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On Almodóvar's World: The Endless Film¹

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Many, many years ago, the study of literature in Spain was ruled by the strict code of German philology. Critical editions, extremely detailed literary histories, and stylistic critical studies were the natural outcome. Imbedded in the German philological tradition was the idea that by examining key texts from any literature (German, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, etc.), one could demonstrate how writers constructed themselves as examples of authentic discourse, the speech used by people in real life at a specific time in history. Attention to biographical detail and explanation of the text attempted to prove that you could glean the historical sense of a given period through the study of a text. Similar approaches were developed in Italy, France, and Spain. De Sanctis appropriated concepts from Hegel (imagination and creation, organic form and dialectical development) in his studies on Dante and later in his *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870–71). Idealistic approaches by Benedetto Croce, Karl Vossler, and Leo Spitzer introduced the idea that it was possible to find elements within the individual peculiarities of a language expressing a psychological state of mind. Menéndez y Pelayo and some of his followers (Menéndez Pidal, along with Amado Alonso and Dámaso Alonso, Martí de Riquer, and later Francisco Rico) followed the example set by the German school in discovering and mapping out a nationalistic version of Spain. Over a lengthy span of time, this approach produced spectacular works such as Manuel Milàs i Fontanals' *De los trovadores en España* (1861) and that of his follower, Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo's *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España* (1883–1891), and more critically astute works such as Auerbach's *Mimesis*, René Wellek's studies on literary criticism and theory, or Amado Alonso's *Materia y forma en poesía*.

Inspired by the Russian formalists and French Structuralism and its aftermath, a swift revolution started in the 1960s that dramatically altered the study of literature. The current status of literature within the scholarly practices of the humanities has been affected by the rejection of old twentieth-century approaches such as philology and stylistics. An increasing number of young scholars in Spain purposely deny any involvement with the old school, that of their old masters and professors or mentors, while some even dare to venture into cultural studies

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territory. Yet the looming menace for the study of literature in Spain is not the choice between a philological or theoretical approach, but one of readership. As the numbers of literature students grow smaller by the minute, the challenge is no longer how to read a text, but to (or with) whom to read it. Many of these potential readers or students of literature are lost en masse to the new “Facultades de Comunicación.” Recent developments in the United Kingdom and the United States in the field of Hispanism may offer a solution. I am referring to the growing interest in the study of film by younger students. The flexibility of academia in both communities has allowed scholars to make a shift, and they have included film as a legitimate teaching and research subject with great success. Many of our colleagues from across the Atlantic look puzzled at this new development.

Nevertheless, most of us come from a post-stylistic pre-postmodern world in which we were trained as literary critics: that is, to read texts. My focus in this piece will be the unfortunate proliferation of studies on cinema that are written from a literary perspective while ignoring the specific language of movies. Movies deal both with words—language—and images in motion; thus, film uses language in imaginative and powerful ways to various effects. It is our job to sharpen our students’ critical skills and transform them into more reflective members of the multiple communities to which they belong. A critical reading of Pedro Almodóvar’s films may shed some light on the kind of exercise our students are facing nowadays.

For quite some time, Pedro Almodóvar’s movies have been the powerhouse of Spanish cinema. Revered abroad, encountering less forgiving audiences at home, and identified with the renewal of Spanish culture after the end of dictatorship, his movies have done much to create a sense of national and collective renewal, giving voice to the worries and needs of marginalized groups such as women and gay men, and creating at the same time a personal world that is shaped by his own obsessions and shared realities. Almodóvar’s world is constructed upon a careful consideration of issues of sexual identity, marginal cultures, and art’s expressivity, most prominently film (sub)culture. Almodóvar’s world is unique in that it is easily recognizable from the opening shot of any of his films.² His world strongly figures themes of vindication and provocation, and includes unique graphics and views of the world. At first sight, Almodóvar’s world could be summarized in a few particularities: his skill at self-promotion (like Dalí or Warhol); the extremely different reception of his movies in Spain and abroad; the existence of what we can call an “estética Almodóvar.” As one reviewer recently wrote in *The New Yorker*: “His world is as hard to the touch as it is elusive to the understanding; there are motives that lurk and scurry behind those walls which we will never trap” (Lane). Almodóvar likes to include ugliness and clichés, self-reflexivity and a fondness for reversed situations.

What do Pedro Almodóvar’s most recent movies, *La mala educación* (2004), *Volver* (2006), and *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) have in common with his first productions, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del*

montón (1978) and *Laberinto de pasiones* (1980)? To what extent is the shocking, provocative approach of his first movies only justifiable against the background of the so-called “*movida madrileña*” and especially the construction of a fictional framework around a world of comic strips, punk rock with a “tonadillera” (kitschy pop song) aftertaste, and a strong anti-establishment feeling? To what point have they been completely abandoned in favor of a more “mature,”³ less provocative model of cinema, more in tune with the consideration of Spain as a part of Europe? Almodóvar’s example represents a unique phenomenon in contemporary world cinema (Epps and Kakoudaki), but nevertheless one that has arisen in a very specific time and place. Even though he has been extremely sharp in establishing a world reputation, the origins of his world are easily identifiable, to a certain point, with Spanish culture right at the tail end of Franco’s dictatorship. This was a moment when artists and writers were fighting for freedom of expression and successfully making connections with the West in the gloomy atmosphere of a decaying, corrupt political regime (Bou and Pittarello). Experimentation with camp became a fruitful slogan, and Almodóvar’s world was not immune to this trend. In her 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag emphasized the artifice, the frivolity, the naïve pretentiousness and scandalous excess of the middle class as key elements of camp. And so we can consider as camp those fragments of songs, objects that communicate a comical version of Francoism, as a way of escaping the pact of forgetting, in a manner similar to that of other contemporary writers and artists: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and his *Crónica sentimental de España*, Juan Marsé in *Si te dicen que caí*, the films of Víctor Erice, or even better, those of Basilio Martín Patiño, particularly in *Canciones para después de una guerra*. These artists stopped doing camp a long time ago.

