AMBIVALENT PASSION:
PEDRO ALMODÓVAR’S POSTMODERN MELODRAMAS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the films of Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar as postmodern melodramas. The crux of my argument is that melodrama is known for its expressiveness and its attempt to restore a spiritual element to a post-sacred world, and is used by Almodóvar to make clear the problems and contradictions inherent in the destabilized world of postmodernity. This definition of melodrama draws primarily on the work of Peter Brooks, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams; it is modified to apply to postmodernism as defined by Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson. The conclusion reached is that Almodóvar is deeply ambivalent about postmodernity.

Chapter 2 considers the twin issues of representation and sexuality in Almodóvar’s first six films: Pepi, Luci, Bom (Pepi, Luci Bom y otras chicas del montón, 1980), Labyrinth of Passions (Laberinto de pasiones, 1982), Dark Habits (Entre tinieblas, 1983), What Have I Done To Deserve This? (¿Qué he hecho yo por merecer esto!, 1984), Matador (1986), and Law of Desire (La ley del deseo, 1987); with a special eye to the representation of sexual violence, it establishes how Almodóvar develops his ambivalent melodramatic imagination.

Chapter 3 considers fashion as a discourse and argues that Almodóvar’s next four films use clothing to place different versions of femininity in dialogue, and uses this as a springboard to consider Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, 1988), Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (¡Átame!, 1990), High Heels (Tacones lejanos, 1991), and Kika (1993) as postmodern “women’s pictures.”

Chapter 4 considers the appearance of the explicitly political along with the symbolism of the image of the map in The Flower of My Secret (La flor de mi secreto, 1995), Live Flesh (Carne trémula, 1997), and All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999).

Chapter 5 uses the metaphor of ghosts to consider the draw of the past in Talk To Her (Hable con ella, 2002), Bad Education (La mala educación, 2004), and Volver (2006), pointing to both the emptiness of the present and the impossibility of returning to that golden past.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the films of Pedro Almodóvar as postmodern melodramas, and, in so doing, to indicate some of the ways that melodrama lends itself to revealing the postmodern condition. Though Linda Williams maintains that melodrama remains the prevailing mode of American popular cinema (1998:42), attempts to reconcile melodrama (usually understood as a distinctly modern form) with postmodernity are few and far between. Because postmodernist art is generally understood in terms of pastiche and critical distance, postmodern uses of melodrama are often simply seen as being critical or parodic as opposed to "genuine". However, in Almodóvar's work, his use of melodrama runs deeper than critical parody: it is the primary mode of meaning-making in the films. His melodramatic impulses run toward making the postmodern universe available, and of trying to make sense of postmodernity's moral and spiritual confusions. In the process, as I will show, his films run the gamut of melodramatic possibilities, from visceral sensation to abstract symbolic depiction of emotional states, and his preoccupations shift from sex and sexual violence to fashion, then growing less tangible as he shifts his thematics to representatives of time and space like maps and ghosts.

Almodóvar made his first full-length feature film in 1980, five years after the death of President Franco and the end of Spain's fascist government. The simultaneous release from both the political controls of fascism and the moral controls of Catholicism, which had a central role in the Franco government (Kinder 1993:34-35) created a wildly liberated, anything-goes atmosphere. After decades of harsh censorship, filmmakers were free to show whatever they wanted – which meant that they could deal with
previously forbidden topics, including homosexuality. Positive representations like those put forth by Eloy de la Iglesia paved the way for Almodóvar’s normalized queer families as in *Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*, 1987). Almodóvar’s films appeared at the tail end of the transition period, which was the heyday of *destape* films.¹ Melodrama quickly established itself as Almodóvar’s primary mode of exploring the moral ambiguities of this (for Spain) unprecedented freedom. From his earliest films, the characters operate in a moral – and sexual – universe where everything is permitted. Old restrictions no longer apply, and characters forge new relationships with the world in this knowledge. Though Almodóvar’s work comes from a specifically Spanish context, the postmodern freedom he explores in his films speaks to a global audience; his films are consistently successful in North America, with his most recent film, *Volver* (2006) grossing $12.9 million in the U.S. alone, making it the fifteenth-highest grossing foreign film since 1980 (“Foreign Language Movies”).² No doubt his references American film make the works more accessible to global audiences, but I would suggest that his widespread international popularity stems from his ability to speak to postmodern conditions to which the rest of the Western world can relate.

Almodóvar began his career by making Super 8 shorts, which, as Gwynne Edwards puts it “contain some of the themes that appear in the later films and also give an indication of Almodóvar’s sense of parody and irony,” but lack the themes that would come to preoccupy him, including the complex interrelationships of love, life, and art

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¹ *Destape* means “uncovered,” and refers to a popular genre of soft porn in late-1970s Spain (Salvador 92).
² Based on figures not adjusted for inflation. However, Almodóvar is well-represented in the top 100 foreign films in North America, with six films on the list. *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, even without adjustment for inflation, grossed $7.2 million when it was released twenty years ago (“Foreign Language Movies”).
The majority of Almodóvar criticism in English revolves around placing him in the context of Spanish cinema and culture, often combined with an auteurist attention to thematic and stylistic similarities. Given the plethora of available work dealing with these topics (including Martin D’Lugo’s *Pedro Almodóvar*, the space devoted to Almodóvar in Marsha Kinder’s *Blood Cinema*, and Paul Julian Smith’s *Desire Unlimited*), I have elected to keep that context in the background. Within English-language Spanish film criticism, the body and sexuality are topics that come up quite frequently, in part because of Almodóvar’s popularity: Stephen Marsh and Parvati Nair’s anthology *Gender and Spanish Cinema* features a still from *Live Flesh* (1997) on the cover; Santiago Fouz-Hernandez and Alfredo Martinez-Exposito’s *Live Flesh: The Male Body in Contemporary Spanish Cinema* is named after the same film; and Paul Julian Smith’s *Laws of Desire* and *Vision Machines* deal with depictions of homosexuality and sexuality in general, respectively – one named after Almodóvar’s film, the other with an image of Victoria Abril from *Kika* on the cover. There are also a number of more traditional auteur-centred books on Almodóvar, including Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz’s recent *Pedro Almodóvar*, Mark Allinson’s *A Spanish Labyrinth*, and Gwynne Edwards’ *Labyrinths of Passion*; all of these pick up on common themes, as well as deal with themes of sexuality and Almodóvar’s generic influences. Part of the reason that Almodóvar has drawn so much specific auteurist criticism so early in his career is in his tendency to *invite* this kind of criticism, both in his self-promotion and in his films, which constantly refer back to each other. Vernon and Morris write, “For the postmodern auteur […] the creation and mobilization of a celebrity persona has become at least as important as the making of films” (15), noting Almodóvar’s plethora of
adopted identities, even in 1995, from punk rocker to “arbiter of the international fashion scene” (16). More recently, Marsha Kinder noted Almodóvar’s choice to work only in Spain, and produce his films through his own company, El Deseo, where he retains “total artistic control” (2005:10).

Certainly, some of this body of work has discussed Almodóvar’s use of melodrama. Linda Williams wrote about High Heels (Tacones lejanos, 1991). In “Melodrama Against Itself,” Kathleen Vernon argues that for Almodóvar, “Melodrama provides the mode for exploring the breakdown of old hierarchies and the resultant dissolutions of barriers and boundaries in a postpatriarchal, postreligious Spain” (60). Marsha Kinder’s recent piece on Talk To Her emphasizes the moral fluidity of Almodóvar’s melodrama as well. Also, there have been several pieces on aspects of postmodernity in Almodóvar’s work, with the best-known and most thorough being Smith’s Vision Machines. However, the two aspects have never been considered in tandem: the melodramatic readings tend to glide by the centrality of Almodóvar’s postmodernism, and the postmodern readings tend to underplay the power of his melodrama. To understand Almodóvar’s appeal, both are required.

Melodrama, of course, has a history much longer than the cinema. As Peter Brooks explains in his landmark study The Melodramatic Imagination (published in 1976), melodrama’s roots go back to popular theatre that emerged after the French revolution. Brooks sees melodrama as emphasizing theatricality, Manichaean morality, and most importantly, as “a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force” (xvii). The central point of Brooks’s analysis is that melodrama uncovers what he calls the “moral occult” as it operates in a post-sacred world (20).
Brooks applies his conception of the melodramatic to the novel, but his serious reconsideration of a form previously taken to be a "low" cultural form was embraced by feminist critics looking to reaffirm the importance of the oft-maligned Hollywood "women's picture," most notably Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, who with Brooks provide the theoretical backbone for my assertions about melodrama throughout this text, along with Thomas Elsaesser, whose essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," was originally published in 1972, treats melodrama in a similar way to Brooks, but placing a greater emphasis on film style as a way of articulating the social and psychic context of the Sirk and Minnelli films he studied.

Melodrama emphasizes the morally charged gestures of everyday life, of what Brooks calls the "text of muteness," the aspects of gesture and staging that express moral ideas that are beyond language, those for which words "appear to be not wholly adequate" (56). Gledhill goes further, suggesting that melodrama acknowledges "the limitations of the conventions of language and representation" (33). Almodóvar acknowledges the inexpressibility of some ideas in language using traditional scenes of melodramatic sensation, but also by placing various discourses—linguistic and otherwise—next to each other in order to undermine the idea of one specific discourse being "natural" or correct. This can be associated with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, in which different languages are made to interact: "As such they may all be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (292). Robert Stam suggests of Bakhtin's formulation that it "is especially appropriate to any number of postmodernist films which, rather than
represent ‘real’ humanly purposeful events within an illusionistic aesthetic, simply stage the clash of languages and discourses” (51). I take the idea of “discourse” fairly broadly, to encompass not just language itself but also other discourses of cinema, including systems of morality (with regard to *Matador* in Chapter 2), clothing (throughout Chapter 3), and genres themselves (in Chapter 4). Almodóvar replaces the Manichaean morality of traditional melodrama with a multiplicity of options. Bakhtin is also relevant in Almodóvar’s references to other filmmakers – his films constantly mention and reference other films, particularly Hollywood ones. Intertextuality is an important part of the Bakhtinian dialogic. Part of the discourse in his “Discourse in the Novel” is its discourse with other works. “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word,” as he puts it (293). He ends “Discourse in the Novel” with a discussion of “re-accentuation,” in which the meanings of images from the past are changed with their context: “great novelistic images continue to grow and develop after the moment of their creation; they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth” (422). Part of Almodóvar’s work is to “creatively transform” tropes of Hollywood melodrama. Throughout this thesis, Almodóvar’s films will be assumed to be in dialogue with earlier melodramatists. Names like Sirk, Fassbinder, and Hitchcock will come up repeatedly, in part because of their clear influence on Almodóvar, but also because discussion of them makes up the body of melodramatic theory, so that seeing Almodóvar in relationship to these filmmakers will also clarify his relationship to melodrama.
Postmodernism is a notoriously nebulous concept, with as many definitions as it has theorists. For the purposes of this study, I am drawing on several different theorists of postmodernism on the assumption that they all speak to aspects of it. I work from the assumption that the condition of postmodernity is defined by the cleaving of the commonly understood relationship between the signifier and the signified. Jameson calls it a “breakdown in the signifying chain” (71). Baudrillard calls it the “precession of simulacra” (1). This one shift means that a whole host of assumptions – about morality, about family, about gender, about anything assumed to be “natural” – can be challenged.

My goal is not to prove that this is the defining condition of everyday life, but rather to understand how this aspect of postmodernism informs Almodóvar’s cinema. This study draws primarily on Jameson and Baudrillard to describe what happens to art in this state of affairs. Their works are the touchstones, though I do draw on ideas from other theorists, including Judith Butler’s discussions of gender and Todd McGowan’s on the disappearance of prohibition. I would argue that all this work derives from that same breakdown in the signifying chain; it can be regarded as a loss of certainty, but it can also be seen as opening up possibilities of meaning. Almodóvar treats postmodernism ambivalently, with his earlier playful comedies leaning more toward celebrating that openness, his most recent films almost obsessively focusing on the loss of certainty, and the ones in between trying to reconcile the two possibilities.

Certainly, there is an assumption that this cultural change is accompanied by what Jameson calls a “waning of affect,” wherein people are emptied of emotion and, like Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe, “transformed into their own images,” a flattening of emotional response (71). However, the continued relevance of melodrama as a mode of
filmic storytelling makes this idea questionable. Part of my project in considering
Almodóvar is to suggest that postmodernity and melodrama's sentimentality are not
mutually exclusive, and, moreover, that their interrelationship is not ironic, but essential.
Though melodrama and postmodernity have not been simultaneously considered at
much length, there have been some attempts to deal with audiences' emotional responses
to postmodern texts. Kimberly Chabot Davis's recent *Postmodern Texts and Emotional
Audiences* attempts to do so by gauging audience response via interviews. While Davis
strives to strike a balance between audience studies and textual analysis, her emphasis on
the affective side of melodrama over the *ways* melodrama creates these meanings limits
the scope of her arguments. Lawrence Grossberg argues in “Postmodernity and Affect:
All Dressed Up With No Place to Go” for a serious reconsideration of the value of
affective art: “The affective is one plane of everyday life, one form of communicative
economy” (276). However, both Davis and Grossberg are primarily concerned with
affect as it impacts leftist political struggle, with Grossberg calling for his readers to
“identify the strategies and sites of empowerment made available in the contemporary
cultural forms of popular mood or attitude” in order to reconnect with the everyday
struggles of the people (290). Though he does not address it specifically, melodrama,
with its “stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience” (Gledhill
1987:33), could be one of those sites.

Davis ends her ethnographic study with the argument that “much of the political
power of sentimental postmodernism can be found in the intense identifications that it
fosters both within and across sexual identities, genders, and ethnicities” (177), arguing
essentially that “sentimental postmodernism” (a term she uses interchangeably with
"postmodern melodrama") allows for identification without erasure of difference, fostering "utopian hope in the viability of a pluralist and feminist democracy" (179). While Davis does show that such sentimental postmodern texts as Manuel Puig's novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976) can have powerful effects on readers, *moving* them to reconsider attitudes and prejudices (176), her ultimate example of the power of sentiment is Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). She argues that the film "nearly turned the tide of the 2004 U.S. presidential election" (179). That, even if a correlation between the film and the election results could be easily drawn, Moore's film was a failed effort, suggests that the value of melodrama and cinematic affect is not in direct political action. As Christine Gledhill puts it: "Melodrama touches the sociopolitical only at that point where it triggers the psychic, and the absence of causal relationship between them allows for a short-circuiting between melodramatic desire and the socially constructed world" (1987:37). Melodrama's political power is not so much in its ability to enact social change, but that "It acknowledges demands inaccessible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse" (Gledhill 1987:38). That acknowledgement of the limits of discourse suggests that melodrama's ability to express longing for "something more" in everyday life is a large part of its appeal.

In studying Almodóvar, I am considering some of the different ways that melodrama can mean. Chapter 2 deals with Almodóvar's first six films; it considers not just the representation of sexual bodies, but the morality in that representation, and considers how melodrama can make available even complex theoretical discourse. From the lightheated comedies *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (*Pepi, Luci Bom y otras chicas del montón,*
1980) and Labyrinth of Passions (Laberinto de pasiones, 1982), to the progressively more serious Dark Habits (Entre tinieblas, 1983), What Have I Done To Deserve This? (¿Qué he hecho yo por merecer esto!, 1984), Matador (1986), and Law of Desire (Le ley del deseo, 1987), sex and sexual violence play a large part, but so does the production of images – Almodóvar is self-referential from his first film. Chapter 3 centres on Almodóvar’s successful, woman-centric films of the early 1990s; it considers the cross-pollination of melodramas and “women’s pictures,” as well as the relevance of fashion and costume to all of these, christening the four films “the fashion films.” The Oscar-nominated Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, 1988) cemented Almodóvar’s international reputation and led to Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (¡Átame!, 1990), High Heels (Tacones lejanos, 1991), and Kika (1993), all of which play on classical Hollywood “women’s pictures.”

Chapter 4 sets out to define Almodóvar’s “map trilogy” of the late 1990s. It takes as a starting point the Baudrillardian idea that today, the map precedes the territory, and considers what that implies about the consistent appearance of maps in the mise-en-scène and the importance of travel in The Flower of My Secret (La flor de mi secreto, 1995), Live Flesh (Carne trémula, 1997), and All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999). Chapter 5 takes on another metaphor to consider Almodóvar’s three most recent films, “the ghost trilogy.” Talk To Her (Hable con ella, 2002), Bad Education (La mala educación, 2004), and Volver (2006) are, each in their own way, preoccupied with the past. This in itself goes back to one of melodrama’s first impulses: to return to a simpler, more innocent time.
CHAPTER 2: Ambivalent Freedom: Sex and Sexual Violence, Representation and Morality in The First Six Films

It is not just to titillate that my examination of Almodóvar begins with sex. Almodóvar began making full-length features toward the end of Spain’s transition to democracy, which began with Franco’s death in 1975. Though the social and political changes brought about by the end of fascism are many, in terms of film culture this led to a loosening of censorship restrictions. Prior to the end of the Franco regime, explicit sex and nudity were forbidden in Spanish films, though sexuality was common by this point in the other European cinemas. Salvador notes that even under Franco, there were already calls to soften film censorship, especially in terms of sexuality, noting the early 1970s popularity of excursions into France or Portugal to see erotic films prohibited by the authorities: “Today’s public would doubtless find it amusing that 110,000 people had seen Last Tango in Paris [Bernardo Bertolucci, 1973] in Perpignan, a city with a population of only 100,000” (93). This appetite led to the appearance of destape films and a boom in erotic imports as well. Almodóvar’s films, in other words, appeared in a milieu where nudity and what most North Americans would call “soft porn” was very much the norm. In other words, the representation of sexuality was an issue that would have been present in the minds of his Spanish audiences, particularly in the early transition. Almodóvar’s first six films initially seem like an odd group for study; they do not seem to “fit” together as naturally as his later films, but by looking at the way Almodóvar’s oeuvre evolved through the 1980s, we see the development of the moral framework and the melodramatic imagination that would inform his later work. These films can be easily broken into chronological pairs: 1980’s Pepi, Luci, Bom (Pepi, Luci,
*Born y otra chicas del montón* and 1982’s *Labyrinth of Passions* (*Laberinto de pasiones*) are comedies centred on the *movida* subculture and celebrate its rudeness and licentiousness, as well as its total “post-moral” freedom from limits; in 1983’s *Dark Habits* (*Entre tinieblas*) and 1984’s *What Have I Done To Deserve This?!* (*¿Qué he hecho yo por merecer esto?!*), Almodóvar introduces melodrama and an address to Spanish cultural institutions (the Catholic Church, the patriarchal family) to produce an expression of ambivalence about the liberations celebrated in the two earlier films; and in 1986’s *Matador* and 1987’s *The Law of Desire* (*La ley de deseo*), Almodóvar embraces the melodramatic mode as he attempts to revise the Manichaean morality of the cinematic thriller for the postmodern, “post-moral” era. All of these films contain an aspect of visceral sexuality — often violent, sometimes consensual, always shocking to the spectator. This is of a piece with the “sensational” aspects of the melodramatic mode, which combines pathos and sensational action to “achieve moral legibility” (Williams 1998:59).

