the 1980s. Almodóvar’s evolution suggests a softening of those initial works of provocation as they gradually took inspiration in more classical narrative models as in the case of *La ley del deseo* and above all *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, a film that, in fact has become a classic expression in France. In fact, in the 1990s, a restaurant was opened in Lyon that took its name from the film title and was located in the heart of what was the city’s own *Movida*-like development during those years.

The free local guide to Lyon published by the business school describes the restaurant this way:

C’est nouveau et c’est bien à Lyon. Les maruras [*sic*] (entendez les madrilènes échevelées) ont enfin trouvé un endroit où elles pourront manger des tapas au son d’une musique entraînante et dans un décor hétéroclite et surprenant, comme dans un film de Pedro (*Le Petit Paume* 1991).

(It is new and it is found in Lyon. The “maruras” [the intended word is *marujas*, a Madrileñan female type] have finally found a place to eat tapas accompanied by the sounds of up-tempo rhythms and in an eccentric and surprising décor reminiscent of one of Pedro’s films.)

This promotional description is revealing of the way in which the “Almodóvar phenomenon” has found a home in France. By the 1990s, the once disconcerting

Pedro Almodóvar had been assimilated as a well-known figure much esteemed by the French public. It is no longer a question of eccentricities or provocations. He has simply become a filmmaker whom the French public both understands and likes.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this film see the anthology edited by Roberto Cueto (2009).
- 2 Strauss has exercised a fundamental role in the reception of Almodóvar's cinema in France as elsewhere. His book, based on interviews with the director, first published in French as *Pedro Almodóvar: Conversations avec Frédéric Strauss* in 1994, has been updated several times and translated into Spanish, English, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, Chinese, Japanese, and Finnish.
- 3 In exploring these forms of cultural coding I develop material first presented in the paper "¡Que dé la cara! Esbozo de una mimogestualidad en la obra de Pedro Almodóvar" for the colloquium, "Pedro Almodóvar: Local and Global" organized by Professor Dieter Ingenschay at the Humbolt-Universität of Berlin in September 2008.
- 4 There is a form of embrace, the *embrassade*, but it is rare, and the *accolade*, used in official ceremonies. We may also find the word *étreinte* which implies a very intense, even amorous relation. An example of this classical gesture is the final embrace in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *Fresa y Chocolate / Strawberry and Chocolate* (1992), whose intensity in no way corresponds to either the *embrassade*, or the *accolade*, but rather to the *étreinte*.
- 5 Nonetheless, every culture has its own variations on the manner in which it counts. In France, for example, one generally counts from the thumb to the pinky finger, while in Spain it is the reverse: from pinky to thumb.
- 6 The distribution of Almodóvar's films in France are as follows: *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (Bac Films); *Laberinto de pasiones* (Colifilms); *Entre tinieblas, ¿Que he hecho yo para merecer esto!* (Ecran Sud/Films Du Semaphore); *Matador* (Tony Moliere Distribution, 1995; Colifilms/1995 Films Sans Frontières); *La ley del deseo* (AAA Classics); *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Fox/1993 Films Sans Frontières/1998 Films Sans Frontières); *¡Átame!* (UGC); *Tacones lejanos* (UGC); *Kika* (UGC); *La flor de mi secreto* (CIBY Distribution); *Carne trémula* (CIBY Distribution); *Todo sobre mi madre* (AMLF); *Hable con ella* (Pathé Distribution); *La mala educación* (Pathé Distribution); *Volver* (Pathé Distribution); *Los abrazos rotos* (Pathé Distribution); *La piel que habito* (Pathé Distribution).
- 7 In the year 2000, *Todo sobre mi madre* won the same award, along with the Oscar for Best Foreign Film.

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Almodóvar in Asia

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and LGBT Film Culture

E. K. Tan

In 2001, Chinese pop icon Faye Wong released an album titled *Fleeting Time*. The album cover shows a medium close-up portrait of a 1980s Comme des Garçons unisex Wong, clad in a colorful camouflage jacket and a lace bandeau cap—Wong looks like a character from an early Almodóvar film. The award-winning music video of the title song, “Fleeting Time,”¹ adopts a set similar to the color-saturated domestic space common to Almodóvar’s films. Clad in a red dress and wearing dramatic makeup, Wong looks like the female counterpart of the Taoist immortal attendants—Golden Boy and Jade Maiden. The camera slowly tracks Wong’s movement as she paces around the room. The emotionally charged ballad resonates with props such as lamps, a flowerpot, and wallpaper with retro design (in this case, Hyperion), a trademark of Almodóvar. Nevertheless, Almodóvar’s influence on Asia is not limited to popular musical culture. Literary figures like renowned Taiwanese artist/poet Chiang Hsün references Almodóvar’s film *Hable con ella/ Talk to Her* (2002) in his essay collection *For a Spring of No Regrets*,² and Hong Kong science-fiction writer Tam Kin invokes Almodóvar’s complex family relations to heighten the suspense in his cyber-punk novel *Dark Night’s Tune* (2008).³ Even more significant is the mutual admiration between Almodóvar and internationally acclaimed Hong Kong auteur, Wong Kar-wai, expressed in a variety of stylistic affinities and influences.

Both Almodóvar and Wong are often seen as transnational or global auteurs. Their films are uniquely local yet they embody aesthetics that respond to the phenomenon of globalization. Although both directors have found significant acknowledgment of their works among their respective local audiences, it is their global audiences that openly embrace their innovative styles and unconventional narratives. What makes Almodóvar’s and Wong’s films truly global and

transnational seems to be the hybrid form they adopt to devise their individual cinematic style. Carla Marcantonio (2007: 4) recognizes this hybrid aesthetic as a mixture of various national cinematic forms such as Hollywood, the French New Wave, and Italian neo-realism. Not only are their films transnational in the literal sense, they are also seen as transnational because, in some ways, their films speak to a larger audience not limited by national boundaries and cultural specificities. In addition both Almodóvar's and Wong's films are products of a transitional era in post-Francoist Spain and Hong Kong (surrounding its 1997 handover to China). It is these settings for both auteurs that circumscribe certain national and cultural anxieties, motivating them to construct narratives that question and redefine the concept of the nation.

Almodóvar and Wong's appropriation of melodrama as the key genre for most of their films can also be regarded as a reaction to these anxieties. This common characteristic is one factor that makes the global circulation of their films possible, despite their local specificities. Moving beyond simple imitation or pastiche, they adapt the conventions of Sirkian melodrama for their own use. In particular, Almodóvar and Wong embrace Sirk's conception of music as emotional excess used to arouse psychological identification among the audience, deploying both composed score and pre-existing songs to enhance the plots and meanings of their films. Almodóvar has explained that the inclusion of pre-existing songs is an essential part of his scripts; he uses songs as musical voiceover to explain the plot and enhance actions because they "have a narrative and dramatic function and are as descriptive as color, light, decorations or dialogue" (Parra 2008: 1). Almodóvar especially identifies with Wong's use of pre-existing songs by design in his films, calling the Hong Kong director "a creator of atmosphere," to the extent that music is almost more important than the story in Wong's films (Parra 2008: 1). For example, in *Chungking Express* (1994), Wong adopts The Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin'" to frame Faye Wong's character's desire to leave Hong Kong for her dreamland, California. This song functions as her theme song, appearing as both diegetic and non-diegetic music in her scenes. In explaining the role of music in his films, Wong notes:

As part of our life, music has become an indication telling us where and when we are. In my own films, I try to figure out what kind of environment that is, including its geographical area, and what kind of noise this place would have. What kind of smell? What are the identities of the people in this environment? What do they do there? But sometimes I start with music in mind. This is hard to explain. My instinct is that film must have a kind of atmosphere that matches a certain period. In *Chungking Express*, for instance, I know from the beginning that it must be "California Dreamin'"—innocent, and simple, like summertime in the 1970s. During the planning stage, I did not have a script. When Chris Doyle, my cinematographer, asked me what this film was about, I played "California Dreamin'" to him (Dissanayake and Wong 2003: 65).

The fact that his choice of a song or songs in films often precedes his scripts echoes Almodóvar's claim that music is more important than story for Wong. In the case of Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) a central reference is Nat King Cole's rendition of Cuban singer Oswaldo Ferres's 1947 pop song "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás." This song encapsulates the film's themes of chance encounters, missed meetings, impossible love, and the plot of role-playing. Nat King Cole's American-accented Spanish rendition of the song further alludes to the colonial history of 1960s British Hong Kong and American cultural imperialism in the region. Interestingly, a few years later, Almodóvar included a verse from "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás" in *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004), in the scene in which Gael García, Bernal's cross-dressing character of Zahara lip-synchs to Spanish actress Sara Montiel's recording of the song (Vernon 2009: 64–5). Another musical inter-text is evoked in *In the Mood for Love*'s Chinese title, *Huayang Nianhua* (*Full Bloom*), that comes from a 1946 popular song from by Zhou Xuan, a Chinese actress and singer who was popular in the 1930s and 1940s. "Full Bloom" depicts the longing for the 1920s and 1930s Shanghai when the city was prosperous and cosmopolitan before the advent of World War II. The song appears once in the film as diegetic music aired on the radio as a dedication to Maggie Cheung's character by her husband on her birthday. Mirroring a similar sentiment of the song when it was released in 1946, the film's use of the song and the song title as its Chinese title express contemporary Hong Kong people's sense of nostalgia for a prosperous time in Hong Kong history such as the 1960s. This nostalgia contrasts the prosperous 1960s Hong Kong with the unsettled period surrounding its handover to China in 1997. Both "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás" and "Full Bloom" not only enhance the mood of the film but also supply the film's narrative with multilayered meanings.

Similarly, in Almodóvar's *Volver* (2006), the song "Volver" (Return) is heard in Penélope Cruz's character Raimunda's performance for the film crew at dinner. The well-known tango, given a cultural transplant not dissimilar to Nat King Cole's rendition of "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás," captures the theme of return and nostalgia on multiple levels in both the content and the context of the film. The film's narrative involves the return of the characters to their hometown in La Mancha and the return of Raimunda's mother, Irene, to life. Echoing the fictional themes, the film marks the return of Cruz from Hollywood cinema to Spanish cinema, and the reunion of Almodóvar with his lead actress from earlier films, Carmen Maura. All these interlocking motifs, linked by the song "Volver," make the film rich and meaningful for the director, his cast, and dedicated audience alike.

I have included this discussion of Almodóvar and Wong to highlight the overlap between these two global auteurs who may well have influenced each other by virtue of the global circulation of their films, especially in the international film festival circuit. For Asian audiences familiar with Wong's style, the similarities between them have also potentially made them more ready to appreciate Almodóvar's films. Such cultural cross-pollination has no doubt contributed to the circulation of Almodóvar's films in Asia, especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is



Figure 21.1 The tango “Volver” is given a cultural transplant in Raimunda’s performance in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © Paola Ardizzioni y Emilio Pereda.

this context that I now turn to the case of another Asian filmmaker, the Taiwanese filmmaker Zero Chou. In what follows I will explore in depth the influence of Almodóvar’s work on Chou’s feature film *Splendid Float* (2004) and the indirect inspiration it casts on the LGBT community in Taiwan. In order to support this analysis, I will outline the circulation of Almodóvar’s films in Taiwan, and then, with this foundation, explore the themes, ideology, and aesthetics that are appropriated and translated into Chou’s film.

After thirty-eight years of martial law, ending in 1987, Taiwan began a new chapter in history characterized by new expectations but also a high degree of cultural anxiety. As a vehicle for creating and transporting novel cultural meanings to the masses, cinema required its own process of restructuring to meet the need for imagining Taiwanese identities that might express these altered realities. In the early 1990s, the Taiwanese film industry experienced significance changes in both production and exhibition. First, the Government Information Office (GIO) revised its funding policy and instead of subsidizing approximately 100 films per year, the office decided to provide full funding to approximately twenty films per year. This resulted in the production of mostly art house, international film festival driven projects. Second, the GIO adopted an open policy toward Hollywood imports. Instead of bringing revenues to the government, this open policy allowed Hollywood to monopolize the Taiwanese film industry. Profits made by Hollywood imports do not help support Taiwanese film industry but reinforce

Hollywood cultural hegemony. Due to the changes in government policies, film production companies and studios that failed to adapt to the changes either shut down or migrated to other locations in Asia.

In view of these negative impacts on the Taiwanese film industry, the role of the film festival circuit based in Taiwan has become especially important. With the change in funding policy that significantly reduced the quantity of local films produced each year, the development of local film festivals worked to motivate local filmmakers to produce despite the lack of subsidies from the government. In this context the film festival circuit in Taiwan works toward connecting Taiwan globally to the rest of the world. To counter Hollywood's dominance in local markets, the Taiwanese film industry has devised strategies not only to support and embrace local productions but also to promote the circulation of foreign films other than Hollywood commercial products. One such strategy is to encourage the participation of a wide variety of foreign films at local-based international film festivals such as the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and the Taipei International Film Festival. This new outlook looks beyond the nation toward global networks, aligning Taiwan with other national cinemas for the production of an identity that is uniquely Taiwanese in the post-martial law era.⁴ This is the backdrop against which foreign films from all over the world are introduced to Taiwan, and various cinematic traditions converge, interact, and exchange.

Pedro Almodóvar's films were first introduced to Taiwan through the film festival circuit. The film festival phenomenon originated in Europe as an alternative to the screen culture of Hollywood cinema that is driven by the studio system and prioritizes box-office profit. European cinema favored the film festival circuit as a way to introduce, promote, and circulate film art and this European model has shaped the various international film festivals around the globe with a structure that celebrates the auteur and cinema as art and high culture. Although debates continue over the role and even definition of such concepts as "auteur" and "high culture" as definitive categories for organizing and programming international film festivals, they continue to constitute important strategic approaches in the discourse of the international film festival circuit (de Valck 2007: 15–16). In practice film festivals as a phenomenon work in two somewhat contradictory ways: they strive to resist the dominance of Hollywood global circulation of its products on the one hand, while benefiting from the reflected glow of Hollywood glamour in bringing festivals to international attention.

The Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in fact predates the reforms of the 1990s, and was established by the Republic of China's GIO in 1962. The annual event remained under the same governmental management for twenty-six years until 1990 when it was handed over to the Motion Picture Development Foundation. An executive committee was formed, consisting of nine to fifteen film scholars, critics, and filmmakers. The main structure of the Golden Horse includes a chairperson and five departments: administrative, marketing, public relations, grants and subsidies, and film festival.⁵

In 1991, the 28th Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival included a series of Pedro Almodóvar's films under its "Directors in Focus" program along with works by African director Idrissa Ouedraogo.⁶ Even though this was the first time Almodóvar's films were introduced to Taiwanese cinephiles, the film festival committee decided to schedule a tribute to the auteur, showcasing the entire collection of his feature films from *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*/*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980) to *¡Átame!*/*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990).⁷ We can infer that the "Directors in Focus" series on Almodóvar was a success, given that it led to the special program, "Spanish Panorama," the following year at the Golden Horse Film Festival. In 1992 the Golden Horse brought to Taiwan ten diverse Spanish films made between 1956 and 1991. These films include: *Calle Mayor*/*Main Street* (Juan Antonio Bardem, 1956), *Viridiana* (Luis Buñuel, 1961), *La Sabina*/*Sabina* (José Luis Borau, 1981), *La colmena*/*The Beehive* (Mario Camus, 1982), *Demonios en el jardín*/*Demons in the Garden* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1982), *Carmen* (Carlos Saura, 1983), *La vaquilla*/*The Heifer* (Luis García Berlanga, 1985), and Almodóvar's most recent film at the time *Tacones lejanos*/*High Heels* (1991). In 1994, *Kika* was screened under the "World Panorama" series along with two other Spanish films: Julio Medem's *Vacas*/*Cows* (1992) and *La ardilla roja*/*The Red Squirrel* (1993).

Between 1995 and 2001, Almodóvar's works were absent from the Golden Horse Film Festival. This was not because Taiwanese cinephiles had gotten over their interest and curiosity in Almodóvar and his works but mainly because with the growth of film festivals of different themes and purposes, Almodóvar's films were no longer the exclusive property of the Golden Horse. Another reason for this absence was that his films such as *Carne trémula*/*Live Flesh* (1997) and *Todo sobre mi madre*/*All About My Mother* (1999) had broken through to commercial theaters thanks to the familiarity and popularity of his works among Taiwanese audiences as a result of the Golden Horse's efforts in promoting his films. In 2002 Almodóvar returned to the Golden Horse with *Hable con ella*, selected along with six other special features for the festival. In addition to its commercial release (drawing on the fame of both its director and star protagonist Penélope Cruz), *Volver* was showcased under the "Master's Panorama" along with films by directors such as Robert Altman, Woody Allen, Michael Winterbottom, and Claude Chabrol.

As noted earlier, there was an explosion of film festivals of varied themes and purposes in the late 1990s in Taiwan. The rise of film festivals devoted to promoting global or world cinema became a way to reinvent a new mentality for Taiwanese culture integrating diverse global and local culture. Equally invested in promoting the appreciation of world cinema among Taiwanese audiences is the Taipei Film Festival (TFF). The Taipei City Government inaugurated the TFF in 1998. It is the only film event that includes a division—New Talent Competition—to acknowledge the works of aspiring directors from around the world and Taiwan. Every year, the TFF attracts approximately 100,000 attendees to a showcase of close to 200 films. Besides the competition division, the TFF also includes two

other main sections: “City in Focus” and “World Panorama.” The former focuses on introducing Taiwanese audience to one or two cities each year drawing upon cinema made over the past twelve years; the latter consists of two subcategories—recent works by international directors and images from Asia.⁸

In 1998, the TFF showcased a series of first feature films—“Amazing First Films”—by world directors such as Wim Wenders, Orson Welles, and Alain Resnais; Almodóvar’s *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* was the representative from Spain. In 2004, the “City in Focus” category of the sixth TFF focused on Spanish cities—Barcelona and Madrid. The films were grouped under “Masters’ Classics” and “Spanish Panorama.” The classics surveyed films by directors like Carlos Saura and Luis Buñuel along with six early Almodóvar films.⁹ “Spanish Panorama” introduced contemporary works such as *Torremolinos 73* (Pablo Berger, 2003) and *Las horas del día/The Hours of the Day* (Jaime Rosales, 2003). Almodóvar returned in the following year at the seventh TFF with *La mala educación* as the special feature.

What is the basis of Taiwan’s fascination with Spain and Spanish cinema? Is post-Francoist Spain perceived as similar to post-martial law Taiwan? If so, what common experiences do they share? Could the common denominator be the previously mentioned cultural anxieties generated in a nation’s journey to recreate its own identity? Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz quotes Alejandro Yarza to argue that Almodóvar and other artists of the post-Franco transition era were concerned with restoring a national identity that was not false or invented by the regime. In his view the reconstruction of this identity and its cultural signs are immediate concerns in Almodóvar’s films, concerns that are projected as “signs of cultural anxiety” directly related to the crisis of national identity (Acevedo-Muñoz 2007a: 39). Though less focused on a crisis of national identity, post-martial law Taiwan was also very much concerned with rewriting history and rethinking Taiwanese identity. The Kuomintang (KMT) government led by Chiang Kai-shek took over Taiwan after fleeing from Mainland China in 1949. Between 1949 and 1987, the KMT government with their strong nostalgia for the mainland and longing to return home one day, inflicted violence on the Taiwanese people and the aborigines. Following the February 28, 1947 uprising of the Taiwanese people against the KMT (known as the 228 Incident or 228 Massacre),¹⁰ the Chiang Kai-shek government declared martial law in 1948, and suppressed the use of Taiwanese dialects and the promotion of native Taiwanese culture and national identity.

The repercussions of such violence include the political persecutions in the 1950s often referred to as the “White Terror.” The lifting of martial law in 1987 meant the end of the authoritarian state. Taiwan was reborn as a new national body that required the rewriting of a past that had been repressed for decades—especially its nativist roots. The cultural anxiety in Taiwan’s case involved the negotiation of a new identity that is torn between the Taiwanese local identity and Chinese cultural heritage. In such a context cinema has become a space of contestation and negotiation. Almodóvar’s films, which dominated the circulation

of Spanish cinema abroad, in Taiwan as elsewhere, offered models of contestation toward old identities and ways for Taiwan to strategically rethink its national and cultural identities. Along this line of thought, it is productive to ask what exactly about Pedro Almodóvar and his works do Taiwanese filmmakers and cultural workers see as inspiring and generative in the pursuit of both their artistic development and cultural production. In the case of post-martial law Taiwan, the construction of a Taiwanese identity intersected with Taiwan's participation in the global economy that led to the blossoming of multiple forms of subjectivities, especially those belonging to cultural groups such as the LGBT community. The negotiation between the local and the global of the burgeoning Taiwanese identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s facilitated the shaping of a national identity that democratically embraced an array of cultures and non-normative identities to reshape Taiwan into a nation of global vision. Taiwanese cinema, in this context, became the vehicle of such national representation.

Taiwanese film critic Wen Tien-hsiang claims that 1992 was a significant year for the Taiwanese LGBT community. With the help of Edward Lam (organizer of the Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival), Hwang Tsui-hwa, the main organizer of the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival, included a series of ten films (a mix of features and shorts) of LGBT themes in the festival program for the first time in the history of the TFF. This specific gesture formally introduced "New Queer Cinema" to Taiwan and consequently inspired the founding of the first gay and lesbian organization at the nation's most renowned university, the National Taiwan University. Although Almodóvar's films were not among the ten films in the series at the festival, his *Tacones lejanos* was shown under a different category. However, Wen argues that this development in the history of the LGBT community in Taiwan was a product of more than a film series at a major film festival. He wrote an essay "Gay and Lesbian Film in Taiwan: 1980–1991" in the same year, listing and discussing queer films that were accessible to, and might have impacted, the Taiwanese LGBT community. One of these films was Almodóvar's *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987). This film was shown in the "Directors in Focus" series in 1991 at the Golden Horse and had supposedly helped pave the way for the inclusion of the "New Queer Cinema" series in the following year. According to Wen, independent filmmakers and distributors related to the film festival and who cared for the needs of art-house cinephiles, took an interest in New Queer Cinema and have since contributed greatly to the visibility of gay and lesbian films in Taiwan. At one point, they were even seen as box-office guarantees.¹¹

Wen describes in his reading of *La ley del deseo* that Almodóvar's exploration and open treatment of gender, sexuality, and passion in the film maintain a balance between its melodramatic style and critical stance on moral issues. By focusing on Almodóvar's open approach on issues relating to sexuality, desire and identity, his use of camp aesthetics, and appropriation of melodramatic style, I offer a reading of Taiwanese lesbian director Zero Chou's 2004 feature *Yanguang Sishe Gewu Tuan/Splendid Float*.

In *La ley del deseo*, a gay film director, Pablo Quintero (Eusebio Poncela), becomes involved with Antonio Benítez (Antonio Banderas), a young man who is greatly uncertain about his sexual orientation. Antonio's volatile behavior in the film, which culminates in the murder of his rival for Pablo's affection, can be interpreted as a form of homophobic reaction as he seeks to purge himself of the "perversion" and to preserve his heterosexual demeanor. Despite Antonio's instability and murderous act, Pablo ultimately forgives and accepts him. Pablo's passion, sympathy, and acceptance are endorsed in the film when the narrative unveils the history of his post-operation transgendered sister Tina Quintero (Carmen Maura) and the secret about her affair with their father when she was a child.

Queer, transvestite, and transgender characters are common in Almodóvar's films. The transgendered character Tina Quintero in *La ley del deseo* is the physical embodiment of social contradictions. As the film narrative unfolds, Tina's body becomes a site where the past and present collide. Traumatic experiences and tensions surface as narrative tropes in the film deconstruct fixed identities and heteronormative structures; these tropes, on the other hand, stir up the "cultural anxiety" in the historical context of post-Franco[ist] Spain (Acevedo-Muñoz 2007a: 39–40). Nevertheless, confronting one's "cultural identity" is a necessary step to reinvent one's identity and post-Francoist Spain embodies this openness to contestation, like Tina's body. The deconstruction of fixed identities and contestation of heteronormativity in Almodóvar's films are done through camp aesthetics. Almodóvar's camp sensibility is not a simple replication of the conception of camp within the gay context. It is an aesthetics that is, in Marcia Pally's words, "generous and affectionate" and a trope that exaggerates but not to demean (2009: 83). What frames the narrative trope of camp aesthetics and the critical approach to the contestation of conventional gender roles in Almodóvar's films is the melodramatic form. Camp aesthetics work in parallel with what Despina Kakoudaki (2008) calls the "coincidence plot" to map out tensions and conflicts that would push the boundaries of social conventions. With these characteristics in mind, we will see how Taiwanese director Zero Chou's *Splendid Float* employs similar tropes and aesthetics to compose a melodramatic narrative.

Chou was the recipient of the Teddy Award for films on LGBT topics at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival for her feature *Spider Lilies*, the same award Almodóvar received in 1987 for *La ley del deseo* during the award's inaugural year. Chou's *Spider Lilies* was directly compared to Almodóvar's films, especially *La ley del deseo* by the jury at the Berlin Festival (Li 2007). Before becoming a feature film director, Zero Chou was a political news correspondent for an underground television station. This experience made her realize the profound influence visual images have on society and individuals. When she was stationed in Kinmen (an island west of Taiwan) as a correspondent, Chou became a member of Firefly Image, an independent studio. Together with local documentary filmmaker Dong Chen-liang, Chou made documentary films on Kinmen. One of her best-known projects during her days at Firefly Image was *Floating Islands* (2000)—in which she

took upon herself the role of both the project coordinator and executive producer. For this film series consisting of twelve films by independent producers/directors, the filmmakers engaged with their subjective emotions and affective views to depict Taiwan's outlying islands (Chen and Hwang 2010: 47). The uniformly poetic style in this series disavows the ethics of objectivity in conventional documentary filmmaking, subverting the mainstream discourse on objective truth advocated by documentary filmmaking. After leaving Firefly Image and returning to the main island Taiwan, Chou sought to focus solely on her own creative work. Shifting her attention to LGBT issues, Chou began making a series of short and feature films.

Corners (2001), Chou's first documentary exploring LGBT issues, documents untold love stories in an intimate gay bar, Corners, in Taipei two months prior to its closure. The film inherited the narrative style of *Floating Islands*, abandoning conventional documentary style for a poetic form of aesthetic approach in addressing the subject matter. Its style emphasizes the rhythm of the images through editing, juxtaposing events inside and outside the physical space of Corners, and employing visual metaphors to depict the dream-like erotic and romantic exchange between gay and lesbian lovers who patronize the bar (Chen and Hwang 2010: 48). The poetic form of the first-person narrative is mapped onto blurry visuals to delineate an esoteric atmosphere in this queer experimental film. The film also uses voiceover interviews and first-person narrative to contrast the real-life experience of these same-sex couples with their struggles against the hostility of a heteronormative society. A unique feature of this documentary is the use of the French language to compose the first-person narrative. The use of a foreign language to unveil the inner voice of its subject is a strategy to conceal feelings of embarrassment over one's confession on the one hand while on the other it creates a sense of alienation by highlighting the gap between the unspeakable desire of the LGBT communities and the language of self-expression that belongs to the mainstream culture.

Chou's first feature film *Splendid Float* (2004) introduced her to international audience via venues such as the London International Film Festival, the Vancouver International Film Festival, and the Pusan International Film Festival. In this film, Chou depicts how LGBT subjects construct their own voice and identity, and define their roles in a hostile heteronormative society through the lives of a group of drag performers.