In Almodóvar’s films one can witness the shadows of a camp reality. It has frequently been said that Almodóvar normalizes deviance, and so manages to centralize an alternative canon (Ballesteros). But it is also true that in some of his latest movies (*Hable con ella* and *La mala educación*, for example) he trivializes this deviation from the norm, although in the opinion of the audience he confirms and expands his provocative attitude.⁴ I wish to present a global reading of Pedro Almodóvar’s films, focusing particularly on the features that, from his earliest films through his most recent ones, remain unchanged or are only slightly modified. Thus, by tracing these basic elements in the films of Pedro Almodóvar, I will endeavor to outline a paradigm of his endless film. This kind of reading was already suggested by the filmmaker himself in a public address at Harvard University in 2004. He declared that his latest movie (*La mala educación*) was a summary of his whole trajectory. This could confirm the unity of his world and the nature of the “film of films.” More recently, Marsha Kinder has coined the term “retroseriality” to refer to the serial bonds with earlier films, reinterpreting, revising, and even revitalizing stories, situations, characters, and actors. In her own words:

his films increasingly perform an evocation of earlier works (both his own and intertexts of others) that leads us to read them as an ongoing saga and to regroup them into networked clusters. [. . .] [H]is films remind us that new works influence old works just as old works influence new ones, for new variations lead us to reread older works in new ways. (Kinder 269)

What this demonstrates is that he works with a well-considered structure that reappears time and again.

In the early days of his artistic life, Almodóvar's efforts could be related to those of the bulk of young filmmakers looking for alternatives to the auteurs' films of the last years of the dictatorship. The so-called urban film had its moment of glory at the beginning of the 1980s in the so-called "*comedia madrileña*" (Madrid comedy). These young filmmakers separated themselves from a symbolic cinematographic model, that of Carlos Saura, which had its apogee in the last years of the Francoist dictatorship. From this perspective, a phrase that Almodóvar enjoys repeating makes sense: "mis películas no son antifranquistas, porque yo, en mis películas, ni siquiera reconozco la existencia de Franco. Están hechas como si Franco no hubiera existido" (Strauss 30) (My films are not anti-Franco because in them I do not even acknowledge Franco's existence. They are made as if he had not existed). A film like *Ópera prima* (1980), by Fernando Trueba, paradigmatically represents this break with the previous film model and marks the emergence of the *comedia madrileña*. The films of Fernando Colomo, José Luis Garci, and even some by Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, such as *Maravillas* (1980), to cite just a few, are representative examples of how filmmakers were exploring new ways of expression at the end of Franco's dictatorship. However, Almodóvar's voice almost immediately became noticeably different from the rest of this group.

Almodóvar offered a strong, unconventional attitude from his very first movies. What most particularly characterized his world, at first glance, was the inspiration it took from the underground, which paralleled, for example, the efforts of the "Warhol factory." In Almodóvar's case, this world was deeply indebted to the *movida madrileña*. He continued to color, revise, and soften this inspirational axis, which was so decisive in the beginning of his work and was never fully abandoned, and which has, in fact, become perhaps the most defining characteristic of his particular universe. As Marvin D'Lugo demonstrated, Almodóvar's "auteur" films are inspired in part by Andy Warhol's radical concept of authorship: a rejection of originality (recycling and plagiarism) and the incorporation of a marginal world populated by homosexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals (82–84). Almodóvar has been able to create his own aesthetic through an apparently unintentional amalgam of the previously cited elements.

A quick review of the ample bibliography generated around Almodóvar's films reveals the great interest provoked among critics by two issues. Their attention to ideology, rather than specific technical

elements, is not unheard of. In general, Spanish film (and literary) criticism has been beleaguered by ideological issues, thus replacing aesthetic discussion and turning a deaf ear to more theoretical or philosophically oriented approaches.⁵ Those who are most attentive to the problematic of sexual orientation, an issue which is evidently dominant in Almodóvar's films, declare this aspect of his art the most decisive one.⁶ Farfetched connections have been made on many occasions. We will look at two examples. In Paul Julian Smith's opinion, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*'s explicit references to North America (the use of English-language pop music on the soundtrack, the appearance of a drag queen claiming—implausibly—to be from New York) suggest we should look more closely at the relationship between gay cinema in the two countries (Smith 175). Bradley Epps also emphasizes this characteristic of Almodóvar's films:

Frenetic, effervescent, wild, and rapturous, they are also willful, deliberate, and self-conscious. They focus on dispersion, center on marginality, and concentrate on excess. They seem designed, almost systematically, to scandalize and trouble; they seem fixed, almost obsessively, on the movement of sexual desire. They are also, of course, framed largely around figures of femininity and homosexuality: figures subject, in Almodóvar's eyes, to nervous anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and flamboyant histrionics: to hysteria. ("Figuring Histeria" 99)

It is clear that this focus exists in Almodóvar's films. But concentrating solely on it is a partial and reductionist reading of his films, since among the millions of spectators who are fascinated (or terrified or surprised or scandalized) by Almodóvar's movies, only a small portion expects this kind of reading.