His first two films were treated as marginal and unserious by establishment Spanish critics, leading Almodóvar to struggle in gaining government support, but the success abroad of *What Have I Done* compelled the government to start taking him seriously; they provided financial backing for *Matador* and *Law of Desire* (Triana-Toribio 2003: 136-138). This period shows Almodóvar’s increasing engagement with melodrama, no doubt for its flexibility and emotional power as “the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred universe” (Brooks 15). Almodóvar’s relationship with the “post-moral” was tied to sexuality, and the self-reflexivity that his first films were noted for is tied to sexuality
as well, and the visceral experience of watching — generally transgressive, either because homosexual or “perverse” in their desire — sexual bodies on film. But even Almodóvar’s postmodern preoccupation with self-reflexivity becomes melodramatic as he increasingly positions his references to performance, art and artifice, and to other films as part of the melodramatic universe. This is unsurprising, as the roles of art and representation are not merely interesting theoretical gambits to please critics; they are fundamental moral questions of the postmodern age. The way that he centres representation is to push sexuality forward, forcing the spectator to confront the image.

A “post-moral” universe: establishing the moral coordinates of postmodernity

Neither Pepi, Luci, Bom nor Labyrinth of Passions are melodramas. Both are comedies of errors that centre on Madrid’s movida subculture, a movement that delighted in rudeness and frivolity, adopting much of the style of British punk, but in prosperous, newly democratic Spain, without its element of political dissent (Allinson 2002: 227). Pepi, Luci, Bom has a loose, episodic structure that revolves around the romance between Luci (Eva Siva), a middle-aged housewife (who leaves her policeman husband (Félix Rotaeta) and masochist, and Bom (punk singer Alaska), a teenaged punk singer and sadist, as it is chronicled by Pepi (Carmen Maura), an heiress who is raped by Luci’s husband in the first scene of the film and later goes into the ad business. Luci eventually goes back to her husband, while Pepi and Bom head off toward a new life together. Labyrinth of Passions follows the adventures of Sexilia (Cecilia Roth), a nymphomaniac who is afraid of the sun, and Riza (Imanol Arias), a gay prince from the fictional Arabic nation of Tyran: the film follows their separate stories until the two meet.
and fall in love. In the end, both Sexi’s and Riza’s sexualities are explained by a flashback to a single “childhood trauma” — a day at the beach (hence Sexi’s aversion to the sun) when Riza is molested by his stepmother the empress Toraya (Helga Liné), and Sexi, rejected by her true love, agrees to have sex with a whole group of boys to blunt the pain, the scene parodying the kind of “revelation” that ended Hitchcock films like Spellbound (1945), in which a single event explains all the psychological problems of the protagonist, as noted by James Mandrell (45). He says of the director’s parodic use of psychoanalysis, “it is no coincidence that the logic of overdetermination found in psychoanalysis implicates itself in Almodóvar’s version of Madrid” (45). These films’ primary importance for this melodrama-centred study is that they establish the moral universe that Almodóvar will spend the rest of his career testing the limits of. Here, however, it seems to have no limits; indeed, the end of the Franco regime and the liberalization of Spanish society, along with a more general global move toward late capitalism, produced a wildly permissive milieu. Sex was no longer linked to morality, as it was in the Catholic Church-dominated Franco era, so Almodóvar’s choice of sexuality as the central way of exploring the new Spanish permissiveness is unsurprising.

This liberation, especially in Almodóvar’s cinema, can be associated with the idea that contemporary society is no longer founded on prohibition, but on the command to enjoy, as Todd McGowan describes in The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment. McGowan takes a Lacanian approach to explain the shift in social life from one where one’s pleasure is defined by prohibition, to one where the imperative is instead to seek enjoyment, making the obtainment of that enjoyment
seemingly impossible. One of McGowan's more illustrative examples is drawn from contemporary political life: instead of asking the populace to sacrifice for their countries, as prior presidents had done in times of war, after the attacks on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush told citizens to show their patriotism through spending money - through consumption; enjoyment has become one's cultural duty (36). McGowan links the injunction to enjoy with a decline in patriarchal authority, both of actual fathers and fathers as Master-Signifiers (42), and with the increasing primacy of the image, and image-based media over causal narratives (62). In both films, the characters' lives are structured entirely by enjoyment; though this kind of hedonism is not in and of itself exceptional, what marks Almodóvar's characters as different from other pleasure-seeking rebels is the absence of any kind of prohibition against which they can rebel. Though certainly the post-rules, post-moral universe sketched out by Almodóvar did not accurately reflect social experience - no one would take the comics-inspired Pepi, Luci, Bom or the screwball comedy of Labyrinth as "realistic" - they can be seen as reflecting a new sense of freedom with regard to social organization and sexual identity. The boundaries that formerly structured society are gone and what is left is the compulsion to enjoy - despite the fact that, as McGowan asserts, enjoyment requires prohibition.

The most striking aspect of Pepi, Luci, Bom, watching it this late in Almodóvar's career, is how clearly articulated the moral questions that will continue to dominate his films are here. In Pepi, Luci, Bom, there is a very real sense that the law really does not matter, and everything really is permitted. "The law" as such is represented by Luci's husband, who is listed in the credits only as "El policía" ("the policeman"). In the first scene, Pepi is threatened enough by the force of law that she offers herself to him
sexually to avoid arrest (because of the marijuana plants she is growing on her balcony), though at first she “does not recognize” his credentials, a line that can be read two ways (Gaugler 286). It becomes clear the laws (both civil and patriarchal) he represents have been exposed as dead words. After his Luci leaves him for Bom, he phones the police and is indignant when told there is not actually anything she can be charged with. As Acevedo-Muñoz notes, until Franco’s death in 1975, men did have legal control over their wives (20); the Spanish context makes the shift between prohibition and liberation more clear-cut than in other Western cultures. The law no longer functions as a way of keeping women in line; it is perhaps not surprising that by the film’s end, Luci, now free from patriarchal law, no longer gets anything out of her no longer transgressive relationship with the teenaged sadist Bom. Luci goes back to her husband, embracing her abjection in her marriage. So in following her sexual desires freely, Luci winds up in exactly the same place that she started. They reunite when he finds Luci outside a nightclub; he tells his wife (falsely) that he can arrest her. “A real husband doesn’t need the law to deal with his wife,” Luci taunts him. “You know how I like to take the law into my own hands,” he replies, finally giving her the vicious beating she craves. In the end, it is made clear that Luci and her husband have “taken the law into their own hands,” reworking traditional social mores to suit their own desires, and through Luci’s knowing monologue at the end of the film in which she tells Pepi and Bom that she is “much more of a bitch” than they realize. Almodóvar invites the viewer to question what is really so wrong with their arrangement, despite the disgust of Pepi and Bom, who suddenly appear conformist in their rebellion, dressed in strangely matching outfits.
McGowan follows Lacan in telling us that one cannot enjoy without prohibition: if there is no Law forbidding something, the pleasure taken in doing it disappears as well: because “the introduction of Law is an obscene act, an act producing the possibility of enjoyment it prohibits” (16). Almodóvar’s first two films celebrate the absence of law, but they do not acknowledge the fact that without these laws, there can be no true enjoyment. In *Labyrinth of Passions*, the “founding prohibition” of incest is broken. Initially, this seems to be part of the horror of the abuse suffered by Sexi’s drycleaner Queti (Marta Fernández Muro), but when she is “transformed” into a second Sexi by plastic surgery, she quickly jumps into bed with her new “father” (Fernando Vivanco) by slipping him the virility drug her “real” father (Luis Ciges) used, solving his aversion to sex and fulfilling her own desires in one fell swoop. Their affair is revealed when Sexi’s therapist Susana (Ofelia Angélica) calls, and the pair is shown in bed together. Queti-Sexi tells the self-identified Lacanian psychoanalyst: “You were mistaken, our family has no sex problems,” and smirks as she says “You were right; I was in love with my father.” This neat solution of Dr. La Peña’s (Sexi’s father) and Queti’s family problems can be taken two ways: on one level, there is a joke on the psychoanalyst – while Susana is shocked, the audience can laugh because this is not “real” incest, given that they know Queti is not actually Sexi – but on another level the incest does need to be read as “real.” For one, as far as Dr. La Peña knows, he has just had sexual relations with his daughter. Also, the scene’s position in the film must be considered: it comes after the viewer has seen Queti comfortably “take over” Sexi’s life after a superficial course of plastic

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3 McGowan draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss for this claim, arguing that “The incest prohibition creates social coherence by drawing people away from what is closest to them (the family) and toward the social organization itself” (12).
surgery, and to demonstrate "the extent to which one's personal and even familial (and therefore biological) identities are up for grabs and amenable to self-fashioning" (Mandrell 52). Within the film, this is treated by Sexi and Queti as a reasonable solution for their mutual problems, reflecting the breakdown in the causal chain that McGowan mentioned when the Master-Signifier is no longer present to organize the symbolic: Sexi’s desire to leave her life behind and Queti’s need to escape her crazy father.

However, this identity switch seems excessive given that Queti is actually presented with a solution to her problem by Sexi’s chemist friend, which is to stop dosing her father with the "libido-controlling drug" that is making him hallucinate that she is her mother— and even if that failed, what prevents her from simply running away? Similarly, Sexi seems through the rest of the film to live a fairly freewheeling life without responsibilities—she could surely have run away with Riza without going through the complications of having a double take her place. This is not to complain about the film’s logical lapses or lack of realism but rather to point to the utterly disproportionate nature of Sexi and Queti’s identity trade. That Almodóvar had his heroine trade in her face, her name, her family, her home, her friends— in essence her entire self— for love, and that Queti, who earlier said that she would happily trade lives with Sexi, wound up taking that promise literally, when the story’s logical demands did not require it, points to the deliberateness of the denial of identity. This goes back to the incest question because the incest prohibition is based on identity: it is not sex in and of itself that is banned, it is sex with specific people— if identity is changeable, then incest loses all meaning.
This can also be seen as an example of the “schizophrenic” break between signifier and signified outlined by Frederic Jameson only two years after this film’s release:

The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a two-fold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (72)

This is the kind of constant preoccupation with the present that runs throughout Almodóvar’s first two films: the viewer is asked to accept that Queti can become Sexi because she looks like Sexi now, without any regard for the history that makes her not-Sexi. This can also be linked to Almodóvar’s camp sensibility – discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3 – in the sense that Almodóvar takes nothing, even the dictates that structure society, seriously. Valis, who links kitsch and camp with cursilería, a 19th-century Spanish sensibility linked to bad taste and pretensions of elegance,4 sees this ability to remake identity as “a potentially enriching split screen of self-projection that, nevertheless, oscillates alarmingly between kitsch and utopia and probably falls somewhere in between” (290). That instability of identity can be positive, as is seen in films like Labyrinth of Passions – and in characters in Almodóvar’s other films, like the costumed prostitute Cristal (born Carmen, played by Veronica Forqué) in What Have I Done – but ultimately (like postmodernism) eradicates any sense of history, which will

4 As Valis puts it: “It is not coincidental or surprising that lo cursi should reemerge as kitsch or even camp in the post-Franco era, for the movida years more often than not vamped as pastiche or parody the culture of Francoism (franquismo) itself (or its remains) as quintessentially cursi” (5).
remain submerged until Almodóvar’s most recent films, discussed in Chapter 5. Sex itself is never treated in Almodóvar as though it is related to love; for instance Riza and Sex fall in love long before they have sex. If people have no essence, sex becomes just the interaction of bodies.

This utter loss of the signified, let alone any laws or boundaries connected to it, is represented less positively in *Dark Habits* and *What Have I Done*. It is important to note that once he starts associating the postmodern with loss of certainty, Almodóvar’s cinema takes a distinctively melodramatic turn. In *Dark Habits*, a nightclub singer named Yolanda (Cristina Sánchez Pascual) hides out in a convent after her boyfriend (Will More) dies of a drug overdose, drawing the romantic attention of the convent’s heroin-addicted Mother Superior (Julieta Serrano), and befriendng the other nuns, who respectively write romance novels about the scandalous exploits of the girls the convent helps, take LSD, fall in love with a priest, and keep a pet tiger in the convent’s garden. The film shifted from pure comedy toward melodrama in its portrayal of the Mother Superior’s naked longing for Yolanda, which is played with clear-eyed sincerity. Here, the sense of no limits that was established in Almodóvar’s first two films as the reigning ethos begins to crack a little, as the film’s happy ending is undermined by the anguished cry of the Mother Superior, who is left alone in the convent the rest of the convent’s nuns enter the new world outside. Paul Julian Smith has written on *Dark Habits* in several different volumes (in both *Laws of Desire*, a study of homosexual representation in Spain, and in *Desire Unlimited* (37-49), a book devoted to Almodóvar as auteur), but his account of it in *Vision Machines* is the most germane to this discussion, as it addresses the way Almodóvar is attempting to refigure the way that sexuality is
represented. Not only does he characterize the nuns as rivals for Yolanda’s affection, but further that: “it is at the level of cinematic technique that Almodóvar inscribes a new frame of visibility for relations between women” (29). Smith notes here that upon the film’s release, many male critics missed the love story between the Mother Julia and Yolanda that is at the centre of the film and revealed through the nun’s desiring looks. He emphasizes scenes such as the one wherein Sister Rat (Chus Lampreave) reads a text (based, according to Smith, on a real religious tract from the 1960s) on the moral dangers of kissing that is surprisingly sensual in its detailed description of the various types of kiss available: Almodóvar shows the reactions of the nuns straight on, emphasizing their private rapture or fear of the words (30). This scene shows the fluidity of desire in the new regime, and also the ineffectiveness of the old, prohibitive law, which actually produces desire as much as it regulates it – now so obvious that it is parodied. The use of this historical artifact in a modern context is an example of the kind of camp recontextualization which would become more and more important as Almodóvar’s career wore on. In Chapter 3, I will address how camp becomes a central part of his discourse. At the end of the film, the convent “breaks up,” and Yolanda leaves Mother Julia alone; it ends on the Mother’s loud scream, shot from outside the convent window – suggesting again that removing pleasure’s prohibition does not actually result in pleasure, and that someone may be left behind in this rush forward.⁵

By What Have I Done, Almodóvar’s version of a society without rules has become more dystopic. Although no one seems to be bound by laws, many characters

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⁵ Heins Walker has a suggestion as to why that might be the Mother. She sees the Mother Superior as belonging to a line of misogynistically-portrayed Spanish “devouring mothers,” standing in for the repressive failures of old Spain (281).
still clinging to old rules — Antonio (Ángel de Andrés López), for instance, holds to old definitions of family and honour — but on the whole the film seems to express a longing for a return to some sense of deeper meaning, as the film’s poor, alienated family variously clings to dreams of the village (Grandma (Chus Lampreave) and Toni (Juan Martínez)); of the Fascist past, represented as Germany (Antonio); and of drugs and commercial goods (Gloria (Carmen Maura)). As Kathleen M. Vernon puts it, the film does not push the viewer to forget history, “but the challenge the hold of that history over future stories” (69). Though the film paints a dark picture of contemporary Spanish life, there remains a sense of hope in the idea that this life could still be rewritten if only there could be a break with history; an idea that anticipates by nearly twenty years the role history will play in his most recent films. Almodóvar’s style becomes more fully melodramatic here as Gloria and her family are consistently pictured as victims of social forces they cannot control, like the victim-heroes in melodramas described by Linda Williams, who says: “In cinema the mode of melodrama defines a broad category of moving pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims” (1998:42). When denied more stimulants by her pharmacist because of the rules, Gloria complains: “Where are the rules about 18 hour workdays?” This comes through visually, as well, in Almodóvar’s constant visual references to the confinement of the characters within the working-class high-rise complex. Almodóvar constantly films his characters in extreme long shots as small figures set against giant buildings, and the horizontal lines of the buildings are echoed in the striped blanket and wallpaper in the family’s cramped apartment, increasing the sense of the characters’ entrapment by their circumstances; this use of mise-en-scène as
political critique is consistent with the way that Thomas Elsaesser describes the Hollywood melodrama: “An acute sense of claustrophobia in décor and locale translates itself into a restless, and yet suppressed energy surfacing sporadically in the actions and the behaviour of the protagoonists” (52-53). Though Elsaesser was discussing work like Douglas Sirk’s, which used sets to critique the world of his middle-class protagonists, the principle works just as well here, where the milieu being examined is economically different. Melodrama becomes the primary mode of Almodóvar’s filmmaking here as the film takes realist tropes – like the everyday lives of the urban poor⁶ – and inflects them with excessive melodramatic scenes, like Carmen Maura’s wordless cries of frustration as she imitates the karate exercises she had seen earlier after a disappointing failed sexual encounter in the shower of the karate studio she cleans. This kind of wordless visualization of an emotional state, which seems to express more than language ever can, is pure melodrama in its appeal to viewer emotion. This is something Brooks understood when he wrote the centrality of the expressions of bodies over verbal expression:

Gesture, a “return” to the language of presence, became a way to make present and available new, or revived, indications of meaning, emotional conditions, and spiritual experience. In the silence created by the “gapping” of the traditional language code, mute gesture appears as a new sign making visible the absent and ineffable (79).