During the day, Ah Wei (Chen Yuming) works for his family business as a Taoist priest. His main task is to perform funeral rites for the dead. At night, he cross-dresses and performs with "Splendid"—a dance troupe on an electronic float—under the alias Rose. When a family from his fishing village hires him to perform rituals at the funeral of their son, who drowned while out at sea, the dead son turns out to be Ah Wei's lover—Sunny. While performing the rituals, Ah Wei cannot suppress his emotions and begins bawling like a baby, arousing the curiosity of those who are at the funeral. The pain of losing his lover is so inconsolable that Ah Wei/Rose decides that he wants to keep Sunny's tablet (a stone or wooden slab

engraved with the name of the deceased) in his house, and to honor it as Sunny's widow. After Sunny's family rejects his request, Ah Wei/Rose's sisters from "Splendid" repeatedly visit Sunny's altar in drag, hoping that the family will grant Rose's wish. On the burial day, after family and friends have all retired, "Splendid" appears with their electronic float to give Sunny his personal drag show. The show begins immediately after the opening statement: "'Splendid' will take you to the eternal heaven."

In the beginning of the film, we see "Splendid" performing outdoor at night. The troupe uses a float built on a truck as their stage as they travel from location to location. This genre of performance is derived from the Taiwanese funeral rite culture invented in the 1980s—known as the electronic float. The electronic float hires scantily clad young women to sing and dance as a tribute to the gods, to console the dead soul, and to mourn with the living (Liang 2010: 40). However, its introduction to Taiwanese society is directly related to the conventional voyeuristic structure of patriarchy—the male gaze on female bodies. The interesting aspect of the electronic float as a hybrid cultural form is its kitsch aesthetics similar to Almodóvar's use of bullfighting and flamenco imagery; the float is a reinvention of tradition and local culture as disavowal and transgression through the pastiche of cultural forms.

In the opening establishing shot, the entire surroundings are dark, except the contrasting cityscape on the other side of the screen separated by a river. This contrast symbolizes the clear division between mainstream Taiwanese culture (represented by the modern city culture) and the marginal (represented by the LGBT subculture). After a shot-reverse-shot sequence between the on-screen audience and performers, a long shot follows, placing the troupe at the bottom right of the screen, marginalized and clearly delineated by its surrounding as an outcast. At the same time, this framing technique highlights and brings into focus the idealized image of the spectacular and colorful visuals of the drag troupe's performance. The film explores a significant LGBT theme through the story of the performers: drag and gender performance. The figure of the drag queen directly addresses the issue of gender as a construct by rejecting culturally proscribed identity categories; simultaneously, its presence in *Splendid Float* revises gender roles with reference to individual desire.

In an interview, Chou claims that "we all live in drag in order to fit into society" (Chen and Hwang 2010: 49). Based on this claim, we can see how the concept of gender performance functions as a basic emotional structure for LGBT communities. Because their sexual objects are not of the opposite sex, LGBT subjects are stigmatized for their defilement of heteronormativity. The queer community consciously imitates and mimics heterosexuality, or pretends to be "normal" as their strategy to survive in the mainstream culture of society. This strategy subverts the heterosexual social structure and denaturalizes it in order to highlight the fact that gender preference and identity are after all a performance. By juxtaposing the life of these individuals inside and outside their drag

performance, *Splendid Float* exemplifies Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* about the performativity of gender. The concept of the biological body, gender identity in the heterosexual structure, and the argument of gender performance are all constructed and contingent; they are neither natural nor fixed (Butler 1999: 163–80). Hence, the all-male dance troupe's drag performance is a form of mimicry.

In addition to challenging mainstream conceptions of gender identity, Chou's film also directly challenges the deep-rooted patriarchal culture and tradition in contemporary society. At night, Rose performs in drag for "Splendid"; during the day, he is Ah Wei, a Taoist priest who acts as a medium to guide the dead from the mortal world to the underworld. In a tragic incident, Ah Wei/Rose loses his lover Sunny. As I have noted, Ah Wei is then hired to perform the funeral rite for Sunny. During the ritual, Ah Wei bawls incessantly beyond his own control, inviting ridicule from his fellow ritual performers, and a scolding from his uncle who manages the religious service. In a subsequent scene when Ah Wei's uncle warns him that his feminine demeanor would have a negative impact on his profession as a Taoist priest, Ah Wei's aunt, who at the moment is cross-dressing as a male priest to prepare for a ritual, defends Ah Wei by arguing that the traditional definition of gender identity and the designation of gender roles are mere constructs of customs that are naturalized over a long period of time. Chou uses Ah Wei's aunt's cross-dressing as dialectical argument to point out Ah Wei's uncle's problematic claim. In a subsequent scene, Ah Wei uses his priest identity to perform a private ritual for Sunny in order to keep Sunny's soul with him as a way to preserve their relationship. Because homosexual relationships are not acknowledged by the heteronormative society, Ah Wei chooses to perform the private ritual for himself and Sunny, disavowing the rigid gender stratification of the heterosexual world. Chou uses Ah Wei's and Sunny's desire to maintain a faithful relationship between the mortal world and the underworld to criticize the lack of flexibility in compulsory heterosexuality. In so doing, the film calls for the negotiation for a livable space for those who deviate from the mainstream lifestyle. If the purpose of funeral rites is to transport the immortal soul from the mortal world to the underworld, then religious customs should respect the prior life of the dead rather than violently impose the structure of heterosexuality onto the soul of the dead homosexual being.

The film concludes with the entire cast of "Splendid" putting on a show to commemorate Sunny's passing. This gesture is a deliberate appropriation of a heteronormative practice—the funeral rites—into a transgressive form—the drag show. In *Splendid Float*, this mourning ritual of patriarchal ideology is (mis)appropriated as a stage for drag performance to challenge the repressive nature of heteronormative practices and to affirm the performativity of gender and identity. It is also a way to engage with marginality in order to contest and revise social and political institutions. In a sense, the imagery of the funeral rites has a very similar function to that of the Catholic altar frequently shown in Almodóvar's films.

Chou's is not only interested in deconstructing or attacking tradition and patriarchy in *Splendid Float*, she also concerns herself with the very gesture of

revising and reinventing traditions and investing local cultures with new forms of identities. It is in this sense that new Taiwanese identities are proposed.

Conclusion

When asked during an interview about the use of color in her films, Chou explains using *Splendid Float* as an example:

The LGBT Pride flag has six colors. Each color symbolizes something different. For example yellow symbolizes the sun or sunshine; hence, I call one of my characters in *Splendid Float* Yellow Sun/Sunny. What I want to do is to bring together the Taiwanese local culture and the vibrantly colorful queer culture. From a visual standpoint, Taiwanese culture and queer culture can be put in dialogue; they are similar in the way they appropriate bright and saturated colors. Take for example the betel nut kiosks in Taiwan; they are always decorated with glittering objects and filled with bright and splendid colors. Italy seems to be the only other place besides Taiwan that is so colorful and so full of vibrant energy. Is not Taiwan such a place? (Chen 2010: 244–5).

It is indeed through this (mis)appropriation of local culture via the mechanisms of camp and kitsch aesthetics that new forms of Taiwanese identities are proposed. The new identities are not products of fixed social conventions but contested and revised marginal experiences that are appreciated for their instability. It is this instability that allows gender, sexuality, and desire to be openly examined so as to encourage, as Acevedo-Muñoz observes with respect to Almodóvar's films, "the understanding and coming to terms with one's own 'authenticity' even if that which is authentic is paradoxically marked by reinvention" (2007b: 45).

I do not intend to claim with this chapter that Almodóvar's films have played a defining role in shaping the works of some contemporary Taiwanese directors such as Zero Chou, or that his films have offered the LGBT community the strength to fight for their presence and voice in a heteronormative society. However, the influence of his works, among many other influences in the global and local networks of the Taiwanese society, cannot be overlooked as part and parcel of the new Taiwanese identities in the making since the early 1990s. What makes these exchanges and circulation of cultures possible is the international film festival circuit in Taiwan that has eagerly transformed itself into a network of global visions and relations. Conversely, this same circuit is partially responsible for the globalization of Almodóvar and his works, however it may be expressed. Almodóvar might well have been offering a sly acknowledgment of his connection to Taiwan in *La mala educación* when he included the reference to a news clipping about a Taiwanese woman who threw herself into a crocodile pit in the zoo (D'Lugo 2009: 381).¹²

Notes

- 1 In 2002, "Fleeting Time" won Best Music Video at the 2002 Taiwan Golden Melody Award. Christopher Cheung Man Wah, Hong Kong's top photographer and television commercial director directed the music video.
- 2 Almodóvar is mentioned in the very beginning of *For a Spring of No Regrets* on page 1.
- 3 This reference appears on page 214 of the novel. The novel was nominated for the Chiu-ko Novel Award.
- 4 In fact, in 2003, the GIO made significant changes to its funding policy to accommodate the new approach—an approach to embrace a global network of filmmaking. See Shackleton (2003).
- 5 For more information on the Motion Picture Development Foundation, see "Taiwan Cinema" at <http://www.taiwancinema.com>.
- 6 Burkina director Ouedraogo is known for his films *Tila/The Law* (1990) and *Samba Traoré* (1993). Both films were contenders at international film festivals: the former won the Grand Prix at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, while the latter won the Silver Bear at the 43rd Berlin International Film Festival.
- 7 The other films shown were *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983), *¿Que he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), *Matador* (1986), *La ley deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988).
- 8 For more information on the structure of the TFF, see its official site at <http://eng.taifeiff.org.tw>.
- 9 *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, *Entre tinieblas*, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, *Matador*, *la Ley del deseo*, and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*.
- 10 The 228 Incident was a riot started by the Taiwanese people against the newly arrived KMT government. The uprising began on February 27. The following day, the KMT government adopted violence as their approach to suppress the riot, killing approximately 30,000 people. For more information on the incident, see Kerr (1965).
- 11 Wen discusses the significance of the year 1992 in his article "Wen Tien-hsiang's Top 10 Gay and Lesbian Films" in the *China Times* blog.
- 12 In an interview at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, a Taiwanese reporter asked Almodóvar for the source of the news clipping. Almodóvar claimed that he read it in a Spanish tabloid about two to three years earlier. The reliability of this source has not been proven.

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PART VI

Art and Commerce

To the Health of the Author

Art Direction in *Los abrazos rotos*

John D. Sanderson

For international audiences, Pedro Almodóvar epitomizes contemporary Spanish cinema, and is deservedly hailed as one of the outstanding filmmakers of the western world. His distinctive thematic and aesthetic choices allow audiences from very different countries to recognize his authorship, while at the same time contributing to a sometimes skeptical reception of his films in his home country. Rodríguez suggests that “Tal vez sea la estética melodramática predominante en Almodóvar la razón por la cual la crítica española haya sido tan severa a la hora de valorar su obra” (Perhaps the predominant melodramatic aesthetics in Almodóvar is the reason why Spanish criticism is so severe when it evaluates his work) (2004: 148). His characteristic *mise en scène*, judged “excessive” by these same critics, is marked by a striking use of color and a remarkable set design and use of *atrezzo* (props and on-screen fixtures and objects) that can be related to U.S. melodrama of the 1950s, although, paradoxically, for an international audience these are precisely some of the features that make his work so “Spanish.” Nevertheless, there is far more to his permanently evolving work that contributes to his unique visual style.

The treatment of these aesthetic issues relies to a great extent on his art department, and Antxón Gómez, the Barcelona-based art director and production designer, who worked regularly with Almodóvar for a decade and a half, starting in 1997 with *Carne trémula* / *Live Flesh* through to *La piel que habito* / *The Skin I Live In* (2011), with the sole exception of *Volver* (2006).¹ This longevity may owe to the fact that their first film together represented such a remarkable departure from the director’s previous work, a complete submersion into the *noir* world required by the adaptation of a foreign literary source, Ruth Rendell’s novel *Live Flesh*.

In leaving behind the familiar terrain of his customary comic and melodramatic features, Almodóvar may well have particularly appreciated Gómez’s role in opening up new possibilities. *Todo sobre mi madre* / *All About My Mother* (1999), their next film



Figure 22.1 Almodóvar and Gómez on the set of *La mala educación* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Diego López Calvín.

together, incorporated many recognizable elements of Almodóvar's canon, but there was also enough innovation to make it his most awarded production, and he has not looked back since. Holguín (2006: 294–5) remarks that this film “es una vuelta de Almodóvar a sus propias raíces, pero en su época de madurez. Una etapa donde los sentimientos y emociones predominan sobre todo lo demás. Y una madurez de su narrativa, tanto literaria como cinematográfica” (is Almodóvar's return to his own roots, but in a period of maturity. A phase where feelings and emotions prevail over everything else. And a maturity of his narrative, both literary and cinematic).

One constant feature in Almodóvar's films with Gómez is the recurring use of hospital sets. In *Los abrazos rotos* / *Broken Embraces* (2009) alone there are five different hospital locations. For a film director who physically somatizes his concern with the production of his films, it only seems natural that health would be an issue in a movie about a film director. As he comments in his film diary for *Volver* (Almodóvar 2009: 450), “Before shooting I always fall ill. This is so recurrent that it has turned into a tradition: it means that everything is ready to start.” If we look back at the first part of *Todo sobre mi madre*, which involved Manuela's (Cecilia Roth) work as transplant coordinator at the “Clínica Ramón y Cajal” in Madrid and the death of her son in a car accident, it is understandable that many interior scenes were set in hospitals; the subplot related to Rosa's (Penélope Cruz) pregnancy in Barcelona also led to shooting in the remarkable “Hospital del Mar.” As for their subsequent film, *Hable con ella* / *Talk to Her* (2004), the look of the “Clínica El Bosque,” the workplace of male nurse Benigno (Javier Cámara), was the product of multiple decisions by the art department

that entailed completely repainting the premises and filling it with *atrezzo* in order to present one of the most striking hospital sets in Spanish cinema. In *Los abrazos rotos*, both main characters, Mateo (Lluís Homar) and Lena (Penélope Cruz), are hospitalized at different moments in the film, as are Lena's father (Ramón Pons) and the young Diego (Tamar Novas). The location and redesign of this type of setting seems to have become a central feature of Gómez's creative portfolio.

Taking *Los abrazos rotos*² as its starting point, this chapter will make use of the thematic recurrence of hospitals and hospital settings in Almodóvar's most recent films in order to analyze the specific contribution of the art department. The fact that art design was in the hands of the same professional in six of his last seven films, something exceptional when compared with Almodóvar's prior practices, may lead us to believe that he discovered a stable aesthetic foundation upon which to experiment in the creation of further variations. In what follows we will analyze the use of color codes, the elaboration of set design, and the selection and placement of *atrezzo* in order to identify the key elements that define his current *mise en scène*, while also referring to Almodóvar's previous films with Gómez, and even cross-referencing the director's earlier work.

Color

The color palette of a film is the range of predominant hues and tones to be used in different shots in order to contribute to the presentation of the emotions or moods of the characters, the general atmosphere of a set or to express an abrupt interference in a harmonic existence. Some colors customarily carry with them a symbolic meaning to which an audience will react almost unconsciously, so the semantic layers provided by their choice and distribution within a shot constitute a useful device for the filmmaker to establish the coherence between the story being told and its visual texture.

Subtlety in the use of color has never been an attribute of Almodóvar's work. Quite the contrary. To the oft-cited influence of Hollywood and especially Sirkian melodrama we can add Pop Art to understand how their convergence in his cinema has resulted in a palette of bright colors, one of his most distinguishable features. Gómez reflects on this issue, recalling when they first worked together:

Yo ya sabía que su relación con el color es una constante. A la hora de hacer las propuestas soy consciente de que un sofá rojo, color que le encanta, tiene más posibilidades de gustarle que uno violeta, opción que detesta. Sin embargo, considero que el verde fue una novedad que introdujimos en *Carne trémula* y que ha perdurado en películas posteriores (Sanderson 2010: 144).

(I knew that his relationship with color was a fixed value. I made my own proposals, but being aware that a red sofa, a color he adores, has more possibilities

of being chosen than a violet sofa, an option that he detests. However, I believe that green was an innovation that we introduced in *Live Flesh*, and that has remained in other films.)

Traditionally, green is complementary to red, so it may come as a surprise that Almodóvar had not used it previously, but the Spanish director does not necessarily look for smooth conventional combinations in his shots. The comparatively subdued tone of *Carne trémula*, however, favored this chromatic variation, linked, as mentioned above, to the change of genre and its less striking color palette. An interesting example of the effects of this innovation in the film was the set of the green kitchen in Sancho (José Sancho) and Clara's (Ángela Molina) home, in which he is seen cooking, dressed in green, a special meal to celebrate their twelfth anniversary. The color of his shirt blends into the background and reinforces the character's attempt to convey a feeling of household harmony in order to persuade his battered wife not to leave him. A similar false stability is also suggested in *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004), here combining green with warm sandy brown for the outdoor activities the priests share with the children. Only after Father Manolo's (Daniel Giménez Cacho) attempted rape of schoolboy Ignacio (Nacho Pérez) does the tone abruptly shift to the melodramatic blue of the *nuît americaine* as the predatory priest roams the boys' dormitory.

Blue and red have always represented Almodóvar's most common color choices, and the first part of *Todo sobre mi madre*, set in Madrid, confirms this preference. At Manuela's minimalist home she wears a red top while cooking dinner for her son, who is dressed in blue pajamas. In a later scene in the street outside the theater she wears a red coat as she waits for him in front of a huge and mainly red billboard advertising *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Huma Rojo (Marisa Paredes)—even her surname refers to red. Huma will later be seen playing the part of Blanche Dubois on a spare stage set dominated by the deep blue of the curtained background. The remainder of the film, shot in Barcelona (the first time Almodóvar chose a city other than Madrid as primary location), foregrounds the representative brownish and golden hues of Catalan modernism, far more soothing for Manuela than the emotionally more strident reds and blues of the film's painful beginning.

Hable con ella follows a color code anticipated by the poster of the film, where we see Alicia's (Leonor Watling) profile in blue, like the uniforms worn in the hospital where she lies in a coma, whereas Lydia (Rosario Flores) is shown in red, a color associated with her bullfighting and other related passions. In the film their male companions wear clothing coordinated with those colors: Benigno wears his blue uniform at the hospital and Marco (Darío Grandinetti) dresses in red in various scenes, as if in an outward expression of his inner suffering. Even after Lydia's death and Benigno's imprisonment for the rape of Alicia, Marco will still wear red when he goes to the prison to visit his friend Benigno, dressed in blue; they evoke the two women in their absence.

In *Los abrazos rotos*, Almodóvar points out in his blog that he found another color to add to his palette once the action was transferred from Madrid to Lanzarote:

En mi primera visita a la isla mi identificación con el color negro suponía una novedad para mí. El negro no había formado parte de mi paleta de colores. Llegué a pensar en el más facilón de los paralelismos, mi reciente afición al negro se debía al personal duelo por la muerte de mi madre. Mi recién estrenada orfandad encontraba su reflejo en la oscuridad de la isla (Almodóvar 2008b).

(On my first visit to the island my identification with the color black was a novelty for me. Black had never formed part of my palette of colors. I even thought of the easiest of parallels, my recent fondness for black was due to my personal mourning for the death of my mother. The fact that I'd been recently orphaned found its reflection in the island's darkness.)

One could initially be tempted to point out that, with the abundance of funeral scenes in *Carne trémula*, *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and *Volver*, black could hardly be said to be a novelty in Almodóvar's canon. However, isolated patches of that color do not have the same encompassing effect as the generalized background provided by the lunar valleys and black sands of Lanzarote. The emotions conveyed by the car accident that results in Lena's death and Mateo's blindness also justify the choice of location.

In any case, his favorite red color is still widely spread across the film. In the portrayal of Mateo's present, years after the accident and located at the beginning of the film, it is interesting to note how Almodóvar develops a point of view for the character even though, technically, he should not have one since he cannot see. In the opening scene he has been walked home by a young woman (Kira Miró) he has just met, and the sexual attraction he feels for her is represented in the reverse angle shot of her, set against the red dashes created by a background of shelves on which also sits a red toy rocket. In this scene the spectator is effectively perceiving the visual representation of the inner sexual drive of a blind man. Gómez³ refers to this shot:

Compramos los módulos que componen las estanterías por razones puramente prácticas, ya que iban en una variedad de colores que podían combinarse armónicamente en cualquier escena. De la misma manera, el cohete de Tintín de la portada del libro *Viaje a la luna* era solamente otro objeto coleccionable que un cineasta como Mateo podría conservar. Si alguien lo interpreta como un símbolo fálico, todo depende del cristal con que se mire.

(We bought the modules that made up the shelves for pure practical reasons, since they were in a variety of colors that could be combined harmonically in any scene, but not thinking about any specific shot. In the same way, the model rocket of Tintin from the book cover of his *Voyage to the Moon* was only another collectible object that

a filmmaker such as Mateo would treasure. That someone could eventually interpret it as a phallic symbol is definitely left to the eyes of the beholder.)

Editing, in any case, is a post-production process, and the fact that a close-up of Mateo's swelling crotch is interspersed between the above-mentioned shots makes it difficult not to establish some kind of connection. Shortly afterwards, an identical chromatic resource will be used for the reverse angle shot of Lena from the point of view of tycoon Ernesto Martel (José Luis Gómez) while both of them are in his office, so the association does not appear far-fetched.

These examples give evidence of Almodóvar's artistry in his use of color, which allows him to convey subtextual meanings related to his characters' moods or feelings, as well as to emotional or tranquil moments in the plot. He himself seems surprised that color is an issue that makes him stand out in his national context, as he comments to Frederic Strauss: "It is something very Spanish, but it is hardly used in Spain. ... It corresponds both to my personality and the baroque behavior of my fictional characters. Explosions of color fit in very well with high drama" (Strauss 2006: 86). This offers yet another reminder of why Almodóvar is not representative of Spanish cinema even though, internationally, this feature also makes him very "Spanish".

Set Design

The choice and design of sets is hugely important in the development of the general atmosphere of the fictional "environment" where a film takes place. Whether it is an outdoor location, a specially adapted indoor location or a studio set where everything has been built from scratch, all this work aims to solidify the central concepts of the film by establishing a meaningful background for the story being told. The art design for *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), for instance, was brilliantly effective in the sense that some of its sets were so clearly built in the studio that they contributed to define the artificiality of most of the characters. Félix Murcia, its art director,⁴ explains how an initial project on paper must be approached:

Para proponer con criterio propio los escenarios que aparecen en las películas, sean de la naturaleza que sean, se impone previamente, desde la lectura de un guión, la necesidad de imaginarlos como si ya existiesen realmente, y además con su puesta en escena—es decir espacio y acción—estudiándolos mentalmente como si se tratase de la reexaminación de lugares reales. Esto conlleva inevitablemente tener que pensar y detallar todo aquello que necesariamente ha de estar presente en los escenarios en los que se ha de desarrollar la acción, y expresarlo gráficamente después mediante bocetos artísticos y también dibujos técnicos (Sanderson 2010: 18).

(In order to propose with your own criteria which sets will appear in a film, of whatever nature they may be, there is a previous need, from the moment the script is read, to imagine them as if they already existed, also with their *mise en scène*—that is, space and action—studying them mentally as if they were a re-examination of real places. This inevitably implies having to go into detail and think about everything that necessarily has to be present in the sets where the action will take place, and then express it graphically by means of artistic sketches and technical drawings.)

Chicas y maletas / *Girls and Suitcases*, the film-within-the-film of *Los abrazos rotos*, was shot in the same studios as *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. It evokes the 1988 original by means of copycat sets, parallel scenes and overacting, evident in the higher vocal pitch and register displayed by the actors in its scenes when compared to the rest of the film. Penélope Cruz's Pina suffers far more "melodramatically" than her Lena, and this is owed partially to the very different sets in which both characters convey their emotions. Of course, this is not the first time that Almodóvar uses cinematic meta-narrative as a theme. We can trace filmmaking way back as the main plot of both *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1987) and *¡Átame!* / *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), but it is remarkable that the film Almodóvar made with Gómez prior to *Los abrazos rotos*, *La mala educación*, also featured the shooting of a film-within-a-film,⁵ and a number of stylistic resources developed then to visually portray this process have persisted, including some self-acknowledged autobiographical references that go far beyond the evocative use of sets. We will explore this dimension further in a later section of the chapter.

Almodóvar is fond of using both natural locations and sets built in studios. The use of Barcelona as backdrop for most of *Todo sobre mi madre* is a landmark in his career, with some memorable household locations such as the modernist home of Rosa's parents and the apartment with impressive views rented by Agrado, both homes of actual friends of Gómez, who lives in Barcelona and was able to show Almodóvar around with positive results for the final film product (Sanderson 2010: 143–4). None of the locations required practically any modifications.

However, even if redesign is needed, sometimes it is easier and cheaper to transform a natural location than to build a set in a studio (Rizzo 2005: 43). This was the case of *Hable con ella*, where a whole wing of the "Clínica El Bosque" was totally transformed in order to make it convey all the subtextual meanings involved in the development of the two main stories, those of the "couples" Alicia–Benigno and Lydia–Marco. We will go into greater detail about this process in the section devoted to hospitals.

But not all the location scouting for this film was as smooth. Generally speaking, a major issue when making up one's mind whether to use a location or build it in a studio involves calculating how much modification will be required to suit the pre-production planning or, rather, its budget. This delicate situation emerged in *Hable con ella* with the location of the dance academy, which the production department was initially quite wary about. It was Gómez who had found the



Figure 22.2 The dance academy in *Hable con ella* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2004; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Miguel Bracho.

abandoned premises, a huge loft with a glass façade in a corner of the well-known Santa Ana square in Madrid, which looked out onto two streets. He recalls: “Estaba hecho polvo y necesitaba una restauración total, pero tenía el tamaño y la situación ideales para que se pudiera ver desde fuera, a través del cristal, todo lo que pasaba dentro” (It was absolutely in shambles and needed to be totally restored, but it had the ideal size and situation so that you could see from the outside, through the glass, everything that happened inside).⁶

Almodóvar realized it was just what they needed, so the production department agreed it was well worth restoring. Once that was sorted out, they had to find the apartment from which Benigno could spy on Alicia. The shots would be taken diagonally from above, but, evidently, the reverse angle could have been located anywhere, since the academy and the inside of the apartment would never be in the same shot. But Almodóvar’s fondness for shooting in continuity, in order to contribute to the development of the characters and to regularly verify the whole sequence in the workprints, made him insist that it had to be realistically across the road. Luckily for Gómez and his team, a young Frenchman who had recently purchased an apartment there and was about to start work on it was contacted, and he happily rented it to the production, and also had it refurbished for free.

Following the film’s plot, there were various stages in the renovation of Benigno’s apartment, ranging from what it was like when his mother was still alive to the modifications started after she died, which Benigno “discussed” with the

comatose Alicia looking through magazines, and on to the final redecoration, which we only see when Marco stays there after his friend's imprisonment. He will also spy on Alicia through the window, but with one subtle difference: the frame surrounding the window Marco looks through is now painted in a passionate suffering red, whereas when Benigno had been watching at the beginning of the film it was white, the symbol of an innocence eventually disrupted by rape.

Glass buildings are not unusual in Almodóvar's filmography, as can be verified in *Los abrazos rotos*. The headquarters of Ernesto Martel's company (actually an insurance company located in the Calle Orense, Madrid) has a similar structure, very useful in creating a generalized monochromatic gray tone for the interiors in which Ernesto and Lena, each also dressed in gray, blend in with the background to convey a sameness related to an exclusive business environment. Only when she breaks the news that she needs to go to the hospital because her father is seriously ill, do we get a reverse angle shot of her from his perspective showing a reddish orange wall in the background, which suggests Ernesto is physically attracted to her.