Other critics insist that Almodóvar is a possible paradigm for postmodernity in Spain. They have therefore focused on the presence of a specific narrative model, that offered by North American cinematographic melodrama (Vernon), or on the uses of parody (Deleyto). Other readings trace parallels between Almodóvar's career and Spain's search for its identity at the end of the dictatorship. According to Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz: "The search itself for a satisfactory formal identity and the films' dependency on intertextuality, camp appropriation of 'Spanishness' and a generic instability are among their defining characteristics" (1–2). Thus, Almodóvar addresses and explores Spain's national identity during the political transition towards democracy.

These are valid readings and undoubtedly very clever. But in all cases they distort and appropriate Almodovarian discourse in the service of a specific program of sexual vindication or of vindication of an aesthetic and political postmodern change. They submit all readings of the La Manchan director's films to predetermined ideological positions. Although both positions are in part founded on the same themes in the films, or on one of the most important principles of structural

organization that we recognize in them, they suppress other possible readings. I will try, then, without delegitimizing other options and without discrediting the importance of these other potentially trendier and more polemical readings, to outline a more comprehensive reading of Pedro Almodóvar's cinema, focusing on the central elements that make up his world. I am interested not only in establishing a grammar of motifs, but also in elucidating some of the ways in which they interrelate.

As stated at the beginning, Pedro Almodóvar's films have a special strength that is similar to that of other great filmmakers, writers, and artists. One that leaves a strong imprint, and that marks the entirety of his production. As is the case with filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Yasuhiro Ozu, Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, or India's Satyajit Ray, many of his films are nothing if not variations on the same idea/story that is told again and again. Woody Allen always tells the story of a middle-aged character looking for sexual fulfillment that he does not find in a daydreamed Manhattan (today a London, tomorrow a Barcelona). Bergman returns insistently to eternal questions about death, couples, the passage of time. A film like *Summer Interlude* (1951) contains the whole world of the Swedish director's great classic films: *Wild Strawberries*, *Persona*, *Fanny and Alexander*, down to his last film, a sort of cinematic will and testament, *Saraband*. Ozu, with his floor-level shots, presents the Japanese family in crisis. Welles always exemplifies the rise and fall of an extravagant character in Xanadu or Shanghai, someone who is fighting for a different and more authentic life. His archetypal model is Don Quixote, whence his interest in Cervantes's character. Perhaps one of the secrets of Almodóvar's success and of the relative scorn he inspires among Spanish critics is his relapse into this basic script, and the fascination/repulsion that his obsessive and repetitive world arouses.

As with other exceptional artists, Pedro Almodóvar's films have always had a particular strength. They are distinctively themselves, and explore neglected areas of the collective imagination. The films are constructed by combining provocative situations at the outer limits of verisimilitude with others of a more normal appearance. They offer a passionate analysis of romantic relationships, always with ingenious solutions and plot twists that challenge both realism and the principle of the suspension of disbelief. These are some of the ingredients of a recipe for success with which he has been able to capture the imagination of a segment of the public that has been faithful to him rain or shine, a recipe that has at the same time been rejected by the other segment of the public and by many of the gossip journalists that live off the Spanish press. Many have not been able to understand the originality of his alternative proposal, denying him the recognition that he has been offered abroad.

Is this another instance of envy, the national sin?⁷ Yes, in part it is. But this reaction also shows how diverse readings of Almodóvar's films can be. Much of what his movies present to the spectator is banal in an Iberian context, but clearly provocative in much more socially

conservative societies such as France and Italy, and absolutely alternative (always with the threat of his movies being X-rated or judged morally scandalous) by the puritanical publics of the United Kingdom or the United States. One could relate this to the phenomenon that Álvarez Junco detected when discussing European (post)romantic approaches to Spain:

Se comprende que no es España lo que impresiona a los viajeros, sino la pérdida de esas cualidades en sus países de origen. Al idealizar España lo que hacen es lamentar la represión, el convencionalismo, el anonimato, característico de la modernidad urbana y masiva. (8)

(One understands that it is not Spain that impresses travelers, but the lack of those qualities in their own countries. When they idealize Spain, they are really lamenting repression, conventionalism, anonymity, typical of dull urban modernity.)

Many foreign viewers of Almodóvar's films also fall prey to this approach, becoming enthralled and (re)creating a romantic—and imaginary—version of Spain.

What are the basic, essential elements of a film by Pedro Almodóvar? We can cite at least four: First, pleasure in the obscene or shocking by simultaneously presenting characters from opposite worlds, in a new version of the “world-turned-upside-down” medieval fable.⁸ In *Laberinto de pasiones*, for example, these contrasts are shown through the gynecologist who rejects any kind of sexual relations and his nymphomaniac daughter. This relates to the more or less explicit need to recognize and vindicate marginal situations: gays and lesbians, transsexuals, abandoned women, raving lunatics; in short, a string of characters not integrated into society find in Almodóvar's movies a space for normality. Secondly, some recurrent motifs in which personal and contemporary obsessions are jumbled together: the return to the village, the pair of dumb policemen, the figure of the mother-grandmother who does not fit in the (post)modern world. The particular use of cinematographic language is a third mark of the “Almodóvar factory”: very original shots (low-angle shots, the subjectivity of machines, etc.), the incorporation of music (the lyrics of *boleros*), characters in a situation pressed to the limits, that is eventually resolved happily (“happyendism”). Finally, a complex plot structure, inspired by melodrama, comedy of intrigue, and drama (what has been coined as “Almodrama”), which takes pleasure in playing with tangled situations, and setting up multiple parallel plot lines that converge in a single happy ending. The use of “double,” or mirror situations, is not unstudied, and it allows him to accentuate in various ways his passion for contrast and provocation. It is perhaps this last element that encompasses all of the others and acts as one of the most active and productive leitmotifs of Almodovarian film. Further analysis of this aspect can shed light on the assortment of elements that make up his films.