This encounter is completely without dialogue, from Gloria’s glance at the naked man and his silent invitation, to her frustration at being left unsatisfied, dripping wet in her

⁶ In Blood Cinema, Marsha Kinder notes that neorealism and the melodrama were more generally linked in Spain than in other cultural contexts (26), which goes along with Almodóvar’s statement to Frederic Strauss that for him “Italian neorealism is a sub-genre of melodrama which specifically deals not just with emotions but also with social conscience” (44).
dress. She never brings it up in the dialogue, but the scene haunts the rest of the movie, as Gloria’s loneliness and exhaustion are slowly revealed. When Gloria finally confesses her crime – murdering her husband with a ham leg – to the same man in the same studio, the (literally) impotent police officer merely warns her to keep it quiet, as the ineffectiveness of the law is shown through sexual symbolism. The film ends with her crime covered up, but with Gloria and her young son Miguel left to make their way alone, echoing the ideological ambiguity of *Dark Habits*, but expanding on it in the series of questions it raises in Gloria’s family.

By *Matador* and *Law of Desire*, Almodóvar is more clearly in the realm of genre cinema, reworking the Manichaean impulses of the thriller. Almodóvar’s villains in these films are rendered sympathetically, but ultimately the films show the strain in Almodóvar’s early conception of a *post*-moral universe, in which “good” and “bad” are replaced by a series of apparently neutral options – which are not necessarily meant to be taken as neutral by viewers. In Williams’ terms, Antonio Banderas’s Ángel is the primary victim-hero of *Matador* – D’Lugo argues that he takes the position of the typical female victim (51) – though he does, as will be discussed, attempt to rape a woman. He is the sympathetic figure who is subject to and victim of a number of opposing and overlapping moral economies, represented almost schematically by the characters that surround him. For all that they are schematic, these different sets of authorities are all treated uneasily; Almodóvar’s quirky writing and the actors’ performances all problematize the possibility of an easy embrace of any singular authority. Diego (Nacho Martínez), the titular matador, stands for traditional Spanish masculinity; when Ángel asks him for advice on how to deal with women, Diego tells
him to “Treat a woman like a bull. Let her know who’s boss,” becoming almost a parody of the machismo traditionally associated with Spanish manhood. (It is soon revealed Diego takes this dictum literally, killing the women he picks up.) While Diego is a powerful figure, he delivers all his lines in monotone, and the first scene of the film shows him masturbating to horror-movie images of women being killed, implying that his violent authority is actually a perversion,\(^7\) echoing Luci’s marriage in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. It is in trying to imitate Diego and prove his masculinity — after Diego asks Ángel if he is gay — that the latter attempts to rape Eva (Eva Cobo), his teacher’s girlfriend: Diego’s voice is even heard giving advice in an aural flashback with Ángel’s face in close-up as he stalks Eva. Ángel’s mother (Julieta Serrano) represents religious authority, linked with an oppressive morality and a seemingly absent God. She is an Opus Dei acolyte who follows the letter of the religious laws she subscribes to, but not the spirit. As María Donapetry puts it: “She behaves according to a code which is absolutely empty and serves no purpose but to perpetuate itself,” noting her extravagant meals and the venom which belies her expressed wish that her husband rest in peace (72). Nonetheless, it is her insistence on Ángel’s confession that brings him into the church — although he does wind up confessing to a secular authority, it is his mother’s insistence on her son’s sinful nature that pushes Ángel to confess to crimes he did not commit. In the dialogue, psychologist Julia (Carmen Maura) outright blames her for Ángel’s “guilt complex.” Julia herself represents another kind of “authority” as a psychiatrist; she represents the polar opposite of Ángel’s mother in that the former assumes that Ángel must be guilty, but Julia assumes he must be innocent, somehow

\(^7\) See Jackson for a detailed analysis of the masturbation sequence (265).
redeeming him even for the rape attempt of which he is guilty. She tries her best to find
an explanation for Ángel’s supposed murders, using everything from his domineering
mother to his vertigo as an excuse. Ultimately, however, her interest in him does not
seem to be entirely scientific: when Ángel faints at the sight of a man’s blood, she rouses
him not with smelling salts, but with a kiss, her smile indicating that her interest in
Ángel is not “purely” scientific and echoing Susana, the lusty psychiatrist in Labyrinth
of Passions; Julia also propositions the detective (Eusebio Poncela, whose character is
never given a name beyond “the detective”) early in the film. In both cases, placing these
“scientific” discourses in the mouths of women who are shown to be desiring and
therefore not “objective” undermines the supposed truth-value of those discourses.
Certainly, using women in this light – as emotional, sensual figures in order to
undermine the “rationality” of scientific discourses strikes me as a problem in its own
right, but it is difficult to take any of Almodóvar’s contradictions about gender at face
value. The detective, of course, is a representative of the secular law: it is to him that
Ángel opts to confess, instead of to his “spiritual advisor.” The detective’s own authority
is ambivalent as well, as he is shown, like Julia, to be not an objective representative of
the law, but a desiring subject with his eager gaze on the crotches of Diego’s students,
implied by close-ups of him looking contrasted with close-ups of the men’s groins. As
Jackson puts it: “The detective’s desire to know the truth, to see ‘it,’ is here imbricated
with the desire to see It – the phalus, the pillar of the masculinist order” (267). Matador
opposes these various sets of laws to the alternative morality María proposes. Whereas
Ángel is driven nearly mad by guilt stemming from his mother’s control, María is
completely free from conventional morality. Because nothing drives her but her
passions, she feels free to murder. Almodóvar sets her up as a figure opposed to
traditional morality as well as to power structures like the patriarchy: "Men think killing
is a crime. Women don’t see it that way. Every killer has a feminine side." In other
words, she appeals to an almost feminist ethic of rejecting traditional morality; María is
the kind of threateningly androgynous liberated woman that would appear in American
films like Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) throughout the 1990s – as Jackson
points out, she enters the men’s room and she also quite literally penetrates her objects
of desire with her hairpin (267) – but she does not stand so much for the threat of
feminism as for the kind of removal of limits that Almodóvar explored in his earlier
films. This is especially relevant in Spain, which had in ten years moved from the
restrictive, conservative Franco regime to a liberal democracy: if so much of the old
morality (including the hegemony of the Catholic Church and the illegality of
homosexuality) was wrong, than what is right? María pushes the postmodern breakdown
of boundaries between male and female, and between right and wrong. Placing these
varied discourses in the mouths of flawed, human, desiring characters can be understood
in Bakhtinian terms as "double-voiced" discourse, mimicking the style of the various
"languages" but ultimately placing the reader "outside" them as they watch poor Ángel
tossed from matador school to church to jail to the hospital (see Bakhtin 272, or Chapter
4, where Almodóvar places genres in dialogue). Placing them in dialogue, as opposed to
merely parodying them as a film like Labyrinth of Passions does, suggests that
postmodern life requires the negotiation of these conflicting discourses, none of which
can lay claim to a privileged relationship to truth.
Ángel is not the only victim-hero in *Matador*: the other one is Eva. She is subject to many of the same forces Ángel is: Ángel’s attempt to mimic patriarchal masculinity victimizes her. Though later she does not seem traumatized, Eva’s face *is* injured in the incident. Then, the police’s interview of her clearly is an invasion and an inconvenience. As her mother says: “First they rape you, then they make you talk about it,” (perhaps wrongly) implying that *representing* the rape (either in conversation or in images) is more of a problem than the act itself, an implication which will come up again in *Kika*. As a model, Eva is also subject to another kind of authority that is tied to postmodernity: the fashion industry. Fashion becomes an increasingly important theme to Almodóvar as his career goes on, as will become clear in Chapter 3, but in *Matador* it is one discourse among many; it will later become the site of several different shifting discourses. I will discuss Almodóvar’s self-reflexive appearance more thoroughly below, but in terms of Eva’s status as victim-hero, recall that her wound is exaggerated by her makeup, as the show’s director (played by Almodóvar himself, thereby linking the production of fashion images with those of film images) commands her face be “disfigured”. Certainly this can be understood to link to the celebration of poor taste in his earlier films – like the vomiting nuns in *Dark Habits* or the scene where Bom urinates on Luci in *Pepi, Luci, Bom* – but now it seems more controlled and more sinister. Given the preoccupation with surfaces that runs through Almodóvar’s work, the new hegemony of fashion damages her as much as the old hegemony of masculinity. Eva is also a subject to Diego and Maria’s predatory amorality – Diego quite literally objectifies her, asking her to play dead when they have sex (an action that is figured as a sacrifice in the film by Almodóvar’s overhead shot of the couple, Diego on top, Eva with her arms spread out,
Christlike) and Eva is visually made bull-like toward the end of the film, when in her pursuit of María, she seems to “pose” behind the horn-like iron rails in María’s building. Unlike Ángel, who is utterly helpless before the various moral economies he must navigate, Eva cannot really be simply characterized as a “victim”: she is clearly complicit in and attempts to profit from her objectification. As a model she is used, but she also appears willing and able to use the images of fashion herself. In her last attempt to get Diego to come back to her, Eva dresses up in the blood-red wedding dress and cape she wore in the “Spain Divided” show and does up her face in pale, ghostly makeup. When her mother tells her she looks “dead,” she coolly sips her gazpacho and says that it is “all the better,” again willingly making herself into an object of Diego’s perversion.

Like traditional melodrama’s victim-heroes, both Ángel and Eva are finally revealed to be “virtuous” (Williams 1998:66). Eva tries everything she can to “save” Diego from his obsession with death, perverse “old” masculinity, and from María; Ángel’s innocence is unwittingly revealed by his mother when she tells Julia and the detective that Ángel has always fainted at the sight of blood. It is Ángel’s psychic powers that allow him to help the detective, Eva, Julia, and the other officer in the race against time to save Diego and María. Given it is a typical melodrama, the group arrives “too late” – fulfilling another of Linda Williams’s dictates with regard to melodrama’s relationship to time (2004:739) – after a suspenseful pursuit cross-cut with María and Diego’s “preparations” for their ritualistic mutual murder. Of course, the murders are pornographic for María and Diego, coming “on time” (which Williams associates with pornography) and showing one of the many ways that Almodóvar crosses Williams’
“body genres.” Paul Julian Smith has also noted the use of pornographic elements in this film, suggesting that “Almodóvar’s ‘gentrification’ of provocative sexual material in these films clearly allusive to pornography are framed within repeated allusions to Hollywood melodrama of the ‘40s and ‘50s,” (like King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun (1946) in Matador and the way Almodóvar acknowledges rewriting A Streetcar Named Desire’s (Elia Kazan, 1951) Blanche Dubois in Law of Desire’s Tina in his production notes) suggesting that Matador and Law of Desire use these other elements in order to produce ironic contemplation in the viewer and “the nostalgic longing they imply for the untrammeled excesses of melodrama” (1997:191). To my mind, however, the mixing of genres goes back to the multiple discourses of morality dialogized in the film – what is melodramatic from the perspective of Ángel and Eva is pornographic for María and Diego. Almodóvar keeps the ending from the pathos of traditional melodrama, as the film ends with the detective saying, “I’ve never seen anyone so happy.” This leaves viewers to question their reaction to the film’s murders: if both parties want to die, and they died fulfilled, is it really murder? This question disavows the deaths of the other victims in the film; making the amoral ethos that pervades the film’s world one that the audience questions, even if the characters do not (much like the maternal melodramas discussed by Linda Williams (1998:42)). The “proven virtue” of Ángel is problematic as well – he does “gain empathy that is equated with moral virtue” (Williams 1998:66), but this empathy is complicated by the knowledge that Ángel did actually attack Eva. The film retains melodrama’s attempt to generate moral clarity through identification with a victimized figure, but the difference in Almodóvar is that in making the aggressor a victim, the moral truths expressed are greatly altered.
Even the title of *The Law of Desire* is telling in this regard. In the title, “the law” is directly linked to “desire” because that is the only factor guiding the hero’s actions as he writes his own rules for life – Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) picks up men casually and then sends them away if they do not please him; he does drugs; and he has control over others as a writer and director as well. Pablo’s attempts to make his own laws ultimately wind up causing his boyfriend Juan’s (Miguel Molina) death, endangering his family by exposing his sister Tina (Carmen Maura) to danger and the pain of betrayal by stalker and murderer Antonio (Antonio Banderas), and driving Antonio to suicide. The film contrasts the pleasures of making one’s own rules with the consequences. The clearest example of this phenomenon is the letter Pablo types and sends to Juan – because it is the kind of letter that he wants to receive – with a note asking him to sign it and return it. Pablo’s writing is an attempt to “direct” his own life, to make Juan into the kind of boyfriend he wants him to be. He is satisfied when the letter comes back, reading it to himself as if Juan had written it. However, it soon takes on a life of its own. When Antonio finds it, he does not know the provenance of the letter and assumes the worst; his jealousy of Juan drives him to throw the other man off a cliff. Other letters fare no better in the film, as his letters to Antonio signed “Laura P.” are found by the police, who spend much of their investigation looking for a woman named Laura, who naturally is only a character in Pablo’s next screenplay – however, her resemblance to his sister leads the police to target her. The way Pablo attempts to direct his life with letters and live by his own rules is intimately tied to his professional involvement in creating fiction.
On the other hand, Tina’s attempts to forge her own identity are much more conflicted than Pablo’s: her self-constitution is constantly combined with an awareness of the instability that comes with self-reinvention. Tina’s life seems built on the ignorance of the kinds of divisions that constitute social identity — she (as a boy) falls in love with her father (transgressing the incest prohibition described by McGowan) and she also changes genders (traversing the boundaries of gender difference that are typically set up in childhood sexual development as viewed by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble⁸) — Almodóvar underscores this with his casting of famous transsexual actress Bibi Andersen as Ada’s “real” mother (Acevedo-Muñoz 87). However, in the end, Tina seems to have very little left to hold onto. Though she tells the priest who abused her as a boy that she is “essentially the same,” throughout the film her identity — her “essence” — hardly feels stable. At various points in the film she claims that things are “all she has.” She walks out of the chapel where she has confronted Father Constantino (Germán Cobos) saying that her memories “are the only thing she has left.” When she is angry at Pablo for basing a character on her she says, “I’ve paid a high price for my failures. They’re all I’ve got.” When he is suffering from amnesia, Tina finishes telling Pablo her life story — because his amnesia leaves her “without a past,” as though her identity requires external qualification — by telling him, “You’re the only thing I’ve got.” Tina

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⁸ Butler argues that gender identity is inscribed when the parent is lost as a potential sexual partner:
If feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of the effective internalization of that taboo, and if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and, indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity (81).
In terms of Tina’s development, neither the incest prohibition nor a definitive gender identity is strongly inscribed.
has transformed herself, like Queti did in *Labyrinth of Passions*, but her self-creation is tinged with a sense of loss. Tina’s attempts to escape her past – which, remember, includes sexual abuse and incest – predict the ways Almodóvar’s most recent heroes, in *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002), *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004) and *Volver* (2006), will be literally and metaphorically “haunted” by their histories. Tina’s predicament illustrates the dilemmas of identity wrought by the postmodern obsession with the surface and the here and now, but it does so in melodramatic terms: Maura performs Tina as constantly aware of her body, adjusting her breasts frequently, and her voice softens and her eyes tear up as she tells the amnesiac Pablo her story, making her another figure in the melodramatic tradition of self-nomination.

Following along these lines, the climactic moment of the film comes when Pablo recovers and is able to name Antonio, who has become involved with Tina, as the murderer. Brooks notes the importance of nomination in melodrama, an importance that is heightened by its dramatization:

> When we say “father” and “daughter” in real life, it is in a lower key, with an accommodation to convention and the complication of experience. When we utter the same terms in melodrama, it is to name the plenitude of the pure, and excessive, feeling. The emotions and conditions expressed are almost overwhelming in their instinctual purity; they taste too strong (42).

Tina’s self-nomination is similarly powerful: her announcement of her true identity (not “daughter,” but “son”; both “brother” and “sister”) and the importance of Pablo is fraught with emotional power. Though these characters have been presented thus far as postmodernists living for the moment – when Antonio claims that Pablo’s frivolity hides a deeper love, Pablo replies that he really *is* frivolous – their embrace shows how important the stability of their family relationship is to both of them. When Tina tells
Pablo he is all she has and thanks him for not judging her, the viewer believes her. Almodóvar’s queer rewriting of the family has been commented upon often (see Arroyo 41-42, Acevedo-Muñoz, who sees this as “recreating the family as a reflection of the nation” (84), or D’Lugo’s account of the new family as part of a “utopian project” (56)), it is part of his overall melodramatic project to try to restore some emotional and moral clarity to the confusions of the postmodern age.

The Post-Sacred, Taken Literally

This kind of emotional embrace of reworked institutions points to one of the most important features of melodrama as described by Brooks and taken up by film theorists like Christine Gledhill, when she says, setting melodrama against the “confidence” of realism that the world is representable: “Melodrama, however, if Peter Brooks is right, has no such confidence, for it attests to forces, desires, fears which, no though no longer granted metaphysical reality, nevertheless appear to operate in human life independently of rational explanation” (1987:31). Almodóvar has made a frequently commented-upon habit of treating Catholic symbolism in secular ways (see Smith 1996:30 for one example). The sexual liberation I have discussed thus far was directly tied to the waning power of the Church, and both of these factors are reflected in Almodóvar’s films of the 1980s. This tendency begins in and is best articulated by Dark Habits, which is set at a more or less secular convent, which, as Paul Julian Smith notes, is frequently seen to be cinematically boxing the women in (29); shadows of the criss-crossed windows also fall frequently upon the nun’s faces, further implying that their
connection to the convent imprisons them. The convent’s extreme practices of self-debasement, including the humiliating names adopted by its sisters (“Sister Rat” (Chus Lampreave), “Sister Damned” (Carmen Maura), “Sister Manure” (Marisa Paredes), “Sister Viper” (Lina Canalejas)), are frowned upon by the Mother General, higher up in the Church hierarchy, who says that “the nearest thing to pride is an excess of humility.” In other words, an excess of self-debasement becomes almost obscene. The first glimpse of it the audience gets features Sister Viper helping a priest (Manuel Zarzo) dress for mass as the two of them discuss the costumes in My Fair Lady (George Cukor, 1964), drawing a clear connection between the costumes of the church and costumes in general, and also anticipating the spectacular designer ensembles Almodóvar’s characters will wear in the 1990s, discussed in Chapter 3. This connection will be further borne out in the sister’s eventual admission that she is in love with the priest. Sister Rat writes torrid romance novels based on the plights of the women the convent is meant to help. The convent’s Mother Superior (Julieta Serrano) keeps a shrine to history’s “great sinners” in her room, secular figures like actresses and singers. The culmination of the secularization of the church comes when Yolanda performs a sexy song in a dress made mostly of metallic mesh (designed by Sister Viper) for the gathered guests — including the aforementioned Mother Superior — in the redecorated chapel, cleared for a party. Then, with his usual sense for a meaningful object, Almodóvar has the Abbess press a towel to Yolanda’s face, yielding, in close-up, a more colourful version of the Shroud of Turin: a secular relic. Dark Habits’ camp treatment of religion is clear, but it must be noted that it is combined with “the forging of Almodóvar’s first powerful melodramatic heroine” (D’Lugo 37). The film is noted as much for its emotional appeal as for its light
treatment of religion, and indeed Almodóvar’s relationship to the numinous must be considered in light of both aspects of his aesthetic.