Filming in a studio is a different matter altogether, since it allows the filmmaker to have absolute control over every minor detail of the set. There is no need to adapt to any pre-existing structure, since absolutely everything can be built following the instructions of the art department as long as there is enough room and budget. Almodóvar elaborates on this issue:

In a studio you can put the camera where you like, you can put up walls and take them down, you're free. ... What has interested me most in my studio work since *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, is the possibility of using all the artifice that comes with it, creating all the sets inch by inch (Strauss 2006: 110).

Chicas y maletas reuses designs which evoke *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, such as the bedroom with the burning bed, the kitchen where the drugged gazpacho is prepared, and, above all, the balustrade which looks at an artificial horizon of skyscrapers that had also appeared in *¡Átame!*; with this latter set the layers of cinematic meta-narrative multiply.

Another conceptually interesting set is Mateo's home, built entirely in the studio as if it were designed for a blind inhabitant. It has no doors, though the actual transition spaces to the different rooms are too big for a standard door anyway. Also remarkable is the lack of lamps or other lighting fixtures in the shots; the only related item we can see are some gelatinous switches, bought in Japan, in the background that would enable a blind man to find them easily. Gómez remarks on Almodóvar's astounding attention to detail:

A Pedro le gusta tener los decorados acabados con mucho tiempo. Recuerdo la pensión donde Zahara tiene un encuentro fugaz con un antiguo amor suyo en *La mala educación*. Ese decorado estaba en el plató dos meses antes de que se llegara a utilizar y Pedro pasaba por allí de vez en cuando y comentaba que quizás podríamos

cambiar esto o aquello; poca cosa pero siempre aprovechando la ventaja de poder trabajar con tanto tiempo disponible (Sanderson 2010: 146).

(Pedro likes having the sets finished in plenty of time. I remember the hostel where Zahara has a one-night stand with a former childhood sweetheart in *Bad Education*. That set was already built in the studio two months before it had to be used, and Pedro would drop by now and then and say that we could change this or that; hardly anything, but always taking advantage of the possibility of working with so much time available.)

For a film director who wants time on his side, it is definitely an advantage to have his own production company, and his brother Agustín running it.

Atrezzo

The recurrent presence of a specific typology of objects in a film provides layers of meaning that contribute conceptually to the stories being told. Props are obviously important because they will be used or directly referred to by the characters, while other objects present in the shot can be expected to blend in with the background simply to make a scene more believable with reference, for instance, to where and when the action is happening. However, with Almodóvar these theoretically decorative elements can stand out in the shot and express as much meaning as what the characters are saying or doing.

Art directors or production designers can tell how important these elements are expected to be before the shooting begins thanks to the level of specificity in the script or in the subsequent notes added in the pre-production process. Gómez refers to them as “script *atrezzo*” and differentiates them from “general *atrezzo*,” which consists of a wide range of objects that are associated with a specific time and place, suit the circumstances of a specific character, or are simply established clichés that would be easily decoded by the audience. Whether objects acquired at random may eventually become more relevant will depend on the director or, sometimes, as mentioned above, on the textually inscribed “eyes of the beholder.”

For instance, the magazines, posters, photographs, books, or other graphic material that can be found scattered throughout a shot may have different degrees of importance. Thus the photograph of Bette Davis next to Huma Rojo’s mirror is far more relevant than the one in Mateo’s office. Huma started smoking because of her admiration for the American actress and took her artistic name, derived from *humo*, smoke, as a result, not to mention the fact that the plot and the title of Almodóvar’s film is directly related to one of her most memorable performances. On the door of Huma’s dressing room there is a poster of a Spanish theater production of *Salomé*, which was also the title and theme of Almodóvar’s last short (1978) before he embarked on his first feature film, while in Mateo’s office in *Los*

abrazos rotos we can see a cover of *Life* magazine featuring Fellini's *8½* (1963), another film about filmmaking, and in B movie director Máximo Espejo's (Francisco Rabal) editing room in *¡Átame!* there is a poster of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956). None of the characters refer to them directly, but these graphic *atrezzo* elements provide meaningful subtextual nuances.

The opening credits of *La mala educación* are designed by Juan Gatti as a succession of posters that are torn away to reveal the names of cast and crew, ending with a poster of a film written and directed by Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), now diegetically part of the opening sequence. This peeling away of layers to see what is underneath in order to understand your past anticipates one of the main issues of the film, later made clear in a lingering shot of the façade of the Cine Olympe, where we catch sight of the face of Zahara seeping through stretches of more recent posters. Gómez has explained how these effects were achieved by first creating the posters, gluing them one on top of another, and then carefully tearing them off in order to allow meaningful images or words to emerge. This basic technique had already been used in his first collaboration with Almodóvar, *Carne trémula*, producing a far less visible background image for the bus-turned-urban manger where Isabel (Penélope Cruz) is giving birth to Víctor.

Other *atrezzo* elements are simply visual clichés that allow the audience to decode a wider reference instantly. The very first shot of this birth scene shows us a huge decorative glass nativity star hung over an empty street that automatically locates the action at Christmas time, traditionally a period of happiness that is contradicted here by the voiceover declaration of a state of emergency by Francoist minister Manuel Fraga. The final shot of the film includes another nativity star in order to round out the plot, providing an example of the circular narrative that Almodóvar is very fond of. Now it is Víctor's (Liberto Rabal) baby who is about to be born in a democratic Spain with crowded streets, but not on a bus; he is taking his wife Elena (Francesca Neri) to hospital by taxi. Things have changed for the better.

One of Almodóvar's most recurrent clichés, concerned as he is with the process of artistic creation, is the use of typewriters. As he admits, "if I must pick a fetish from among the props, I'd rather take the typewriter" (Almodóvar 2009: 455). Novelist Amanda Gris employs one in *La flor de mi secreto* / *The Flower of my Secret* (1995), with which she cannot help writing a dark thriller when her publishers are expecting more romance novels from her. Ignacio (Francisco Boira) also uses one for his film script *La visita* / *The Visit* and for the opening lines of his final letter to Enrique before he dies of an overdose in *La mala educación*. In *Los abrazos rotos*, it might seem contradictory that blind scriptwriter Mateo / Harry Caine applies screen reading software to "hear" the daily newspapers on the web while he is seemingly still using a typewriter for his film scripts. Gómez argues that it makes for an easier decoding by the audience, and that the choice is not so outrageous since Almodóvar was still using his Olivetti typewriter to write his scripts years after personal computers had taken over.

Atrezzo elements are also very economical for defining minor characters who have little screen time. The first shot of Madame Mylene (Kitty Manver) shows her

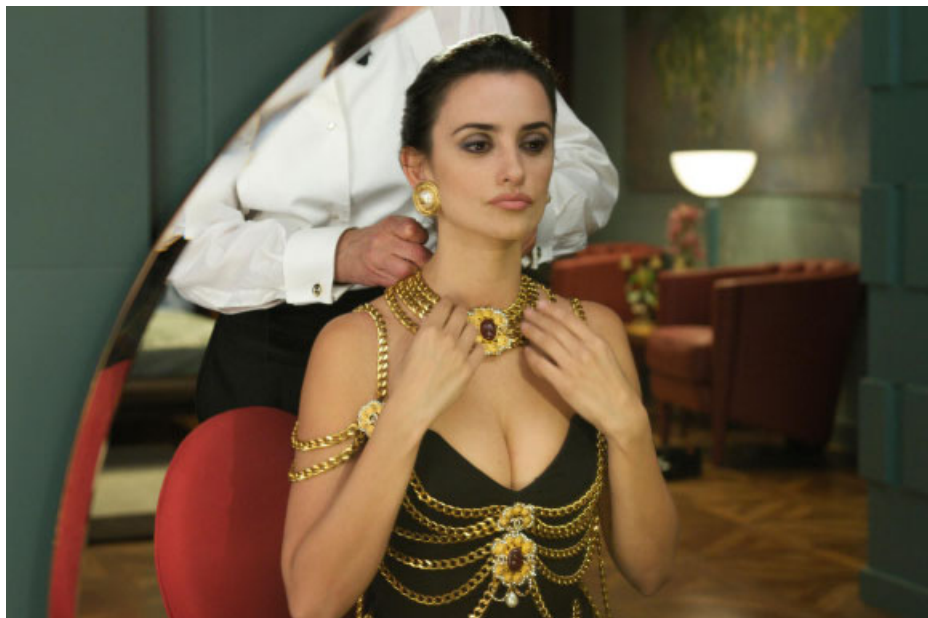


Figure 22.3 Lena in chains in front of a mirror in *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2009; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

sitting on a gilded armchair answering a phone call from Lena in order to arrange sexual encounters for her. The design and fabric of that armchair expresses her association with the ostentatious wealth, vulgarity, and corruption that Gómez defines as “Marbella style,” in a reference to the expensive, glamorous Spanish tourist resort. Later on, when Lena has begun her affair with tycoon Ernesto Martel, the first shot of her at his home shows her in front of a mirror trying on a striking piece of gilded jewelry that strongly resembles a set of chains, a conjunction that might well be read to symbolize how she has surrendered her freedom for his wealth.

This shot brings us to what is probably the most recurrent element in Almodóvar’s filmography: mirrors. Very much in the melodramatic Sirkian mode, mirrors will often reflect the expectations society has of a female character and, as a consequence, what she has become before realizing that it is not what she really wanted. If we recall the various shots of, for instance, Jane Wyman in Sirk’s *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) or Lana Turner or Susan Kohner in *Imitation of Life* (1959), we can easily establish a parallelism with another shot of Lena later on in *Los abrazos rotos*, again looking at herself in a bathroom mirror after Ernesto has repeatedly made love to her during their weekend escapade to Ibiza; she then vomits.

Mirrors have been used to great effect by Almodóvar in dressing-room scenes when an actress is getting ready to become somebody else, a visual trope which has a lot to do with the thematic content of his films. Huma’s U-shaped mirror in

Todo sobre mi madre allows for several variations, from the multiple reflection of the same character, which can be topically related to schizophrenia, to the interaction between two rivals, or when the shot is opened up and we see who is diegetically present in the scene as well as her reflection. In *La mala educación*, where the supplanting of personalities is a key issue, mirrors will regularly be used. Perhaps the most interesting example takes place in the dressing room of the drag artist Sandra, who imitates the legendary Spanish star Sara Montiel. Juan (Gael García Bernal), who is pretending to be his dead brother Ignacio, has come to ask him/her to teach him to become Sara in order to play the part of Ignacio in Enrique's film, thereby multiplying the layers of imposture and disguise. In an interesting remark in the Spanish DVD audio commentary, Almodóvar observes that the *transformista* looked far more like Sara Montiel when he was reflected in the mirror than in his straight on shots. He had successfully become his own image.

Other reflecting surfaces can also act as mirrors. When Ignacio is about to shoot up the pure heroin that Juan and Señor Berenguer (Lluís Homar) have bought for him, we see his desperate image reflected on the spoon where he is going to cook it. This symbolic visual is also used in *Carne trémula* to comment on Elena's drug use, with the concave surface of the spoon again showing us how deep the fall has been. In *Los abrazos rotos* it is in Madame Mylene's final scene that we see the lines of the far more glamorous cocaine spread out on a silver tray that reflects her distortedly in a position of power. In two brief scenes with only a couple of elements of *atrezzo*, her character has been fully portrayed.

On the whole, the presence of these objects in a shot can provide semantic nuances that go far beyond their primary iconographic meaning. As LoBrutto (2002: 25) points out: "An object which has a common meaning is turned into a symbol of the story, and therefore provides a semantic complexity. A visual metaphor can act on the subconscious, supplying subliminal content, layers of meaning." Its iterative use in the *mise en scène* can thus contribute to develop one of the overall concepts of the film and help to interpret the cinematic text. Almodóvar's filmography is very rich in noticeable *atrezzo*, which has become another distinctive feature of his work. Gómez (Sanderson 2010: 156) explains that "A Pedro le encanta pasearse con su bolsa de 'trastos' poniendo cosas aquí y allá en los decorados" (Pedro loves walking up and down the sets with his bag of bits and pieces, putting them here and there). As we have seen, his minute attention to detail has proven worthwhile.

Meta-narrative

One of the remarkable features mentioned above of *Los abrazos rotos* is Almodóvar's self-reference to *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* with the filming of *Chicas y maletas*, where sets, events, and even actresses (Rossy de Palma, Chus Lampreave)

are recalled from the earlier film, to the point of shooting in the same Barajas studios in Madrid. The first scene we see of the film being directed by Mateo shows Lena preparing gazpacho in the kitchen in the same way as Pepa (Carmen Maura) did in the prior Almodóvar film. There is a close-up of her hand cutting up bright red tomatoes surrounded by striking green peppers and garlic, almost a still-life painting, followed by a shot of Lena's exaggeratedly sulking figure against a background of red tiles and a seemingly unused kitchen *atrezzo*. We clearly realize we are watching the film-within-the-film because of the highly saturated colors that make up the set.

Almodóvar's previous work with Gómez involving the differentiation between cinematic meta-texts had also been very elaborate. *La visita*, the film being shot in *La mala educación*, was definitely *noir*, so it could not include such striking colors. In that case the format of the screen made the difference, with a reduced 1:85 aspect ratio for the film-within-a-film and the customary anamorphic size for the main narrative, a technical solution that depends on cinematography and editing rather than art direction. At one stage we do watch *La visita* in anamorphic size, but only because we see it being filmed by Enrique Goded in a scene which includes a shot showing the set and the actors on the left-hand side and the crew on the right. It is followed by another shot of the "fourth wall," where the film crew (including Gómez himself) and equipment are located, with the artificial door to the priest's office looming in the background. Once the final scene of Ignacio's murder is over, they start dismantling the sets (it would seem that Goded, as does Almodóvar, likes shooting in continuity, since this is the end of his film). The lights are out, cameras moved, decoration brought down, and the wardrobe assistant (Leonor Watling in a cameo role) helps Juan remove his female attire. He starts sobbing in the nakedness of the studio, even more striking because, as Almodóvar points out in the DVD audio commentary, "it is the first time we are shown the warehouse," a natural location being used as an artificial set for the shooting of the film-within-the-film: meta-narrative at its peak. The plot twist, however, lies in the fact that the real-life Father Manolo, now called Señor Berenguer, has sneaked into the studios—in a similar way to Ricky (Antonio Banderas) in *¡Átame!*, but with no wig—determined to give his version of the story to Enrique. The behind-the-scenes view of the rudiments of filmmaking makes fascinating cinema in Almodóvar's hands.

There is still another typology of meta-cinematic representation that is common to both *La mala educación* and *Los abrazos rotos*: the inclusion of sequences in video format. The heavy grain of this footage diffuses both color and definition since it does not render contrast and, consequently, conveys an impression of unofficial recording, the revelation of a secret we are not supposed to know. The art department does not have to change the sets for these far more tonally attenuated shots; in fact, even further desaturation can be achieved during post-production. In *La mala educación* we have the sofa scene in which Señor Berenguer and Juan fondle and film each other until an unexpected Ignacio storms into the video field of

vision. The filming stops abruptly because they had wanted to keep their affair secret, even though the intruder does not seem to care. In *Los abrazos rotos*, Ernesto Martel's son (Rubén Ochandiano) is in charge of filming every single move of Lena on behalf of his father, who suspects that she might be having an affair with Mateo while they are shooting *Chicas y maletas*. He even follows them to Lanzarote, and through his grainy recording we will manage to see in greater detail how the accident that kills Lena took place. In both films, this new type of representation shows how Almodóvar is open to experimenting with visual forms.

Interestingly, the first video recorded by Martel's son is the scene in which Lena is trying out different hairstyles in front of the mirror in the studio, a visual trope used yet again to project a model image of what, in this case, the film industry expects from or imposes on its female stars. It is a joyful moment (she tries different styles, from Audrey Hepburn to Marilyn Monroe, with wigs as a key *atrezzo* element), but the video recording also captures Mateo's production manager Judith's (Blanca Portillo) grimace at what Lena's audition conveys about the growing relation between director and actress. She gestures at the camera to stop filming, but we have already seen what we were not supposed to. In the meantime, Lena's interaction with the mirror continues, and Almodóvar makes an interesting reflection in his blog about this process, noting that:

las líneas del rostro de Penélope son más armónicas cuando se reflejan en otra superficie que si la miras de frente. Espero que ella no se moleste, me excita más el reflejo de Penélope que la propia Penélope (Almodóvar 2008c).

(The lines of Penélope's face are more harmonious when reflected in another surface than if you look straight at them. I hope she won't get annoyed, I'm more excited by Penélope's reflection than by Penélope herself.)

Speaking as a close friend, but also as a film director, Almodóvar finds her reflection visually more compelling than her actual self; it gives him more of what he wants from the actress. Clearly mirrors play a vital role in his filmmaking.

There is an eye-catching element of *atrezzo* in the film studio as well, a collection of robots on a shelf in Mateo's office which confirms his tendency to accumulate objects, a habit alluded to when referring to the model rocket in the film's first scene. But the remarkable thing here is that it is the same collection that Enrique Goded had on a shelf on his bedroom wall in *La mala educación*, as can be verified in the scene the morning after he seduces Juan. When Gómez was consulted about the importance of this specific item in the script, he clarified: "No tuve que salir a buscarlo. Es su propia colección, que consiguió hace muchos años. Ya que Enrique y Mateo son también directores cinematográficos, ¿por qué no iban a valorar este tipo de objeto y guardarlo también?" (I did not have to go out looking for it. It is his own collection, which he acquired many years ago. Since Enrique and Mateo are also film directors, why shouldn't they treasure this kind of item and keep it around as well?)"⁷

Mateo's office, however, is totally different from Enrique's. As Almodóvar (Strauss 2006: 64) remarks, during the time he was shooting *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, "Agustín's office was a cardboard box. He carried it about everywhere," and accordingly Mateo's office is represented as an improvised and provisional space in the film studios where everything is piled up untidily. Enrique's office, on the other hand, is far more elaborate: the professional premises are painted in bright colors with graphically striking posters on the walls and venetian blinds on windows, very much like the offices Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo, opened in the 1990s, according to his own audio commentary on the Spanish DVD edition. Here is where the film begins when one day Juan pushes past a door on the left-hand side of the screen, an actor begging for a part and also carrying a film script under his arm. At the end of the film, he will leave through another door on the right-hand side of the screen, this time from Enrique's home, again neatly rounding out a circular narrative which brings together the director's professional and private lives. In any case, both Enrique and Mateo's offices were studio-built sets, which proves how meticulously Almodóvar planned this aspect of the films.

For those looking for more meta-cinematic parallels, it might just be sheer coincidence that the surname of Mateo's production manager, Judith García, who also does the shopping and cooks for him after his accident, is the same as Almodóvar's real-life production manager, Esther García.⁸ She has been working for him since *Matador* (1986), and actually plays a part herself in *Los abrazos rotos* as a cook, but in producer Ernesto Martel's household. As for *Chicas y maletas*, further self-references are found when, concerning the set of Pina's penthouse, Mateo furiously complains to Judith: "Está completamente despersonalizado. Una cosa es que yo pida un decorado gráfico, pero esto está completamente muerto" (It's completely impersonal. I asked for a graphic set but this is totally dead). When she asks him, "¿Hablo con Antxón?" Mateo replies, "No, ya hablo yo con él" ("Shall I speak to Antxón?" Mateo replies, "No, I'll do it). Interestingly, Antxón Gómez was only appointed for the production of *Los abrazos rotos* the week the actual shooting began, having missed all the pre-production process, so these lines must have been squeezed in at the very last minute. And a final tongue-in-cheek allusion can be found on the clapperboard used when shooting *Chicas y maletas*, which bears the words "Camera: R. Prieto," referring to the name of the cinematographer of *Los abrazos rotos*, Rodrigo Prieto, internationally celebrated for his regular work with Alejandro González Iñárritu and Ang Lee. In this instance, as with the mention of Antxón Gómez, the anachronistic references for a film fictionally being produced almost two decades earlier highlights the intertextual playfulness at work across much of the Almodóvar corpus.

On the whole, the very different visual texture of *Chicas y maletas* within *Los abrazos rotos* is its most outstanding feature, the coexistence of two chronologically easily distinguishable styles within the same film marking a remarkable

achievement for any art department. When asked about the huge contrast between the texture of the scenes in Pina's flat and the rest of the film, Gómez reflected on it, giving an interesting insight into his highly specialized trade:

La verdad es que en aquellos decorados mezclamos muebles de Missoni de los setenta con diseños actuales de Habitat, algo totalmente anacrónico pero que nos venía muy bien para diferenciar *Chicas y maletas* y *Abrazos rotos* de una manera creíble sin confundir al público; después de todo, son escenas de una película, no un documento histórico. Yo diría que el aspecto clave es el color; no la paleta, sino el volumen. En la cocina y el salón de Pina teníamos grandes masas de rojo y amarillo por todas partes, azulejos, paredes, cuadros, muebles. . . . Pero si observas cuidadosamente la mansión de Ernesto Martel encontrarás los mismos colores, sólo que con retazos aquí y allá. Así que era más una cuestión de masa que de gama de colores a la hora de distinguir la película dentro de la película.⁹

(Actually, in those sets we mixed Missoni's seventies furniture with a very contemporary Habitat design, which is totally anachronistic but served well for our purpose of differentiating *Girls and Suitcases* from *Broken Embraces* in a believable way, without confusing the audience: after all, they are scenes from a film, not a historical document. I would say that the key feature is color; not the palette, but the volume. In Pina's kitchen and sitting room we have huge masses of red and yellow everywhere, tiling, walls, pictures, furniture. . . . But if you look carefully at Ernesto Martel's mansion you will find the same colors, only that they are dabbled here and there. So it was more a matter of mass than of range of colors in order to distinguish the film within the film.)

Hospitals

As we have noted, the typology of natural locations most frequented by Gómez during his collaboration with Almodóvar is hospitals, which form a series of essential sets for *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, and *Los abrazos rotos*, and thus reveal a thematic continuity within his recent filmography. In fact the hospital motif first originates even earlier in the director's career. Manuela's story in *Todo sobre mi madre* actually has its starting point in the opening scene of *La flor de mi secreto*, in a simulation of an interview with a woman whose son has just died, played by a nurse named Manuela (Kitty Manver), in order to persuade her to donate his organs. The tragic twist for the Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre* is that her son does eventually die in a car accident, and she has to go through the whole process for real. The scenes in the "Clínica Ramón y Cajal," where she works, and in the Galician regional hospital where her son's heart will be transferred to another patient, mainly involve corridors where medical staff rush and relatives sit, with the only requirements for the art department being the red armchairs in the former hospital where Manuela and her friend wait for

the tragic news. The anguish of those tense moments is thus marked with a color, as we have seen, closely related to the main character.

The rest of the movie takes place in Barcelona, where one of the subplots concerns Rosa, an HIV-positive pregnant nun who has to be taken to hospital by Manuela herself. Gómez recalls showing Almodóvar around his home town:

Todas las mañanas pasábamos por delante de este edificio que yo le insistía que teníamos que visitar, y él me decía que sí, sin mucho interés, porque no se daba cuenta de que era un hospital; creía que eran unos grandes almacenes.

(Every morning we walked past this building that I insisted we had to visit, and he said yes, without too much interest, because he didn't realize that it was a hospital; he thought it was a shopping mall.)¹⁰

The "Hospital del Mar" has a huge glass façade which again proved to be very useful in obtaining some impressive exterior and interior shots. Gómez continues: "La amniocentesis de mi esposa antes de nacer nuestro primer hijo se realizó aquí, y recuerdo la sensación de mirar al mar como símbolo del principio de la vida, y también del final" (My wife's amniocentesis prior to the birth of our first child was performed there, and I remember the feeling of looking at the sea as a symbol of the beginning of life, and also of the end). This feeling is transmitted when Manuela and Rosa are sitting in the hall overlooking the sea, with the joy of pregnancy overshadowed by the danger of death for both mother and child. No changes were needed for such a remarkable set.

Hable con ella, in contrast, required a complete redesign of the hospital location, "Clínica El Bosque," since so many major scenes took place within its premises. Alicia's room, the most visited part of the hospital, was painted in what Gómez refers to as "brownish ocher," another of Almodóvar's additions in his constantly evolving color palette, and it provided a stable background for the apparently soothing light blue uniform of Benigno. The occasional dashes of passionate red came from one of the two psychedelic lava lamps (which eventually symbolize the rape scene), a vase, and a cushion on the designer sofa placed at the entrance.

Lydia will be taken to the same hospital after being gored by a bull in the Aranjuez bullring and going into a coma in its medical installations. In this latter location, the white-tiled corridor with two ordinary chairs where her sister and her husband sit tensely conveys the panic felt when experiencing a serious health problem away from one's usual surroundings, where the necessary resources may be lacking. The bullring scene would be found reminiscent of real-life events for a Spanish audience.¹¹ No redesign was necessary.

Very different were the corridors of "Clínica El Bosque," which, as Gómez recalls, "[S]e pintaron en su totalidad, hasta las franjas señalizadoras del suelo, y se pusieron asientos del famoso diseñador Alberto Liébana a los lados" (we had totally repainted, even with signaling stripes on the floor, and lined up with seats of famous designer Alberto Liébana).¹² Lydia is taken to a room with walls the

same color as Alicia's, but the far more widespread touches of red will come from a portable altar, traditionally associated with the world of traveling bullfighters, set up by her bedside table. As we have already shown, on the whole blue will prevail in Alicia's story and red in Lydia's, and their male counterparts will bear those colors in their absence.

Volver had only a brief scene in a hospital, where Raimunda's (Penélope Cruz) family's lifelong neighbor Agustina (Blanca Portillo) is taken for observation once her cancer gets worse. But it was after the release of this film when Almodóvar had a serious health problem himself, as he mentions in his blog:

El año pasado, después de la exhaustiva promoción de "*Volver*", cuando por fin podía dedicarme a cuidarme y escribir, caí fulminado durante meses por el ataque de ininterrumpidas y persistentes cefaleas y migrañas. Me puse en manos de neurólogos, hice varios tratamientos, pero no es esto de lo que quería hablar, lo que quería decir es que viví mucho tiempo en mi habitación, a oscuras (Almodóvar 2008a).

(Last year, after the exhaustive promotion of *Volver*, when at last I could devote some time to looking after myself and to writing, I was struck down for months by an attack of uninterrupted, persistent headaches and migraines. I put myself in the hands of neurologists, I underwent various treatments, but that isn't what I wanted to talk about. What I wanted to say is that I spent a lot of time in my bedroom, in the dark.)

This experience might have been a source of inspiration for the development of Mateo's character in his next film, *Los abrazos rotos*, and also a reason why so many hospital sets were used, more than ever before in his career. Four main characters have to be taken to hospital at different moments in the film, so various natural locations were found that could convey a variety of subtextual meanings.

The public hospital where Lena's ageing father (Ramón Pons) is picked up by his wife (Ángela Molina) and daughter was "especially decrepit," according to Gómez. We see her father sitting in a shabby corridor with a background of old, rusting lockers, ready to be discharged because his doctor, who is going on holiday, sees no point in keeping him there in spite of his serious condition. Almodóvar's concern with the National Health Service had already been briefly alluded to in both *La flor de mi secreto*, when the protagonist Leo faints amid a demonstration of medical students, and *Carne trémula*, when on Elena's television screen we see the news that waiting lists are so lengthy that patients are flocking to emergency wards in order to get admitted into hospitals. In *Los abrazos rotos*, Lena and her mother are obliged to take her father back home and put him to bed, his desperate situation expressed through a reflection on the varnished wardrobe of his bedroom.¹³

There is a remarkable contrast between the public hospital and the modern and fully equipped private hospital "Manzanares" where Lena's boss, Ernesto Martel, arranges for her father to be taken after he suffers a relapse. We again only have access to its corridor, the bluish-gray walls providing a background not unlike

Martel's office building, although here the long rows of seats are green, as is the doctor's uniform, and, more importantly, Lena is now dressed in red. As boss and secretary disappear down the corridor once he has made sure her father will be properly looked after, Lena's mother stays behind and gazes knowingly at the couple. A fade out on her will be followed by a fade into the present of blind Mateo walking down the similarly colored corridor of his apartment, a cause-effect subtextual connection achieved by editing.