Cinema, in Sartre's opinion, juxtaposes themes in time and space, creating double exposures ("surimpressions") and polyphonies ("polyphonies cinématographiques"). The simultaneity of themes can be expressed in two ways: through the montage, which André Bazin characterizes as an "imagist" outline (imagistes); or through the conjunction of two themes in the same scene or shot, described by Bazin as a "realist" focus—that is, the *mise-en-scène* approach. It is known that André Bazin was an advocate of depth of field, and rather than montage he preferred *mise-en-scène* (long-take style), with emphasis on the set, acting, decoration, lighting, and costumes.⁹ The so-called *mise-en-scène* (staging). Also known as "depth of field" or a sequence shot, is a technique that allows the unity of space and the relationship between objects within a space to be maintained. As defended by André Bazin, it gives the spectator the freedom to exercise his own control over the process of viewing, determining for himself what to look at, in what order, for how long, and how to effect the proper synthesis of this process of viewing. It maintains the existential ambiguity present in life, centered in the space. *Mise-en-scène* incorporates two styles, one in which the camera allows us to see, almost in a documentary fashion, as in neorealism; and another that indicates a more aesthetic reinterpretation of reality, in which realism derives exclusively from a respect for spatial unity, as in the cinema of Orson Welles and Andrei Tarkovsky. Almodóvar became a filmmaker as an autodidact, by watching films, and he is an experienced practitioner of the two principal forms of cinematic language, montage and *mise-en-scène*. But even though Almodóvar has mastered both techniques, his films unquestionably stress, as I discuss next, a strong use of montage.

The narrative organization of Pedro Almodóvar's films with an emphasis on montage is based on two rhetorical figures: contrast and juxtaposition. Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage is very relevant in understanding this type of cinematographic language used by Almodóvar. Eisenstein defended the idea that meaning in movies was generated through the clash between contrasting frames (*The Film Form; The Film Sense*). This is, without a doubt, one of the trademarks of Almodóvar's cinematographic language.¹⁰ The combination of contrast and juxtaposition is what permits him to spin narrative threads to form an original model, with more or less vague echoes in some cases, and direct ones in others, that tie the films back to the comedy of intrigue and the high comedy of North American cinema in the 1950s, as well as to melodrama and bolero. Generally speaking, his plots are well rounded (carefully composed and balanced), wandering and impossible from a realist perspective, and self-contained: everything fits within them.

Many critics relate them to the theatrical genre of melodrama, which is dominated by stereotypes, near caricatures, of good and bad that are meant to move the audience without allowing it to reason. Melodrama is based mostly on scenographic and theatrical effects, unintentionally becoming a parody of tragedy. It is rewritten for the use and abuse of the bourgeois ideology, and reduces historical and social contradictions to

nothing. Almodóvar has played with this particular structure since his first movies. In films such as *Pepi, Luci, Bom* or *Laberinto de pasiones*, his approach was closer to the language of comic books. In fact, it was not until *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, his first major international success, that Almodóvar gained control over the language of the comedy of “*enredo*,” or screwball comedies, although some critics wonder if it is not “too tainted by melodrama” (Evans 71).

A movie like *Mujeres* can be related easily to melodramas, which are characterized by a plot that attends to the audience's emotions. If “melodrama” originally meant a combination of drama and melos (music), its literal meaning is “theatrical work with music,” in which music underscores the emotions of the plot. Typical melodramas exaggerate domestic romantic situations with commonplace characters, and were aimed at a female audience. They normally present situations of human emotional crisis: failed love or difficult family circumstances, tragedies, illnesses, psychological or physical diseases. The characters, individuals (usually women) or couples, face great social pressure, repression, improbable circumstances, and experience great difficulties with their social surroundings (female friends, work, lovers, family).¹¹ All this can be easily translated into the “Almodóvar world.”

Almodóvar's cinema is founded on narrative hybridism. As discussed by critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin, narrative hybridism condenses its eclectic approaches, mixing realities and, through contrast, seeking pure and simple provocation, or the construction of an alternative meaning that reflects the complexity of a social, sexual reality, that of Spain—Madrid—in the last twenty years. As Bakhtin explained, hybridization is “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (358). This is an essential principle of Almodóvar's cinema, since he can use it to present an opposition between languages—not strictly natural ones—in the broader sense of contrast between different perceptions of the world. A good example of this would be the shocking environment in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, where a rapist policeman is presented side by side with his wife Luci, a woman longing for liberation. The contrasts between husband and wife play a destabilizing role, and present a world very different from that of Pepi and Bom, with their wild parties (the “popular erections”). In other films, the obsession with military or police figures acquires a leading role, presenting a stark difference between a male-dominated world with a very specific set of rules and unconstrained female life. In *La flor de mi secreto*, Almodóvar presents the contrast between a colonel in the Spanish army and a member of the United Nations peacekeeping commission in Bosnia who is unable to quell the conflict in his own married life. In *Carne trémula*, the central action focuses on the conflict in a double love triangle: a social outcast just released from jail, two policemen, and the policemen's wives, who at different times become lovers with the ex-convict. In *Átame*, a crazy young man, recently

released from a mental institution, tries to seduce a porn star by abducting her.