However, the constant recurrence of religious iconography and other elements of the supernatural indicate that his relationship to the numinous is more complex than is sometimes assumed. Almodóvar has never been accused of warm nostalgia for the old days, but his films do retain a sense of there being “something” beyond everyday experience, whether it is allegorized in supernatural abilities (like the psychic Ángel in Matador, the telekinetic Vanessa in What Have I Done, and even in Sadec’s uncannily good sense of smell in Labyrinth) or displaced onto romantic or familial relationships like Pablo and Tina’s. As Ryan Prout puts it:

Although the forms of Catholic practice may seem to be dead in [Dark Habits], taken as a whole Almodóvar’s oeuvre seems to be alive with a sense of the sacred, the magical, the uncanny and the numinous, all of which point towards what could perhaps best be described as a religious temperament. Arguably, in Almodóvar’s cinema the irrationality of the religious faith which allows believers to pursue a materially unobtainable God is reinvested in a belief in personal relationships (58).

Prout aptly describes the impulse toward re-establishing some sense of the numinous that runs throughout Almodóvar’s work; he uses the Mother Superior’s desire for Yolanda, not God, in Dark Habits as a primary example. While Prout does not directly link this impulse with melodrama, this desire to make some kind of numinous available through art can be easily linked to Brooks’ assertion that in melodrama, “The universe must always show itself as inhabited by cosmic ethical forces ready to say their name and reveal their operation at the correct gesture or word” (40, emphasis mine).

In Matador, not only do Ángel’s psychic powers serve an important plot function, but they make him a tortured innocent, a victim-hero powerless to control the
forces of evil that will not let him rest. The film also retains an aspect of the supernatural in the centrality of the eclipse, a cosmic event that renders the entire film blood red (in a probable nod to Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1963)), and as Prout points out is “seemingly inspired by Revelation” (58). Donapetry, who traces the religious symbolism in both *Matador* and *The Law of Desire*, points out the sincerity of Tina’s and Ada’s belief in the latter, no matter how kitsch their altar is (73) and suggests that Pablo himself seems to be the agent of various aspects of “God’s” will:

By the time we view this scene, Pablo has throughout the film been answering the prayers which Tina and Ada direct to the Virgin Mary. Therefore it should not surprise us that Pablo takes the place of the Virgin in Almodóvar’s pietà. In this last scene, as he holds Antonio, he feels deeply both the pity and the piety that the image evokes (74).

For Donapetry, Almodóvar’s use of religious imagery points not simply to a pro- or anti-religious statement, but to a surprisingly melodramatic-sounding way of clearly demarcating moral coordinates. “God may very well be dead or may not ‘be’ at all for Almodóvar personally, but the ethics and emotions, particularly the pathos of his characters, come through loud and clear,” she writes, suggesting that the human condition in his films has “transcendental overtones that point towards the existence of a common belief” in moral rights and wrongs (75). Though to fully embrace this idea would be to ignore the aspects of amorality in his films, Almodóvar’s cinema does contain both of these elements, celebrating the freedom of secular society while still expressing a longing for plenitude and solidity of belief. This is the province of Brocksian melodrama. These aspects of Almodóvar’s cinema undermine the sense of no anchors and no limits that permeate his early cinema – it is as if Almodóvar is trying to cinematically re-insert the missing “something” into his moral universe, to give his art a clarity that life lacks.
From Self-Reflexivity to Artistic Responsibility

Though Almodóvar’s cinema keeps one foot in the camp of the numinous, his cinema more often concerns one of the most obvious issues of postmodern, post-sacred culture: the hegemony of visual culture and the fading of the real in the face of the simulacrum. This state of affairs has been most famously theorized by Baudrillard, who argues that the image has lost its referent, the image itself becoming the only thing that matters, “its own pure simulacrum” (6). In “Postmodernity, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Frederic Jameson suggests that the hegemony of mechanical reproduction in the culture industries in postmodernism makes different aesthetic demands than those in modernism, positing that:

in the weaker productions of postmodernism the aesthetic embodiment of such processes often tends to slip back more comfortably into a mere thematic representation of content—into narratives which are about the processes of reproduction, and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum (79).

Certainly Jameson is right in seeing these kinds of evocations of the simulacrum and of technologies or reproduction as more obvious and less sophisticated than other works of art (his comparison of Antonioni’s Blow-Up (1966) and De Palma’s Blow Out (1981) being an excellent case in point in this regard – a complex modernist meditation on reproduction is transformed by De Palma’s literal link of the original accidental reproduction to a film’s production) but if the distinction between high and low has so utterly collapsed, what use is sophistication? Jameson suggests architecture is better poised to deal with these issues than other aesthetic languages, but can “the distorting and fragmenting reflexions of one enormous glass surface to the other” really be
privileged "as paradigmatic of the central role of process and reproduction in postmodernist culture" (79)? Almodóvar’s tendency to treat these elements thematically is a generally melodramatic impulse. His stories become increasingly concerned with the problems and dangers of artistic and commercial reproduction (especially sexually explicit reproduction, a timely question in Spain), leading ultimately to the despairing end of *The Law of Desire*, in which his filmmaker, screenwriter, and pornographer protagonist throws his typewriter (on which he writes both his fateful letters and his screenplays) through a window. This kind of obviousness is not just "comfortable," as Jameson puts it, it is tied to Almodóvar’s melodramatic imagination: by making his films moral dramas about art and performance, he makes those problems of postmodernity an available aspect of the moral universe.

Intimately tied to any questions of morality is Almodóvar’s evolving relationship to art and artifice. *Pepi, Luci, Bom* is playfully self-reflexive with sexual displays like Bom urinating on Luci played for shocked laughs. By the time he made *Law of Desire*, this self-reflexivity has been transformed into ambivalence about the freedoms of making one’s own rules afforded by art. This ambivalence is clear not only in Almodóvar’s increasingly polished aesthetics, which show him attending to artistic “rules” in a more concerted way than he did in the earlier films, suggesting that just because one can do anything does not necessarily mean one should, but also in terms of story.

*Pepi, Luci, Bom*’s self-reflexivity may be playful, but it is extensive: within the story of the film, Pepi is clearly writing portions of the film the spectator has just seen. At one point, Pepi is explaining to Luci and Bom how they need to perform even as
themselves: "Reality looks artificial," she tells them, with a self-awareness about the breakdown of the boundaries between image and reality described by Baudrillard. Acevedo-Muñoz suggests that: "Pepi and her friends seem to be deliberately deconstructing the fiction on its own basis," including calling attention to the film's poor technical qualities (23). This is the first instance of a consistent privileging of performance that would persist throughout Almodóvar's career. While Acevedo-Muñoz links performance with a theatrical space "where paradoxically 'real' emotions can be glimpsed and where characters often confront real feelings" (17), another way to consider the role of performance is to consider it in light of the other aspects of representation and artifice: performativity in Almodóvar's world is privileged only because it can be considered no less real than "the real world" of the diegetic space.

Another sign of his early self-reflexivity are his cameos in the first few films. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, he shows up at the party to host the "General Erections" contest (a play on the phrase "general elections," linked to the emerging democracy) in which the man with the largest penis becomes "king for the night." This king's royal powers seem to be mainly sexual, yet another reorganization of the sexual state. At one point, Almodóvar, enraptured, questions whether or not the penis he is seeing is "real, or merely a fascination." As Kevin Michael Gaugler notes, the party scene took place in a semi-public space, with partygoers who were likely, given the conditions of production, to be Almodóvar's real friends (279). This performance creates – as Gaugler argues in his dissertation – a liberated space in which Luci can perform her sexual abjection without fear of judgement (as from outside), when she performs oral sex (281). However, her
performance is not merely for the privileged public-private heterotopic\(^9\) space of the group, but for the rich man who has funded the party and is watching through binoculars – a spectator within the film who is in a similar position to the cinematic spectator: “Moreover, he embodies the public paradigm of culture which utilizes clandestine courtyards and cinematic worlds to bring heterotopic never-never lands into the line of sight” (282). In a way, though, his gaze is also a sexual violation: Luci believes she is performing among friends, but his (and our) voyeurism takes her sexual display out of her control. The scene is played for laughs, but its implications are sinister. In setting up spaces of performance within the film, and also acknowledging that these spaces are part of a larger fiction, that he is producing this kind of new paradigm in the world of simulacrum, where images and reality are blurred. As his career goes on, Almodóvar will begin to explore the moral problems this produces in a more concentrated, melodramatic way.

By *Dark Habits*, the relationship has grown more complex. The Mother Superior’s lust for Yolanda is linked to her love of pop culture’s “great sinners” whose images decorate her office. Though he argued that the Mother Superior’s love of Yolanda was treated with a religious reverence, Prout also argued that: “If the luminous arrival at the convent of the streetwise Yolanda evokes an annunciation, it also evokes the beam of projected light which cuts through the shadows of both religious and cinematic auditoriums” (56). Prout points out the way religious imagery is combined with images stemming from the culture industry – no wonder so many of the Mother

\(^9\)Gaugler borrows the concept of heterotopia from Michel Foucault, meaning “other space,” and defined as sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24).
Superior's beloved "great sinners" are movie stars – but by the film's end, it is clear that an image without any original is no substitute for the sureness of belief, as the film ends not with Yolanda's new lease on life, but with the Mother Superior's lament. It is telling that Almodóvar's secularized treatment of religion also evokes issues of representation; in *Dark Habits*, the hegemony of religion is a thing of the past, but the hegemony of the image is alive and well.

*What Have I Done* begins by acknowledging its artificiality with a crane shot of a film crew that Gloria walks through, reminiscent of Godard's opening to *Contempt* (1963). There is a double acknowledgement of the film's construction here. By acknowledging the film's construction by way of an allusion to another film, Almodóvar shows an awareness that this kind self-acknowledgement has become cliché in an of itself. However, the themes of visual culture come through in other ways in the work. Grandma is associated with the old-fashioned village life (to which she eventually returns), but she also seems to relate to the world in terms very much determined by contemporary visual culture, as she sings along with the camp music video that Almodóvar and his singing partner Fabio MacNamara appear in, lipsynching to an old song, with McNamara in drag. She also has her grandson Toni write a letter for her – because she is illiterate – but as Toni is skilled in the art of forgery, she has it written out

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10 This appears to have been a purposeful reference, as Godard's film is quoted a second time in the film, when Cristal bends forward to make her back a "table" for one of her clients to sign something, directly quoting the scene where Jack Palance's movie producer has one of his assistants perform the same action for him.
11 For a more thorough consideration of the use of folkloric music in *What Have I Done* and its "authenticity" as relates to Spanish identity, see Núria Triana-Toribio's consideration of the film: "He continuously (and ironically) evokes the non-authentic folkloric music and costumes that appeared in the folklóricas or in ways inspired by their mode of representation" (1999: 238).
in the hand of Grace Kelly; a close-up of a photo of the actress is provided, to make it clear that imitating her handwriting is somehow meant to evoke Kelly’s glamour. She and Toni eventually do decide to go back to the village and start farming – which might seem like a simpler way of life and as Marsha Kinder has noted was certainly held up as such in conservative Franco-era melodramas from the 1950s (43) – but they are inspired to do so by *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961), a Hollywood film. On the other hand, the domestic space of the home seems to have been colonized by commercials, as Vernon notes in describing an early sequence, the first one in which the viewer sees Gloria’s home, wherein the camera is placed apparently inside Gloria’s washing machine and fridge:

> In both instances, the camera is positioned to show the appliances, in effect, looking back at her. While this nonnaturalistic use of the reverse-angle shot is startling to the spectator, it is not entirely unfamiliar, since TV commercials for clothes washers and fried chicken recipes long ago appropriated this particular editing figure (66).

The failure of Gloria’s life to live up to the kinds of middle-class happiness promised by commercials is clearly brought into relief by the setting of her tireless domestic labour against the aesthetics of TV commercials; this will, of course, be brought through in Gloria’s purchase of the curling iron, which does not even lead to a change in her hair. Finally, this hegemony of the image is exemplified in prostitute Cristal, who changes her name and is trying to learn English in order to become an actress. Cristal has a closet full of “costumes,” in order to become whoever her client wants her to be. Her job is not just to provide physical pleasure, but also to create whatever sexual simulacrum her clients pay for, whether pretending to be a dominatrix for an author so he can research his novel, or even pretending to be a girlfriend for the sexually troubled police officer’s
therapist. Though the film is not truly about representation or performance, as his later films will overwhelmingly be, aspects of representation linger in this melodrama of the socially downtrodden, because representation has become such a major part of contemporary life.

*Matador* foregrounds these questions with Almodóvar’s direction of the fashion show, as well as the clearly-elaborated parallel with *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946): Almodóvar has his two lovers, who will kill each other in ecstasy, watch Vidor’s lovers kill each other. This is not the only instance in the film of characters’ behaviour reflecting cinematic images screened in the film. The effects of visual reproduction on the lives of the characters are explicitly questioned in the film, which begins with Diego masturbating to a series of gruesome murders in a horror movie; the horror movie’s scenes are echoed in Ángel’s “visions” of the murders, including one memorable shot of a woman with bright red lipstick being drowned in a bathtub which visually rhymes with a similar shot in the horror film. Diego is also shown watching a video of his own going — “again,” as Eva complains — when he finds that Maria was in the audience and it is unclear whether his reviewing it is melancholic or pleasurable, given the way he fetishizes violence. The shallowness of postmodern visual culture and the way it generates sexuality is suggested by the sequence backstage at the fashion show, in which the camera is placed where the makeup mirrors would be in the cramped space. Almodóvar plays the designer, whose great theme is “Spain Divided” — but this grand statement begins to feel like posturing: when his character is asked about the division he replies that the country is split between “the envious and the ignorant.” When asked which he is, he jokingly replies “Both!” In *Matador*, the proliferation of the image and
the simulacrum is no longer a way to freely reinvent oneself: it does bring its own pleasures, but, as with Maria and Diego, their pleasure comes at the expense of others, who they seem not to perceive as people.

The representation of not just sex, but sexual violence is an ongoing problem in Almodóvar’s oeuvre. In *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Labyrinth*, where Almodóvar’s main goal seemed to be issuing a challenge to any conventional morality, the sexual assaults are treated casually and comically. In *Pepi*, the scene is cartoonish, scored by a Little Nell song and matches the comic books Pepi is reading and the comic book art that adorns her apartment in tone, as the policeman penetrates Pepi and draws a broad comical scream from her; it is revealed later that her anger over the rape is not so much a response to trauma, but an economic complaint – she had planned to sell her virginity. In *Labyrinth*, Queti is shown passively submitting to her father as he ties her up, believing she is her mother, and then rapes her with a cross hanging over her bed; though Queti herself does tell Sexi she “has traumas,” within the film it is not presented as the hellish torture that it would be in a film that still held with traditional morality, or even with the darkness that it would be in *Volver*, for it is just one story among many. In *What Have I Done*, there are no rapes actually pictured, but Gloria sells her 12 year-old son to a grown man for a curling iron; however, what most viewers (and certainly the law) would consider a criminal abuse of the boy is not seen as such in the film – Miguel is a willing accomplice, embracing the “sale” as a chance to have art lessons paid for. Again, the “specialness” of sexuality is flattened into just another commodity. In *Matador* and *Law of Desire*, as Almodóvar moves toward melodramatically treating the problems of
representation, the representation of sexual violence is treated more explicitly, a thread that he will take up further in the films discussed in Chapter 3, culminating in *Kika*.

In *Matador*, Ángel’s attempted rape of Eva is represented in melodramatic terms. Though melodrama usually relies on music for its emotional charge, none plays as Ángel drags Eva down the alley. There is also no dialogue, again echoing Peter Brooks’ characterization of melodrama as the “text of muteness,” including mute tableaux and wordless gestures, reflecting both its origins in pantomime and melodrama’s attempts to get at something *beyond* language (56): only the sounds of the two struggling, with close-ups of their faces close together, of Ángel’s hands pulling down Eva’s bright pink tights, of her expression of fear as Ángel fumbles with his Swiss Army knife (the latter showing how uncomfortable Ángel is with the idea that he should be asserting himself in this way to live up to Diego’s vision of masculinity). As Ángel begins to thrust, Almodóvar cuts to a long shot of the pair – Ángel in red slumped over and clashing with Eva in pink, pressed against the trunk of a green car. The tableau is held for a moment, allowing the audience to see both the odd beauty in the scene – the bright clothes of the protagonists standing out against the dark greys of the surrounding alley – and the way both are leaned against the car suggesting just how much the characters are “bent” by the series of shifting moralities they are subject to. The real moment of melodramatic sensation12 comes when lightning crashes – a loud sound is heard and the frame is filled up with blue light and a close-up on Ángel makes it clear that he has just had an orgasm.

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12 These kinds of effects were common to early twentieth century stage melodramas as described by Ben Singer, who said “Crucial to a great deal of popular melodrama was sensationalism, defined as an emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of peril” (48). Singer notes that at the turn of the last century, this was one of the term’s key meanings.
It starts raining as he – again in long shot – slumps weakly over Eva, who remains bent backward on the car, realizing what he has done as rain seems to reflect his emotional state. He stutters out an “I’m sorry” as she pushes him away. Eva slaps him and falls over as she runs away – Ángel’s attempt to prove his machismo again undermined by his fainting at the sight of Eva’s bleeding face. Eva touches her wound and glares at Ángel accusingly, but also disgustedly; because Ángel has fainted, the sequence’s point of view shifts to hers, and complicates any sympathy the viewer may have retained for Ángel. I have spent so long on this scene because it boils down to visual signs so many issues important to understanding Almodóvar: the impulse against simply condemning even violent actions such as Ángel’s as immoral is weighed against the difficult, complicated affective experience of watching the sequence. With the camera placed low to the ground as Ángel drags Eva away from the street, Almodóvar gives the viewer a visceral sense of the violence of Ángel’s actions, the close-ups further pushing them to sympathize with Eva – but the long shots that Almodóvar moves towards go in the opposite direction, stepping away from the action to almost reduce it to an image. Particularly since the impact of the scene is not blunted by the information that comes after, that this is not a “real” rape, as Eva tells the police that Ángel came between her legs. Though it was less than “real,” the emotional impact of the scene and of Ángel’s guilt in the sequence that follows is undiminished. Taken alone, it would be difficult to understand the scene as a conscious attempt to expose the problems inherent in treating a crime as controversial as rape as somehow beautiful as opposed to just reproducing such impulses unquestioningly, but in light of the way that sexual violence recurs, in increasingly mediated and abstracted ways in his career – from the startling bongo-
scored scene in *Kika*, repeated as a violation when it is shown on television, to the abstracted cut to a lava lamp in *Talk To Her* – this scene is a key moment in the development of Almodóvar’s aesthetic.