The next hospital, the "Clínica Quirón," has a grandiose glass façade, the only feature that is made use of. Judith's son Diego has unknowingly taken GBH mixed in a drink at the nightclub where he works and collapses; an ambulance rushes him to the hospital. Judith is away shooting, so Mateo must go by taxi to visit him. He gets out and staggers disoriented with his white cane in front of a huge natural "brownish ocher" wall until a stranger offers to walk him to the main entrance. Through its glass structure we see him go to reception before the shot fades to black. That is all we see of the hospital, because in the next shot Diego will wake up in Mateo's home.

The remaining two hospital locations are used immediately after what are probably the most dramatic moments in the film. The first occurs when the jealous Ernesto pushes Lena down a long flight of stairs once she has announced that she will be leaving him for Mateo. He then decides to drive her to the hospital himself in his Rolls-Royce. Gómez reflects on their choice of location:

Decidimos que este hospital era la mejor opción simplemente porque tenía una curva pronunciada en el acceso a la entrada principal, y eso nos permitiría transmitir una sensación de urgencia veloz cuando el Rolls de Martel se precipita hacia la rotonda para llegar. Lo transformamos en la entrada de urgencias, así que pusimos un cartel enorme con la palabra "urgencias", y también cubrimos la entrada de cristal con adhesivos para que no se pudiera ver bien lo que había dentro; esta parte de un hospital siempre requiere mayor intimidad.¹⁴

(We decided this hospital was the best option simply because it had a steep curve in the access to the main entrance, which would allow us to convey a sense of speedy urgency when Martel's Rolls-Royce dashes onto the roundabout to get there. We transformed it into the access to the emergency ward, so we had to put up a huge board with the word "urgencias" on it, and we also covered the glass entrance with plenty of stickers so that you could not see clearly what was inside; this part of a hospital has always required a greater intimacy.)

As for the scenes that take place inside, mainly of Lena having x-rays taken, there was nothing remarkable in the set that distinguished it from any other hospital, but, with Almodóvar's keenness for continuity, they were also filmed there.

The climax of *Los abrazos rotos* is the car accident, which results in Lena's death and Mateo's blindness, and a concern we have referred to above re-emerges: the uncertainty of being hospitalized away from one's home town. The hospital



Figure 22.4 Almodóvar directs Blanca Portillo and Lluís Homar at the hospital in Lanzarote during the filming of *Los abrazos rotos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2009; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Paola Ardizzioni and Emilio Pereda.

premises in Lanzarote are remarkably basic: a gloomy room with grayish chairs will lodge the convalescent Mateo with little evidence of the usual machinery of modern medicine surrounding his bed, and the doctor's office is hardly any better than Mateo's at the film studios in Barajas. The installations serve the purpose of conveying a feeling of helplessness; Judith flies urgently to be by his side, and once she can get him on his feet she takes him back to Madrid. Lanzarote's volcanic blackness is left behind, but will remain in Mateo's life.

We have thus discussed the different features of the five hospital locations that were useful for the development of the plot and for the portrayal of the characters involved. From the "decrepit" installations of the National Health Service hospital where Lena's father is initially treated, or not treated, to the lavish corridors of the one tycoon Martel arranges for him, or the convoluted access to the emergency ward where the injured Lena is delivered following her "fall" and the gloomy atmosphere of the hospital in Lanzarote; all these natural sets supply various nuances of meaning that complement the themes and issues presented throughout the film. This recurrent typology might be read to reveal a fixation on the part of the director. There are no hospitals in his following film, *La piel que habito*, but the main character played by Antonio Banderas is a medical professional, in this case a plastic surgeon, who operates at home.

Conclusion

The goal of the art department working on a film is to make the visual elements present in the shots complement the narrative and fit into the general design plan. This involves issues concerning the color palette, the choice and design of sets, and the elements of *atrezzo* which make up the *mise en scène*. In *Los abrazos rotos*, the portrayal of Mateo, a film director who goes blind, has allowed us to explore in depth the visual presentation of two themes, cinematic meta-narrative and the use of hospitals, which had already been present to a certain extent in Almodóvar's previous work, but which here entail a more self-referential approach.

The analysis of the use of color confirms that Almodóvar's preference for bright colors has given way to the inclusion of other tones in his palette, from the more subdued green present since *Carne trémula*, his first full immersion in a *film noir* aesthetic (and also his first film with Antxón Gómez), to the volcanic black natural sets of Lanzarote in the last part of *Los abrazos rotos*, as well as the "brownish ocher" that his longstanding collaborator points out as now prevalent in his work. This broadening range has proved to be a permanent feature of his visual style, emphasized by the contrast between his current work and *Chicas y maletas*, which evokes an earlier visual texture and tone, achieved here more by the volume of color than by the actual colors chosen.

Almodóvar's attention to detail is also confirmed by the calculated quantity and quality of *atrezzo* used in his meticulous *mise en scène*. The graphic materials, collectibles, furniture, religious imagery, and other objects purposefully scattered throughout his shots supply layers of meaning that contribute to strengthening the concepts he is trying to convey with his films. As for set design, studio-built sets have increasingly given way to location scouting as another of the priorities in his more recent work; since the outstanding Catalan natural sets of his most awarded film, *Todo sobre mi madre*, his work has included relevant locations outside Madrid, such as Valencia, Galicia, La Mancha, or the Canary Islands. As for buildings, we have analyzed the usefulness of glass façades in these recent films, though in this chapter we have focused more specifically on the various hospital installations used and the demands made of Gómez as art director and production designer, especially in the five medical locations of *Los abrazos rotos*, which had so many different subtextual nuances to transmit.

The visual texture of Almodóvar's work is one of his most recognizable features, and the fact that he took on Antxón Gómez as a regular member of his production team could indicate that he had found a professional in his field with whom to continue his stylistic evolution, relying on stable artistic foundations. The international success which has made him the best-known Spanish film director worldwide would seem to justify this choice, despite the doubters in his own country. John Healey alludes to this situation in a controversial article published in *El País*, in which he observes that:

Hubo una época en que, cuando surgía el tema del cine español en el extranjero, los enterados hablaban de Carlos Saura y de Víctor Erice. Ahora casi nadie habla de ellos y el personaje que todos reconocen es Pedro Almodóvar. . . . Su genio reside en su inteligencia, en su habilidad de trucar el sistema, sacando provecho de ello en vez de sufrir por ello (Healy 2010).

(There was a period in which, when the topic of Spanish cinema arose abroad, knowledgeable people talked about Carlos Saura and Víctor Erice. Now almost nobody talks about them, and the personality they all recognize is Pedro Almodóvar. . . . His genius relies on his intelligence, on his ability to trick the system, taking advantage of it instead of suffering for it.)

The hope is that he can continue to trick a system that still tends to support and promote a grave post-Franco uniformity rather than the breath of fresh air supplied by Almodóvar's mature but still innovative and transgressive work, and that the favorable international reception will contribute to him overcoming the remaining degrees of local hostility without suffering any setbacks, medical or otherwise.

Notes

- 1 At the time he was already committed to the art direction of *Salvador* (Manuel Hueriga, 2006), followed by *Che: Part One* and *Che: Part Two* (Steven Soderbergh, 2008), before going back to work for Almodóvar in *Los abrazos rotos*.
- 2 *The Skin I Live In* had not been released when this essay was completed.
- 3 From an interview for this article with Antxón Gómez on July 25, 2010.
- 4 Félix Murcia was credited as set decorator but was the *de facto* art director.
- 5 Fuentes (2009: 430) considers that "In many respects, *Bad Education* is a noir return to *Law of Desire* (1987), for both films are metacinematic, centered as they are on the turbulent lives and loves of movie directors."
- 6 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.
- 7 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.
- 8 In the audio commentary of the American DVD of *Bad Education*, in which Esther García plays the part of a warden at the prison in Segovia where Marco visits Benigno, Almodóvar says about her: "She is the boss. She is more of a boss than I am."
- 9 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.
- 10 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.
- 11 In the audio commentary of the American DVD edition, Geraldine Chaplin's two words: "Remember Paquirri," would conjure up newsreel images for the average Spanish spectator of who was probably the most popular bullfighter of his time lying, still conscious, on the bed of the hospital installations of the bullring of Pozoblanco, Córdoba, after being gored by a bull on September 26, 1984. Because of the lack of adequate medical facilities, an ambulance had to be called to take him to the Military Hospital of Córdoba. He died on his way there.
- 12 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.
- 13 Gómez remarks: "No tuve que salir a buscar un armario especialmente barnizado; ya estaba allí cuando Almodóvar de repente decidió que sería más efectivo filmar el

reflejo que la acción en sí” (I did not have to go out looking for a specially varnished wardrobe; it was already there when Almodóvar suddenly decided that it would be far more effective to film the reflection than the action itself). Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.

- 14 Interview with Antxón Gómez, July 25, 2010.

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Making Spain Fashionable

Fashion and Design in Pedro Almodóvar's Cinema

Gerard Dapena

Among the least studied aspects of Pedro Almodóvar's film persona is his role as a fashion icon and arbiter of taste in matters of design. His frequent presence at Spanish and international fashion shows and his well-publicized friendship and professional collaboration with leading exponents of contemporary fashion such as Jean Paul Gaultier, Giorgio Armani, and the late Gianni Versace attest to Almodóvar's interest in and love of fashion (Spindler 1994; *Vogue España* 2008). Without exaggerating, Almodóvar can claim to be the most fashion-conscious European director of his generation; the textures and colors of fabrics play an important role in his films' visual design and items of clothing occasionally take on significant narrative meaning. Moreover, as Almodóvar's media profile has risen in tandem with the growing commercial success of his films abroad, granting him the kind of celebrity status that few filmmakers manage to achieve, so has haute couture played a more meaningful part in both the look of his films and the construction of Almodóvar's public persona (e.g. through his donning of designer labels for interviews and promotional events). But it must also be noted that Almodóvar's ascent as a filmmaker of international status has paralleled the increased visibility and worldwide projection of Spain's fashion industry. Both phenomena—Almodóvar's transformation into one of Europe's most popular and beloved cineastes and Spain's projection as a fashionable nation—came about in the wake of Spain's transition to democracy, coinciding with the efforts of the government of Socialist prime minister Felipe González to cast a modern, up-to-date image of Spain: that of a nation which had finally achieved its rightful place in the new European order after decades of isolation and backwardness.

Following the Socialist party's victory in the elections of 1982, Spain became renowned for its rapid accommodation to the political structures of parliamentary

democracy, its progressive social advances and strong economic growth, and its wholehearted embrace of consumer capitalism. Madrid's freewheeling nightlife and cultural effervescence and Barcelona's rebranding as a center of architectural innovation and new design trends were covered in many newspaper and magazines articles, complementing the state's promotion of the country's shoreline as a premier vacation spot. In short order, as González's government instituted an abrupt rupture with the values of Francoism, Spain became fashionable both as a tourist destination and a center of artistic creativity. Almodóvar, as the Spanish filmmaker with the greatest international projection in the post-Franco era, contributed significantly to the representation and dissemination of this image of a hip Spanish (post)modernity. But Almodóvar's cinema made Spain fashionable in an additional sense: by the ways in which his films' imagery and storylines depicted Spain's youth, and later on its rising middle class, as consumers of designer clothes and accessories of national and foreign origin, linking the consumption of fashion to the construction of new identities which embodied Spaniards' long delayed desire to be perceived as full-fledged modern subjects. Thus, Almodóvar's fashionable images have a twofold projection according to their reception markets: for the Spanish public, they offered a schooling in how to be fashionable, serving up imaginary and pleasurable modes of identification with his performers made possible through the consumption of fashion brands and accessories; for audiences abroad, the fashion-conscious characters in Almodóvar's films were further proof of Spain's newly acquired cosmopolitanism and modern identity.

My essay seeks to examine the intersection of Almodóvar's cinema, the fashion world, and the cultural policies of Spain's Socialist government in the period running from the Socialists' rise to power in 1982 to the loss of their parliamentary majority in 1996. The Socialist era witnessed Almodóvar's progression from underground filmmaker to internationally acclaimed art-house auteur, the rise and consolidation of a new generation of talented Spanish fashion designers, and the establishment of a fashion industry with international projection, parallel phenomena which received, to greater or lesser extent, the support of the Spanish state as part of a larger campaign for recognition on the world stage of Spain's artistic, cultural, and entrepreneurial achievements.

It is my contention that the ongoing dialogue between Almodóvar's cinema's and the world of fashion benefited enormously from the support provided by the Socialist government to Spain's resurgent fashion and design scene. *Matador* (1986) embodies this encounter of Spanish film and Spanish fashion which the Socialist administration endeavored to promote the world over as the brand of Spain's transformation under González's leadership.

Just as the Socialist era crucially witnessed Almodóvar's development as an artist of the cinema, it equally marked the height of Almodóvar's integration of film and fashion, as well as the start of his self-fashioning into a clotheshorse on and off the pages of fashion magazines. During the years in which the Socialist party was in power, fashion played an increasingly significant role in the mise en scène of

Almodóvar's films and in the construction of his characters' identities. During this same period, Spain's nascent fashion and design industries, under the Socialist government's wing, changed Spaniards' attitudes towards fashion, giving rise to a society of consumers who sought to construct and perform new modern identities through the purchase and display of clothes, accessories, and high-end design objects. The first film I examine in this essay, *Laberinto de pasiones/Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), released the year of González's electoral victory, showcases the central role of fashion to the bohemian subcultures whose hedonistic lifestyles and iconoclastic artistic activities would be appropriated and projected by the Socialists' cultural agencies as the face of a liberated (post)modern Spain, eager to claim a cutting-edge spot on the international cultural scene. In the last film I discuss, *La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret* (1995), attire and home furnishings communicate the attainment of European standards of high living as a normal experience for Spain's professional classes towards the end of the Socialist era. Fashion and design in this film function as the identity signs of a Spanish bourgeoisie so thoroughly confident in its privileged social status that it could perfectly envision putting an end, six months after Almodóvar's film premiered in the fall of 1995, to the fourteen-year political hegemony of a Socialist administration who had made Spain such a fashionable place. In between these two films, I cover four other movies by Almodóvar wherein, I shall argue, it is possible to chart a progression from the presentation of fashion designs "made in Spain" to a preference for haute couture clothes "made in Europe" by foreign celebrity fashion designers. This progression mirrored, at the same time as it molded, a shift in Spaniards' consumption of fashion and design from cultural tastes grounded in the national and local to new ones shaped by cosmopolitanism and globalism, a shift enabled by an increased sense of prosperity and purchasing power obtained throughout the years of Socialist government.

A History of Spanish Fashion and State Policy

Although Spaniards such as Cristóbal Balenciaga and Paco Rabanne revolutionized the world of haute couture fashion in the 1950s and 1960s respectively, they were based in Paris and thus belong to the history of Spanish fashion only nominally. With the exception of Manolo Pertegaz, a favorite among Spanish high society and one of the very few haute couture designers of the Francoist era to establish an international presence—he opened a store on New York's Fifth Avenue in the early 1960s—Spain's fashion was virtually unknown beyond its borders. However, by the end of the 1960s, Spain's staid fashion scene began to change under the influence of trends emerging in London and New York; pop singers like Massiel and movie stars like Marisol and Rocío Durcal were influential in disseminating innovative fashion looks, such as the miniskirt, among a receptive minority of fashionably-forward

Spanish women. The Ministerio de Información y Turismo organized the first promotional efforts on behalf of the local fashion industry, inviting foreign buyers to preview the new collections of 1968–69; in the ensuing years, haute couture designers like Elio Berhanyer, Pedro Rovira, and Carmen Mir received financial support from the Spanish Chamber of Fashion. Meanwhile, in the early 1970s, design companies like Moda del Sol launched the first ready-to-wear collections in Spain, benefiting from the appearance of a sizeable middle class as a result of the economic boom of the 1960s.

With Franco's passing and the establishment of democracy, Spain's fashion industry underwent a changing of the guard which paved the way for its international launch. Josefina Figueras (2003) has described how the arrival of a generation of young fashion designers embodying a new taste displaced the haute couture elders from their position of preeminence, forcing the closing of their studios as state support shifted to up-and-coming talents such as Pedro del Hierro, Jesús del Pozo, Adolfo Domínguez, and Toni Miró. In the meantime, public taste shunned luxury and ostentation in favor of a restrained sense of style more in tune with the prevailing egalitarian ethos. Joint efforts between fashion studios and the Ministry of Industry and Energy led to the institution in 1982 of the first Spanish Fashion Week and the creation of the Centro de Promoción de Diseño y Moda (Center for the Promotion of Design and Fashion—CDM). Beginning in 1985, the competing Pasarela (Runway) Gaudí and Pasarela Cibeles, Spain's two main annual fashion events, carried the political and cultural rivalry of Barcelona and Madrid respectively into the domain of fashion, each vying into the present day for international attendance and prestige.

The industrial side of fashion also expanded in tandem with Spain's democratization. As a result of a greater awareness of fashion among the Spanish masses and greater access to affordable clothes sold in department stores like El Corte Inglés and in big chains like Zara, Cortefiel or Mango, a mass market for Spanish-made fashion products came into being by the mid-1980s. As a sign of this burgeoning consumer market, *Vogue* started publishing a Spanish edition in 1988.¹ According to Figueras (2003), by the year 2000 there were about 7,000 Spanish companies involved in the business of fashion, generating more than two million euro in sales and employing over 200,000 people; exports accounted for about 40% of their output.²

Almodóvar and Costume Design in Film

As other scholars have already pointed out, a love of clothes permeates the world of characters, as well as Almodóvar's understanding of *mise en scène*. Eva (Eva Cobo) in *Matador* and Candela (María Barranco) in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) are fashion

models; the nuns of *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) organize an impromptu pageant in their convent not unlike a fashion show and the dancers of the avant-garde performance at the end of *Hable con ella/Talk to Her* (2002) dress like fashion models. Images culled from 1960s fashion magazines imbue the opening credits of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* with a camp Pop sensibility, while the behind-the-scenes preparations for a fashion show are a source of parody in *Matador*. Additionally, a shirt becomes an important plot device in *La ley del deseo/Law of Desire* (1987), sadomasochistic fetishwear is prominently displayed in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!/What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), finely crafted bullfighting suits appear in *Matador* and *Hable con ella*, and regional folkloric dress is treated ironically in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón/Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (1980) yet aesthetically highlighted in *La flor de mi secreto*. Tight, body-hugging and breast-lifting dresses emphasize the voluptuous curves of Penélope Cruz's body in *Volver* (2006), just as the accoutrements of femininity (wigs, lipstick, face powder, fake nails and eyelashes, breast enhancers etc.) are instrumental to the convincing drag impersonations of Miguel Bosé and Gael García Bernal in *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991) and *La mala educación/Bad Education* (2004) respectively.

The conventional wisdom is that costume design for film should be subordinated to the narrative, attending to the story's demands for verisimilitude and characterization without seeking to stand out in its own right. Although costumes can on occasion be sumptuous and colorful enough to call attention to themselves, as is often the case in period films, spectators are not supposed to leave the movie theater thinking primarily about the costumes. For this reason, as Sarah Street (2001) remarks, few famous fashion designers have worked steadily in film, since their creations are frequently too personal and original to go unnoticed. Yet the fashion world has been no stranger to the cinema; a number of films have told stories set within the fashion business or simply featured characters who work as fashion models or fashion designers. Furthermore, classic Hollywood movie stars often became paragons of fashion to their adoring fans, setting trends in dress, hairstyles and makeup, both through their on-screen performances and public appearances, as well as through the circulation of their portraits, frequently taken by fashion photographers, in magazines and newspapers or among members of fan clubs. Moreover, certain female film stars established long-lived associations with a particular fashion designer: for instance, Audrey Hepburn was a loyal customer of Givenchy and Catherine Deneuve was a friend and longtime client of the late Yves St. Laurent.

In contemporary Spain, movie stars, television personalities, and socialites have also operated as clotheshorses and setters of fashion trends. Princess Letizia inaugurated Madrid's 2010 fall fashion week at Pasarela Cibeles by showing up in an outfit designed by Adolfo Domínguez. Among the so-called Almodóvar girls, Rossy de Palma and the pop singer Alaska have attended fashion shows and appeared in fashion spreads.³ In fact, a photoessay in *Vogue España* (Molina Foix 1999), timed

with the release of *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999) and featuring individual pictures of the film's five female protagonists striking glamorous poses in couture outfits, implied that an innate sense of fashion was an essential precondition for qualifying as a *chica Almodóvar*. Penélope Cruz, in particular, has bolstered her image as a movie star through her associations with the business of fashion, modeling haute couture gowns at award ceremonies, signing exclusive contracts with the Spanish fashion chain Mango and the cosmetics firm L'Oreal, and, of course, gracing the covers of countless fashion magazines; she also opened her own fashion store in Madrid (Barker 2004, 2007).⁴

A close examination of Almodóvar's use of costume and design in his films reveals a certain tension between their invisibility and visibility. Generally speaking, clothing and accessories are invisible when they play a supporting role, being strictly deployed to communicate the character's personality and socioeconomic status; they acquire visibility once they stake out a stronger visual presence and function at a higher semiotic level. Across Almodóvar's filmography, there are many examples where costumes have primarily an informative, utilitarian function and are thus relatively invisible; yet in several of Almodóvar's most memorable sequences costume becomes a protagonist in its own right, conveying information that exceeds the merely functional through the importance given to the textures and colors of the fabrics and through a variety of accrued extratextual meanings, such as the designer's name. Arguably the distance between invisibility and visibility is the place of fashion.

It is not surprising that, as he has evolved from maverick filmmaker to international auteur, Almodóvar has increasingly mobilized fashion as another tool with which to define his authorial signature as well as his public persona. In an interview for the monthly magazine *GQ*, Almodóvar outlined his fashion credo: "I like to take different styles and mix them ... [I am] not capable of wearing a totally matched outfit ... [I] like using different colors: the bright, tacky colors of 1970s' soul music performers" (Apell 1989: 114).⁵ Almodóvar's eclectic approach to fashion is evinced in a photograph accompanying Tracy Young's short profile of the filmmaker in *Vogue*; the photograph's caption lists Almodóvar as wearing a shirt by Gaultier, pants by Yamamoto, a jacket by Comme des Garçons, and shoes by Armani (Young 1990: 124). In the aforementioned interview for *GQ*, Almodóvar cites some of his fashion preferences at the time: he confesses to choosing Gaultier for appearances at evening ceremonies because of the extravagance of his designs, but wears Armani, Moschino, and Versace during the daytime. The writer concluded that Almodóvar dressed the way he directed: with a keen sense of mischief, expressed most visibly in his energetic defense of bad taste in dressing (Apell 1989: 114).

Eventually, Almodóvar's personal preference for haute couture fashion spilled over into films like *Tacones lejanos* or *Kika* (1993). Undoubtedly, the presence of clothing by star designers has allowed for cross-promotional efforts with the world of fashion, supplementing the films' marketing campaigns with useful doses of glamour. Increasingly, the filmmaker as auteur has joined the fashion designer as

auteur in a mutually re-enforcing relationship of celebrity and product branding. Nevertheless, statements from his collaborators attest to the seriousness with which Almodóvar approaches the subject of costume design, exemplified by the exacting demands he often places on these designers, whether it entails the manufacturing of dresses—he brought to his meeting with Versace a portfolio of sketches illustrating his vision of Kika's wardrobe—or shoes: e.g., Robert Clergerie's repeated adjustments to the high-heel shoes he created for Marisa Paredes to wear in *La flor de mi secreto* (Castilla 1995). Even when the costumes are meant to be somewhat invisible, subservient to their role as tools of characterization, their selection is a matter which Almodóvar handles with fastidiousness. For instance, when it came to selecting the wardrobe for Carmen Maura's put-down working-class housewife in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, Almodóvar borrowed clothes from his relatives; while this undoubtedly constituted a cost-cutting measure, it also represented an aesthetic decision: "Carmen Maura's clothes, which were very important to me, belonged to my sisters or friends of my sisters. It was vital Carmen's clothes look worn, that they should have the ugliness of overuse" (Strauss 1996: 52).

Made in Spain

Although Almodóvar's first feature-length film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom* premiered as the cultural phenomenon known as the *Movida* began to take shape, his second film, *Laberinto de pasiones*, is a more representative portrait of this brief, but influential movement in pop music, the arts, and fashion which managed to expand in the early 1980s beyond the Madrid boho communities of Malasaña and Chueca to become a media event that symbolized the restoration of Spain's democratic liberties and the rebirth of its cutting-edge creativity. The end of Franco's dictatorship provided an opening for cultural experimentation and the possibility of living alternative lifestyles. Among the youth who identified with the term *modernos*, there was a sense of new, infinite possibilities and a belief that Madrid, with its around-the-clock revelry, was ready to stand alongside New York, London, or Paris as a place of cultural innovation and hip (post)modern lifestyles (Vernon and Morris 1995: 8). Almodóvar eulogized this upbeat image of Madrid in his second feature, albeit with a certain tongue-in-cheek attitude: "When I was writing the script of *Labyrinth of Passion*, my intention was to present Madrid as the world's most important city, a city everyone came to and where anything could happen. . . . It was an ironical idea, of course, but one which many people, who started promoting Madrid as if it really was the world's most important city, took very seriously" (Strauss 1996: 23). This link between the construction of a modern subjectivity and the representation of Madrid as a city of pleasure and desire (D'Lugo 1995: 131) is explicitly articulated in *Laberinto de pasiones*'s dialogue; connecting the hip taste in

fashion displayed by Riza, the male protagonist, to the city's hedonistic spirit, the film's female protagonist, Sexilia, states: "Madrid es la ciudad más divertida del mundo y él es tan moderno" (Madrid is the most entertaining city in the world and he is so modern).

Laberinto de pasiones was produced by the owners of the Alphaville cinemas, a small art-house multiplex near Madrid's Plaza de España, where Almodóvar's first film had enjoyed a very long run on the midnight slot. At the time of *Laberinto*'s release, the *Movida* was still a relatively unknown phenomenon outside of a small group of journalists and tastemakers. Responding to the movie as if it were a generational portrait, a crowd of hipsters and fashionistas, not unlike the *modernos* who populated the film's fictional world, attended its premiere at the Alphaville, inspiring a satirical chronicle by novelist and journalist Francisco Umbral (1982) in the daily *El País*. Alejandro Varderi has argued that the modern urban sensibility that permeates Almodóvar's cinema reached a feverish pitch in *Laberinto de pasiones*; the film, according to Varderi, encapsulated the meaning of the term *moderno* in the early post-Franco era, providing the best entry point for understanding Madrid's passage into a postmodern condition (Varderi 1996: 156–7). As Varderi indicates, *Laberinto de pasiones* gave prominence to marginal urban subcultures whose lives and identities had not been depicted yet in Spain's cinema, such as the medley of bohemian artists and designers, rockers, fashionistas, and homosexuals who made Madrid's *Rastro* area, the site of the city's largest open-air flea market, their favorite public playground. Previously hidden from view, they burst forth in *Laberinto de pasiones* in brazen fashion, sporting outrageous coiffures and dressed in leather or brightly colored outfits made out of vinyl and rubber; in Almodóvar's film, clothes, accessories, and haircuts stand out as signs of a distinct, rebellious identity, aggressively asserting their presence in the congested, cacophonous urban landscape while gleefully pushing the boundaries of so-called good taste.