Cinema also presents many similarities with the written word: “the novelistic hybrid is an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image of another language” (Bakhtin 361). This is what some critics have called intertextuality, a concept which may be too narrow for Almodóvar’s world (Riambau). Applied to the director’s cinema, the “novelistic hybrid” reminds us of Almodóvar’s frequent theatrical (*La Voix humaine*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and cinematic “quotations,” which are perfectly intertwined with the film’s plot. The music and lyrics of songs are very important in Almodóvar’s films and offer a counterpoint to the situation that is being experienced onscreen. In *La flor*, the flamenco dance presents a counterpoint to the love that is born; the passion of the scenery does not correspond to the faint attraction that Leo feels for Ángel. In *Átame*, the final scene is filmed over a song by the Dúo Dinámico and, in fact, is a bit more complex than what Smith has written: “this is once more an example of the double ‘miming’ we have seen elsewhere in Almodóvar’s oeuvre: just as the characters reproduce their feelings in the form of popular culture, so Almodóvar echoes that culture and subjects it to redirection” (Smith 211). The chords of the Dúo Dinámico’s song “Resistiré,” with its message of overcoming difficulties, represent a catharsis that resolves the grave situation experienced by the characters in *Átame*. In *Mujeres*, we recognize echoes of Cocteau’s *La Voix humaine*, along with allusions to Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, to Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar*, and even to George Cukor’s *The Women*. Almodóvar’s notes shed more light on this issue:

Cuando empecé a escribir el guión de *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, pretendía hacer una versión muy libre del monólogo de Cocteau. En la obra, el amante ausente no tiene voz, incluso cuando llama por teléfono y ella le responde, a él no se le oye. [. . .] Al contrario que Cocteau, no sólo le he dado voz al ausente, sino que lo he convertido en un profesional de la voz. Cuando terminé de escribir el guión, lo único que permaneció de Cocteau (además del atrezzo: una mujer sola, el teléfono y una maleta) es lo que él no escribió: las palabras del amante ausente. Y sus mentiras. (Almodóvar, “Mujeres”)

(When I started writing the script of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, I wanted to write a very open version of Cocteau’s monologue. In his work, the absent lover does not have a voice; even when he telephones and she answers, we cannot hear him. [. . .] Unlike Cocteau, I have not only given him a voice, but I have also made him a professional at it. When I finished writing the script, the only thing that remained of Cocteau [apart from the props: a lonely woman, a telephone and

a suitcase] was what he did not write: the words of the absent lover. And his lies.)

Esteve Rimbau has paid attention to this feature of Almodóvar's world. According to this critic, just like some of his characters, Almodóvar's films are the result of mixing genres: "In broad strokes, his comedy would open ever-widening holes in its trajectory toward the introduction of the melodrama, in a path that also meets up with the detective story (*Matador*, *Carne trémula*) and the so-called popular subgenres of local color (the serial, the situation comedy, the *españolada*)" (Rimbau 248–49). In fact, an "Almodrama" is the result of mixing and appropriating different genres and cannibalizing previous texts, films, plays, and songs.

In *Todo sobre mi madre*, the performance of a play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and the viewing of *All About Eve* are deeply interconnected with the actions and passions of the film. It is a case of *mise en abyme*, a situation within the narrative that concentrates on one of the central problems laid out in the storyline. This is also the case in *La ley del deseo*, which makes use of the theatrical production of *La Voix humaine* superimposed on a version of Jacques Brel's *Ne me quitte pas*, sung in Spanish and by a woman. Both the play and the song function as mirrors of the situation that the characters are experiencing in the film. As Esteve Rimbau demonstrates, intertextuality plays a significant role in *Todo sobre mi madre*, which incorporates elements from *L'important c'est d'aimer* (Andrzej Zulawski, 1974), *Opening Night* (John Cassavetes, 1978), and *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) (Rimbau 242–44).

In this category we may include the case of plot circumstances that are repeated in several films, whether amplified or subverted. In *La flor de mi secreto*, the protagonist's friend is a psychologist, and this psychologist is also the protagonist's husband's lover. She trains doctors to negotiate organ donation with families. The situation and character are amplified to occupy the center of the story, no longer as mere training, but as a full-time job. Manuela in *Todo sobre mi madre* has the same job, with the ultimate irony that she is the one who will have to make a decision about the donation of her son's organs. Going back to *La flor de mi secreto*, the fictional plot of the rejected novel written by Leo becomes on a larger scale the initial setting in *Volver*. In *Los abrazos rotos*, an important element in the film is the "re-editing" of an old film: the gazpacho scene in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*.