That scene anticipates the ambivalence towards the representation of sex in *Law of Desire*, which is the film in which Almodóvar most straightforwardly addresses artistic responsibility, which is equated with sexual responsibility. It is the first time that Almodóvar himself does not appear in one of his films, but he is often understood as having a “stand-in” in the film’s gay filmmaker protagonist Pablo. In *Law of Desire*, art is clearly understood as affecting the world and having seemingly moral consequences. While in *Matador* the danger of representation was linked to violence, here it is purely sexual. After the credits, the film opens with a scene that appears to be from one of Pablo’s films, and draws heavily on the “screen test” trope in gay porn (Jackson 261). The scene shows a man “performing” an act of masturbation for an unseen listener; Almodóvar also shows the voice actors who are dubbing in the sound. It is clear that Antonio’s obsession for Pablo is based on this scene as he masturbates in a bathroom, repeating the “Folleme” (in English, “Fuck me”) line from the scene. Pablo’s pornography is so powerful that it has enthralled him. That Antonio’s love for (or, at least, sexual obsession with) Pablo is linked to his creative output in the culture industry is clear as well in his watching Pablo’s TV interview about his ideal mate. Antonio’s intent viewing of the interview is signaled by his position: he is shown sitting atop a ladder watching a ceiling-mounted television from a few inches away. Pablo’s creative endeavors as writer and director do not just draw obsessive fans, however. They also hurt his sister, whose life is the inspiration for his next screenplay; her association with
“Laura P.” draws the suspicion of the police. Her anger at him for taking “her mistakes” is palpable; as is the way that Pablo’s use of her persona, both in publicity and in her performance in his play, is shown in that argument scene. Tina stands next to a mirror, so there are several different reflections of her, breaking her personality into a series of merely surface images; this is another way that Tina’s ambivalence around her own self-definition comes into play. It is, as noted above, also Pablo’s art-making that leads Antonio to murder Juan and to become involved with Tina before he kills himself. Pablo’s deep involvement in the culture of reproduction is treated with much more ambivalence than Pepi’s is in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, and his deeply moral realization of the impact that his “frivolous” use of images like these is at the centre of the film’s story.

At the beginning of his career, Almodóvar’s films emphasized visceral images of sexual bodies. In a new, postmodern Spain, *everything* was permitted: previous limits on sex and expression had utterly disappeared. Almodóvar’s first two films seem focused more on celebrating these freedoms than exposing their problems, but the discomfort produced in watching scenes like Queti’s rape is more fully explored as the 1980s wore on. Almodóvar quickly moved from just *producing* strong visceral reactions to incorporating questions about what those reactions mean into his melodrama. By the time he made *Matador* and *Law of Desire*, a more sophisticated visual style was matched by a more sophisticated moral approach. Though neither of these films *reject* the freedoms or crossed boundaries of the new moral order, they do begin to explore the changed moral and emotional terrain of post-Franco, post-moral Spain in a way that parallels the ways that melodramas have explored the post-sacred. Almodóvar’s sex-centred films expose the contradictions inherent in a moral environment that prizes self-
fulfillment above all else, even if he does not always answer the questions he raises. These contradictions become more evident as Almodóvar’s filmmaking concerns become more closely linked with the “women’s pictures” of classical Hollywood, as I will discuss in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO: She Wears Her Heart on Her Sleeve: Femininity and Melodrama in Almodóvar’s “Fashion Films”

After his first, viscerally body-oriented films of Almodóvar’s early career, his focus began to shift to look, no longer at bodies as sexual, but at the way clothing abstracts those bodies. “Clothing and other kinds of ornamentation,” writes Kaja Silverman, “make the human body culturally visible” (145). In the standard postmodern formulation, clothing (at least in cinema) becomes the sign that generates the signified body. Style and femininity are certainly of interest to Almodóvar throughout his career, from the outrageous punks of Pepi, Luci, Bom (1980) to the spectacular drag of Bad Education (La mala educación, 2004), but they are never more important than in the four films he made in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the beginning of his ascent to international fame. I have christened these his “fashion films.” Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios, 1989), Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (¡Átame!, 1990), High Heels (Tacones lejanos, 1991), and Kika (1993) are in clear dialogue with classical Hollywood texts – particularly the “women’s pictures” that have been such popular objects of study for feminist scholars – centrally in their mutual narrative and stylistic emphasis on costume. Almodóvar’s films depart from classical women’s pictures in many ways, starting with the outright acknowledgement of femininity as masquerade, never allowing for a “natural” womanhood, but more compellingly, by including a series of different femininities, to highlight the number of choices women have in terms of the ways that they can present themselves in the “postfeminist” era of the 1980s and 1990s. If fashion is discourse, then these films can be seen as an example of what Bakhtin theorist Robert Stam describes when he says that
postmodern films “simply stage the clash of languages and discourses” (51). Just as Minnelli and Sirk’s melodramas took stories with four or more different characters and gave “each of them an even thematic emphasis and an independent point of view” (Elsaesser 62), Almodóvar’s fashion films take each character’s relationship to the social world as unique. But more than that, his films treat them all as equally true. Or, more accurately put, equally constructed. Postmodern femininity is anything but essential. As with the postmodern morality I discussed in the last chapter, characterized by a world in which seemingly anything is permitted, gender expression is built from the inside out. If there is no “natural” womanhood, every outfit becomes a costume, every day a performance. But, the choices that Almodóvar’s characters make often seem to be limited by plot convention: if the cleaving of signified and signifier makes anything possible, why do Almodóvar’s women continue to make such “conventional” choices, both in their self-presentation and in their romantic lives? This is not a question that Almodóvar can ever answer, but leaving these question marks at the centres of his films begins to suggest the limits of camp femininity – even as the films seem to revel in these images.

Almodóvar followed up Law of Desire with the Oscar-nominated Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, the controversial romance Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, the maternal melodrama High Heels, and the darkly spectacular Kika. In all of these films – with the possible exception of Tie Me Up! – costume carries a set of meanings that complements and unsettles the film’s narrative meaning. While in Tie Me Up!, the costumes do not make themselves known in the spectacular way they do in the other films, the issues the costuming brings up in the other films is still present: femininity is
presented as a construct, and, more importantly, the film aims to reconsider the “male gaze.” Almodóvar’s focus on the moral implications of representation shows a good deal of continuity with the films brought up in Chapter 2, but with a greater attention to the conventions of gender that fashion enforces and explores. In simply not positioning the male gaze as the default, Almodóvar is able to expose some of the contradictions inherent in postmodern gender construction, and through a mainly melodramatic mode of address, he raises questions about what freedom means, and whether the absence of rules means that society (or the audience) must accept every decision his characters make.

All of the films above have in common “happy” endings that feel ambiguous or tenuous. The end of Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown has Pepa returning home to her apartment with the sentimental comment that “the kids are asleep,” as if in the course of one day she has somehow formed a household with her daffy friend, her ex-lover’s illegitimate son, and the son’s (now) ex-fiancée — who is the first person she tells about her pregnancy. The ease and speed with which all these bonds were created and with which the old ones are cast aside is an earmark of Almodóvar’s work. Carlos and Candela go from strangers to lovers in virtually no time at all. How can they be sure that these bonds will last longer than the ones they cast aside? The only answer is that it is the end of the movie; by forcing the conclusion of the characters’ emotional states at the end of the film, Almodóvar hints — even if the viewer does not think it consciously — at the constructed nature of the film’s happy ending. Tie Me Up!’s perverse romance ends not with a lovers’ embrace, but the uncomfortable drive to the new family home. High Heels ends with a mother and daughter embracing, the death of the mother
balanced by the promise of a new life – and a heroine who has gotten away with murder. *Kika* has Ramón, revived again, headed to the hospital, while Kika, his erstwhile fiancée abandons following him to the hospital, drives off with a cute young hitchhiker, who promises to “point her in the right direction.” Though they retain some of the shocks and the self-reflexivity that goes with it of the first films – particularly in *Kika* – the fashion films produce the kind of moral ambiguity that can be (ironically) created by melodrama’s push for emotional-moral clarity. Laura Mulvey’s statement that “the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes” (1987:76) seems particularly germane to films like *Tie Me Up!* and *Kika*, which literally end with their heroines driving off into an uncertain future. The tenuous closes of *Women on the Verge* and *High Heels* are similarly uneasy resolutions, with their heroines pregnant but their futures otherwise uncertain, with quickly formed bonds that could just as easily be broken – though the characters’ immediate problems are resolved, the audience cannot be entirely satisfied with the result.

Linda Williams writes about melodrama’s potential for social criticism in her famous essay “Something Else Besides a Mother,” about *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937): “Rather than raging against a fate that the audience has learned to accept, the female hero accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions,” arguing that “the maternal melodrama presents a recognisable picture of woman’s ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women’s lives” (320). It is not a coincidence that fashion is central in Vidor’s film as
well: it is in part Stella’s garish clothing – her overuse of ruffles, furs, and makeup make her “a travesty, an overdone masquerade of what it means to be a woman” in the eyes of her husband and his upper-class peers (311) – that keeps her from entering the world of her ex-husband and daughter. In the end, Stella chooses to debase herself in her daughter’s eyes so the girl will reject her and choose a better life. Of this ending, Williams notes:

the entire Stella Dallas debate was over what it meant for a woman viewer to cry at the end of the film. Did the emotion swallow us up or did we have room within it to think? Could we, in other words, think both with and through our bodies in our spectating capacities as witnesses to abjection? (1998: 47)

Essentially, Williams is attempting to define what classical melodrama, which places women in the place of victim, can mean to feminists: if a viewer’s sad reaction to the plight of the film’s victim-hero is drawn to the injustice of the circumstances, can it actually be a progressive tool? High Heels is not the same as Stella Dallas, even if both films show mothers exalted through self-sacrifice: it is made in a time and a world when women’s representation in the image-dominated media landscape had been consistently questioned. The idea that all images of women and all fashion are somehow tools of the patriarchy – and that women who participated in these systems were deluded – was now in common circulation, so women had to negotiate the conflicts between their desire to embrace femininity and the sense that femininity is somehow a capitulation. Almodóvar weaves these questions into the fabric of his films.

In the four films that I have christened the “fashion films,” the tension between surfaces and a longing for depth – a tension that one could argue are elemental features of even the “classical” Hollywood women’s film, like Stella Dallas, where Stella’s cheap-looking surface adornments are at odds with her internal virtue – is played out in
the interaction between the story and the clothing. In *Women on the Verge*, Pepa’s hold on her style is much stronger than her hold on her emotions. In his notes on the film, published on his website, Almodóvar defends the “pencil skirts and high heels” Pepa wears:

> The truth is that she looks good on them, but they forced her to walk in a way that Susan Sontag (as she told Elle magazine after visiting the set) finds inappropriate for an independent and contemporary woman. I understand and agree with Sontag when she fights sex polarization, but that has nothing to do with Pepa. Women must feel free even when it comes to choosing the clothes they wear.

Almodóvar goes on to quote Maura’s response to the question of whether the tight skirts and heels are uncomfortable:

> Of course they will, but I’ll look as if they didn’t. To a character as Pepa is, heels are the best support for dealing with fear. Should Pepa neglect her look, her mood would stumble down hopelessly. Flirting takes discipline and it represents her main power. It means that the others can’t defeat her yet.

However, in the end, it is only after she runs to the airport disheveled, not wearing any shoes, with hair covered in gazpacho, that Pepa is finally able to let Ivan go. In *High Heels*, earrings and shoes remain fetish objects, as Rebeca wears the earrings her mother bought her as a girl, hoping she will notice, but Becky forgets that Rebeca was even there. And the “distant heels” of the Spanish-language title belong to Becky in Rebeca’s childhood memories of waiting for her mother to come home at night. But these are fetishes for a daughter longing for her mother. In *Kika*, the spectacle of the clothes threatens to overwhelm the story – which is itself about spectacle; Andrea Caracortada’s showy cyborg clothing is most discussed, but Kika’s series of garish Armani ensembles is equally as attention grabbing. And in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, Marina’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” as a former porn star and current movie star is played against her own
desires. After shooting has ended on her film, the director Maximo Espejo – sort of a personification of the male gaze – is still sitting in his wheelchair on set and watches her bend over a couch to pick something up. Without looking up, Marina places a pillow over her bottom and tells him to stop looking at her. He says he is not looking at her, but “admiring” her; her look back shows that she is well aware of his watching her, and her response is not entirely passive. In all of these cases, women have “surfaces” negotiated to respond to society’s expectations.

**Fashion and Cinema: How Clothes Become Melodramatic**

Before going further into the films, I will consider how fashion, femininity, melodrama and camp intersect, since these are the intersections that Almodóvar exploits to generate meaning. Melodrama is known for its excessive qualities; Hollywood melodramas are known for pushing the emotion (even the hysteria) of their stories into the mise-en-scène. Thomas Elsaesser writes of the “sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, colour, gesture, and composition of frame” (52), arguing that in the colour family melodramas of Sirk and Minnelli there was “a conscious use of style as meaning” (54). Elsaesser saw the use of mise-en-scène in these as a way to indicate the emotional states of the characters beneath the surface, in order to produce a critique of American capitalist ideology. Though he does not discuss costume as a specific aspect of this, treating it as part of the overall mise-en-scène, he establishes a precedent for reading a melodrama’s style as being especially informative.

In that light, it is unsurprising that much of the discussion of fashion and cinema tends to focus on melodramas or “women’s films,” where dresses were as much
marketing tie-ins as character touches. Clothing in the Hollywood woman’s film is generally communicative, particularly in films that deal with questions around a woman’s place in the world – I am thinking particularly of Joan Crawford films like Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and Johnny Guitar (Nicholas Ray, 1954) (which appears in Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown) here, where changes in Crawford’s costumes relate to her character’s changes in emotional and social status – with Mildred’s ever-expanding shoulder pads and Vienna’s shifts from masculine to feminine clothes linked to their careers and romantic lives. In “Costume and Narrative,” Jane Gaines goes so far as to compare melodramatic costumes with music itself: “Like the musical code, the vestural code has a basic typifying function as well as an elaborative function, the latter accessing the realm of emotion and compensating for expressive deficiencies in the dialogue” (203). In the women’s picture, Gaines argues, that “in terms of costume surplus, film melodrama can absorb and motivate beyond the capacity of other genres” (211), no doubt because of melodrama’s pushing of meaning outside the dialogue and onto the mise-en-scene. While Almodóvar’s fashion films certainly have comic elements, clothing acts in this kind of excessive manner in all these films, hinting at and drawing out a discourse of femininity that is submerged in (and occasionally contradicted by) his romantic plots.

The relationship between fashion and cinema is most often discussed in terms of questions of femininity, and this is not a coincidence: clothing and other bodily

13 This is a common trope in discussion of clothing and cinema – the way that fantasy is used for commercial purposes cannot be separated from its stylistic uses. The most famous discussion of this phenomenon is Charles Eckert’s “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window”; Charlotte Herzog’s “‘Powder Puff’ Promotion: The Fashion Show-in-the-Film” is also relevant.
adornments *are* a major component in how femininity is culturally produced, especially since ornament in dress shifted from being a class marker to one of *gendered* class at some point in the eighteenth century (see Silverman 137 for more on this shift). In postmodern melodramas like Almodóvar’s, fashion becomes more complex: the clothes his characters wear take on lives of their own, the collaborations of major fashion designers do become selling points, and surfaces become spectacular, as with the Gaultier clothes for *Kika*, or all the emphasis on Rebeca’s Chanel wardrobe in *High Heels* – one of the first shots is the label on the inside of her purse. But the celebration of surfaces is not so unreflective that the films do not also become an *examination* of the postmodern overemphasis on surfaces, where some of the problems and contradictions of this visual economy are exposed, as self-presentation becomes self-invention.

**Fashion & (Feminist?) Camp**

The emphasis on surface and performed personality over some kind of “deep” self does not only relate to postmodernism: it also has roots in camp. Because camp embraces elements of performance, it has been seen as having the potential to expose *everything* as performed. Beginning as a discourse within gay subcultures, camp was introduced as a subject for serious academic study in Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” originally published in 1964. Sontag first expressed many of the aspects of camp that still give it currency:

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater (56).
However, in her view, camp’s playful superficiality excluded it from having any kind of political import: “To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude that is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (52). This argument sounds dated now, as Sontag’s “Notes” predate Judith Butler’s postmodern argument that, if all gender is performative (often taken in its most positive light, but for Butler “The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced iteration of norms” (1993:94)), then non-normative gender performances can be a site of political resistance, or at least destabilization. Both before and after Butler, many scholars have taken exception to the “camp as apolitical” formation; it is now fairly uncontroversial to claim that camp’s emphasis on gender performance and the artificial has, at the very least, political ramifications.

Though it is often associated with gay male culture and even is occasionally with misogyny, Pamela Robertson has argued that camp has potential for feminism as well. She suggests that the idea that “gay men appropriate a feminine aesthetic and certain female stars but that women, lesbian or heterosexual, do not similarly appropriate aspects of gay male culture” is wanting, suggesting instead that there is a cultural exchange between women and gay men (5). She goes on to argue that “Camp has an

14 This debate is well-covered elsewhere. See Moe Meyer (who argues that “camp gains its political validity as an ontological critique” (137)), Andrew Ross (who goes so far as to say that “Camp [...] is more than just a remembrance of things past, it is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor” (320)), and Richard Dyer (who argues that camp is “precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty, and masculinity,” but also considers the way camp can be limiting to queer identity (113)) for some of the better-known discussions of camp’s politics.