Although *Laberinto de pasiones* is not the first film in the history of Spanish cinema to foreground the emergence of new fashion and design trends among Spanish youth, it is certainly the first to do so from inside an underground movement and exudes therefore a greater sense of authenticity and authority. Interiors for the film were shot inside the new residence and studio of the two painters known as Las Costus on Montesquenza Street; their old apartment in Malasaña had been one of the formative nuclei of the *Movida*, serving as a gathering space, artistic center, sexual playground, and drug den for the disparate individuals and factions which came to regard themselves as *modernos*. *Laberinto de pasiones*'s art direction included sets designed by the painter Guillermo Pérez Villalta and displayed pictures taken by photographer Ouka Lele, while some of its costumes were designed by the late musician and painter Carlos Berlanga; all three artists were prominent early participants in the *Movida* (Correa Ulloa 2005: 53).

In an editorial published in *El País* at the tail end of the *Movida*'s reign, French sociologist Gérard Imbert argued that the movement's original avant-garde impulses were compromised and trivialized the moment the *Movida* became

fashionable. At that point, it devolved, in Imbert's view, into a discourse of surfaces and appearances that construed a modern identity as a series of performances, whereby "ser moderno es hacerse el moderno" (to be modern is to act modern) (Imbert 1986). Teasing out Imbert's inference on the role that fashion might play in this drift towards the superficial, I would argue that *Laberinto de pasiones* is a work precariously poised between the oppositional, subversive roots of the *Movida* and its later commodification as spectacle, masquerade, and fashion statement. While Almodóvar's film posits hedonism as a liberating, transgressive practice, it also finds in consumerism a path for personal fulfillment; finally, its radical proposition of gender identity and sexual orientation as a fluid, mutable state coexists with a celebration of identities created through the allure of surfaces and the pursuit of ephemeral material possessions.

Hence, it is not surprising that clothing and other indicators of fashion play an important role in the film's discursive and visual economy. The film's opening sequence illustrates the construction of identity by means of the ephemeral encounter with the beguiling surfaces of fashion-related objects in quite a literal manner. Viewers first obtain an image of Riza's face through a series of multiple reflections of his head across an array of sunglasses hanging vertically from a stand in the *Rastro*. Until then the spectator has only been offered views of his back, swathed in a leather jacket, and his pelvic area, squeezed into tight-fitting jeans, clothing choices which signify a hip urban masculine identity. The sequence also conveys information about the two main protagonists' sexual orientation through the foregrounding of clothes, as parallel editing juxtaposes Riza's cruising of men in the *Rastro* with Sexilia's own cruising activities by means of intercut point-of-view close-up shots of various men's crotches, the sizes of which are enhanced by the tightness of the pants worn by these men. Through the sense of lust projected in these point-of-view shots, the pants become highly eroticized items of clothing.⁶

Alternative and queer gender identities are equally represented in other scenes of *Laberinto de pasiones* by dint of fashion styles. Sitting at an outdoor café, the very queer Patty, played by erstwhile Almodóvar sidekick Fanny McNamara (a.k.a. Fabio de Miguel), and a girlfriend are clearly coded as *modernos* by their choice of punk/New Wave fashion: tight, slim-leg vinyl pants and vintage leather jackets, garishly dyed hair, and spiky haircut. In an interview, McNamara defended the key contributions of Madrid's drag queens and fashion-conscious queers to the *Movida*'s inception and, more importantly, to the central role that fashion played in its projection of a (post)modern identity. With their provocative makeup, hairstyles, and dress, McNamara argued that homosexuals and transvestites functioned as a trend-setting avant-garde by daring to show themselves in public spaces in ways which subverted social canons of behavior, taste, and gender identity (Gallero 1991: 318). McNamara's jolting camp performance in *Laberinto de pasiones* certainly infuses the film with a good deal of its subversive edge. Patty is also the voice and embodiment of fashion in the film's discourse; no sooner is he done posing for a porn photonovel than the ensuing conversation

with Riza turns to fashion: the prince has decided he needs a makeover and Patty is more than happy to advise on the choice of haircuts and colored dyes. Flipping through the pages of a fashion magazine, Patty settles on “a crazy color de Londres” (a crazy color from London) that will make Riza look like “la reina de Halloween” (the queen of Halloween) because “lo moderno fue siempre futurista” (the modern was always futuristic) and “el futurismo siempre es glitter” (futurism is always glitter).

Sporting this wild new haircut, Riza shows up at a rehearsal of Sexilia’s all-girl band, *Las Ex*. Riza’s flirtatious conversation with the girls’ boyfriends, who have their own rock band (*Ellos*, featuring members of the actual band *Radio Futura*), revolves around a shared passion for clothes and cosmetics. Examining a red vinyl jacket worn by one of the musicians, Riza cannot help but exclaim: “¡Qué chaqueta tan bonita!” (What a lovely jacket!). Following the band into their dressing room, Riza next professes his love of cosmetics: “¡Qué maquillajes tan divinos!” (This makeup is divine!). Before long, Riza has borrowed the red jacket and jumps on stage, substituting for the ailing lead singer, to perform one of the *Movida*’s underground hits: “Gran Ganga,” originally sung by the duo of Almodóvar and McNamara in their nightclub appearances. In fact, Almodóvar also makes an appearance, accompanied by McNamara, at a rock concert later in the film, semi-dressed in drag, sporting a short leather jacket and skirt, a pair of fishnet stockings, and high heel shoes. The intimate relation between radical street fashion and alternative pop music in the *Movida* is further underlined in this concert sequence by the hip artsy dresses and accessories (earrings etc.) worn by Sexilia and her band members during their stage performances.

Fashionable dress is also important to a secondary plot in *Laberinto de pasiones*: the friendship between Sexilia and Queti (Marta Fernández Muro), who works at a drycleaners. No sooner has Sexilia dropped off her trendy clothes at the store than Queti is trying them on in front of a mirror and later wearing them in public. When caught by Sexilia, Queti speaks of her deep admiration for the singer. Flattered by Queti’s devotion, Sexilia brings her along to a friend’s apartment; its trendy décor—colorful paintings, flashy wallpaper with semi-abstract shapes of nude couples embracing in a variety of positions, and a couch upholstered in wild psychedelic patterns—delights Queti: “¡Qué monada de paredes! ¡Qué colores tan divinos!” (What lovely walls! The colors are so divine!). Just as earlier dialogue underlined the characters’ fascination with clothes and fashion accessories as signifiers of their modern subjectivities, here it draws attention to the eye-catching sets, which play off the fanciful dresses and hats worn by Sexilia’s friends, as further supplementary markers of *modernidad*.

Thus, *Laberinto de pasiones* already evinces Almodóvar’s predisposition towards pushing fashion and design to a high level of visibility where its sensuous and decorative properties outshine, and even undermine, its purely narrative role. Sexilia’s most provocative costume consists of a suit—a black leather jacket and pants combo—with plastic breasts attached to the fabric covering her torso; it is a rather

gratuitous fashion statement, as far as the narrative is concerned, although its presence may be justified as an outer expression of Sexilia's aggressive sexuality. For her part, Riza's stepmother, the empress Toraya (Helga Liné), dons a variety of highly fashionable outfits, in keeping with her aristocratic status, but one in particular stands out for its finesse and performative role: out one night looking for Riza in Madrid's gay cruising grounds, she puts on a chic, tailored male suit and a fedora in order to pass as a man. At other times, dress in *Laberinto de pasiones* serves no obvious purpose whatsoever. In one sequence, Sexilia's exits a subway and walks through a non-descript neighborhood, her long red cape floating behind her, a striking visual flourish which contrasts with the dull urban surroundings; this moment is one of the first instances in Almodóvar's cinema where an item of clothing is treated as a purely abstract form removed from any narrative or descriptive function, a mere surface of color to be enjoyed for the visual pleasure it provides. It is also one of several moments throughout the film in which the color red attains a prominent place in the visual correlation between costume, sets, and props. For instance, early in the film, during Sexilia's first conversation with Susana, an Argentine Lacanian psychoanalyst, both women are dressed in red; as part of the décor, a prominent red feather appears on the left of the screen (next to Sexilia).

In the end, *Laberinto de pasiones* deals with a number of important critical issues, such as the use of fashion as a vehicle for subcultures and marginal groups to construct and act out new, contestatory identities in the public sphere, defying established notions of taste and gender identity, but the film also reveals how this consumption of fashion is imbricated within larger patterns of consumerism. Its young characters resort to fashion as an important means to their integration into social networks and their building of community; it also lies at the heart of their interactions with popular culture. Yet Almodóvar's attitude towards his characters' mimetic thrall to mass-media lifestyles is somewhat ambiguous, as his satirical treatment of the matter too often skirts the surface. Angustias, one of Sexilia's friends and a veritable clotheshorse, quips at one point in the film: "Eso de ser estrella me tira tanto" (I really dig being a star). This Warholian one-liner is played for laughs, but Queti's fascination with being an underground rock star like Sexilia is less easily reduced to a joke, as her obsession reaches such pathological levels, beyond her theft of Sexilia's clothes, that she undergoes plastic surgery to look physically just like her idol; the hideous results are side-splitting but the entire affair is too disturbing to be easily shrugged off with a chuckle.

Fashion returns to the foreground in Almodóvar's fifth feature, *Matador*, a collaboration with novelist Jesús Ferrero and, often less acknowledged in the scholarship on the film, with fashion designer Francis Montesinos. One of the most innovative and creative fashion designers of his generation, Montesinos combined a fresh, eclectic and theatrical sensibility with a flair for garnering media attention. His designs from the 1980s have been variously described, on the one hand, as visionary and iconoclastic and, on the other, as *castizos* and *folklorizantes*, that is, invested with a certain traditional Spanishness rooted in regional folklore

(Plaza 2004). Merging aesthetic influences from such polar artistic practices as flamenco and rock music and infusing the resulting designs and stage shows with an irrepressible love of excess, attributed to the exuberant *cultura fallera* (culture of the Fallas festival) of his native Valencia, Montesinos emerged as one of the most flamboyant personalities in Spain's post-Franco fashion scene and thus a prime candidate for impersonation. In *Matador* Almodóvar makes a brief cameo appearance as a high-strung fashion designer named Montesinos, supervising his models' dresses and makeup as they are about to hit the runway, while being pursued at the same time by a fashion reporter.

The intersection of state cultural policies, the fashion industry, and the film industry are perfectly illustrated in Montesinos's spectacular *Made in Spain* fashion show, which took place on September 28, 1985, during Spanish Fashion Week, in Las Ventas, Madrid's premier bullring, drawing over 10,000 spectators (López de Haro 1985). Carrying a reputed price tag of 16,000,000 pesetas, financed in part by the Spanish Ministry of Industry and Energy, the Generalitat Valenciana, and the department store Galería Preciados, *Made in Spain* was one of the cultural highlights of the early Socialist years. After an opening barrage of fireworks, Montesinos's ten collections—which bore titles such as the Greco line and the Goya line, the Picasso Collection, and Las Meninas—were exhibited on ten horse-drawn carriages which circled the bullring; the final collection was tellingly titled *Made in Europe*. The clothes on display (gowns, jackets, suits, capes, skirts, vests etc.) abounded in combinations of red and gold inspired by the colors of the Spanish flag; the collections featured a balance of cutting-edge and traditional designs, the latter echoing bullfighting attire and regional dress, such as the *zaragüelles*, a combination of skirt and trousers typical of Valencia's rural communities. Celebrities from the theater, the cinema, and the fashion world joined bullfighters, horse riders, folkloric dancers, and pyrotechnists in the arena. A few months earlier, Montesinos had organized a second fashion show, titled "Homage to the *Movida*," described by *El País* ("La noche movida de Francis Montesinos" 1985) as a kind of fashion "happening"; Almodóvar and Bibi Andersen, among other cult figures from Madrid's nightlife, walked the runway wearing Montesinos's creations. Almodóvar shot footage of both events, which inspired the fashion sequences of *Matador*.

By the time *Matador* reached movie theaters in Spain and abroad, the *Movida* had evolved from an underground movement to a mass-media phenomenon, in the process losing most of its oppositional energies; this mutation enabled its appropriation and instrumentalization by city and state institutions as part of their marketing campaigns to sell a modern image of Spain to the outside world. As the *Movida* became increasingly branded as a fashionable lifestyle, fashion acquired even greater prominence as one of the movement's distinctive artistic contributions; young and up-coming designers such as Manuel Piña, Sybilla, and Ágatha Ruiz de la Prada created clothes which embodied the (post)modern sensibilities of post-Franco Spain. Through the preeminence given in its *mise en scène* to contemporary Spanish fashion, *Matador* further proclaimed the wealth and sophistication

of Spain's arts and design scene under the Socialist government; coincidentally, it was Almodóvar's first film fully supported by the Ministry of Culture. The street fashions and flea market and vintage clothes worn by the young *modernos* in *Laberinto de pasiones* are replaced in *Matador* with a mixture of casual, ready-to-wear items, on the one hand, especially for the male characters, and haute couture dresses of striking beauty, on the other, for actresses Assumpta Serna and Eva Cobo; moreover, the cosmopolitan look of *Laberinto de pasiones*'s urban subcultural fashions gives way in *Matador* to clothes inflected with a national sense of style. In addition to Montesinos's creations—some of which belonged to the *Made in Spain* collections—*Matador* includes designs by another leading figure of Spain's new fashion scene, Antonio Alvarado—who designed the suits worn by Eusebio Poncela's police chief—as well as costumes by Jose María de Cossío, who would go on to become Almodóvar's main costume designer for the next twelve years.

If *Laberinto de pasiones* showed that Madrid's *modernos*, despite emerging from decades of isolation under Franco, were not completely ignorant of the latest street and underground fashions in London or New York, *Matador* set out to project the vitality of an up-and-coming, quintessentially Spanish fashion industry; it is one of the few moments in which Almodóvar's aesthetic concerns lined up with a state-sponsored agenda: that of making Spain a fashionable place to visit as well as a place where fashion mattered. Perhaps this is why, as Correa Ulloa suggests, there is such a strong, recurring presence of Spanish visual motifs, particularly those associated with Andalusian art and culture, which had not received such prominence in Almodóvar's previous films (2005: 76).

Borja Casani, director of the cultural monthly *La Luna de Madrid*, opined that Spaniards labored under an inferiority complex which the international attention drawn to the *Movida* helped dispel: "Antes de los 80, la imagen de España era muy mala. Nos humillaba cuando salíamos al extranjero. Había complejo. Lo español estaba mal visto" (Before the 1980s, Spain had a terrible image. We felt humiliated each time we went abroad. There was a complex. Anything Spanish was held in poor regard) (García León and Maldonado 1989: 130). In a way, *Matador* set out to redress those perceptions and refute that state of mind. Regarding the importance of fashion in *Matador*, Almodóvar declared: "Quiero demostrar que en este país es posible vestirse tan bien como uno quiera" (I want to prove that it is possible for anybody to dress in this country as well as one would like to) (García León and Maldonado 1989: 184). In the film, María Cardenal embodies the new Spanish femininity of the democratic era: a successful career woman, economically independent and sexually aggressive, and very fashion conscious. María is both modern and at the same traditional in her appreciation of deeply rooted Spanish customs such as bullfights and this duality comes across in her choice of dress: in the office, she wears finely tailored two-piece suits (for instance, a black and white checkered jacket and skirt combo), but in her leisure outings she wraps herself in Spanish capes. She is also fond of designer fetishwear and treasures accessories of an artisanal quality, such as the finely crafted hairpin (designed by Chris Bures) which

doubles as a murderous weapon. A brief scene which shows María shopping in the emerging fashion and design district on Almirante Street, in Madrid's Chueca neighborhood, is arguably meant to underline the *modernidad* of her taste as a consumer. Furthermore, she is an archetypal Almodóvar character in the sense that red seems to be her favorite color: she wears red nail polish and is fond of deep crimson lipstick. Moreover, during her first visit to Diego's house, she gravitates towards a red bullfighting cape, which ends up wrapped around her torso.

As in other films by Almodóvar, *Matador* offers its share of gratuitous fashion moments, where the spectacle of beautifully crafted and photographed clothes overtakes their narrative function as costume. During a visit to a hospital where her client Ángel is recovering after an accident, a long shot holds María in the center of the frame as she enters and advances through Ángel's room wearing a black skirt, a white blouse and vest, and a stunning knee-length white jacket, which plays off the white décor of the hospital's walls and medical equipment. Later in the film, she attends a fashion show wearing a golden-colored blouse, a red skirt with a black sash, and a black cape with a golden-colored underlining. Fleeing the event at the sight of Diego, she comes to a stop at the overpass known as the Segovia viaduct, a favorite jumping point for suicide victims. As she peers over the edge, Almodóvar shoots her from a low angle (the camera seemingly positioned under the bridge), with the yellow underlining of her cape floating in the air, creating a visually pleasing surface of bright warm color on the screen. Almodóvar achieves another impressive visual moment later in the film, this time centered around an elegant red wedding gown worn by Diego's girlfriend, Eva. Having heard of the couple's plans to run away, Eva attempts to convince María to give up Diego, but the lawyer rejects her pleas. As María descends in an elevator, Eva runs down the stairs of the same building, hoping to prevent her from leaving; Almodóvar shoots her rapid descent from a high angle, with the camera positioned at the top of the spiral staircase looking down at her body; a train of red tulle, floating behind her as she races down the steps, duplicates this spiral shape. Incidentally, red and fuchsia are also colors favored by Eva both on and off the runway.

Matador, with its thought-out incorporation of fashion into the film's mise en scène, signaled Almodóvar's rapid evolution as a visual artist. In his seventh feature film, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Almodóvar achieved an ever greater sophistication in the coordination of costumes, sets, and overall design (Edwards 2001: 100, 102). The film's costumes were designed by the Madrid-based studio of the Peris Brothers, a fashion house with a century-long tradition of providing costumes for theater, opera, and zarzuela performances and an extended involvement in the production of film costumes dating back to the 1940s. While the clothes featured in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* never reach the degree of originality and artistic expressiveness of Montesinos's creations, remaining much closer to the supporting role traditionally assigned to costume in film, fashion remains an important vehicle for Almodóvar's aesthetic vision of (post)modernity in



Figure 23.1 Dressed to kill: wearing her pink suit, Lucía confronts Pepa in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Macusa Cores.

post-Franco Spain as well as for his representation of femininity. From the outset, fashion declares its relevance to the film's visual texture and thematic concerns: collages of retro fashion images drawn from different advertising sources accompany some of the opening credits designed by Juan Gatti: hats, shoes, eyelashes or lipstick tubes appear besides the names of each actor. The bright primary colors, with their overt reference to Pop Art, imbue this sequence with a cheery and breezy tone, prefiguring the film's strong camp sensibility.

The character of Lucía (Julieta Serrano) embodies this retro sense of fashion through her preference for 1960s era hats and coats, bell-bottom pants, and elaborate wigs. During an outing to confront Pepa, she puts on a leopard skin suit with a matching tall hat; towards the end of the film, during the chase scene in the airport, Lucía is ludicrously dressed in a pink suit more appropriate to a little girl.

In fact, as she acknowledges to herself, her choice of clothes is a self-willed attempt to maintain the illusion that time has stood still. Almodóvar clearly plays up Lucía's eccentric sense of fashion not merely for laughs, but also for its enjoyable kitsch value, indulging in the guilty pleasures to be had in the contemplation of bad taste. On the other hand, Pepa (Carmen Maura) and Paulina (Kiti Manver) wear clothes that identify them as contemporary professional women who juggle the demands of the workplace—such as the unspoken code of dress that women must ascribe to in an office setting—with society's pressures to comply

with accepted standards of femininity (e.g., when she goes to work, Pepa wears a blue jacket and skirt and black high-heel shoes).

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios's costume design generally favors styles of dress which strike a balance between the expression of social identity and the desire for comfort and pleasure. In her review of the film, critic Margaret Walters (1989) praised Almodóvar's intuitive recognition of the very real pleasures that women find in dressing up and putting on makeup. In fact, Stella Bruzzi, among other women film historians, has sought to theorize possible practices of female spectatorship where women's sensorial engagement with fashion images on screen can result in empowering scenarios of fantasy and identification and acts of stereotype-defying reappropriation (1997: xix). In the film's opening credits, the word "mujeres" features a female figure striking a classic *Vogue* magazine pose next to each letter. Moreover, one of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*'s most circulated publicity shots encapsulates the film's union of fashion, beauty, artifice, style, and pleasure: lining up horizontally all of the film's main protagonists, the picture short-circuits the standard function of a publicity shot—to convey a sense of the narrative and its characters—by introducing the visual language of the fashion spread. Thus, the actors' bodies strike poses which are clearly less about the revelation of personality and more about the display of clothes.

As a model, Candela's sense of fashion, in line with her youth, is more on the cutting-edge: during the first half of the film, she wears tall boots over long white stockings and a white-and-blue striped top and mini skirt; she also sports large earrings in the shape of a coffeepot. In one scene, Almodóvar generates humor from the incongruous image of Candela's tall, lanky figure walking through a garbage dump in the outskirts of the city in her fashionable outfit. On the other hand, Pepa, a successful voice dubber and actress in television commercials, wears simple but elegant clothes appropriate to her age and manifests a penchant for colorful fabrics and patterns that match the bright and vibrant décor of her penthouse apartment, with its ample terrace and its enviable view of Madrid's skyline. Her affluent position is conveyed by the fact that she puts on eight different sets of clothes throughout the film, ranging from the pink pajamas she is wearing as the film begins, to the blue jacket and skirt combo over a white shirt with black polka dots worn during her visit to Paulina's law office, and ending with a red jacket and skirt combo over a low-cut red top with a pattern of dark red and black dots, capped by red high-heel shoes. In her home, Pepa is often positioned next to red objects: a telephone, plastic flower pots, kitchen rags, tomatoes. As Mark Allinson notes, red and related warm colors dominate the film's palette and reverberate throughout its *mise en scène*: red sofas and rich wooden floors complement the warm orange walls of Pepa's penthouse. At the end of the film, both Pepa and Marisa are wearing red (Allinson 2001: 183).

Artist Javier Mariscal noted that the generation of artists and cultural entrepreneurs behind the *Movida* was the first to succeed in their attempts to sell a totally modern image of Spain (Gallero 1991: 371). The worldwide box-office smash of

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios proved that projecting a cosmopolitan sense of style was one avenue to achieve this goal. Using the glamour, artificiality, and kitschy taste of 1950s Technicolor Hollywood as a point of reference—in particular the comedies of Doris Day—Almodóvar harnessed this feeling of opulence in order to project the image of a lifestyle free of material want (Young 1990). On the subject of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*'s design, Almodóvar stated: “He intentado hacer una película donde todo sea muy bonito y muy agradable, aunque no sea real . . . La gente viste bien, vive en bonitas casas con preciosas vistas . . . Todo es hermoso, artificial y estilizado” (I have tried to make a movie where everything is very pretty and very comfortable, even though it may not be real . . . People dress well, live in nice houses with lovely views . . . Everything is beautiful, artificial and stylized) (Blanco 1989: 103).

Made in Europe

Almodóvar once confessed his desire to make a film, along the lines of *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957), where fashion would be the protagonist (Young 1990). Almodóvar's two ensuing films after the controversial *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), *Tacones lejanos*, and *Kika*, would come closest to realizing this desire. *Tacones lejanos* was Almodóvar's first co-production with a European partner, CIBY 2000, which also co-produced *Kika* and *La flor de mi secreto*. It is probably not an accident that the availability of French co-financing coincided with the sudden presence of European haute couture designs in Almodóvar's cinema. As we move into the 1990s, we see a progression in the films' costume design from fashions “made in Spain” to those “made in Europe.” For *Tacones lejanos*, Almodóvar enlisted the collaboration of two iconic powerhouses in the fashion world: Giorgio Armani and Chanel—one of the Armani outfits worn by actress Marisa Paredes alone is said to have cost 3,000,000 pesetas. Both Almodóvar's screenplay and camerawork ensure that spectators do not miss out on the presence of these clothes, which function both as material objects and symbolic texts. For instance, while Rebeca (Victoria Abril) waits at an airport lounge for her mother's arrival from Mexico, a close-up shot of the interior of her red handbag fills up the widescreen image, allowing the viewer a clear glimpse of the Chanel logo. A few minutes later, her mother, Becky (Marisa Paredes), will expressly remark upon Rebeca's Chanel suit, which reappears throughout the film—Rebeca is even wearing it the day she is released from prison.

Becky, on the other hand, wears Armani. Thus, these women's fraught relationship is conveyed in part through their differing brand loyalty, a behavior which would resonate with spectators attuned to the discourses of haute couture fashion and the meaningfulness of choosing one designer label over another.

As in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, a deep-seated love for the glossy comedies and lush melodramas of classic Hollywood's Technicolor era and an



Figure 23.2 Fashion statement: Rebeca, played by Victoria Abril, in real Chanel in *Tacones lejanos* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1991; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Mimmo Cattarinich.

aesthetic affinity for the fashion spreads in *Vogue* magazine informed, according to Almodóvar himself, the visual design of *Tacones lejanos* (Fotogramas 1991). The opening credits sequence is reminiscent of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*'s beginning in its use of bold colors (orange, fuchsia) and contrasting hues (blue and red, yellow and blue), its Pop Art references to Warhol's silkscreen paintings, and its vaguely retro look. Once again, and perhaps to a higher degree than in any previous film, red dominates the Almodóvar palette. In the film's first scene, which takes place in Barajas airport, Rebeca wears red sunglasses which match the color of her handbag and the lounge's seats; as Becky stands by the baggage carousel, she is wearing a bright red suit, a red pamelà hat, red sunglasses, red high-heel

shoes, and red earrings, while carrying a red handbag. When Rebeca tells her mother about Letal, the drag queen who impersonates Becky's youthful Pop persona, they are standing next to a poster of Letal dressed in bright red and bearing a spectacular headdress made of red feathers; in her performance, Letal also wears another striking red outfit (a glittery short red dress with a red blouse tied in a knot around her waist) complemented by red long gloves, red earrings, and red platform shoes; the décor of the cabaret also abounds in red surfaces. Later on, the blood orange walls of Rebeca's apartment play off her red Chanel suit. Finally, during their testimony to Inspector Domínguez about the death of Rebeca's husband, both mother and daughter are dressed in different shades of red. Varderí has suggestively argued that Almodóvar's predilection for bright, colorful compositions operates as a compensatory experience for the Spaniards of his generation who were deprived of the dreamy Technicolor vision of life by the underdevelopment and poverty which characterized long periods of Franco's dictatorship (Varderí 1996: 164). But Almodóvar has also mentioned the impact that his discovery of Caribbean colonial art and popular culture had on the intense chromaticism of his films from this period (Minero 1994: 32–3); perhaps as response to that recent encounter with the aesthetic world of Latin America, *Tacones lejanos* includes a flashback scene of Rebeca's childhood during a vacation on Isla Margarita, off Venezuela's coast.