Almodóvar's world is a resourceful one, filled with imagination and inventive new situations. But at the same time it is plagued by elemental obsessions that torment him. It is for this reason that he returns to the same situations, characters, themes. In fact, many of his films can be reduced to a search: a character, generally female, tries to reconstruct her life after a traumatic episode. The typical Almodóvar movie consists of a more or less crazy quest to rebuild something that has gone wrong. *Mujeres* offers many paradigmatic examples, for example, when the

character Pepa is abandoned by her boyfriend, Iván. The movie starts with a series of scenes of incomplete dialogue: a dream in which Iván gives compliments to a series of women; messages on an answering machine. Incomplete dialogue is also stressed in *Johnny Guitar*'s dubbing scene, in the movie's most memorable dialogue about the end of love, almost in disgust, with Joan Crawford responding to Johnny-Iván's questions with no sound. It ends with a dialogue between Pepa and Marisa, in which she first reconciles herself to having a child alone, and then confesses to having lost her virginity in a dream. After two days of pursuing him by telephone to tell him that she is pregnant, playing hide-and-seek all over Madrid, trying to evade Shiite terrorists and a vindictive ex-wife, the search culminates with liberation from the masculine environment, in which the final dialogue plays a decisive role. The development from the initial situation of crisis leads to the ultimate solution, an alternative to the norm.

Together with his narrative principle, which I am calling one of contrast and juxtaposition (of situations, characters, etc.), mirror symmetry is another recognizable element of Almodovarian cinema. As explained by Lotman: "La ley de la simetría especular es uno de los principios estructurales básicos de la organización interna del dispositivo generador de sentido" (41) (The law of mirror symmetry is one of the basic structural principles of the internal organization of a meaning-generating device). In the case of Almodóvar's films, this is applied to a world of transgressions, a way of looking with new eyes at old, known realities. From the beginning, he offers strong criticism of some of the taboos of Spanish society: the notions and representations that religious and sexual education generate, or claiming a central position for marginal groups (women and gay). Thus, almost unintentionally, his cinema becomes a vast fresco of tensions, frustrations, and desires in Spain after the Francoist dictatorship. He becomes the chronicler of a new society, many-colored and contradictory, that dominates Spain in the twenty-first century.

It is through the idea of mirror symmetry that we arrive at the central mechanism of Almodóvar's cinema. A series of rhetorical tropes serve as vehicles for the expression of a contradictory world, in the provocative version that the director wishes to bestow on it. Antithesis, oxymoron, paradox, *reversio*, chiasmus, contrast, dichotomy, parallelism, juxtaposition—all are nothing but fundamental rhetorical devices for the expression and denunciation of a double world. The double language that we recognize in (almost) all his films is an example. Even in the far-off *Pepi, Luci, Bom* he presents certain situations from pornographic cinema in an everyday environment of complete normality. By joining both worlds in a sharp contrast, he destroys the foundations of each.

One of the songs that Almodóvar himself composed and performed in *Laberinto de pasiones* poses the question of the double and the superposition of situations and voices, and offers an important key for the comprehension of this aspect. In "Gran ganga" we hear:

Vivo en continua
temporada de rebajas.
Sexo, lujo y paranoias,
ése ha sido mi destino.

(I live in an unending
sales period.
Sex, luxury and paranoia,
that's been my fate)

In the song, the questions posed by the singing voice are modified by the other, that of the chorus (in italics):

¿Quién soy yo y a dónde voy?
¿Quién es él y a dónde va?
¿De dónde vengo y qué planes tengo?
¿De dónde viene y qué planes tiene?
Gran ganga, gran ganga, soy de Teherán.
Calamares por aquí, boquerones por allá.

(Who am I and where am I going?
Who is he and where is he going?
Where am I from and what are my plans?
Where is he from and what are his plans?
Great bargain, great bargain, I am from Teheran.
Squid over here, anchovies over there.)

This song, from early in his cinematic career, establishes the tone of what I am interested in discussing here. It draws our attention to the dialogical structures and specular treatments in Almodóvar's cinema. Let's review several characteristic uses of these structures.

The use of double situations in Almodóvar's films can be related to Freud's "*unheimlich*" (which corresponds to the Spanish "*siniestro*" or "*inquietante*," the Italian "*perturbante*," and the English "uncanny"), or the unfamiliar. What is terrifying for Freud about the *unheimlich* is its familiarity, its belonging to our world, and, therefore, the impossibility of not recognizing it. The feeling of the *unheimlich* is awoken when something apparently insubstantial, belonging to the everyday, revives repressed past experience, especially related to infancy and the awakening of our sexual consciousness. Freud plays here with two concepts: fear of the unfamiliar and intellectual uncertainty. The word "*heimlich*" encompasses the dialectic of privacy and intimacy that is inherent to the bourgeois ideology. The *unheimlich*, understood as the unfamiliar, the unpleasant, the strange, is superimposed on the second, less common meaning of the word as the revealed, that which stops being secret. That is to say, what should remain secret, but which has been revealed through negligence. In Freudian terminology, the *unheimlich* is the sign of the return of the repressed.

Freud also relates the sinister to the theme of the double, which in principle reassures you about survival: “from having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger (messenger) of death” (Freud 387). The double (*doppelgänger*) is a source of a primary narcissism in childhood, the love for oneself. Freud’s thesis is that the *unheimlich* is anything that we experience in adult life that is a reminder of previous psychic states, aspects of the unconscious life, or the primitive experience of human beings. And one can include: castration, the double, involuntary repetition (the compulsion to repeat, *Wiederholungszwang*, as a structure of the unconscious). Almodóvar, in creating situations in which he combines the uncanny and the double, as well as the mirroring of situations, advances the notion.