15 See Caryl Flinn’s “The Deaths of Camp” for a consideration of how camp “may collude unwittingly with a dominant culture that seems increasingly bent on doing damage to the female body” (453).
affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment” (6), and points to female stars who knowingly make use of aspects of gay culture, like Mae West and Madonna, encouraging readers to consider “subcultures in constellation” (7). Robertson’s take on camp relies heavily on examinations of female spectatorship that appeared following Laura Mulvey’s famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” piece, particularly Mary Ann Doane’s “Film and the Masquerade.” As Doane puts it, drawing on Joan Riviere16: “The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed” (427), in order to theorize that the masquerade “effects a defamiliarisation of female iconography” (427). She asks “What might it mean to masquerade as a spectator? To assume the mask in order to see in a different way?” (428) This essay again predates Gender Trouble, which extrapolates from Riviere’s theories to the point that the mask is the only possible gender expression, but Judith Butler’s work is helpful in seeing the more positive possibilities of this kind of distance, which Doane regards as negative, distancing women from the deeper pleasures of feminine proximity. Robertson answers these questions with camp: “Camp not only allows for the double nature of masquerade (the spectator in disguise will always see through two pairs of eyes) but also accounts for the pleasure of the masquerade (typically unacknowledged)” (14).

Much of Robertson’s discussion of camp confines itself to questions of femininity and, therefore, of fashion. She discusses Joan Crawford’s star image in her late 1940s films, focusing on Johnny Guitar, the film Pepa and Ivan are dubbing in

16 “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (39). Riviere’s psychoanalytic account found that women would often “put on” femininity as a mask to hide knowledge, almost as a defense mechanism.
*Women on the Verge,* as one that “combines features of a certain kind of artificiality with a hard professionalism” (90). Robertson sees Crawford as a figure whose “self-made,” and therefore artificial, stardom began to be used against her as times changed. Part of the camp sense of artifice around her femininity is linked to her shifts between “masculine” and “feminine” costume in *Johnny Guitar,* which signal a kind of sexual fluidity: Robertson even suggests the possibility of reading her as a lesbian (111-112). The importance of costume to this level of meaning is clear when Robertson concludes that Vienna’s “gender bending [...] can be read as a parodic form of masquerade” (112).

Many of the films discussed in terms of fashion in film are the same ones that come up in discussions of camp in cinema. For instance, *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939), another film that would seem to have influenced *Women on the Verge* with its all-female cast comically fighting over an absent man (and in which Crawford appears as the villainess, a golddigger who steals the heroine’s husband), is discussed in Charlotte Herzog’s essay on Hollywood fashion show sequences as an example of the fashion show as a fantasy, distinct from the rest of the film because it is in colour and offering a kind of wish fulfillment to a female spectator: “The dream/film offers to fulfill the wish of buying, owning, and wearing the fabulous gowns in the show which would be impossible for many women in real life” (154). But it is also given a chapter in Alexander Doty’s *Flaming Classics,* wherein the fashion show sequence is discussed in terms of its camp value, noting the over-the-top visual jokes that Cukor included, such as having monkeys appear dressed in miniature versions of the models’ costumes (87-88).

In their obsessive reworking of old cultural products and playful approach to gender performance, Almodóvar’s fashion films certainly can be read as having an aspect of
feminist camp – particularly Women on the Verge and Kika, both of which feature an
array of femininities placed in dialogue. However, Almodóvar’s films cannot really be
taken as camp: they are both at times too sincere in their emotional appeal and at other
times too self-aware to be what Sontag called “naïve camp.” Nonetheless, I believe there
is an element of camp that is set against the melodramatic in Almodóvar’s work. The
element which links feminist camp and women’s pictures is the centrality of a female
spectator: the importance of female subjectivity in both of these sensibilities carries
through Almodóvar’s oeuvre, the “fashion films” in particular.

**Melodrama and Camp**

Though camp started out as subcultural and a way for intellectuals and outsiders to
relate to mass culture without participating in it, Klinger points out that, since the 1960s,
camp has become “a sensibility available to many”; she terms this more institutionalized,
less specifically queer sensibility “mass camp,” and argues that it plays a role in how
classical Hollywood films are received by contemporary audiences (133). However,
mass camp is different in that it has lost the “palpable risk of social censure” that it had
for pre-Stonewall gay men; because camp is now so popular – though Klinger’s book
came out in 1994, the same year as Madonna’s Bedtime Stories album, I would argue
that it remains a part of popular discourse in the twenty-first century – it has lost some of
its oppositional edge (140). One of the main targets of mass camp was old Hollywood:
“Responding to a difference between past and present conventions, mass camp
renegotiates the meaning of films according to modern standards” (141). This is
especially true of 1950s melodramas like Sirk’s (the subject of Klinger’s book) –
viewers respond knowingly to the now-obvious conventions of romance, gender, and genre in Sirk's melodramas; but as Klinger points out, this does not necessarily mean that contemporary viewers are more "enlightened":

Outdatedness may ultimately provoke a Sirkian distantiﬁcation from the tenets of melodrama; the mass camp viewer may grasp the constructedness of romance and gender roles, for instance. But this awareness does not necessarily connect with a larger association between ﬁlm and ideology; it may simply rest on a sense of superiority to the past that remains essentially self-congratulatory vis à vis one's superior spectatorial skills, one's ability to spot vintage corn. (155-56)

Certainly, Almodóvar's ﬁlms were all made in a culture with this kind of relationship to Hollywood melodramas. However, his ﬁlms do not merely use tropes drawn from Sirkian melodrama in order to draw a distinction between the past and the present, rather, they combine campy archetypes with more contemporary elements, like explicit sexuality. Admittedly the fashion ﬁlms are not as explicit as the ﬁlms discussed in Chapter 2, but Tie Me Up!, High Heels, and Kika all do feature scenes of simulated intercourse. The core of the mother-daughter story in High Heels is not all that different from Imitation of Life (Sirk, 1959) (nor Bergman's Autumn Sonata (1978), which is mentioned in the ﬁlm), but it is complicated both by the relatively "realistic" sex scene between Rebeca and Letal, as well as Becky's own camp value in Letal's drag show. The ﬁlm's world is not the "innocent" camp of 1950s melodramas viewed through contemporary eyes, but neither is it exactly one that is meant to elicit an ironic camp response – it is a world which includes camp discourse, but does not privilege it as the only way of looking at the world.

Essentially, though the ﬁlms are aware of the postmodern loss of the signiﬁed and full of sly camp humour, they also retain a sense of the "longing for the numinous" discussed in Chapter 2, for the sense of moral and emotional clarity that melodrama
strives to provide. If anything, the proliferation of surfaces, images, and artificiality only increases this sense of longing, as plenitude seems ever further away. Though the irony of camp would seem to mitigate the emotional appeal of a melodramatic work, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, though it is easy to point to the ironic excesses of *Imitation of Life*, the Mahalia Jackson-scored funeral scene at the film’s end draws tears regardless, even from a contemporary academic viewer like myself. Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill have argued that melodrama has not disappeared with the advent of cinematic “realism,” but rather that melodrama has always been embedded in it (Williams 1998:67). One wonders why it is not equally possible for melodrama to be embedded in less “realist” or illusionist styles. Awareness that one is watching a film, contrary to many modernist assumptions, does not necessarily mitigate emotional investment. Almodóvar’s films embrace a camp worldview that hints that *all* aspects of life are performed and in which degraded cultural objects become “props” and “costumes”; however, they also contain a pure emotional appeal that attempts to restore some sense of “plenitude” to the depth-free world of camp. The way that Almodóvar distances viewers from Kika — through her theatricality, through the spectator’s awareness of her naïveté about Nicholas’s sinister tendencies and Ramón’s history with Andrea, the woman who put the videotape of Kika’s rape on television — does not lessen her pathos when she learns that Ramón has been lying to her: he was the voyeur who called the police and has been taping her, and his relationship with Andrea went much deeper than he initially admitted to her. Her tears, which she stifles as she pretends to sleep, are as real as anything else, and the audience shares in her private pain. Indeed, as melodrama’s pathos often relies on a spectator’s distance from a character — the dramatic
irony of knowing their story would have worked out differently if they had one piece of information – so it is a better combination with camp’s (somewhat less than dramatic) irony than one might think.

One of Almodóvar’s most abiding motifs is the friendly encounter between camp star and camp fan: in these films there is Pepa and her cab driver in Women, Becky and Letal in High Heels, and Ricky and Marina in Tie Me Up!. But the trope goes back as early as Sexi and Queti in Labyrinth of Passions (Laberinto de pasiones, 1982) and as late as Huma and Agrado in All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999) (see Chapter 4 for more discussion of this). This is one way that Almodóvar bridges the gap between being camp and using camp. Susan Sontag’s camp involved objects or art used for the “wrong” reasons; art that was meant to be serious was loved for its failure. Almodóvar’s camp is always already self-aware: there is no “straight” reading for his comedy. In Kika, the talk show hosted by Doña Paquita (played by Francesca Caballero, Almodóvar’s mother) might be taken as naïve camp, with Doña Paquita’s insistence that her guest have some chorizo before she asks the first question and her obvious reading off of her script, but this is mitigated by the presence in the text of Kika and Amparo, who watch the show and laugh affectionately. In other words, not only are the films available to read in terms of ironically challenging good taste, emphasizing surface, and underscoring performance, they require it. This acknowledgement of performativity seems to place the audience “backstage,” but the problem is that there is no “real” actor behind the character.
Clothes and Femininity in *Women on the Verge*

Though fashion was always important for Almodóvar, the opening of his seventh full-length film, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, foregrounds fashion as a commodity like never before. The credit sequence appears to be a collage drawn from vintage ads for women’s clothing and makeup: the contrast of these images of still, styled controlled “women” (and fragments thereof) with the “on the verge of a nervous breakdown” in the film’s title is intriguing and prepares the viewer for a film where appearance carries meaning. The first shot, which contains the production company’s credit, features a woman pulling her pantyhose away from her legs with a manicured finger – but because the hose is flesh-toned, she looks for a moment like she is pulling away her skin. In its original context, it is not clear what the image did mean, but having a woman’s pantyhose appear to be a part of her body speaks to the film’s playful attitude toward the idea of “natural” femininity – one’s “look” is as important as anything going on below the surface. When Marisa wakes up and tells Pepa that after her nap, she no longer believes herself to be a virgin, Pepa tells her that she has “lost that hard look that virgins have.” So, not being a virgin is not looking like a virgin. Surface is everything.

On paper, clothes do not seem to be central to the film’s narrative, but costume becomes one of the film’s strongest indicators of feeling. Though *Women on the Verge* takes place over two days, Carmen Maura has five costume changes in the film, all suits (or variations) with tight skirts. One is a black skirt with a bright red cardigan with white trim, over which she wears another cardigan that is identical to the first, except that it is plum, not red. The doubleness of her clothing reflects a different kind of doubleness. As Maura said, fashion helps Pepa keep it together – the excess of her clothes points to the
emotional chaos they are concealing. Pepa’s emotionally disordered state is reflected sartorially. If, as mentioned, clothes allow Pepa to feel that she has not entirely lost control, her costumes do not entirely work. Pepa is an actress, like Tina (Maura’s character from Law of Desire), and like Tina she is recognized nearly wherever she goes (by the pharmacist she goes to get sleeping pills from, by the mambo taxi driver) so she is, in a sense, always performing.

The other characters’ costumes are impossible to ignore as well. Candela’s oft-mentioned coffeepot earrings bob around as she moves her head, and fit in strangely with her midriff baring athletic tank top and skirt, paired with a pom-pom trimmed jean jacket. Her disordered clothing represents her own disordered mental state, and her costume change into Pepa’s simple black dress utterly transforms her. Since she is a model, it is fitting that she can inhabit different “looks” in the blink of eye. Lucía’s vintage costumes signal how her conception of her femininity is “out of time.” Evans suggests that her relationship to her father (who defends her dated clothes while her mother would prefer she break away from the past) is to blame: “Oedipalised to the point of dependence, Lucía turns herself through dress and cosmetics into a spectacle, not just to satisfy her own bizarre needs but also, in common with many other women, for the gratification and pleasure of others” (46). However, the film also benefits from the retro charm of the garments; as Kaja Silverman puts it, “by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, [retro] makes clear that the past is available to us only in a textual form, and through the mediation of the present” (150-51). In other words, the relationship to the past afforded by vintage clothing is similar to the one brought about by camp recycling. Lucía’s relationship to the past is linked to her illness, but in the
larger text of the film, her out-of-place Jackie-O suits help to generate a dialogue between fashion discourses that makes it clear that this historical conception of womanhood is false and – by implication – the contemporary one must be as well. When Andrew Ross wrote of camp film stars: “Each demonstrates how to perform a particular representation of womanliness. And the effect of these performances is to demonstrate, in turn, why there is no ‘authentic’ femininity, why there are only social representations of femininity, socially redefined from moment to moment,” he did not mean that they all did this in the same text (325).

The film itself is a late-1980s spin on Cukor’s all-female comedy of manners, The Women. The Women not only has the aforementioned female cast centred around an absent man, its settings are mainly in the domain of the beauty industry: boutiques, spas, department stores. Almodóvar was also inspired by Cocteau’s La Voix Humaine, a one-women monologue that Carmen Maura’s character performed in Law of Desire. Linda M. Wiëlem’s study of the adaptation draws on Linda Hutcheon’s description of parody as having ironic distance, but not necessarily mocking the source material: “Almodóvar never pokes fun at the suffering of his protagonist, Pepa. He fully respects her emotions, but he bases his comedy on an inversion of the trajectory that those same emotions take in La Voix Humaine” (142). In both cases, the man (or men) in question are completely absent from the piece, but in Almodóvar’s film Ivan (Fernando Guillén), the ex-lover who Pepa (Carmen Maura) spends the whole film trying to get in touch with, does appear several times, but he remains a cipher. The question in Women on the Verge is not: “Will Pepa and Ivan get back together?” The question is: “Why is Pepa so concerned about Ivan at all?” A female spectator (and likely a male spectator) watches
the film wondering why a self-possessed woman like Pepa wants anything to do with a womanizer like Ivan; her pregnancy provides some narrative explanation, but it is concealed for much of the film. This is similar to the way that Linda Williams’ female spectator watches Stella Dallas, understanding but not quite accepting Stella’s choice to erase herself. Though initially Almodóvar’s ending seems happier, it is ultimately as ambiguous as Vidor’s: Stella walks off in the distance triumphant, and while Pepa is in a position of more power and has more choices than Stella, it still is unclear that she is “something else besides a mother.”

**Tie Me Up! and Femininity**

As I suggested above, in *Tie Me Up!*, Marina is constantly being defined and redefined in terms of her to-be-looked-at-ness. Certainly her status as an actress (and porn star) make her a sex object for Maximo, who is later seen watching one of her old movies. It emphasizes her appeal in terms of a Mulveyan “to-be-looked-at-ness,” playing to and signifying male desire (2000:40). Her femininity is almost parodic, as she favours off-the-shoulder floral sundresses, the girlishness of her clothes contrasting with her baser desires for drugs, and her taking control in her sex scene with Ricky. But, this is undermined in several ways. Almodóvar follows up the scenes of Marina on set with a moment where Marina, on her way home, pauses to tell some labourers how to care for their horse. She is later also seen on the toilet (which, as Nandorfy notes, made her less appealing to at least one male critic (55)). Both of these scenes obviously undermine an uncomplicated idea of Marina as a sex object, as does the bathtub scene. The only time Marina is seen fully nude is in this scene, when she is taking a bath alone. The camera is above her as a toy scuba diver swims toward her crotch. Marina smiles and holds the
scuba diver to her chest – it is punctuated with a close-up of her relaxed, smiling face and presented as a moment when her body is a source of pleasure for her, especially in the context of her status in the entertainment industry. Here there is no male protagonist controlling the camera’s “look,” nor is Marina’s body a site of guilt or threat. Her other nude scene is the lovemaking scene with Ricky, where again, she is the “director,” and her desires are those driving the action.

The film is in many ways structured like a romantic melodrama – the male hero falls for the heroine and eventually wins her over – but, as Martha J. Nandorf puts it, “The male protagonist’s usual suave and convincing appeal is represented in *Tie Me Up!* *Tie Me Down!* as psychosis” (57). Ricky (Antonio Banderas) is introduced in a mental institution, and decides to win over recovering drug addict Marina (Victoria Abril), who he once slept with, by kidnapping her. The kidnapping begins with a jarringly violent encounter between the two, wherein Ricky strikes her. Harmony Wu sees Ricky’s kidnapper as stemming from horror stereotypes, where Marina’s choices (to love or not to love) come straight out of the women’s film: “In *Fáteme!,* because Ricki forces Marina into the choice of either remaining his tied-up captive or falling in love with him, the actual speciousness of the structure of ‘choice’ in the love story is made nakedly apparent, further compromising the ‘love story’ with the horror story” (265). However, as the film wears on, Marina warms to Ricky when he is beaten up by a drug dealer he had robbed earlier in the film (played by Almodóvar regular Rossy de Palma), eventually either falling in love with him or “los[ing] her autonomy and accept[ing] the role assigned to her Rickie (sic)” (Nandorf 58), depending on who you ask. After they have sex, Ricky draws Marina a “subway map” of his life, matching the artful map
shower curtain behind he and Marina as she tends his wounds. The map-as-life metaphor – in which, like a Hollywood movie, the union of a couple represents “the end” – is a small moment in the film, one which will be more subtly and more completely treated in the “map trilogy” discussed in Chapter 4.

In Nandorfy’s discussion as well as most critical accounts of the film, the central question the viewer is left with is why Marina chooses to start a life with her kidnapper. The response that this produces is one that is familiar to fans of melodrama – even though Marina accepts her fate, the audience of the film does not. Though some critics have read the end of the film as utopic (Acevedo-Muñoz calls it “unambiguously hopeful” (133)), the ending is ambiguous for others – D’Lugo notes the varied responses to the film and its “curious moral slippery slope” of Ricky’s apparent absolution through affective response (74). Wu describes it in terms of conflicting spectatorial desires:

If we root for Marina to stay and not run away, we realize we are endorsing the theme of a man violently coercing a woman into submission and a woman loving her oppression. If we root for Marina to run away, we deny the possibility of the delicious pleasures of their romantic and erotic union. The collision of these conflicting narrative pleasures indeed can produce an ideological awareness of the abuses of women in a patriarchal society (268).