The film press acknowledged the prominence of fashion in *Tacones lejanos* in a number of witty headlines: for instance, Rikki Morgan titled her *Sight & Sound* review (1992) "Dress to Kill" in an allusion to Brian de Palma's slasher movie as well as to the murder which happens in Almodóvar's film. But not all critics were pleased with this development; for instance, *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin (1991) felt that the clothes were so eye-catching that they managed at times to upstage the actors who wore them. Moreover, citing *Tacones lejanos* as a case in point, other critics and scholars have argued that Almodóvar's films of the early 1990s seem increasingly concerned with the lives, feelings, and material possessions of a newly constituted bourgeoisie, in keeping with Almodóvar's own professional and economic success. According to the filmmaker (*Fotogramas* 1991), many of the luxurious furnishings and unique design objects which appear in *Tacones lejanos* belonged to him. As Varderí notes, beginning with *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, the private spaces inhabited by Almodóvar's characters are ever more sophisticated and cinematic, exhibiting a growing love of artificiality and exuding a wealth, generated ironically under a Socialist administration, which removes them from the ordinariness of everyday life (Varderí 1996: 164). Becky's transformation of the humble basement apartment in which she grew up into a chic modern-looking space, painted in bright primary colors and decorated with canvases in the style of Warhol's serial silkscreen portraits, exemplifies this flight from humdrum reality to Hollywood glamour. Indirectly, Becky's makeover of the old *portería* also bespeaks the transformation of Madrid's dilapidated old quarters into a fashionable and pricey real estate destination for the new monied professionals of the Socialist years.



Figure 23.3 Manuela accompanies Agrado in faux Chanel in *Todo sobre mi madre* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1999; prod. El Deseo, S.A.). © El Deseo, S.A., S.L.U. © Teresa Isasi.

For critics and viewers who adored the shabby and vulgar underground aesthetics of Almodóvar's early films, the filmmaker's evolution from John Waters to Douglas Sirk was at the very least disconcerting and, ultimately for many, infuriating.

Disappointed fans responded by coining the term "Almodólar" as a reference to the filmmaker's newfound obsession with the lives of the rich and famous and the spectacle of luxury (Correa Ulloa 2005: 100). Yet even in *Tacones lejanos*'s rarefied world of expensive threads and high-end accessories, fashion items enable Almodóvar to evoke resonant depths of feeling. The pair of white earrings, a childhood present from Becky, which Rebeca wears to greet her at the airport, are fetish objects which have consoled her during her mother's fifteen-year absence; when these earring get caught up in Becky's hair as mother and daughter embrace, the complicated nature of this relationship is made patently clear. Later on, in the film's final scene, Rebeca's sighting of two feet wearing red high-heel shoes through a window in her mother's basement apartment evokes deep-seated childhood memories. As her mother lies on her deathbed, Becky recalls her inability to fall asleep until she heard the comforting sound of her mother's high-heel shoes tapping their way along the corridor leading to her bedroom; Becky's shoes are thus invested with both a material presence and an affective dimension.

At the same time, as we have come to expect from Almodóvar, fashion is not exempt from the filmmaker's well-known irreverent sense of humor. Discussing

his vision of the wardrobe worn by actor Miguel Bosé, in his double role as a police inspector and a female impersonator, Almodóvar described it as oscillating between the look of a department store's collection inspired by the controversial Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón and the slutty attire of a Beverly Hills whore (*Fotogramas* 1991). And for the film's Madrid premiere, in a priceless publicity stunt, Almodóvar and his cast arrived at the movie theater standing inside an enormous high-heel shoe placed above a limousine.

Working again with a high budget courtesy of CIBY 2000, Almodóvar continued his love affair with European haute couture in *Kika*, taking it to a new stage by engaging the collaboration of two radically innovative designers: Gaultier and Versace. The latter supplied the sunny and colorful costumes for the film's homonymous protagonist, played by actress Verónica Forqué, whereas Gaultier designed the outfits worn by reality TV presenter Andrea Caracortada, played by Abril, including the film's *pièce de résistance*: a futuristic-looking rubber bodysuit rife with militaristic overtones and technological adaptabilities. Described by Bruzzi (1997: 11) as containing "epaulettes studded with video controls," "flip-up shades," "breastplates lamps protected with industrial meshing" which "function as a makeshift lighting system," heavy duty boots, and a helmet which also doubles as the mount for a video camera, this costume transformed Abril into a hybrid creature, one part biker, one part machine. While Gaultier's other three costumes for Abril are nowhere as excessive as the one I have just described, they are still deliberately intrusive, operating on a plane removed from narrative motivation or realistic characterization; moreover, Almodóvar's camerawork seeks to maximize the visual impact of these eccentric outfits. In the sequence depicting Andrea's first broadcast from the set of her television program, the camera is positioned at the bottom of the screen, tracking first to the right in synchronization with Andrea's footsteps as it horizontally follows the train of her dress before moving upwards along her torso, where the dress' black fabric is ripped open to reveal two fake, orchid-like red breasts (surrounded by hanging red threads meant to resemble trickling blood), and ending in a close-up of her face. In Andrea's next television appearance, the camera pulls back from the edge of a tattered red velvet dress, tracking upwards to reveal Andrea's body perched on a television monitor suspended from the ceiling; her arms and legs are swathed in surgical bandages, made to look like long gloves and stockings. In her final television broadcast, Andrea wears another long black dress ripped around the shoulders and along the torso, revealing a red bra; a prosthetic leg is glimpsed through a slit along the right side of the dress. On all three occasions, her hair is pulled back in a tight, very slick hairdo. If the rubber suit dehumanizes Andrea to the extent of making her resemble a cyborg, the vamp look of her on-camera appearances amplifies the ghoulish side of her personality.

By contrast, *Kika*'s cheerful, optimistic personality and motherly, nourishing qualities are conveyed through the simple, bold and high-key colors of her blouses and skirts. Almodóvar asked Versace to express his vision of the character's extroverted and warm-hearted nature through her choice of dress, marked once again

by a dominance of the color red. Early in the film, as she applies makeup to a supposedly dead Ramón (Alex Casanovas), Kika is wearing a red dress and red hairband, which match the red bedspread upon which Ramón is lying. As the story moves forward in time, a slightly older Kika appears in a red dress with a pattern of white polka dots. During the notorious rape scene, Kika is dressed in red; so is her assailant. Finally, in the concluding scenes, Kika picks up a hitchhiker in a red car; she's wearing a strapped dress with a red and white floral pattern and red high-heel shoes and carrying a big red handbag. As Spindler (1994) has noted, Almodóvar's designs for the cut and shape, colors, and floral patterns of Forqué's clothes embodied a notion of Kika as a sort of benign fertility goddess possessed of a curvaceous figure: low-cut dresses served to emphasize Forqué's large breasts, while the actress wore prosthetic hips in order to comply with the filmmaker's full-figured image of his protagonist. More so, the theme of female fertility extends to even some subliminal aspects of the film's set design: Alejandro Yarza notes the presence of a painting of a naked woman surrounded by fruits which hangs above Kika's bed (this nude also appears in a poster hanging in the living room) and reads the upholstered fabrics of the armchairs' cushions, which resemble a cow's hide, as design elements further reiterating this motif (Yarza 1999: 161).

It is common knowledge that Almodóvar has always invested great care into the visual design of his films: at the beginning of his career, he even painted some of his own sets. As his films became more widely seen abroad and higher budgets enabled him to splurge on high-end design objects, Méjean (2007: 135) claims that it became fashionable among young professionals in Spain and even in sophisticated European capitals like Paris to decorate their apartments in the style of Almodóvar's sets. A substantial part of *Kika's* large budget was devoted to its sets, arguably among the most expensive of any in an Almodóvar film to date.⁷ A good deal of the action takes place inside Kika's and Ramón's apartment, which contains a variety of furnishings, decorative objects, and fabrics that play off and complement the actors' bright costumes, tending towards the high-key color range: the hallway walls are painted in warm harmonizing colors of salmon and light yellow; the bathroom tiles form bright blue patterns; and various pieces of furniture and fabrics are red, while others are blue; access to the kitchen, where red ceiling lamps and red-trimmed chairs play off dark blue cabinets attached to light blue walls, is through a blue door with an oculus framed in red. Throughout, an eclectic Pop sensibility prevails: lava lamps containing fluid red shapes emit a yellow glow and shelves are overcrowded with kitschy figurines and religious images. Paintings and photographs hang on walls alongside framed posters, underscoring the artsy milieu.

Kika's first sequences evoke the interrelated businesses of fashion and cosmetology. The opening scene accompanying the credits recreates a photo shoot for a lingerie advertisement through a *mise en scène* reminiscent of a scene in *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966): a fashion photographer (Ramón) straddles a prone, scantily dressed female model, aiming his camera at her body and urging

her to strike erotically provocative poses. As other scholars have pointed out, this fashion scenario introduces many of the key issues that the film develops later on, such as voyeurism, fetishism, male objectification of the female body, and the porous borders between art and pornography. In the immediately following scene, we first meet Kika, lecturing to her students about the appropriate way of wearing fake eyelashes. Together, both sequences construct an image of Spanish society gripped by narcissistic fantasies and exhibitionist impulses and thoroughly seduced by the sort of alluringly erotic surfaces which the contemporary fashion industry so vigorously advertises.

One of Juan Gatti's posters for *Kika* illustrates this reign of narcissism and exhibitionism, as evidenced by its presentation of the film's main characters in strikingly performative poses reminiscent of fashion magazine spreads; personality is thereby virtually reduced to the display of clothes and accessories. Modeled after the aforementioned publicity shot of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, this poster's design expands the photograph's horizontal line-up of the performers onto a second tier, thus dividing the space of the poster into two groups of four actors, one group on top of the other. The flattening of the bodies into almost colored cutouts accentuates the graphic qualities and interplay of colors and black type. This frivolous, decorative presentation of modern-day Iberians as clotheshorses strikingly contrasts with the raw graphic images from Andrea's exploitative television report on the Good Friday processions in a rural village: these practices—where dress also plays a central role—document the persistence within Spain's carefully crafted image of modernity of atavistic customs redolent of backwardness and primitiveness.

La flor de mi secreto

As Spain's Socialist government tottered in the mid-1990s under the weight of charges levied for corruption, malfeasance, and nepotism, Almodóvar staged an anti-government demonstration in *La flor de mi secreto*, the final film covered in this essay, as an excuse to intertwine two of his greatest passions: cinephilia and fashion. Halfway through the film, the protagonist Leo (Marisa Paredes) stumbles upon a large group of medical students assembling on the streets to protest recent educational policies. As she struggles to make her way through the crowd, Leo is pushed and shoved around—on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she is rescued by her friend Ángel (Juan Echanove), who takes her into his arms and walks her to safety. Any spectator familiar with classic Italian cinema would instantly recognize the reference to *Voyage in Italy* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953). But viewers might also be struck by the visual contrast between the sea of ordinary white laboratory coats and Leo's highly fashionable blue outfit.

This briefly glimpsed panorama of political dissent and social crisis notwithstanding, *La flor de mi secreto* generally depicts Spaniards as a prosperous people,

comfortable in the skin of their European identity and in the enjoyment of posh European lifestyles. Ángel, an editor in the cultural section of the newspaper *El País*, dresses well and lives in a fancy penthouse with salmon-colored walls and large windows overlooking the Plaza de Callao and the buildings of the Gran Vía, in the heart of Madrid's commercial district. In Ángel's lushly designed space, Leo's fashionable clothes, which clue us into her professional success as writer of harlequin novels, come to life in a way that does not quite happen when she is in the company of her husband Paco (Imanol Arias), a military officer deployed in Bosnia, in the more austere environment of her own apartment. Paco's international mission signals Spain's ascending political and diplomatic role in Europe: for instance, in 1995, the year of *La flor de mi secreto's* release, Spain presided the European Union for the second time in its history. The sober, neutral colors of his uniform, covered with medals and insignia, points to this new continental identity achieved by cooperation and integration and the shedding of signs of national cultural identity; the latter, however, are not completely jettisoned in Almodóvar's film, albeit elevated to the realm of haute couture. In their respective dance performances, Blanca (Manuela Varga), Leo's housekeeper, wears a flamenco dress designed by Sybila, whereas her son Antonio (Joaquín Cortés) wears an Andalusian-style vest and pants designed by Dolce and Gabbana.

The colorful, artsy milieu of *Kika's* central couple is replaced in *La flor de mi secreto* by spaces decorated in more sober color schemes in keeping with the film's bourgeois, middle-aged protagonists and their low-key affluence. Unlike his use of stylized sets in *Kika*, Almodóvar chose to shoot *La Flor de mi secreto* in a real apartment, rented specifically for the occasion (Méjean 2007: 140). Our first glance of Leo's place is through a traveling shot across a bookcase: as the camera lingers over the titles of her books, it conveys the literary taste and intellectual profile of the space's inhabitant, a writer herself. The décor of Leo's apartment, revealed in subsequent scenes, includes some visually interesting items of high-end design, such as the bathroom cabinet shaped like the Red Cross logo. Next to the bathroom sink, the camera frames (slightly out of focus) lotions and cosmetics with the Chanel logo, objects which establish Leo's taste and imply her elevated socioeconomic status. At one point in the film, Leo exits her apartment onto the street and, as she hails a cab, the dome of the church of San Francisco el Grande looms in the background, indicating her residence in the city's fashionable old quarters. Yet during one of her outings, Leo's walk is thwarted by her painfully tight boots, perhaps a metaphor for the suffocating undercurrents of her superficially happy and affluent life.

Given its generic affiliation as a woman's picture in the tradition of classic Hollywood melodramas, it is quite appropriate for items of dress, such as Leo's boots, to take on symbolic functions. In *La flor de mi secreto*, Almodóvar, however, refrains from showcasing the work of trendy celebrity European haute couture designers, enlisting instead the collaboration of long-established Italian fashion houses such as Max Mara (for Paredes's wardrobe) and Ermenegildo Zegna (for Echanove's wardrobe). As we have come to expect in an Almodóvar film,

Leo wears her share of red clothing: during a special dinner at home celebrating her husband's return from Bosnia, Leo dons a red evening dress, which contrasts with Paco's beige uniform in a meaningful visual dynamic conveying the couple's emotional distance. Leo dresses in red again when she later attends Antonio's flamenco performance, perhaps not entirely an innocent choice of color, as the plot hints at a strong sexual attraction between them.

Leo's elegant sense of fashion and the upscale atmosphere of her bourgeois environment sharply contrast with the lower middle-class world of her sister Rosa (Rossy de Palma) as it appears to viewers through its embodiment in dress and design. The décor of Rosa's apartment breathes a kitsch sensibility in the white lace embroideries that cover the couch, in the fabric and design of the living room curtains, in the knick-knacks and porcelain figures resting on the bookshelves, and in the vases with fake flowers. Moreover, Rosa's attire (for instance, her sweater) and hairdo lack the sophistication of Leo's getup, thereby signifying Rosa's inferior social status and lesser cultural capital. In another sequence later in the film, Leo visits her mother's rural home; the elderly neighbors' modest black dresses and traditional home designs also differ from Leo's more urbane style. Through these contrasting styles of dress and décor, Almodóvar depicts three layers of Spanish society coexisting side by side: on one end, the film juxtaposes urban and rural modes of living, visualizing on the other end a distinction between upper-class and lower-class lifestyles. Thus, on the evidence of *La flor de mi secreto*'s fragmented and asynchronic fashion tastes, the project that I have claimed for Almodóvar's cinema, i.e., the remodeling of Spanish society into a hip fashionable nation, might be deemed only a partial success.

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay for a serious consideration of the relationship of Almodóvar's cinema to the business and creative world of fashion and design and have sought to contextualize the director's fascination with haute couture designs in terms of his personal taste as well as in relation to the larger framework of Spain's transition from a dictatorship with a feeble and largely unknown fashion industry to a democratic regime which supported its creative sectors and invested in the growth and promotion of a vibrant fashion and design scene. As Spain's fashion industry slowly gained international recognition and cemented a domestic market for its products with the expansion of an affluent middle class and the consolidation of a youth culture, which found in the consumption of designer clothes and accessories a means to negotiate their social and cultural identities, Almodóvar's cinema contributed its share to the project of schooling Spaniards in the art of becoming fashionable. As I have argued, Almodóvar's films depict individuals whose sense of a modern democratic identity—free of the inferiority complexes

and defiant of the stereotypes generated by forty years of Fascism—is partly constructed and acted out through fashion. By wearing colorful clothes and accessories and inhabiting equally colorful rooms furnished with trendy design objects, Almodóvar's characters reflect the enthusiasm with which Spaniards greeted their long delayed access to modernity and assumed their assigned roles as consumers, but they also project the optimism of a people who at last had begun to find their way back into history. Thanks to the vast international projection of Almodóvar's films, these kooky but ultimately endearing, fashion-loving characters have come to symbolize for many foreign spectators all that was exciting and appealing about this new generation of hip, cosmopolitan, and hedonistic Spaniards.

Seen in retrospect, Almodóvar's cinematic love affair with fashion has charted an intriguing, unpredictable path leading from the fashion-conscious hipsters steeped in the punk-inspired subcultures of the early *Movida* years through a detour halfway through the 1980s into the nationalist aesthetics of *Matador* before turning to the crowd-pleasing Technicolor Hollywood period inaugurated by *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* and then continued to greater heights of visual excess and material ostentation in the haute couture designs created for *Tacones lejanos* and *Kika*, before settling into the restrained, tasteful classicism embodied by the designs in *La flor de mi secreto*. I have tried to give this progression some kind of linearity and coherence by describing it as shift from a brand made in Spain to one made in Europe, thus drawing a connection to Montesinos's landmark fashion show, a highlight of the Socialist government's involvement with the fashion world.

Although Almodóvar has occasionally continued his collaborations with renowned fashion designers to the present, his characters' fashion choices now seldom command the same audience attention that had long been a signature feature of an Almodóvar film. The characters in these more recent films display their designer threads and brand accessories with a normalcy which, like the cultural modernization they embody, is up to date and stylish, yet their sense of fashion lacks the dramatic ostentation so common in the films made between 1982 and 1995. This normalization of fashion becomes itself a significant cultural statement about the "New" Spain.

By ironic contrast with this diminished on-screen role for fashion, Almodóvar himself has become increasingly involved in clothing and design-related projects and routinely makes appearances in fashion shows and magazine spreads, consolidating the image of fashion maverick he has been circulating since the 1980s.⁸ In turn, the fashion world has embraced Almodóvar and returned his love, repeatedly referencing a body of films which has become an ongoing source of inspiration to designers everywhere. The December 2009 issue of *French Vogue* included a fourteen-page spread featuring fashion concepts drawn from the filmmaker's cinematic universe; *Harper's Bazaar* followed suit three months later with a multi-page spread depicting fashion celebrities (Karl Lagerfeld, Angela Missoni, Gaultier) and renowned models in scenarios inspired by scenes from eight

Almodóvar films.⁹ Shot by photographer Jason Schmidt and styled by Katie Mossman, "In the Mode of Almodovar" brings the dynamic relationship between the Spanish director and the fashion and design world full circle, paying tribute to a man who has done more than other contemporary filmmaker to bring fashion and film into a synergetic interface and to make fashion an integral part of the identities and fantasies of everyday people.

Notes

- 1 The March 2006 of *Spanish Vogue* set a new record as the biggest issue of *Vogue* ever published; at 1,006 pages, it weighed almost six pounds.
- 2 The stunning success of adolescent businessman Pepe Barreiro's clothing chain Don Algodón has been one of the great entrepreneurial stories of post-Franco Spain. Even more remarkable is the worldwide expansion of the Spanish chain Zara, the pearl in the crown of the business conglomerate Inditex (Industria de Diseño Textil), founded by Galician entrepreneur Amancio Ortega Garaona, which comprises seven additional fashion chains as well as real estate, construction, and other profitable businesses (Surowiecki 2000).
- 3 In the film *Kika*, in a kind of in joke on de Palma's modeling career, the homonymous protagonist tells her maid Juana, played by Rossy de Palma: "Ahora que se llevan las caras raras, hasta podrías ser modelo" (Now that strange faces are in fashion, you could even be a model).
- 4 Cruz, for instance, has appeared on the covers of the Spanish edition of *Vogue* (April 2009) and the English-language edition of *Vogue* (November 2009). She was also guest editor for the May 2010 issue of *Vogue Paris*.
- 5 Almodóvar mounts a similar defense of eclectic fashion choices in a later interview with *Vogue España* (Alas 1995).
- 6 A similar revelation of sexual orientation and desire by means of point-of-view shots of male genitalia delineated through clothing takes place in *Matador*.
- 7 In the final credits, well-known fashion brands such as Armani, Paul Smith, and Panama Jack appear alongside other renowned design names such as Vuitton and Baume & Mercier.
- 8 Among other activities, he designed a logo for Lacoste polo shirts which were included in a special 2008 issue of the fashion and art magazine *Visionaire* and commissioned, as part of the promotional campaign for *Los abrazos rotos / Broken Embraces* (2009), a set of espresso glasses with Cruz's image reproduced in the style of Warhol's silkscreens to be handed out among journalists who interviewed her during the Toronto Film Festival. The *Vogue Paris* issue of December 2009/January 2010 included an interview titled "Pedro Almodóvar. Moments de désir," followed by the photo spread "Photograph Me (x 6)," featuring scenes from an imaginary film set in Madrid, which photographer Bruce Weber conceived as a birthday gift to Almodóvar. "In the Mode of Almodóvar," in *Harper's Bazaar's* March 2010 issue, consisted of eight photographs inspired by the following Almodóvar films: *Tacones lejanos*, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, *¡Átame!*, *Volver*, *Entre tinieblas*, *Carne trémula*, *La ley del deseo*, and *Los abrazos rotos*. Almodóvar appeared in two of them.

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Almodóvar, Cyberfandom, and Participatory Culture

Vicente Rodríguez Ortega

I conceptualize “Almodóvar” as a polysemantic entity that functions in a variety of ways: as a producer, product, celebrity, trademark, filmmaker, and corporation. This essay scrutinizes the means through which a multifarious set of cybercultural practices construct the several meanings of “Almodóvar” within a series of complementary and, at times antagonistic, fields of cultural intervention. First, I analyze the producer–consumer interface on the web in terms of the shifting relationship between media companies, creators, and internet users. I frame these practices within the Spanish context with an analysis of the polemical “Sinde Law” and the competing discourses in regard to piracy, copyright laws, and media policies surrounding it. Second, I study the centrality of appropriation and authorship in Almodóvar’s early public persona through an analysis of his appearance on the Spanish 1980s television show *La Edad de Oro*. I then relate the recurrent exploration of fandom and artist–fan relations in his films with the ways in which Almodóvar disseminates his authorial voice on the web and deals with amateur reinventions of his works. For this purpose, I examine a variety of amateur textual appropriations of Almodóvar’s works to delineate the transformations that the producer–consumer interface is undergoing in the transition from analogue to digital culture. I specifically focus on the ways in which Almodóvar’s production company El Deseo allows or censors the dissemination of a variety of discourses that differ from the construction of the “official” online Almodóvar universe. Lastly, I draw the implications of digital forms of multi-platform and multi-origin online film production, distribution, and social networking in redefining the meanings of the term “Almodóvar” in the context of El Deseo’s new internet strategies upon the release of the director’s latest film, *La piel que habito* / *The Skin I Live In* (2011).

Internet Users, Piracy, and the Re-regulation of the Web

Today movie fans can buy their tickets online, print them at home, and walk into the movie house to see the film they have chosen. They can also rent films using online services such as those provided by Netflix, go to sites such as IMDb.com and Rottentomatoes.com to consult critics' reviews and gather box-office, cast and crew, or release date information. They can download movie trailers on their iPods and watch them while commuting daily to their workplace or they can enter the official website of a film before or after its theatrical release to get sneak previews, trailers, stills, wallpapers, and a variety of ancillary products. As J. P. Telotte argues, official websites not only provide information or lures to advertise the films they promote "but also effectively tell the 'story of the film', that is, as the film's makers and/or distributors see it and want it to be understood" (2001: 34). These sites thus promote the film while launching a multimedia array of stimuli designed to hook movie fans by offering complementary forms of entertainment that are not limited to the viewing of an audiovisual product.

As Henry Jenkins (2006) has argued, new media ownership and production display a growing tendency toward *convergence*, integrating several content delivery systems. Multimedia companies traverse different cultural and technological fields; film studios are components of vertically and horizontally integrated entertainment conglomerates that not only produce content but also partake of "theater ownership, publishing, home video, television network ownership, computer online services, and music publishing, recording and distribution, merchandising, retailing and theme park operations" (Davis 2006: 78). They thus foment the circulation of film content through a variety of exploitation windows and tweak its diverse incarnations to mobilize consumers in different and yet related manners. Movie fans can read a review of an upcoming film in a magazine, call friends on their cell phones to arrange a time and place to view the film, see the movie in a specific theater, buy the DVD of film, play the film's video game on a console, and remain, throughout all these activities, within the confines of the same multimedia corporation. This approach to the creation and distribution of cultural products "opens multiple entry points into the consumption process and, at the same time, enables consumers to more quickly locate new manifestations of a popular narrative" (Jenkins 2003: 284). Film fans can also engage in conversations with people from all over the world in the numerous chat rooms that day after day pop up on the web or they can religiously revisit their favorite film bloggers and become members of a community of internet fans who share their thoughts and ideas about upcoming films, cult classics, films stars, or directors. They may also post links on their Facebook or MySpace walls to expand the ways in which these videos, still images, soundtracks, or other types of information circulate on the web.

In such a multi-platform, intricately networked, and interactive media/real-world universe is it any wonder that some would argue for the equivalent

roles in the creation and dissemination of culture of a George Lucas and the amateur filmmaker who has made a seven-minute spoof film of *Star Wars: The Attack of the Clones* (2002)? Cultural and social interactions are constantly dislocating their boundaries in a variety of ways, creating connecting vectors that aim in many directions and challenge the distinction between producer and consumer, global and local (Latour 2005: 202). While there remain obvious differences between the products and practices of celebrated filmmakers like Lucas and Almodóvar (as between a Lucas production and that of Almodóvar's family-run production company) and the creators of internet parodies, it would be short-sighted to ignore the decisive role of grassroots fandom in the current sociocultural field. The forces of intellectual labor continue to generate a field of production that is in constant flux and redefinition, thanks as well to fundamental shifts in the technological and material basis of audiovisual culture as a whole. Thus, where analogue cultural objects can be mass-produced but only from fixed points of production, peer-to-peer and file-sharing exchanges on the internet undermine this model of cultural production, blurring the boundaries between the consumers and producers of culture and reconfiguring the venues through which film objects are distributed and, therefore, consumed (Poster 2006: 194).

In this sense, DIY ("Do it yourself") media has come into full-throttle existence as a result of the increasing affordability of digital equipment and the expanding literacy in the use of software applications that before were in the hands of a limited group of highly trained experts (Knobel and Lankshear 2010: 10). This consumer-turned-producer is today the dominant *species* of media production on the internet. Specifically, as Vonderau and Snickers state "YouTube has become the very epitome of digital culture not only by promising endless opportunities for viral marketing or format development, but also by allowing 'you' to post a video which might incidentally change the course of history" (2010: 7). We are witnessing thus the rise of a "clip culture" that is outpacing, and often substituting for, cinema and television since now many viewers access media content through YouTube and similar media platforms. In such scenarios, internet users can also copy, alter, post, and disseminate copyrighted materials without the permission of their owners. This fact has posed a major challenge for media companies since the illegal copying and distribution of copyrighted materials have made them suffer significant revenue losses. Even though the industry, and especially Hollywood, praise users and benefit from the unprecedented connectivity that the internet information highways allow through the enhancing of websites, viral marketing, and other related techniques, it also pressures governments to pass stronger legislations against the illegal copying and distribution of copyrighted materials (Bustamante 2011: 35).