A few examples may better illuminate this notion. Let us start with a purely visual technique to which he frequently resorts: the superposition of images, a technique that he achieves through fading frames. The wheels of a car turn into the eyes of one of the protagonists in *La ley del deseo*. In Leo’s apartment, in *La flor*, her husband’s arrival (Paco) is sensitively dramatized when she sees herself reflected in the broken mirror at the entrance. It corresponds disharmoniously with the first appearance of an image of the two of them in a photograph by the matrimonial bed, when Leo is still asleep, and also corresponds with the final sequence, when a wall, which can be mistaken for a picture frame, frames the new couple formed by Leo and Ángel. The tremendous coldness of the first shot (the reunion between Leo and Paco) is increased by the mirror’s superposition effect, because in the second shot the spectator sees their embrace in a mirror. In *Carne trémula*, the shoot-out scene is constructed as a double action: the first shot Elena fires coincides with a shot in *Ensayo de un crimen*, by Luis Buñuel, which is being shown on television. In fact, by mixing reality and fiction, it looks as if the shot has come from the barrel of the pistol in the movie and not from the one the woman is holding, since, thanks to a skillful editing effect, the trajectories of the two coincide. And so virtual reality, cinematography, and the reality in Almodóvar’s film blend together and are mirrored in each other. Each takes part in the others. And it is thus that the frequent cinematic quotations in Almodóvar’s films can be justified and reach their full meaning. They are double reflections of an eye, that of the director, who retains in his retina the experience of a vision and projects it in a new filmic narration, his movie. The initial dubbing scene in *Mujeres*, already discussed above, is one of the most fruitful in this sense. In *Volver* there are allusions to Sofia Loren in Vittorio De Sica’s *La ciociara*, and to Anna Magnani in Luchino Visconti’s *Bellissima*, which we see on the television screen, which in turn are foundations of the character brought to life by Penélope Cruz.¹² A special case of the double in Almodóvar’s films is seen in the film director as a character, which is both a self-reflective device and a way to express his opinions on film. In *La ley del deseo*, we realize how the main character, movie director Pablo Quintero, merges cinema and life, lovers and actors. He uses his sister’s letters and her story as inspiration for the movie he is preparing. Gender and profession

intersect between Pablo and his sister: film director and actress. One situation introduced in this film (the transsexual brother, seduced by the father) expands and reaches its plot completion in *La mala educación*, until it becomes the center of the story. The film director as a character appears in several movies (*La ley del deseo*, *Átame*, *La flor de mi secreto*, *La mala educación*, *Los abrazos rotos*) and is the apotheosis of this double gaze to which I refer above. This loop is reinforced and expanded if we notice that in *Átame* the film director is named Máximo Espejo, his nature is accentuated by his very name. In the initial sequence of *La ley del deseo*, the film director is a voice that “commands” and is not seen. As in *Átame*, the madman gives orders to the terrified porn star.

In many of Almodóvar's films, a conflict between two worlds is presented, a clash without confrontation, which is pushed—as seen before—through contrast and juxtaposition. In *Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto*, the world of the assistant and the taxi driver contrast with that of the pair of writers. In *Carne trémula*, the ex-convict is set against the ex-policeman. This conflict expands against other oppositions: between writing (imagination) and reality; between big-city Madrid and the rural village, with the recurring theme of flight from the city that is represented in so many films by the character played by Chus Lampreave the drug addicted, drug-dealing nun in *Entre tinieblas*. This double effect can also be seen in symmetrical situations that repeat themselves: Riza's father and Sexi, or the characters of Sexi-Queti in *Laberinto de pasiones*; the bus in the initial birth scene in *Carne trémula*, which turns into a minivan in the last scene; pairs of (clumsy) policemen in *Deseo*, *Merecer*, *Mujeres*, and *Carne*. In *Carne trémula*, the voice we hear at the end talking about democracy is (more or less) the voice of Aznar (“España va bien”) and is equivalent to the voice of Fraga Iribarne announcing the state of emergency at the beginning of the film. Some scenarios repeat themselves and correspond to obsessions: references to Germany; life in taxis, and their involvement in decisive moments of the action; the escape to the airport (*Laberinto*, *Mujeres*).

The reality of the films becomes confused, and is magnified by this specular dialogical game, which includes texts and films provoking uncanny effects. In *Deseo* the script of the movie that Pablo Quintero is writing is based on his own relationship with his sister, and on his lover's letters. In *La flor*, the writer Leo, through reading women's novels (which she shamelessly plagiarizes), writes romance novels. But because of the change in her romantic situation, she begins to write gruesome novels that her editors do not accept. At one point Leo even writes a very critical book review of her own book. Using the name Patti Diphusa (Pedro Almodóvar's pseudonym as a writer), she confronts Sol Sufrategui (the name of the secretary of the production company El Deseo) who has a very positive opinion on the book. In a fictional page of *El país*. Leo attacks her novel for the most obvious reasons, because she cannot detect the problems the main characters have as a couple, which are exactly like the ones she has in her own life.