Wu does not, however, go so far as to claim that the film’s ideological message is that simple, noting that the ending leaves the film’s contradictions and the ideological discomfort around the film’s pleasures unresolved (269). The long car scene in which Ricky and Lola sing along – off-key – with the disco tape as Marina drives, smiling, then crying, as they head off toward a new family, is certainly odd as a closing. It takes the audience a brief moment past the film’s classical “happy ending” when Ricky and Marina embrace, in order to hint that the characters’ lives will go on past the end of the
film, but without actually giving the viewer a sense of what that new life will actually look like. Hinting at this future only points to its impossibility.

**High Heels, Fashion, and Performance**

Many of the ways that performance (or masquerade) is worked into *High Heels* seem almost too obvious to point out. The story revolves around a “family romance” between famous singer and actress Becky and her newsreader daughter Rebeca that owes a good deal to *Imitation of Life*. In “Melancholy Melodrama,” Linda Williams links the film with *Mildred Pierce*: “In many ways, Almodóvar’s film is a melancholic revision of *Mildred Pierce* that acts out the queer incestuous romance that the heteronormative Hollywood classic violently represses at its end,” only with the difference that Becky *is* able to fool the law and take the blame for her daughter’s crime (277). Williams stresses Almodóvar’s use of torch songs, and of “no less than three death-bed scenes that climax the film’s last half hour” as being central to understanding the way Almodóvar uses the techniques of melodrama in order to reveal Rebeca’s taboo incestuous desires for her mother (278). In the Spanish context, Kinder describes the film’s purpose as being “to marshal melodrama’s full arsenal of emotional excess in order to eroticize and empower [the maternal] for those traditionally marginalized under patriarchy—or, in other words, to liberate the maternal from the dreaded image of the repressive patriarchal mother,” which features heavily in films like *Matador* (1986) and *Dark Habits* (*Entre tinieblas*, 1983) (1995:146).

Just like in *Imitation of Life*, the mother leaves the daughter behind to shoot a movie and in her absence the daughter falls for her mother’s lover – however, unlike
Sirk’s heroine, Rebeca stays in Mexico for fifteen years, coming back to find her daughter grown and married to the man. It is suggested in the Sirk film that Lana Turner’s character Lora is so caught up in her dream of being an actress that she cannot be sincere. At one point when she is having an argument with her daughter, the girl tells her to “Stop acting, mother.” This line is echoed in High Heels, just after the mother-daughter reunion that begins the film as both women cry and embrace and Rebeca says “Quit acting.” It is clear that “acting” is everything to Becky; the only way she can express her sadness about her daughter’s situation is in a performance. At one point, she says the following to justify her failings as a mother: “When I wake up, I just want to live until 10 PM, doing the one thing I know how to do...perform.” (In the Spanish, Becky uses the word “actuar,” which can also mean “to act.”) The emphasis there is mine: this dialogue shows that Becky embodies the camp idea that life itself can be reduced to performance. It is in “acting,” or at least lying, that Becky is finally able to prove herself as a mother, as well, when she confesses to the murder in order to spare Rebeca.

The other character who embraces this school of thought is Femme Letal/Eduardo/Hugo/The judge (Miguel Bosé) – though in the end he reveals himself to Rebeca without a “costume” or a false beard, there is a lingering sense of doubt about who he “really” is. He even wears the false beard when at home with his mother. When he asks Rebeca to marry him, she asks “Marry who?”, unable to discern who he really is. Letal’s subversion of his own gender is literally “performed,” enacting femininity

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17 Even at the time, the film was associated with Lana Turner’s personal life; her daughter had just stood trial for murdering her mother’s boyfriend. Those parallels were known at the time of the film’s production, but High Heels more closely follows the real-life situation.
through citation of Becky, for an audience of admiring fans who imitate his (her?) every move. However, more than just destabilizing gender boundaries by dressing as a woman and then having acrobatic sex with Rebeca in half-drag, Letal subverts all identity. Femininity is not marked out as the only site of “artificial” performativity: he is just as false as the judge, his mother’s son, or as Hugo, his own informant. If wearing a mask means seeing through two pairs of eyes, Hugo can never take his off: his personality with Rebeca is logically just as performed.

Rebeca’s “performances” are somewhat less obvious than either Becky’s or Letal’s, but when placed into relief with the other characters, it is clear that in her own way, she is “acting” too. When she shows up to read the news just after her husband’s death, her makeup artist (whose hands, covered in brightly-coloured plastic bracelets, are the only thing visible onscreen) asks: “The usual?” “No,” she replies. “More.” Rebeca wears her makeup like a mask and her Chanel like a uniform, so much so that it is a shock to see her in jail, wearing a garish oversized sweater and dumpy jeans, her lips bare of makeup. Rebeca is as much of an actress as her mother, constantly changing her story about her husband’s death. Her sincere, teary-eyed monologue about finding Manuel’s body is delivered with impressive detail – her speaking to him, then leaving, then coming back and embracing him only to then realize that he was not ignoring her, he was a corpse – is touching when she tells it to the judge, but it turns out to be entirely untrue. The second story she tells, with tears running down her cheeks in the newscast – to the consternation of the station’s staff – has the ring of truth and is backed up with the photographs she took of items in their home – but there is no way to know whether or not it is accurate either. So does the affective power of these various performances
disappear in the knowledge that they are false? High Heels certainly does not come to any conclusion on the subject, even if it does raise the question.

**Kika and Femininity**

Femininity is up for revision in Kika: the film is known for its excessive costumes, which combine with themes of voyeurism to become a cinematic dissertation on “to-belooked-at-ness”. Fashion is central to Kika’s aesthetic:

Gaultier’s clothes are deliberately intrusive and thus instrumental in defining the spectator’s responses to a film. Pedro Almodóvar’s Kika juxtaposes several styles and couturiers with just such an intention in mind; of using costume to impose rather than reflect meaning built up within the characters and narrative (Bruzzi 10).

The clothes in the film were credited to well-known envelope-pushing designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, who is responsible for Andrea Caracortada’s (“Scarface” in English) famed outlandish costumes, which Bruzzi compares to “star costumes” like Givenchy’s clothing for Audrey Hepburn (13). Bruzzi goes on to say that: “An anomaly is suggested by the alienating way in which costumes function in Kika is that the more sensational clothes become, the less they signify the beauty and desirability of, in this instance, the female characters who wear them” (13). Some commentators believe Andrea’s over-the-top gowns, like the black dress “ripped” to expose plastic breasts and featuring fake blood, and her mechanical camera suit – in which her breasts actually become headlights – technologize her gender. “Andreais less a woman than a cyborg, defined by Donna Haraway as a ‘hybrid of machine and organism,’” writes Paul Julian Smith (1996:50). Here, Smith is referencing Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” Haraway points out, in line with the anti-
essentialist arguments I have drawn from in other parts of this chapter, that "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (72). She conceives the figure of the cyborg – the complete negation of the "natural" – as a potentially positive one:

But there are also great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities (93).

Smith suggests that "Andrea embodies the conversion of flesh into technology (breasts, eyes, and ears into arc lights, cameras, and microphones) [...] just as she celebrates the blurring of the division between private and public" (1996:50). Andrea does not just blur those distinctions, she renders them meaningless – like Haraway’s imagined cyborgs, she is fighting a border war, but it is not entirely clear that she wins. Smith gives Andrea credit as cyborg woman, but also notices that Andrea is "punished" in the narrative with death, "and not before she has been reduced to tearful femininity at the sight of the dying Nicholas" (52). But does this undermine the more emphatic ways that she undermines traditional tropes of femininity? For much of the film, Andrea is actually the controller of the camera’s gaze, as several of the scenes that she reviews of video she took while spying on Ramón and Nicholas are identical to those seen on camera; she is the detective and voyeur who finally realizes that Nicholas is a serial killer. Also, while her dramatic Gaultier dresses are spectacular, they also defy traditional ideas, not only of natural womanhood, but also of beauty: the first she wears appears to be torn to expose her breasts (actually plastic) and is covered in shiny faux-blood. Another features her
covered bandages, while still another has her actually struggling to walk in a leg brace. Her body is presented as grotesquely injured to match the “real” scar on her face, which she emphasizes with her makeup, much as Almodóvar’s fashion designer character had Eva’s injury emphasized in *Matador*. The mysterious origins of the scar itself are also worthy of discussion: Andrea claims that she was the victim, that Ramón somehow gave it to her, while Ramón says that she did it herself to try to get him to stay, thereby generating and using her “victimhood” for her own purposes. This mystery is never resolved. Nor is the ambiguity of Andrea’s relationship to “passive” femininity. Her clothing is hyper-feminine – the exposed-breasts dress also boasts an exaggerated hourglass shape that would not look out of place on Mae West – but she violently shatters that traditional image of femininity with the rips and her wig made of wires. Her look distances the viewer from her both as a woman and as a person. However, this spectacular “cyborg femininity” is again placed into a discursive world where there are other options of femininity.

Gianni Versace was responsible for Kika’s “gaudy, clashing, optimistic” costumes (Bruzzi 10), which frequently play on old-fashioned femininity, with their bright colours, florals and ruffles. Throughout the film, Kika is literally loudly feminine, as her jangling bracelets and jewelry testify. Kika’s over-the-top clothing feels oddly composed; it draws attention to itself just as much as Andrea’s costumes do. Her style is too much, her dresses are too bright, too feminine. Her costumes are explosions of ruffles and cleavage and clashing colours – orange and pink, mixed floral prints, massive obviously false “gem” earrings. There is a sense that Kika herself is aware of her own femininity as masquerade as well: in the voiceover of her story of how she met Ramón,
Kika mentions, as a preface to her date with Nicholas, "I wore a sheep acrylic orange coat and looked fantastic." Kika's line draws attention both to her awareness of her looks and to their artificiality — one hardly finds orange acrylic sheep in nature. Kika's whole character — her outlandish clothing, her job as a makeup artist, her frank love of men and sex, even her fast-talking patter about being easy-going — points to a constructed femininity more than a "natural" one. One could argue that Kika is presented as a passive character, only able to "respond to actions which engulf her (the rape, betrayal by men she loves)" (Smith 1996:46), like the passive heroines of classical melodramas; however, Kika ultimately has a more complex relationship to womanhood. Her self-presentation is masquerade, and her passively "feminine" role in the film is just as "put on" — it is almost as though she agreed to passive femininity just to be easygoing. After all, while the aggressive Andrea dies, Kika drives off with a new man, more or less unscathed. If Mae West was "the greatest female impersonator of all time" (Robertson 29), then Kika is a close second.

Kika and Ramón's maid Juana represents yet another version of femininity. Played by actress-model Rossy de Palma — an Almodóvar regular who appears in three of the four "fashion films" and who is described as slightly grotesquely carrying on the tradition of the Hollywood comic supporting player by Evans (22-23) — Juana is a lesbian who constantly seems uncomfortable with socially mandated femininity. De Palma wears small dresses and aprons throughout, which emphasize her height and broad shoulders. Juana has a mustache and relatively little makeup at the beginning of the film. When Kika suggests she shave it, Juana replies: "Why? Men don't have a monopoly on mustaches." Her embrace of her decidedly masculine characteristics
presents a clear acknowledgement that standards of feminine beauty are socially ingrained, so she joins Kika and Andrea in Almodóvar’s constellation of camp women.

Nicholas’s victim Susana, played by Bibi Andersen, is seen fully nude repeatedly, in a move taken by Paul Julian Smith to stand for Almodóvar’s “struggling ever more desperately to bring the body into visibility” (1996:42). Though obviously displaying the nude body of blonde, modelesque Andersen invites a certain amount of “visual pleasure,” it is difficult to forget that Andersen’s fame is tied to her transsexuality. Since the character who seems to have the least complicated relationship to femininity was born a man, any idea of “natural” femininity is undermined. Without the extratextual knowledge about Andersen’s transsexuality, her scenes would have a different resonance, but given that knowledge, Almodóvar has produced yet another variation on his self-constructed women.

These conflicting images of femininity are echoed by Ramón’s collages, which decorate the apartment where most of the action takes place, combine religious images of female saints with frankly sexual images of nude and lingerie-clad women. Ramón, who tellingly has a poster for Peeping Tom (Michael Powell, 1960) in his studio, represents voyeurism. Voyeurism belong in the film because it is linked to an older economy of sexuality, in which women are only to-be-looked-at. He even insists on taking photos as he and Kika are making love. This is ludicrous in a film with a woman like Kika, who may be stereotypical, but follows her own sexual desires unapologetically. The film opens with an image of a lingerie-clad model glimpsed through a keyhole, the kind of false framing of a “private” moment that has been a staple of cinema since the earliest days of cinema, which is immediately revealed to be a set-up
for Ramón’s photo shoot. The disorientation is doubled when the model, who had appeared to be lying down passively is actually standing and obviously simulating relaxation (see also Smith 1996:39). This beginning image both points to and then shakes up classical assumptions about the camera’s “look” and its complicity with the male gaze. Certainly, the spectator sees some of Kika’s rape from his point of view, but it is ultimately also shown from several other points of view, including the mysterious tape that appears on Andrea’s show. Though Almodóvar has portrayed sexual violence before, as in Chapter 2, here the focus is explicitly not on the rape itself, but on the fact that it is being watched. The tape’s origins are as mysterious as Andrea’s scar: Ramón claims that he did not take; Andrea claims it came from a confidential source, while it seems likely that Andrea, the film’s “voyeuse,” shot it herself.

**Guilt and Heterosexual Femininity**

There is an abiding sense in the “fashion films” that by being women (or by falling in love with men), Almodóvar’s characters have something to justify. There is a sense that if they were “better” women, they would not fall in love with the wrong men or be feminine. In *Women on the Verge*, not only did Almodóvar feel the need to defend Pepa’s feminine dress in the face of criticism by famous feminist Susan Sontag in the film’s press materials, but when Pepa goes to see Paulina, the feminist lawyer, about Candela’s problem, Paulina tells her that her friend has “committed a crime,” and assumes that Pepa’s tears indicate that *she* is guilty. The suggestion, by a feminist, that tears over a man are a sign of guilt, hints at something deeper. Meanwhile, in *Tie Me Up!*, Marina has to convince her sister that her love for Ricky is genuine; she succeeds in winning over Lola, but perhaps not in convincing the audience that the man who
kidnapped and attacked her is the best choice of husband and father. We can see this as an extension of the way that guilt entered the melodramatic imagination in the first place: "Guilt, in the largest sense, may itself derive from an anxiety produced by man's failure to have maintained a relation to the Sacred" (Brooks 18). Now, however, women must feel guilty for failing to live up to some undefined "authenticity" or "natural" womanhood — as Juana claims she is in Kika, but this is countered by her made-up face doubled in two mirrors, indicating that neither image we are seeing is of the "real" Juana — that is untainted by social determinations of femininity, and for capitulating to social norms in continuing to conform to the norms demanded of them in their self-presentation.

What does all this preoccupation with fashion have to do with melodrama? I see this as Almodóvar's way of making high drama out of the surface of everyday life, as Peter Brooks describes melodrama as doing, that "gestures in the world constantly refer to another, hyperbolic set of gestures where life and death are at stake" (8). Consider this in conjunction with Thomas Elsaesser's work on Douglas Sirk: melodrama's high emotional register charges "everyday" objects like clothing and makeup with great significance, as suggested by Jane Gaines (205). In these films, though the tone varies wildly, the melodramatic mode remains a major mode of communication, as costume — and femininity — become discourses. However strongly the films feature the fashions and the femininities of their heroines, an anxiety lingers around what the meaning of all this performativity can actually be. Almodóvar's stylistic and thematic use of fashion light up an uneasy set of questions about what it is to be a woman (or a man) in the
postmodern era. When image becomes everything, self-image becomes morally fraught; Almodóvar's characters both control and are controlled by their images.
CHAPTER 4: Lost and Found: Almodóvar’s Map Trilogy

The late 1990s are generally seen as a turning point in Almodóvar’s cinema. After Kika, he entered what Paul Julian Smith called his “blue period” (2000:189). The three films that make up the “trilogy” at issue are The Flower of My Secret (La flor de mi secreto, 1995), Live Flesh (Carne trémula, 1997), and All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999). After the poor critical reception of Kika (D’Lugo 80), The Flower of My Secret marks the beginning of Almodóvar’s shift toward “seriousness.” This new seriousness goes with a change in Almodóvar’s moral universe: if his earlier films showed characters heedlessly enjoying a post-Franco world with no rules and altering themselves through costume, the films of the “blue period” begin to seriously address the problems of this kind of freedom and begin to raise questions about what happens to other people in a post-Franco, post-moral world. Flower is the story of Leo (Marisa Paredes), who makes her living as a writer of romance novels under the pseudonym Amanda Gris, but finds she can no longer write the “pink” stories that are expected of her with her marital problems. A visit from her normally absent husband – who is off fighting in the war in Bosnia – makes it clear that their marriage is unsalvageable, so Leo tries to kill herself, but is stopped by a phonecall from her mother (Chus Lampreave). She is brought back from the brink by an extended visit in the village where she was born and the attentions of her goodhearted editor at El país, Ángel (Juan Echanove). The film ends with a renewed Leo and Ángel, who is now ghostwriting her novels for her, sharing a toast and a kiss.

Live Flesh is a complex gloss on the thriller inside a melodrama: the film begins with the Franco-era birth of Víctor (Liberto Rabal) to a prostitute (Penélope Cruz) on a
city bus, and concludes with the birth of Víctor's son. The middle of the story follows Víctor's involvement in the accidental shooting of David (Javier Bardem), a police officer who is left paralyzed and becomes a star wheelchair basketball player. David also marries the woman Víctor was fighting with prior to the shooting, Helena\textsuperscript{18} (Italian actress Francesca Neri). When Víctor gets out of jail, he has an affair with Clara (Ángela Molina), David's ex-lover and wife of his partner Sancho (José Sancho); it turns out that Sancho was actually the one who pulled the trigger when David was shot, knowing that David was bedding his wife. The film climaxes with Helena and Víctor finally having sex and, in revenge, David setting in motion the events that lead to Clara shooting Sancho (and letting him shoot her back) in order to save Víctor from her husband's bullets. As the film ends as it began, with a child being born in a moving vehicle (a car this time instead of a bus), but this time with the streets full of people and hope in the air, Víctor promises his unborn son that people in Spain do not need to be afraid anymore.