In Spain, film companies principally made their profit from the video and television market windows (Álvarez Monzoncillo and López Villanueva 2011: 98). Since the "internet explosion," most Spaniards prefer to stay home and watch illegally downloaded films. Movie theater attendance is down; video purchases

have reached historical minimums. Unable to adapt to the new era, the Spanish film industry has entered a catastrophic crisis that is threatening its survival. The “Sinde Law,” approved March 5, 2011, aims at re-regulating the Spanish media market in order to thwart the power of media piracy and boost the revenues of the national industry.

The “Sinde Law”: from de la Iglesia to Almodóvar

In his farewell speech as president of the “Academia de Cine Española” during the 2011 Goya Awards ceremony, Álex de la Iglesia confronted the controversy over freedom and control of the internet head-on:

Internet no es el futuro, como algunos creen. Internet es el presente. Internet es la manera de comunicarse, de compartir información, entretenimiento y cultura que utilizan cientos de millones de personas. Internet es parte de nuestras vidas y la nueva ventana que nos abre la mente al mundo. A los internautas no les gusta que les llamen así. Ellos son CIUDADANOS, son sencillamente gente, son nuestro PÚBLICO. Ese público que hemos perdido, no va al cine porque está delante de una pantalla de ordenador. Quiero decir claramente que NO TENEMOS MIEDO a internet, porque internet es, precisamente, la SALVACIÓN de nuestro cine. Sólo ganaremos al futuro SI SOMOS NOSOTROS LOS QUE CAMBIAMOS, los que innovamos, adelantándonos con propuestas imaginativas, creativas, aportando un NUEVO MODELO DE MERCADO que tenga en cuenta a TODOS los implicados: autores, productores, distribuidores, exhibidores, páginas web, servidores, y usuarios (de la Iglesia 2011).

(Internet is not the future, as some believe. Internet is the present. Internet is a way of communicating, of sharing information, entertainment and culture that hundreds of millions people use. Internet is part and parcel of our lives and a new window that opens the mind to the world. Rather than being labeled *internautas*, as if they were a different species, internet users are CITIZENS, simply people, our AUDIENCE. They are the audience we have lost and that doesn't go to the cinema anymore because they are at home in front of the computer screen. I want to say that WE ARE NOT AFRAID of Internet, because Internet is, precisely, the SALVATION of our cinema . . . We will only prevail if WE CHANGE, innovating, moving ahead of the curve with imaginative and creative proposals, designing a NEW MODEL FOR THE MARKET that takes into account EVERYONE involved: authors, producers, distributors, exhibitors, web pages, servers and users.)¹

De la Iglesia had resigned as president of the Spanish Academy a few weeks earlier, on January 11, 2011, through his Twitter account, over a disagreement with how the government, and, specifically the Minister of Culture, Ángeles Fernández Sinde, had handled the drafting of the “Sinde Law.” According to the Spanish filmmaker, the politicians had refused to engage internet users, effectively turning their

backs on the consensus he had tried to reach for months as the top representative of the different sectors of the Spanish film industry.² Consequently, for him, the newly approved law was not “the solution.” His departing speech emphasized the need for the film industry to adapt to the evolving contours of digital technology and the subsequent redefinition of the producer–consumer interface in terms of co-dependence. His discourse stems thus from the understanding of filmmaking as an interactive arena of exchange that must evolve to survive, standing in radical opposition with more hierarchical conceptualizations of the relationship between industry and consumers that apply old categories and legislation to the rapidly growing digital world. But, what exactly is the “Sinde Law” and why did and does it continue to stir so much disagreement and debate?

In the first place, the measure known as the “Sinde Law” is not a law but a series of specific changes in the second regulation of the “Law of Sustainable Economy” that details the creation of a “committee of intellectual property,” appointed by the government, in charge of removing content or closing down websites that violate intellectual property laws. This committee has the responsibility to “mediate” and “safeguard” intellectual property rights, reporting “unlawful sites.” More specifically, the committee is empowered to act not only against those who are causing damage to intellectual property rights but also to report those sites that are likely to do so. Initially the committee had full authority to close down sites; ultimately, the Socialist government had to add a provision requiring judicial supervision to the equation in order to get the necessary support in both the senate and congress to pass the law.³ In the final text of the Law, a judge approves or rejects the closure of the reported sites.

From the moment of publication of the first drafts of the “Law” objections rained in. By casting such a wide net as regards violations and potential violations of intellectual property claims, the Law was unenforceable: as the author of the blog “El Catalejo” of *El Mundo* (2011) pointed out, “no conozco ninguna página web que no use una imagen, un vídeo o una plantilla que no esté protegida por derechos de autor . . . Si alguien se pusiese quisquilloso, se podría pedir el cierre del 95% de las páginas web españolas” (there is not a single website that does not use an image, video or template that is not protected by copyright laws. . . . If one wanted to be picky, one could close down 95% of Spanish sites). Others pointed out that the Ministry of Culture has created a Law that establishes as guarantor of intellectual property rights the same government organization that formulated the Law itself. Since a judge is then called upon to authorize or disallow what the committee has determined, as Eduardo Arcos (2011) remarks, the “Sinde Law” “se vulnera un derecho y libertad fundamental en España: la libertad de expresión. Que un organismo administrativo designado por un Ministerio . . . formado por personas que no conocemos, con facultades que desconocemos, se les otorgue tal poder y tal responsabilidad no sólo es una falta de respeto a la ciudadanía, es darle una bofetada al sistema jurídico español” (infringes on a fundamental right and freedom in Spain: the right of free speech. The fact that an administrative body

appointed by a Ministry . . . made up of people we do not know and invested with an unspecified authority, has such power and responsibility, is not only disrespectful to the citizenry but also a slap in the face to the Spanish judicial system).

The *internautas*, or citizens, if we prefer, reacted by drawing up a manifesto, “In defense of the fundamental rights of the Internet,” that codifies a number of these points.⁴ According to them, the “Sinde Law” violates several rights of citizenship. First, it situates intellectual property rights above the rights of citizens. Second, it violates the Spanish constitution by placing a government committee above the judicial system. Finally, it threatens the work of new creators and hinders cultural production. In addition, they accused the cultural industries in Spain of being obsolete and unable to adapt to the digital market environment. Similarly, in their article, “Pasado y Futuro Digital” (2011), Michel Boldrin and Pablo Vázquez state that regulations such as the “Sinde Law” stem from “normativas, en nuestra opinión, basadas sobre presupuestos equivocados. Están pensadas, en buena medida, para proteger a los que no son capaces de adaptarse al cambio tecnológico, no lo entienden, o no quieren inventarse otra manera de hacer negocios que sea más eficiente” (norms, that in our view, are based on wrong assumptions. They are designed to protect those who are not able to adapt to technological change, that do not understand, or do not want to create a new and more efficient way of doing business). Others, such as the blogger @delgado, point out that, in fact, the “Sinde Law” will not save the Spanish film industry and is, instead, defending the interests of multinational corporations. Quoting several cables of the U.S. embassy in Spain revealed by Wikileaks, the blogger details how the U.S. government pressured the successive Spanish Ministers of Culture to fight piracy more resolutely and concludes by stating that the “Sinde Law” violates the citizens’ rights, invents figures, and prioritizes foreign interests.⁵ There is, however, another side to this equation: in sponsoring and facilitating user access to all manner of content, internet providers and hardware manufacturers do not pay copyright fees but, nevertheless, benefit from the illegal transactions that take place everyday using their equipment. As Enrique Bustamante (2011: 34) explains: “En el acceso gratuito se mezclan también agentes (culturales, informáticos, de telecomunicaciones) que buscan por encima de todo—con el atractivo de contenidos propios o ajenos—acumular carteras de usuarios que les permita afrontar el futuro en posición de fuerza” (When we talk about free access we also need to consider the role of agents [cultural, computer industry and telecommunications-related] that seek, above all—drawing on the lure of both legally and illegally sourced content—to accumulate pools of users that will allow them to prepare for the future in a position of power). Sociologist Joan Navarro, for his part, defends the new legislation in his article “A favor de Internet . . . y de la ‘Ley Sinde,’” stating that:

en Internet, copiar (sin el permiso del autor) sí es robar. En la Red no te hace falta sustraer un original para que un creador se quede sin nada, basta con quitarle al original todo su valor económico, difundiendo millones de copias. Copias que nunca son gratis. Pagas por el uso de la Red (más de un 20% más cara que en el resto de

Europa), pagas por los sistemas de descarga (muchos de ellos, además, curiosamente protegidos por derechos de autor), pagas por los servicios Premium, pagas por el uso de la tecnología no por los contenidos que esta te ayuda a disfrutar. Quienes abogan por la ... la “gratuidad” en la Red, en realidad, defienden el lucrativo negocio de quienes no pagan por los contenidos con los que intermedian (Navarro 2011).

(on the Internet, to copy [without the author’s permission] is stealing. On the web, it’s not necessary to actually abscond with a creator’s original work for him or her to lose everything. Disseminating millions of copies of this work is enough to remove all economic value from it. These copies are never free. You pay for the use of the web [over 20% more than the rest of Europe], you pay for downloading programs [many of them, curiously, protected by copyright laws], you pay for Premium services, you pay for the use of technology but you don’t pay for the content this technology allows you to enjoy. Those who plead for free web content are, in reality, defending the lucrative business of those who do not pay for the content that they traffic in.)

Navarro concludes by affirming that businesses that have tried to sell cultural products digitally have invariably failed since they cannot compete with those sites that distribute the same contents for free—that is, illegally. Furthermore, for him, it is not the “citizen” who rules the web but those that have designed a market environment that creates the need for users to rent or buy their services and equipment to perform illegal operations routinely.

In response to de la Iglesia’s resignation via Twitter, Pedro Almodóvar and several other Spanish artists signed a manifesto defending the new law.⁶ They argued that the government had indeed designed the new legislation in close collaboration with all the involved parties, and further that the law was necessary to compete with other, foreign, cultural industries and to preserve the fundamental rights of one of the most remarkable patrimonies of Spain: cultural creation. It seems clear that Almodóvar has positioned himself, at least officially, among those who back the government’s legislation, as we shall see, thus colliding with many of his fans’ views and actions in regard to this issue.

From *La Edad de Oro* to Enrique Goded: The Auteur–Fan Interface

In a 1983 interview with the musical duo “Almodóvar and McNamara” in *La Edad de Oro*,⁷ the host, Paloma Chamorro, asked the musicians whether their work could be considered plagiarism. Almodóvar replied as follows: “Nuestras canciones corresponden a nuestros gustos, pero nuestra capacidad de tergiversación y de transformación es tal que yo creo que el plagio desaparece y acaba construyéndose una obra maestra, incluso a nuestra costa” (Our songs come from different places but our capacity of distortion and transformation is such that I think that plagiarism

disappears and we end up creating masterpieces, despite ourselves).⁸ Occasionally interrupted by McNamara's provocative, off the cuff, statements, Almodóvar goes on to cite a disparate array of popular culture references ranging from Brian Ferry, Manolita Chen, Divine, and Sara Montiel. He ends up concluding that "Yo quiero parecerme a Pedro Almodóvar y terminaré pareciéndome a Pedro Almodóvar" (I want to be like Pedro Almodóvar and I will end up being like Pedro Almodóvar). Almodóvar is not only signaling the derivative character of his creative output as a musician but also foregrounding the capacity of his collaborations with Fabio McNamara to "make it new," capitalizing on an aesthetic of recycling that effectively transforms other materials in a self-conscious manner. He also states that the ultimate goal of his works is to create his own artistic signature, even if it stems from the appropriation of other texts. In other words, even at this early stage of his career, his aesthetic sensibility reveals the decisive importance of the reinvention of the artistic texts he has initially approached as a fan as well as his resolute intention to build his own, unique creative output as a recognizable auteur. Almodóvar's subsequent films are indeed characterized by an "aesthetic of recycling" that traverses multiple musical and filmic genres. Through this very practice he has also evolved into a "commercially viable auteur with an inimitable personal style" (Epps and Kakoudaki 2009: 2). Indeed, the Spanish director's films metacinematically foreground the variety of intertexts that compose the core of his oeuvre and the integral role of fandom in the processes of creation. This dynamic relationship between the appropriation of other texts and his unmistakable recognizability as an auteur is constantly present in his films through the evaluation of fan–author relationships and decisively influences the shaping of Almodóvar's "official" personae on the web.

In *Todo sobre mi madre/All About My Mother* (1999), Esteban, Manuela's son and an aspiring writer, dies *literally* because of his fandom, in pursuit of a "Huma Rojo" autograph. After mother and son attend a performance of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Esteban (Eloy Azorín) runs through the rain after Huma's car to get her autograph. A car runs him over. After Esteban is hit, Manuela (Cecelia Roth) runs in desperation to help him. The camera adopts Esteban's point of view as he loses consciousness. Almodóvar cuts to a tracking shot that slowly approaches Manuela, who waits disconsolately in the hospital's waiting room. Although Esteban is dead, as the camera tracks toward Manuela, her son's point of view continues to frame the story; his voiceover affirms his adamant passion for writing, inscribing the duality fan/creator at the center of the narrative. Esteban's sensibility thus qualifies the ensuing tragic moment and the melodramatic discourse that shapes Manuela's quest to recuperate from her loss as she learns to deal with her past traumas, adopt successive mother roles toward a variety of characters (Rosa, Agrado, Nina, and Huma), and, ultimately, regain motherhood through the birth of Rosa's son—a new Esteban.

In earlier films as well such as *¡Átame!/Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), the cult of the movie star triggers the main conflict in the film. Ricky (Antonio Banderas), a young man recently released from a psychiatric hospital, stalks porn actress Marina Ozores (Victoria Abril), with whom he once spent a torrid night, until he

breaks into her apartment. Ricky vows to keep her locked up until she agrees to marry him and live happily ever after. Ricky has internalized a romantic movie plot which he puts in motion despite Marina's initial refusal to conform to it since she rather perceives her role in Ricky's fantasy as belonging to a psychological thriller or horror film.⁹ Ricky "has accepted versions of the socialized conventions of love and marriage as the course of his life that have been mediated through popular culture" (D'Lugo 2006: 70). He is, indeed, a "generic anomaly"—a violent stalker turned kidnapper—within the idealized scenario of the love story his subjectivity has molded to establish the coordinates of his relationship with Marina. Nonetheless he stubbornly follows this script until, in the end, Marina conforms to his desires. Ricky thus acts as a fan turned into diegetic scriptwriter who refurbishes the contours of the romance script he has designed to exercise his will and ultimately control the behaviors of the "supporting cast" he has enlisted for his "master-piece." This obsessive character of artistic creation and the inalienable passion for such practice play a central role in Almodóvar's works.¹⁰

In *La ley del deseo* / *Law of Desire* (1997), Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) is a playwright and filmmaker tormented by unrequited love. His partner Juan leaves Madrid to run a "chiringuito" (beach-side snack bar) on the coast. Pablo continues to be madly in love with Juan but he does not receive the reciprocity he covets. Disappointed with Juan's letters, Pablo writes the letter he wants to receive. He sends it to Juan and asks him to sign it and send it back to him. In other words, he creates a version of Juan's love that conforms to his desire, his own fantasy framework, to bear the burden of his lover's loss of passion. His idea of authorship—in this case, displaced to his own personal life—is still inscribed within the relational even if he instrumentalizes Juan as an "actor," delivering the lines of the script Pablo writes.

Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez), in *La mala educación* / *Bad Education* (2004), marks a shift toward a more reclusive version of authorship. Following the end of shooting the film-within-the film, *La Visita* (*The Visit*), in which the director vampirizes his own childhood and memories (D'Lugo 2006), Enrique is visited by Juan, the actor posing as his childhood love Ignacio (Nacho Pérez) who plays the role of the adult Ignacio/Zahara (Francisco Boira) in the film. The director reveals he knew long ago that Juan was not in actuality Ignacio but his younger brother. He then commands him to leave. Juan hands him a piece of paper that contains Ignacio's last words. Enrique closes the sliding door of his chalet and frantically opens the folded piece of paper. It reads, "Querido Enrique: creo que lo conseguí" (Dear Enrique, I think I succeeded), followed by a series of typos since Ignacio died of a heroin overdose in the process of writing the letter. Enrique folds the piece of paper and stands paralyzed on the left side of the frame, pondering Ignacio's words. Unlike in the beginning of the film, when his assistant and lover Martín is pictured as a comforting companion for a director in crisis in search for a good story in the tabloids, Enrique is now alone, clutching tightly the unfinished message from his first love.

Perhaps, Almodóvar is signaling that the character has been able to leave behind two traumatic episodes of his life—his relationship with Ignacio/Juan and the

abuse of Padre Manolo (Daniel Giménez Cacho) at school during his childhood. It also seems that artistic fulfillment has brought Enrique to a state of self-isolation. For, as Enrique stands motionless, a series of titles are projected onto the door's metal panels. They explain Juan's rise as a *galán de moda* (popular leading man) for a decade after the release of *La Visita* and his subsequent "mutation" into a television actor as well as his assassination of Padre Manolo/Señor Berenguer (Lluís Homar), who was blackmailing him. The last title reads: "Enrique Goded continúa haciendo cine con la misma pasión" (Enrique continues making films with the same passion). Inexorably, the focus of the shot continues to tighten until the word "passion," eventually out of focus, fills the frame. End credits.

Enrique, Almodóvar's diegetic alter ego in the film, is thus pictured as an artist completely committed to the passion of filmmaking who has no regrets about instrumentalizing Juan for the sake of his own work despite being aware of his deception. Even though he may have been willing to continue working with Juan in order to know the true circumstances of Ignacio's death and gain knowledge about Juan's motivations (D'Lugo 2006: 122), the concluding image of the film fundamentally establishes the centrality of artistic creation itself and the need to have total control over it, situating it above the narrative specifics of the plot. It is as though Almodóvar has internalized the burden of creation that *Todo sobre mi madre* foregrounds through Truman Capote's words in his preface for *Music for Chameleons*: "I started writing when I was eight. I didn't know that I had chained myself for life to a noble and merciless master. When God hands you a gift, he also hands you a whip and the whip is only intended for self-flagellation." Enrique's self-enclosure behind his compound door, full of passion for filmmaking but also alone and under the control of the "merciless master" of creation, can also be read as a metaphor for the director's own relation to his fans on the internet. Insisting on absolute artistic control, Almodóvar and his production company El Deseo function on the internet to "preservar y tutelar la manera que la obra se muestra al público para que coincida con cómo ha sido creada" (preserve and safeguard the way in which Almodóvar's work is shown to his audiences so that it is exactly how it was created in the first place) (Pajuelo Almodóvar 2011). They thus erase those "Almodovarian" incarnations that do not fit their carefully constructed agenda, and disseminate (or allow to exist) those they consider legitimate versions of "Almodóvar's" craft and passion.

"Almodóvar" as El Deseo S.A., Fan-made Artifacts and the Question of Ownership

The title of Almodóvar's blog, <http://www.pedroalmodovar.es/>, is superimposed on the image of a typewriter—thus establishing the immediate association between Almodóvar and the practice of writing, creating, and storytelling. In other words, Almodóvar, from the very beginning, establishes the coordinates



Figure 24.1 Almodóvar's blog mainpage.

of the exchange between his figure and the internet user—*he writes, we read*. Two different strips of celluloid outline the different content boxes with sprocket holes limiting them left and right. Film envelopes his work and oeuvre. Life is film; film is life. Confirming this fact, the main legend on his official MySpace page used to read as follows: “Cinema has become my life. I don’t mean a parallel world, I mean my life itself. I sometimes have the impression that the daily reality is simply there to provide material for my next film.”¹¹ Furthermore, even though like any number of film directors today, he has embraced the web to communicate with his fans, the image underlying the video section is an old-fashioned, vintage, if you will, computer that, in conjunction with the typewriter and the film strips, signals his attachment to a pre-digital understanding of how film culture is produced.

The texts showcased on the site range from an educational piece on the *nouvelle vague* on the occasion of his visit to the 2009 Cannes Film Festival to an animated response to *El País* film critic Carlos Boyero, from reflections on the legal attack on high-profile Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón by the Spanish judicial system to a

piece called “Egotrípico” (a neologism Almodóvar claims to have invented) that champions the concept of “I literature” through the figure of Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Junot Díaz.

The photo section chronicles the making of *Los abrazos rotos/Broken Embraces* (2009), first documenting his writing tour from Tangiers to Cuernavaca (including a visit to his muse Chavela Vargas) and then offering a variety of graphic samples from the production of the film: Penélope Cruz’s hairdo photos; cast members stills; location scouting images with cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto; etc. All the images are accompanied by a short text in which Almodóvar speaks in a colloquial tone to the internet user, giving the impression that he is writing a photo diary directed to each and all of his fans.¹² The site thus provides privileged information, channeling those thoughts, opinions, images, and reflections about the Almodovarian world which come into existence on the web. The site lacks any type of interactive tool to allow the internet user to react or respond to any of Almodóvar’s images, comments, or political standpoints. The communication taking place is one way.

The last entry on the site dates from June 6, 2009, even though as I write these words, Almodóvar had just presented his latest film, *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In*, at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. The blog seems to function only as an occasional tool that is aimed to satisfy the cravings of his fans, composed during breaks in the action between the shooting, post-production, and a film’s release.¹³ He doesn’t appear interested in making the blog a continuous mechanism to interact with his fans. It works thus as a marketing tool for his films and a sporadic window to showcase his political views. In other words, until the release of *La piel que habito* (a case we will discuss later on), those in charge of weaving Almodóvar’s online presence do not utilize marketing strategies that are native to the web itself; they simply transfer pre-digital marketing models and techniques to build his internet persona. Almodóvar fans, in contrast, exploiting the multichannel architecture of Web 2.0, reinvent the Spanish filmmaker’s works in a variety of ways that go far beyond his monologic approach to the creator–fan interface. They display an active form of cinephilia that transforms them into producers of their own Almodovarian artifacts. At the same time, they insert the filmic object within the broader field of social networking.

As those fans and the internet citizen users evoked by Alex de la Iglesia realize, we currently inhabit a media age that is reshaping the contours of the filmic experience, according to the emergence of new practices of cinephilia that do not follow the norms and regulations of traditional film culture but come into existence as enabled through the web. Thomas Elsaesser has codified the split between old and new forms of film spectatorship and consumption, distinguishing between an older form of film appreciation, “cinephilia take one,” and a new kind of internet-enabled film culture, “cinephilia take two.” Cinephilia take one is place-bound, “topographically site-specific, defined by the movie houses, neighborhoods and cafés one frequented” (Elsaesser 2005: 31). This is an auteurist film fan culture,

which maintains a certain attachment to specific cinephilic routes throughout the spaces of the city and is still anchored in the cult of celluloid; hence the enormous importance that this kind of cinephile invests in the screening of new prints and the restoration of film negatives. Cinephilia take two is a form of cinephilia that embraces new technologies, such as DVD, non-linear home editors, and the internet, creating online communities that share diverse types of interests in popular culture objects. The auteurist cinephilia's home is the film festival circuit, the repertory theater, and the film museum. Cinephilia take two utilizes technology as a vehicle to express the viewers' interest in the cinema and disseminate their own interventions on their objects of appreciation. This type of cinephilia is characterized by two related operations: re-mastering and re-purposing (Elsaesser 2005: 36).¹⁴ Re-mastering refers to a gesture of appropriation, seizing the images to make them signify something different for a given community. Re-purposing points to the industry's continuous attempt to open new market windows for the film product, repackaging the same content for different media to maximize profit by creating new allures for the consumer—from DVD extras to the film's official website or viral marketing strategies. Most films are thus born with a set of discourses, or paratexts, in Genette's terms (1983), which, in turn, foment the creation of more discourses. In this sense, the critic, movie fan, the internet blogger, and the web surfer are already part of the package even before they interact with a particular film.

This type of cinephile is not concerned with selecting a particular venue to see a film nor obsessed either with sitting in a particular row in the movie theater as the ultimate guarantor for the full cinematic experience. Instead, this mode of cultural consumption is characterized by the mobility, malleability, and instability of its object of appreciation. It is realized through a continuous circulation and reinvention of audiovisual objects since the whole history of the film medium is digitizable and, therefore, alterable. These new cinephiles can *touch* their objects of appreciation, manipulating them and sharing them with their community of fellow internet cinephiles or internet acquaintances. Consequently, these practices of cinephilia take two have become increasingly associated with forms of social networking that are not exclusively devoted to film but treat the cinematic like any other *hyperlinkable* object. Furthermore, in certain ways, these networking sites epitomize the demise of a cinephilic online culture per se by inserting the cinematic within a variety of online actions that conceptualize film items as one of the many nodes of the networking universes they open upon for their members. Film artifacts become thus a means to hook up users in a continuous dynamic of interaction and exchange with others users, like any other type of content. The film object loses most of its singularity and specificity and becomes one of the several media spectacles internet users utilize to carry out their networking through the multifocal framework of simultaneous windows.

The "Almodóvar" who inhabits the realm of cinephilia take two thus exists on the web in a variety of ways and forms beyond the Spanish director's official



Figure 24.2 Fotolog MURIEL & CIA.

online discourse. Fans create a myriad of artifacts that constantly come into existence, linger or, alternatively, disappear in blogs, amateur websites, photo diaries, video portals, and networking sites. These online reinventions of “Almodóvar” have disparate origins. They are thus not mappable in terms of geopolitical borders. Since the Spanish director is a global phenomenon, these cultural objects originate from many countries and, through the internet, they potentially circulate everywhere. I discuss below a selection of Almodovarian artifacts that are not produced by any official cultural institution, film company, or private media outlet. They are thus amateur and non-financially motivated objects that stem from a sensibility and *modus operandi* that is native to the digital environment. First, I discuss the reinvention of excerpts of Almodóvar’s films in photo diaries, blogs, and video portals. Later on, I analyze specific examples of non-official websites and social networking communities built around the concept “Almodóvar.”

The Fotolog¹⁵ “MURIEL & CIA” has an entry titled “Almodóvar Mania”. It displays a photo, as shown in Figure 24.2, imitating the images of over-the-top fashion style and gender-bending display that many Almodóvar films bring to the fore as one of their key aesthetic principles.

The photo is accompanied by the following text:

"Leo, dear, how many Almodóvar films have you seen?"¹⁶

"Two or three, I believe."

"Uff, we've got to do a marathon ... now you are going to understand many things ..."

And, finally the moment has arrived.

It was towards the end of the 1980s; one afternoon I went down to the video store to see what flick I'd watch that day ... I would watch anything. I saw a title that called my attention. It was four women sitting on a couch, all of them were striking, so I rented the film and I watched it ...

When I finished watching it, I was delighted. The film was something special: it mesmerized and captivated me. I had entered Almodóvar's world through a privileged place with *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. ... Of course back then I understood little about the infinite nuances and details of the film but it was something special. There was something that was screaming at me to watch more films by this "loka" with a mole on his face. And that's how it started ...

Years went by and what was curiosity turned into obsession ... I love everything related to Pedro (for me he is a family member) ... All his craziness, secrets, latest news, "troupe" and, of course, his cinema.

The blog entry is followed by a series of YouTube links to clips that, according to "MURIEL & CIA," provide essential entry points into Almodóvar's cinema. However, when one clicks on any of these links, the video has been removed. The following message appears instead: "This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by EL DESEO." In other words "MURIEL & CIA" is not the copyright holder of any of the clips it would distribute over the web and Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo, has required YouTube to remove these clips.