I noted before that Almodóvar's cinema amounts to a vast fresco of society. Politics are very present. But it is not politics in the primary sense, of complaint and condemnation, as in the social cinema of the 1970s, but rather an elegant game of allusions. It appears in the background, like a subtle time-period note. This is accentuated by the specular character of the movies. The general views of the M-30 and the working-class neighborhood in *Qué he hecho*, besides being a vague reference to Italian neorealist cinema, are a clear denunciation of the type of cheap mass dwelling that has invaded the suburbs of all Spanish cities since the 1970s. The Shiite student-terrorists in *Laberinto* and *Mujeres* correspond to a powerful element in the European and Spanish imagination from the 1980s. The demonstration by Intern Resident Doctors (MIR) in *La flor* offers an environmental detail of the complaints of students' and workers' unions during the decline of the socialist regime in Spain. The specular nature of the beginning and end of *Carne trémula* introduces a sardonic image of the "change." These are harsh commentaries on the evolution of the uses and customs of the Spanish middle class.

In the initial sequence of the film *Tokyo-Ga* by Wim Wenders, we hear a voice-over of the German director speaking admiringly of Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu in words that sound almost like a prayer: "For me, never before and never again since has the cinema been so close to its essence and its purpose: to present an image of man in our century, a usable, true, and valid image, in which he not only recognizes himself but from which, above all, he may learn about himself" (*Tokyo-Ga*). This reflection, *toute proportion gardée* and with a less sacred emphasis, could be applied to the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar. He is a unique director who has achieved almost unanimous world renown for his cinematic work over a period of thirty years, but not for the same merits as the Japanese director. While watching Almodóvar's movies, one cannot help feeling contradictory double sensations, since his films, despite their deformation of reality and their emphasis on supposedly marginal aspects or on situations of conflict, are guided by a universal and localist ("glocal") drive, urban and rural, provocative and conformist. It is precisely these elements of contradiction and marginality that have greatly contributed to the reception of his films. They represent a remarkable contribution to the essence and purpose of cinema as defined by Wenders: to present an image of the human being of our time, a useful, true, valid image, in which one can recognize oneself, but in which, above all, one can learn about oneself.

Over the years Almodóvar has become a celebrity moviemaker around the world and has shot more than 15 movies. With his "Mundo Almodóvar," he has built a sort of endless film, one he shoots again and again, and which is constructed using the elements I have outlined. His films present an original, provocative way of interpreting sexual identity; play an important role in the vindication of women in society; and, whether you like it or not, have become a paradigm of Spanish postmodernity. By using some of the techniques I have discussed,

particularly the recurring shocking contrast or the double (symmetry), the mirror effect, Almodóvar's world makes us reassess the role of the artist and that of women. He creates a world in which, like in Ozu's films, it is "an image of man in our century, a usable, true, and valid image, in which he not only recognizes himself but from which, above all, he may learn about himself."

Notes

1. I am most grateful to the many Brown University students who, with their illuminating and provocative comments in the various courses on the cinema of P. Almodóvar that I have led since 1997, have taught me a great deal. I am also indebted to my conversations with Enric Sullà and the invitation to give a lecture at Venice International University in April 2003. Other audiences included those at Dartmouth College, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), University of Toronto, and Queens University, all of whom contributed decisively in strengthening and developing the ideas presented here.
2. Even if you do not like his films, as took place at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, when the film critics at *El País* and Almodóvar himself aggressively traded insults because of a difference of opinion on the reception of his latest movie ("Almodóvar carga").
3. Representative of this is what Jonathan Van Meter, interviewer for the *New York Times*, writes: "His two most recent films, 'The Flower of My Secret' and 'Live Flesh,' showed signs of maturation and newfound writing skill that are even more evident in 'All About My Mother'" (September 12, 1999).
4. It has been obvious for some time that there are two Almodóvars: the one who is seen in Spain and the one who is seen abroad, especially in countries like the United States. The reasons for this difference in reading are quite obvious. From the Spanish national sin of "envy" and an interest in a Merimée style, to the fact that a puritan culture can project onto the "Almodovarian Other" elements of the uncanny that these societies do not dare to confront.
5. See for example, Kinder, Ballesteros, Estrada.
6. The bibliography is already enormous. I am citing only two of the most representative cases.
7. In a collective volume containing a comprehensive review of all of Almodóvar's films, Antonio Castro muses, "Se trata de un autor muy escasamente representativo de algo que no sea de sí mismo" (Castro 9) (It's about an author that is hardly representative of things that don't pertain to him).
8. The *topos* is studied by E. R. Curtius (94–98). More recently, it occupies an important place in the carnivalesque approaches of M. Bakhtin. The basic book continues to be that of G. Cocchiara, *Il mondo alla rovescia*. Within the Hispanist field, Helen F. Grant's work is fundamental. As Carlos Vaillo has indicated, the unusual associations of ideas, persons, and things that constitute the *impossibilia* of Virgil and Horace are collected and disseminated by Petrarchism. See also J. G. Fucilla. It is obvious that there is an unconscious echo of them in the world of Almodóvar.
9. He gave less importance to cinematography, that is to say all the photographic aspects of a film (camera movement, lens aperture, composition of the shot, point of view, close-up, medium shot, long shot, and so on) and to the editing, that is to say the production of sound and music, the dialogue, and all the noises associated with the image.
10. Excellent examples of this would be sequences such as the gazpacho one in *Mujeres*, in which, with fast mood changes and mix of striking colors, an alliance is created among the women against the pair of stupid policemen.
11. See Barefoot, Byars, Cavell, Cook, Deleyto.

12. In *Matador* he epitomizes this duplication effect: it is a love story that combines looking and being looked at, loving and being loved, killing and being killed, and so covers all of the aspects of total passion (see Donapetry qtd in Smith 84).

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