"MURIEL & CIA's" failed attempt to share its favorite Almodóvar clips with the Fotolog community epitomizes the ongoing battle between two antagonistic conceptions of Web 2.0. The first understands internet sites as distribution portals for content regardless of their source or claims of copyright protection. The second accepts in principle the ways in which diverse communities may consume, interact, and link media content through a variety of sites but, at the same time, attempts to control what media is distributed, how, and with what purposes. Also at stake are competing understandings of their relationship with fans. As we have seen, the very distinction between producers and consumers of culture is incessantly shifting as digital technology continues to evolve like a playground where those who previously only consumed can now exercise their own technical skills, and conceive and distribute content through the web.

These new producers of media content come from anywhere, at anytime, and may be satisfied with a sporadic intervention in a given media field or may, conversely, create and upload material constantly. In short, the scope and limits of

their production are potentially boundless. Here is where such practices come up against copyright law and sanctions intervene, shaping (or censoring) how this media content comes to exist and, fundamentally, *last* on the web. “MURIEL & CIA”’s words come from a fan who has internalized the aesthetic fabric and political content of Almodóvar’s work to the point of making it his own. For him, Almodóvar has become *Pedro* and his filmic lessons have turned into guiding principles for his life. In removing the textual traces of the shared knowledge “MURIEL & CIA” aimed at distributing *Pedro* has mutated into *El Deseo*.

If one visits Almodóvar’s blog, it is supposedly *Pedro* again who talks to fans and lets them know his personal reflections on his film experiences as they happen. Tellingly the marketing gurus of Sony Picture Classics also chose the term *Pedro* to launch their 2006 retrospective on the works of the Spanish director, *Viva Pedro!* For his colleagues, perhaps epitomized by Penélope Cruz’s exclamation of surprise and delight as she read the name of winning director for best foreign film at the 1999 Academy Awards, it is also *Pedro*. In other words, if you know the man or you feel as if you know him thanks to having watched a number of his films, he is (or is promoted as) *Pedro*. “MURIEL & CIA” felt entitled to turn Almodóvar into *Pedro*, to emulate his aesthetic and to share his work but *El Deseo* has intervened. For, on the internet, *Pedro* is never truly *Pedro* but always “Almodóvar”—that is, a polysemantic signifier that performs a variety of related functions in the interface with his fans. First, he/it is a fully recognizable brand of international art cinema; second, an identifiable world view about life and society disseminated through eighteen feature films and a number of shorts; and third, through the alias of his production company, *El Deseo*, a series of protective legal actions against those who attempt to distribute media content he owns according to copyright laws.

If, as this example attests, *El Deseo* seems determined to control the unauthorized appropriation of Almodóvar’s works by fans that manipulate and distribute his audiovisual materials as though they were their own, it nevertheless confronts a series of dilemmas. The reality is that the internet community is unbounded and uncontrollable and that, as much as Almodóvar as *El Deseo* might want to identify and remove all the home-made, DIY manifestations of their copyrighted products, this would be impossible. In the clash between partisans and defenders of old versus new media, traditional content producers and *internautas*, where does Almodóvar stand and how does his production company *El Deseo* currently see the internet and the potential of web-based culture? What can and should their policy and practices be in the face of a certain sympathy (in theory if not in practice) to the cause of what we might call the “online popular”?¹⁷ Is it possible to discern in *El Deseo*’s interventions toward certain sites and types of material a conscious strategy, or do they simply represent reactive rearguard attacks in a battle they are bound to lose?

When one visits YouTube, a myriad of clips from Almodóvar’s films are accessible with a simple keyword search. Some of these are the official trailers of his films; others, however, are selected scenes from his films that different users have



Figure 24.3 *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1988; prod. El Deseo, S.A.) on YouTube.

shared with a variety of motivations. Whereas some of these clips are thus market-driven, others exist because of a type of cultural fandom that does not have any monetary concerns and does not follow the dictates of copyright laws. And this is precisely the structural duality of YouTube as a video portal for media content: it serves the commercial purposes of individual companies that aim at diversifying the ways in which their media circulates and also functions as a platform for amateur production to flourish. Media posted on YouTube unsettles the producer–consumer divide precisely “because it is the site of dynamic and emergent relations between market and non-market, social and economic activity” (Burgess and Green 2010: 90). The clips that Almodóvar has not removed are those that respect the visual and aural integrity of his work—that is, clips that do not alter any of the aesthetic components of the original material. Or, on occasion, clips that combine a variety of aural and visual material in order to pay homage to the Spanish director: a combination of stills from his films with Jeanette’s song “Porque te vas”;¹⁸ a mishmash between posters of his films from several countries; short excerpts from a few films; and Luz Casal’s rendition of *Piensa en mí*, or a practice for a film course at the UCAB (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello) that explicitly imitates, shot by shot, scenes from *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* / *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988).¹⁹

On another site titled “Fanpop Almodóvar Club,” users had linked three Almodóvar-themed videos: the *Volver* and *Viva Pedro!* trailers, and one titled “If Pedro Almodóvar directed *Spiderman 3*.” The latter is a mash-up of Almodóvar’s works and the Spiderman series, following one of the growing trends of home-made trailers and movies on the web: the spoof or mash-up film.²⁰ The website

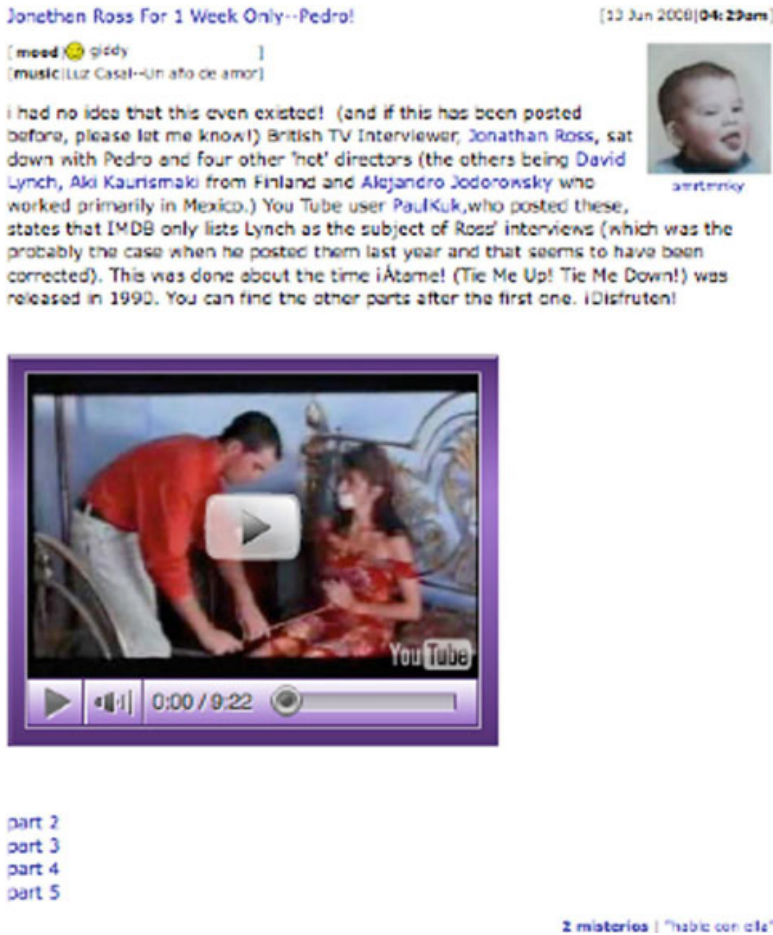


Figure 24.4 A clip from *¡Átame!* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1990; prod. El Deseo, S.A.), removed by El Deseo from the Fanpop Almodóvar Club site.

subsequently removed this third video following a copyright claim by El Deseo. The Spanish director's company seems to remove any kind of amateur intervention that performs a *material* intervention on the original artifact and trivializes his work. In other words, if fans simply create "homage" videos that preserve the integrity of the film excerpt they utilize, El Deseo does not file a copyright claim. If, they do, their online existence is likely to be ephemeral.

On "Pedro Almodóvar Fan's Journal,"²¹ several users comment upon Almodóvar's works and offer advice, photo documents of unusual juxtapositions (like the billboard of a movie theater that simultaneously showed the sentimental drama *Half Nelson* and three Almodóvar films), information about upcoming retrospectives of Almodóvar's works, or simply, photos of his films along with their thoughts, ideas, doubts or questions about diverse aspects of

the Spanish director's career. Even though, like the YouTube clips, these videos are excerpts from Almodóvar's films without any kind of aural or visual alteration, the videos have been removed.²² Why does El Deseo accept the existence and persistence of certain clips on YouTube and similar video portals and remove others? According to the financial director of El Deseo, Diego Pajuelo, at first Almodóvar's company was very tolerant of fans posting clips of materials they own online. However, when *Los abrazos rotos* was released, an anonymous YouTube user started uploading Almodóvar's entire filmography and monetizing it. They subsequently met with YouTube Spain to solve this issue. Firstly, the internet company put at their disposal a tool that, operating through "tags," allowed them to locate Almodóvar's materials and file copyright claims against them. This process proved to be cumbersome and El Deseo agreed to copy all Almodóvar's films and give them to YouTube Spain so that, using a different and more powerful tool, they could locate and remove all Almodóvar's materials available on the site. This strategy created an immediate backlash: dozens of fans complained to El Deseo that they simply wanted to upload a few of their favorite clips and share them with other fans. According to them, El Deseo had betrayed them. As a consequence, El Deseo stopped using this *sweeping* tool. Today, Diego Pajuelo and the director's brother Agustín (we must remember here that El Deseo is a small, family-run, company) watch clips online, filing claims against some and allowing others to subsist, depending on whether they conform to their idea of what an Almodovarian object should be (Pajuelo Almodóvar 2011). This is perhaps why El Deseo's strategy in relation to the existence of fan-made Almodovarian artifacts seems, at times, arbitrary and chaotic since Almodóvar's company does not have specialized personnel to deal with this kind of products. At the same time, we must remember that a company such as El Deseo aims, above all, to disseminate *its* Almodóvar ad infinitum.

In such a scenario, the role of Almodóvar's official site, El Deseo's site, and other official venues such as the Pedro Almodóvar Cultural Association are, at least in principle, to constantly generate content to manufacture demand and, subsequently, foster the creation of myriad forums of Almodovarian content on the web. These, in turn, enhance the visibility of their legally owned properties, and yet, limit, according to their terms, the consumption of the material they choose to distribute as Almodóvar's body of works. In different terms, they promote those contents that fit their understanding of the Almodóvar *trademark* and they remove those which do not. Because the function of the trademark is precisely that: to assure the consumer the product comes from the original source, one that the consumer knows, values, and even identifies with in terms of affect (Coombe 1998: 60). Social networking sites, such as Facebook, "dissolve" and re-contextualize the original artifact or trademark, such as "Almodóvar," within an array of discourses that point, as charted by Elsaesser, in multiple and often unrelated, non-filmic, directions.

From "Almodovarlandia" to Facebook: Social Networking and the Demise of the Cinephilic Object?

"Almodovarlandia" was one of the first comprehensive sites exclusively devoted to Almodóvar.²³ Displaying a very amateurish design and navigation framework, the site offers information about the Spanish director, his actors, each of his films but also taps into a range of cultural information for non-Spanish nationals discussing the place of tapas in Spanish culture and offering brief, and superficial, takes on the role of bullfighting or the Catholic Church in Almodóvar's films.²⁴ It has its own constitution (a series of principles based on the cult to Almodóvar), its university (devoted to the study of the "Almodovarlogia"), and tourism (a series of links to monographic sites on a few Almodóvar films). As the name of the site itself proclaims, visitors are supposed to enter a country where the signifier Almodóvar says it all. Even though it has a "guestbook" where visitors can write their name and email, as its governance link clearly states, the only person able to intervene in the site is its founder: Karl A. Erber, an Austrian national. The importance of Almodovarlandia thus is that in its faithfulness toward its object of appreciation, it does stem from an unequivocal cinephilic "take one" sensibility that seems increasingly displaced in the current types of participatory culture on the web. This is why sites such as "Almodovarlandia" belong to a bygone, more passive, era of distribution content on the web and now seems to have been abandoned by its creator. Even though still an active website, this site appears to be the short-termed passion of an Almodóvar fan that has jumped off his own boat, perhaps overwhelmed, perhaps swallowed by the flexibility and interactive fabric of contemporary interactive networking sites such as Facebook that can easily incorporate video content and establish a more dynamic exchange among their users.

One of the most popular Almodóvar Facebook sites, "Pedro Almodovar"²⁵ has over 71,000 members and displays very little information about his films, biography, or upcoming projects. The wall picture is a shot from Penélope Cruz in *Volver*. The photo section has over 100 photos of the Spanish director, his actors, and stills from his films and posters. In terms of film content it is sparse to say the least. The site briefly describes Almodóvar as "creator of some of the best ever art-house films." Its wall postings are similarly brief. The administrator periodically updates members with the number of fans the community has reached and launches questions such as "Favorite Pedro character?" or "Where in the world are the Pedro fans from then?" or simply welcomes the new day, "Hola. Good morning." Members of the site respond by congratulating the administrator and themselves on the number of fans, declaring their country of origin or simply greeting the rest of the members of the site. In other words, they display a sense of *belonging* and *identification* with other fellow members of the community but far from showing any kind of film taste or cinephilic sensibility, or more specifically, knowledge or shared information about the Spanish director's work, they

seem to function like a social body that could just as well be named “Martin Scorsese,” “Lollipop,” or “F.C. Barcelona.” The links section does offer access to Almodovarian content like a YouTube photomontage that combines Joaquín Sabina’s song “Yo quiero ser una chica Almodóvar” with a series of stills from the Spanish director’s films, the French trailers of *Los abrazos rotos* and *La mala educación*, or music videos that users consider to be inspired by Almodóvar, such as La Fé’s, “La Peluquera.” It also serves as the advertising venue for enterprises such as “Granganga t-shirts” that, under the pretext of selling a t-shirt with Almodóvar’s photo, links the page to a variety of its products. Users also make calls for members to join all the Spanish people in Belgium to gather in support of Judge Garzón.

The largest Almodóvar Facebook page, “Pedro Almodóvar”²⁶ (this time written with the proper accent on the second o), has over 90,000 members and proclaims: “Our goal is to make this Community Page the best collection of shared knowledge on this topic. If you have a passion for Pedro Almodóvar, sign up and we’ll let you know when we’re ready for your help.” It displays a recent Almodóvar photo as its wall picture and a Wikipedia biography of the Spanish director. Nothing else. The two other main Almodóvar Facebook sites are the “Asociación Cultural de Cine Pedro Almodóvar Caballero,” which offers regular updates on the diverse cultural activities they organize, and “Almodóvar Fans Unite,”²⁷ which has an open wall for members to write their own comments and post their links. The latter’s group wall displays a variety of posts, photos, and links ranging from “sexy photos” of some of its users that look like ads for erotic services to actors advertising their availability, from links to short films made by members to one-line opinions expressing preferences in regard to Almodóvar’s films.²⁸ In this sense, this Facebook group seems to have deviated even further from its foundational purpose.²⁹ For, more than anything else, the most recent posts seem to treat the site as an advertising channel, which occasionally and very superficially touches upon its original unifying theme. In other words, like any other Facebook group that offers an open wall for members, it has been *infiltrated* by a variety of users whose goals, preferences, and sense of belonging have little to do with Pedro Almodóvar or any of his films. Instead, members establish a series of networking routes that may offer links to related media contents or may instead provide links to a variety of services or goods that require a monetary exchange. “Almodóvar Fans Unite” epitomizes the transition from monographic websites such as “Almodovarlandia” that did not allow users to directly interact with each other in real time or short duration spans, to the integration of media content in the multi-origin framework of social networking sites. In these, the logic of the hyperlink diversifies the production of artifacts to put it in the hands of many users who, invested in multifarious agendas, typically deviate from the original purpose or goal of the site in which they “stamp” their online presence, and contribute to build a heterogeneous and, at times chaotic, set of discourses.

Conclusion: Almodóvar and the Future of Participatory Culture

Writing in the late 1990s, Rosemary Coombe offered the following reflection: “Global circulations of texts provide enormous political opportunities, but these may well be foreclosed if we insist upon preserving and expanding intellectual property protections appropriate to an earlier era” (1998: 299). Undoubtedly, we are still living in a period of adjustment in this respect. In Spain, the SGAE (Sociedad General de Autores y Editores) continues to launch a frontal attack on piracy to the point of sending its associates to weddings where bands are playing cover songs to charge a fee or asking the owners of hairdressing parlors to pay a yearly charge for playing music on the radio. In the United States, several networks have joined forces to create the video portal www.hulu.com to broadcast their shows and television series and end YouTube’s monopoly of video content.³⁰ For its part, YouTube has tried to establish partnerships with several networks and share revenues from advertising with uneven results. The Spanish network Antena 3 has created its own YouTube channel where it controls the content distributed on the video portal. Film production and distribution company Lion’s Gate launched mash-up contents upon the release of *Forbidden Kingdom* (Rob Minkoff, 2008) and Oliver Stone’s *W.* (2008) and Peter Jackson sought direct input from *The Lord of the Rings* fans through the film’s website prior to the shooting of his acclaimed trilogy. Others, such as George Lucas, surrounded the release of his second *Star Wars* trilogy with tight secrecy. Finally, El Deseo seems to have acknowledged that the internet is the fundamental means through which cultural objects circulate today. A few Almodóvar films are available for download on iTunes and sooner than later his whole filmography will be on the Apple store’s catalogue.³¹ Coinciding with the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, El Deseo opened its official Facebook (290 fans) and Twitter (436 followers) accounts.³² So far, they are using both sites to keep fans updated on recent Almodóvar-related news and answering their comments or suggestions. Likewise, they have also created an official YouTube channel, “El Deseopc,” that will function in the future as an Almodovarian cyber-cinematheque (Pajuelo Almodóvar 2011).³³ This new approach is a potential turning point in terms of El Deseo’s internet strategy that conceptualizes its relationship with fans in a more interactive fashion.

Certainly, film companies such as El Deseo are facing an increasingly complex market environment in the digital age.³⁴ It is also obvious that the free distribution of all contents is not a viable alternative to solve the existing issues. However, as Álex de la Iglesia stated in his speech at the Goya Awards, the film industry clearly needs a new market model. Cultural commentators echo this thought, suggesting alternatives they pessimistically conceptualize as improbable: “El modelo exitoso en Internet debe compaginar los contenidos gratuito y *Premium* de pago ... desarrollar una estrategia clara en formatos; establecer acuerdos estratégicos con las televisiones y con las *majors* de cine y de la música, para disponer de hits que permitan jerarquizar y segmentar

contenidos. Pero eso, a día de hoy, parece improbable” (A successful internet model must combine free content with *Premium* services . . . develop a clear strategy in terms of format; establish strategic agreements with television channels and the music and film majors to own hits that may allow to establish content hierarchies and organize them properly. But today, all this seems unlikely) (Álvarez Monzoncillo and López Villanueva 2011: 98). In fact, most artistic creations are the property of a limited number of cultural groups and multinational companies that, rather than their actual creators, control the production, distribution, circulation, and exhibition of most cultural artifacts (Smiers 2006: 337). This poses the question whether the illegal distribution of cultural artifacts is detrimental to *most* artists or, if in fact, it only damages the interests of certain corporations and a few established creators who do have absolute control over their creative outputs, such as Pedro Almodóvar.

The Almodóvar mania will not stop and his oeuvre will continue to flourish on the increasingly populated cyber universe. One can only hope that Almodóvar, the corporation, will let internet users reinvent its works in a truly dialogic fashion in the near future. For popular culture can never be described properly in the simple terms of buying and selling communities (Fiske 1990: 23). On the contrary, it exists in the interface between the product and the active day-to-day practices of the producer–consumer porous divide. Furthermore, participatory culture does not have to destroy forms of production that are oriented to generate revenue. Instead, it *writes* over them, expanding their impact by re-circulating and re-channeling them to feed back to the mass media with new and unexpected objects (Jenkins 2006: 257). At the core of participatory practices, there is a sense of belonging to a community and the opportunity for each and all of its members to actively contribute to its maintenance, growth, and well-being. And here is precisely where its strength lies: the elimination of top-down hierarchies and the creation of a potentially democratic forum of exchange. As Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel affirm, popular art “restates, in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which reassures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition” (1965: 66). This is precisely what homemade videos, in the forms of spoof trailers, re-cuts of pre-existing films, or other types of amateur media offer: the surprising re-contextualization of already known materials, expanding the interest in films such as Almodóvar’s through the innumerable networks that the forces of participatory culture launch on the web every second.

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Notes

- 1 Upper case in the original text. All translations from Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted. The full speech is available at: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Discurso/integro/Alex/Iglesia/entrega/Goya/elpepucul/20110213elpepucul_9/Tes (Accessed May 3, 2011).
- 2 See “Álex de la Iglesia dimite como presidente de la Academia de cine por la Ley Sinde.” Available at: <http://www.blogdecine.com/noticias/alex-de-la-iglesia-dimite-como-presidente-de-la-academia-de-cine-por-la-ley-sinde> (Accessed May 2, 2011).
- 3 For more details about the “Sinde Law” see: “¿Qué es y cómo funciona la Ley Sinde?, en términos simples y sencillos.” Available at: <http://alt1040.com/2011/01/que-es-la-ley-sinde> (Accessed May 20, 2011); “‘Ley Sinde’ for dummies” Available at: <http://www.elmundo.es/blogs/elmundo/catalejo/2011/01/24/ley-sinde-for-dummies.html> (Accessed May 20, 2011). To read the official document that details the described changes in the “Law of Sustainable Economy” see: <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20100111/texto-integro-propuesta-modificacion-ley-servicios-sociedad-informacion-ii/311347.shtml> (Accessed May 20, 2011).
- 4 To read the entire manifesto, go to: <http://www.enriquedans.com/2009/12/manifiesto-en-defensa-de-los-derechos-fundamentales-en-internet.html> (Accessed May 20, 2011).
- 5 @delgado’s complete post about the “Sinde Law” is available at: <http://www.antonio-delgado.com/2010/12/desmontando-paso-a-paso-la-ley-sinde> (Accessed May 20, 2011).
- 6 The manifesto was signed by filmmakers such as Alejandro Amenábar, Enrique Urbizu and Agustín Díaz Yanes, musicians ranging from David Bisbal to Paco de Lucía, and writers such as Almudena Grandes. See “Almodóvar y Amenábar, a favor de la ‘Ley Sinde’.” Available at: <http://www.cinemanía.es/actualidad/noticias/5625/almodovar-y-amenabar-se-congratulan-por-la-ley-sinde> (Accessed January 6, 2011).
- 7 *La Edad de Oro* was an RTVE show that broadcast from 1983 to 1985. It showcased a variety of cutting-edge and avant-garde artistic and musical movements. The interview is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2qBulDwBCY> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 8 Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJCf_rqsgvw (Accessed February 9, 2010).
- 9 Marvin D’Lugo points out a web of intertextual references to the horror film, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), which shape *¡Atame!* as a generic hybrid navigating between the romance and the horror film.
- 10 The intricate relationship between passion, performance, and fandom is also central in *Tacones lejanos/High Heels* (1991), especially through the network of impersonations established between Rebecca, Becky del Páramo, and her Femme Letal. It is particularly significant how Rebecca replaces the loss of her mother with her friendship and sexual relationship with Letal.
- 11 The MySpace site seems abandoned now, redirecting users to his Facebook page.
- 12 The several times I have accessed this site, the video section is empty.
- 13 According to industry insiders, Almodóvar became disenchanted with the blog after his bitter polemic with film critic Carlos Boyero and stopped writing in it because of this reason.

- 14 Elsaesser points out a third related operation that characterizes cinephilia take 2, reframing, which is “the conceptual frame, the emotional frame, as well as the temporal frame that regulate the DVD or Internet forms of cinephilia” (Elsaesser 2005: 38).
- 15 Fotolog is a Spanish-language networking site that uses photos as a communicative tool between its different members. Typically, Fotolog bloggers upload a photo on regular intervals and their community of friends comment on it or link it to their own personalized page.
- 16 Originally in Spanish, my translation.
- 17 This notion draws on John Fiske’s formulation of popular culture as something “made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. People culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above” (1990: 25). In that sense it exists perhaps less in the products it produces than in the very practices through which these cultural items come to be realized as such and in the ways they reinvent imposed systems of signification to create their own material goods (De Certeau, quoted in Fiske 1990: 31).
- 18 Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xu2g6SBt_1I (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 19 Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bTFlsqRtes> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 20 The website, www.thetrailermash.com, is exclusively devoted to spoof trailers, organizing them by genres (Accessed February 9, 2010).
- 21 Available at: <http://community.livejournal.com/almodovar> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 22 Obviously, there are exceptions to this rule since *El Deseo* cannot map out the entirety of the web. In the video portal Vimeo, the user Jelicou has posted a mash-up between images of *Live Flesh* and Nathaniel Merriweather’s band, “Lovage,” and their theme “Anger Management.” The video is available at: <http://vimeo.com/user3414590> (May 5, 2011).
- 23 Available at: <http://www.almodovarlandia.com> (Accessed May 5, 2011)
- 24 The site can be viewed in Spanish, German, and English. It is obvious that is all written by one individual or a small roster of contributors since their proficiency in the Spanish language, for example, is fairly deficient.
- 25 Available at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pedro-Almodovar/226241900760> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 26 Available at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pedro-Almodovar/109180392441990?ref=search> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 27 Available at: <http://www.facebook.com/directory/groups/M7384144-7710089-7720599#!/group.php?gid=2205310831> (Accessed May 5, 2011).
- 28 One of the group members who posted semi-erotic photos also includes a hyperlink that brings users to her personal Facebook page, which, in turn, has a link to an “Adult Friend Finder”—that is, a site that offers erotic services through the use of web cams.
- 29 Older links, posts, and photos do offer a variety of Almodóvar-related material such as original Russian posters of his films or photos and information about different film festivals or events that Almodóvar or several of his actors attended.
- 30 Hulu’s content, unlike YouTube’s, is only available for viewing in the United States.
- 31 Additionally, fourteen of Almodóvar’s films are also available for instant viewing for 2.99 euro on the Spanish site, [filmin.es](http://www.filmin.es) (<http://www.filmin.es/director/pedro-almodovar>).
- 32 <http://www.facebook.com/eldeseo.official> and [@eldeseo](https://www.facebook.com/eldeseo) (Accessed June 19, 2011).

- 33 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/eldeosepc?blend=5&ob=5> (Accessed June 19, 2011).
- 34 Diego Pajuelo also remarked that El Deseo has shortened the release schedule of *La piel que habito* around the world. Whereas before a year would go by between its release in the first country, Spain and the last, Japan, now it will only take six months. This is another way to fight piracy.

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Almodóvar-related websites

- Almodovarlandia: <http://www.almodovarlandia.com>
- "Almodóvar's Fans Unite" Facebook Group: <http://www.facebook.com/directory/groups/M7384144-7710089-7720599#!/group.php?gid=2205310831>
- El Deseo's official Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/eldeseo.official>
- El Deseo's official Twitter account: @eldeseo
- El Deseo's official YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/eldeseo?blend=5&ob=5>
- Fanpop Almodóvar club: <http://community.livejournal.com/Almodóvar>
- Pedro Almodóvar's Blog: <http://www.pedroAlmodóvar.es/>
- Pedro Almodovar Facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pedro-Almodóvar/226241900760>
- Pedro Almodóvar Facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pedro-Almodóvar/109180392441990?ref=search>
- Pedro Almodóvar's Myspace: http://www.myspace.com/pedro_Almodóvar

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