\textit{All About My Mother} was an unprecedented success for Almodóvar, receiving almost universal critical praise and an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. It begins in Madrid with the death of Manuela (Cecilia Roth)'s son Esteban (Eloy Azorín) and her journey to Barcelona to confront his father, a male-to-female transsexual named Lola (Toni Cantó). As in \textit{Flower}, the "male" half of the couple is absent for most of the film, which focuses on Manuela's friendships with transsexual prostitute Agrado (Antonia San Juan), an old friend of Lola's; actress Huma Roja (Paredes), whose autograph Esteban was seeking when he was killed and who is having a torrid affair with her drug-

\textsuperscript{18} Many sources spell the character's name "Elena," which is how it is pronounced, but the scrap that Víctor keeps where she has written her phone number shows it spelled with the initial "H," so I have opted to keep the spelling in the film.
addicted costar Nina (Candela Peña); and HIV-positive nun Rosa (Penélope Cruz), who is pregnant with Lola’s baby. At the end of the film, Rosa has died in childbirth and Manuela has adopted her son, also named Esteban; this Esteban cleared the HIV antibodies he inherited from his doomed parents and has a bright future ahead of him.

For our purposes, Almodóvar’s use of melodrama changes in two significant ways. For one, it refers explicitly to the political and historical context without the irony of complaints about “too much democracy,” as in the *Pepi, Luci, Bom* era discussed in Chapter 2 and the slick, surface-oriented discourse of the fashion films discussed in Chapter 3. Another important shift is in emotional sincerity: though as discussed in the previous chapters melodrama is a key element in Almodóvar’s films prior to these, it has always been complemented by comedy. While I would not go so far as to agree with Acevedo-Muñoz that *The Flower of My Secret* is “devoid of humour” (162), especially in the scenes with Chus Lampreave and Rossy de Palma as Leo’s mother and sister, comedy does nearly disappear from Almodóvar’s oeuvre for two films (*Flower* and *Live Flesh*) and is much more muted in *All About My Mother*. As noted, *Flower* marks a shift in Almodóvar’s filmmaking practice toward “seriousness.” Not only does *Flower* contain much less comedy than his previous films, it lacks any sexual content, it leaves Madrid, and, most significantly, it is the first time Almodóvar refers explicitly to Spain’s contemporary political realities.

There is one element that links all the films in Almodóvar’s blue period: the image of the map. What Almodóvar is doing in these three films is essentially re-drawing the maps to his moral universe: politically, emotionally, and, generically. While Almodóvar continues to use melodramatic conventions and forms in telling his stories —
as well as melodrama’s appeal to emotion – he is also pulling it away from its presumed Manichean morality, using it instead to display the topography of emotional and moral dilemmas that come with the greater freedoms of democracy and postmodernity. The map and the idea of borders are essential in understanding the transformations Almodóvar’s characters undergo, which are often linked to geographic movement. They either ignore or are able to move outside their prescribed generic roles as they navigate the untrustworthy terrain of the post-Franco, post-sacred, postmodern world.

Metaphorical maps and questions of space and territory are replete in the films, but maps are in the films literally as well. In *The Flower of My Secret*, Leo lies down to die after her suicide attempt under what Almodóvar has described as a “political” map of Spain that hangs over her bed (qtd. in D’Lugo 90); there is also another historical map of the world that hangs on the wall behind Paco as he leaves the apartment. This antique map carries a whole host of implications: if the map over Leo’s bed represents the current unimpeachable truth about geography, the map that Paco is framed at the centre of shows that this “unimpeachable” truth has changed, that indeed the human conception of the world has been transformed. Leo’s recovery is linked to her trip back to the village where she was born – a necessity, her mother says for a woman without a man, lest she get “lost like a cow without a cowbell.” In this context, Leo’s new map requires a connection to the past, both generically (in terms of the role of “the village” in earlier Spanish melodrama) and in terms of her own family history. In *Live Flesh*, Sancho and Clara – who represent the failure of a traditional patriarchal Spanish marriage, with Sancho’s abuse and Clara’s cheating – also have a large map of Spain hanging on their wall, clearly visible behind Sancho when Clara finally gets up the courage to leave him,
even as she has to shoot him in order to get by. Helena walks by a large, colourful map of the world done in the style of a children’s drawing as she enters her childcare centre; the painting has obviously not-to-scale people, houses, and trees scattered across the continents. Plus, as Marsh points out, the film’s characters “travel (off-screen) beyond its borders to a remarkable extent”: David travels around Spain for games throught the film and moves to Miami at the end of the film, Sancho and Clara go on vacation to Portugal, and Helena is the daughter of a wealthy Italian (59). In *All About My Mother*, the map hangs in the central organ transplant office, representing the institutional administration of Esteban’s heart. Here the map prefigures all the journeys the characters will take in the film: Manuela and Esteban/Lola’s emigration from Argentina, and Manuela’s movements across the country from Madrid to Coruña to Barcelona and back.

Though none of his earlier films could be described as apolitical, *Flower* is significant in that it explicitly invokes national politics, drawing the political into the realm of the moral and emotional universe of his film; his use of the political is often explicitely tied to his characters’ emotional journeys. In *Flower*, Leo’s angst about her relationship (not so different from Rebeca’s longing for her mother’s affection in *High Heels*) is treated by the other characters in the film as selfish; Leo’s problems are contrasted with larger political questions, most specifically with her husband’s fighting in Bosnia. The trend continues in *Live Flesh*, with Almodóvar’s first direct reference to Fascist rule, in the form of a flashback to 1970, that includes an announcement that civil liberties are being suspended, emphasized by appearing as a intitile on the screen with glowing red letters. *All About My Mother* is less explicitly political, though it does invoke many contemporary Spanish social problems including poverty, AIDS, and the
prevalence of immigration, placing marginality at the centre of one of his most emotionally affecting films.

The map itself is, of course, not a transparent or unproblematic image. The reason that Almodóvar refers specifically to the map in Flower as a political map is that a map is necessarily political: it is an image of territory defined by political realities – treaties, conquests, migrations, wars, et cetera. So when I argue that Almodóvar is redrawing these various maps, it is with the awareness of what a map means in a postmodern context. Baudrillard uses the metaphor of a map to explain the logic of simulation:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (1)

The important thing to understand about seeing Almodóvar as redrawing borders is the understanding that the “territory” – in this case genre, politics, and morality – is ultimately only engendered by the map. So Almodóvar’s challenge to the map is not trying to establish a better map that more accurately reflects the “real” territory. If we believe Baudrillard that the maps are what make the territory, people should be able to redraw them in any possible way. However, the lingering problems of the past in all three films show that history’s influence still looms, and that many still abide by the prescribed borders even though they no longer can be understood to have any kind of exterior referents. In other words, history has a strong grip on the present, if only in the consciousness of the present subjects.
In this chapter, I hope to use the metaphor of a map to understand the way that Almodóvar allows “borders” to be traversed in terms of generic convention. Before discussing the specific films, I should acknowledge that my analysis is drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s characterization of “dialogic” work. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin puts forth that the novel places different “languages” (“languages that are socio-ideological languages of social groups, ‘professional’ languages, languages of generations and so forth” (272)) into dialogue with each other, undermining the idea that a language is any kind of stable unit. The way Almodóvar in particular uses the different generic “languages” he places alongside each other in the three films can be conceived in terms of a generic “map,” in which various generic languages are treated as different “provinces” of expression, with different ideological baggage. Almodóvar has always dialogized different film texts, but at this point the controlling “language” is melodramatic. However, instead of Manichean stories where a virginal heroine is constantly beset by evil, in the “map trilogy,” characters are placed in restrictive generic “provinces” that they must eventually journey out of in order to form some kind of family. However, because there is no way to move off the map, that is, outside simulation, anymore than there can be expression outside language, Almodóvar’s characters and Almodóvar’s cinematic expression are both obligated to find ways of redrawing the boundaries in order to have a happy ending and to represent postmodern life, respectively. Though the film’s endings often feel too perfect, this is reflective of the same tendencies that Laura Mulvey observed in Sirk: “the strength of the
melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes” (76).

Of the map over Leo’s bed in Flower, D’Lugo suggests that this brief glimpse is significant:

the image of the map prefigures Leo’s physical and metaphoric journey across diverse cinematic and geocultural spaces, as these function to reposition her beyond the frame of melodrama and, in profound ways, to liberate her from the confining patriarchal ideology that is embodied in the map (90).

For D’Lugo, melodrama is much like a map, an imposed and ultimately limiting set of labels that unnaturally defines Leo’s emotional territory. If one views melodrama as a genre, perhaps this is true; taken as a mode, as Linda Williams encourages in “Melodrama Revised,” melodrama is much more fluid than D’Lugo allows here, especially since Almodóvar uses references to melodrama – Angel’s allusion to Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and Leo’s to The Apartment (Billy Wilder, 1960) and her closing homage to Rich and Famous (George Cukor, 1981) – and techniques of melodrama – the “return to the village” that is characteristic of Spanish melodrama as far back as the 1950s, the comforting song of the village women – in order to shake Leo out of her depression. The mise-en-scene and music are employed as primary ways of conveying meaning, from the rain that breaks out in Leo’s depression in the film’s first sequence, to the way Almodóvar shows Leo, joyous at the news that Paco is coming home, amidst the green flowers that grow in her apartment, to the famous shot in which

19 For more on the significance of “the village” in Spanish melodramas, see Marsha Kinder’s first two chapters in Blood Cinema, in which she argues that Hollywood melodramatic conventions are set against Italian neorealist conventions to express the plight of the residents of Spanish cities who have recently moved in from countryside villages (18-86).
Paco and Leo's kiss is shown reflected in a number of mirrors—fragmented just as their marriage is revealed to be—Almodóvar is relying on modes of expression that are historically linked to film melodrama. It is perhaps more instructive to see the conventions of the “women’s picture,” in which women are driven mad by love lost, or more apropos, the romance novel as the “provinces” of Leo’s behaviour in the first part of the film, even as she herself decries (her own pseudonym) Amanda Gris’s works as falsely sentimental. The overwrought scene following Leo’s suicide attempt—in which she cries upon hearing an on-the-nose bolero on TV and breaks down at the (inherently ridiculous) sight of a Roca brand toilet in a shop window which reminds her of a secret joke and Paco shared in happier times—seems to be “doubled-voiced” statements that suggest that the “women’s” stories are outdated and faintly ridiculous “maps” for cinema to address the contemporary condition, let alone for a wealthy published author like Leo to live her life. The way Leo’s emotionalism is contrasted with the protesting students points to her out-of-touch-ness with what is going on in her own neighbourhood; she is standing still while they are moving. At other points in the film her distraction, leaves her equally as blind to her maid’s exceptional talent in dance (which she only becomes aware of after her sojourn in the village) and to the problems of the young man she offers to pay to take off her boots, who turns out to be the drug-addicted son of her editor Alicia (Gloria Muñoz). Interestingly, Ángel later describes Leo’s actions on the day of her suicide attempt in terms of movement between spaces; he borrows from *Casablanca*

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20 For a detailed discussion of Almodóvar’s use of the bolero, see Knights.
21 Bakhtin refers to heteroglossia in the novel as “double-voiced discourse” meaning: “It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (324). Double-voiced discourse includes comic and parodic uses as well as “the discourse of a whole incorporated genre” (324).
to tell Leo that she wore blue the day she walked out of her life and into his. _Flower_ clearly opposes the idea that melodrama requires the old-fashioned and wrong-headed social rules of “women’s literature” (as Ángel calls it) outlined by Leo’s contract: “Novels of love in cosmopolitan settings” with “absolutely no politics” and the “absence of social conscience.” Happy endings are, of course, also required. These “rules” of the romance novel require women to buy into a false sentimentality, and prohibit any challenge to the status quo. The rules are finally cast aside, but Leo’s reinvention of herself is hardly new. She magnanimously declares herself a “marvelous lady” like she is trying on a new pair of clothes as she forgives her maid’s son for stealing from her, and imitates _Rich and Famous_ in her closing toast with Ángel.

Another intertext that is not often read into the film is Fassbinder’s _The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant, 1972)_; Leo, like Petra in Fassbinder’s film, seems to be playing a prescribed role in her love life. Leo’s mother refers repeatedly to the emotional problems that run in her family, more than once mentioning “Aunt Petra.” The scene wherein Leo’s friend Betty (Carmen Elías) confesses her affair with Paco is also quite Fassbinderian, sharing with the New German auteur a self-consciously composed aesthetic in a posed tableau, in which the two women are shot in stark profile as they face away from each other. These subtle links between Leo and the title character in _The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant_ also allows another layer of criticism of Leo’s self-centred grief, as Fassbinder’s fashion designer heroine (Leo’s “aunt”) is defined by her obsession with her girlfriend. In his conversations with Frederic Strauss, Almodóvar cites Fassbinder as an influence, particularly in his critical reinvention of melodrama (124), though Almodóvar notes that
the German director remains Manichean in his way of denouncing injustice: “He always explains very clearly who is bad and who is good” (148); Almodóvar’s films do not have villains. Rather, they have characters who are placed in the wrong generic province, as Víctor is in Live Flesh.

In the case of Live Flesh, Almodóvar actually adapts a preexisting thriller, but he does not keep his characters in their set generic “provinces.” Smith notes Almodóvar’s divergences from the Ruth Rendell novel on which it was based: in the novel, Víctor is a villain, a serial rapist, and David is a handicapped hero incapable of satisfying his wife (2000:184-85). However, Víctor is able to move outside the generic province of the thriller villain just as Leo has moved out of the generic traps of the melodramatic heroine. Víctor appears at first to be a typical emasculated thriller villain, bent on sexual revenge against the woman who mocked his sexual performance and spurned his advances (Smith also notes his resemblance to kidnapper Ricky in Tie Me Up (2000:183).) The association with the classic Hitchcock-type villain is present in the source material and also in Almodóvar’s link with him to the hero of Buñuel’s The Criminal Life of Archibald de la Cruz (Ensayo de un crimen, 1955), which is playing on television during his original attack on Helena and the shooting incident. When Víctor gets out of prison, his initial stalking and menacing of Helena certainly sets him on that path – in the end, of course, he gives up his plan and is able to form a family with Helena. Víctor’s mobility is tied to his “life on wheels”: he is born on a city bus and the film closes with his son ready to be born in a moving car.

And though Victor does not turn out to be a rapist as he was in Rendell’s novel, the incident leading to his arrest, in which he demands Helena go out with him, and the
way he insinuates himself into her life after leaving jail seems to initially be setting the audience up to see him as such. One could argue that Almodóvar’s move was a generous one, humanizing a villain, but this move villainizes everyone else. If Víctor turns out to be a good guy, David’s obsessive stalking of him makes David less a protective husband than jealous, rigid and untrusting, especially after he learns that it was his former partner who actually fired the shot that left him a paraplegic. Eventually, Víctor confesses that he had planned to have sex with her to take revenge – presumably without her consent – but that he has given it up. It is Helena who comes to him: their sex scene emphasizes their mutual desire. It’s fluid as time elapses between positions and Víctor and Helena become covered in sweat. The scene ends with them laying head-to-foot, a close-up emphasizing their hands resting on each other’s buttocks, creating a perfectly symmetrical image. This strong visual image of symmetry can be contrasted with the scene after, when Helena calmly tells David about her infidelity. Her voice does not betray emotion, but the shot of her left alone to pick up the spilled cereal in their pristine house reflects her own sense of her destructive behaviour. The film lacks the traditional heroes and villains of a classic thriller (or even a classic melodrama), but Almodóvar does not conceive the problems in the beginning of the film as completely solved. While Víctor and Helena are happy, their union – starting from the fight in which David was shot and confined to a wheelchair and ending with the deaths of Sancho and Clara (with whom Víctor had an affair) – cuts a path of destruction through the lives of the people they know. If there is a happy ending, it comes at a price. Sancho and Clara’s deaths, dramatized by Helena’s frantic scream, show that the attempt to maintain a traditional marriage (also associated with abuse and alienation) will lead to bloody death, with the
two parties finally killing each other; the contrast between this scene and her idyllic life with Victor is jarring enough to make this life seem slightly too happy.

The primary plotline in *All About My Mother* traces Manuela’s raw grief over the death of her son, but just as central to both the death and the consequent grief is the aging, glamorous actress embodied by Huma Roja (Paredes, in a similar vein to her role in *High Heels*). Huma is a camp icon and is consistently linked to decaying camp divas like Bette Davis: Nina describes Manuela as “like Eve Harrington,” making Huma the Margo Channing; Huma also tells Manuela that she got her stage name from Bette Davis’s smoking\(^\text{22}\); Huma is first seen sporting a turban-like hair covering that goes under a wig, just like Margo Channing is shown wearing in the scene from *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) that Manuela and Esteban watch on TV; and, finally, she plays Blanche Dubois, the ultimate decaying beauty, in the production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that runs through the film. Patrick Paul Garlinger tries to reconcile Almodóvar’s long-standing association with camp to the emotional sincerity of *All About My Mother*, suggesting that it “is not camp film, but a film about camp” (98). Garlinger seems ambivalent about using Almodóvar’s reputation as a queer filmmaker influence his reading, but the director’s sexuality does seem to be central to his attempts to continue to claim Almodóvar as a queer director, noting especially that Manuela’s son Esteban is “coded” as gay through his cultural consumptions (105). For Garlinger, Agrado is the film’s key player of camp. She “embraces and expresses her campiness as a form of authenticity. As such [...] Almodóvar suggests that camp – the camp devotion for divas – is an authentic part of the various identifications that, for some gay men at

\(^{22}\) “Humo” is Spanish for “smoke”; “Huma” is a feminized version.
least, constitute what it means to be gay” (107). Agrado’s camp devotion is not taken lightly, and indeed it seems to flower into a real and lasting relationship, as she is still “taking care” of Huma when Manuela returns two years later.24

The idea that *All About My Mother* is about camp is a productive one. The film takes sincerely many of the things that camp takes insincerely, particularly the figure of the aging female star. Caryl Flinn argues that “[w]hile it seems unlikely that gay male camp is either deliberately or essentially misogynist, the frequency with which the abjection of camp’s ostensibly ‘fading’ subject gets projected onto the female body-object is cause for some concern” (452). *All About My Mother* gives dignity and emotional depth to the aging, decaying figures that camp usually treats as ridiculous: from Agrado, the supposedly artificial transsexual prostitute, to Lola/Esteban, the female father of two children who is dying of AIDS, to Huma, the aging actress with the assumed name, where more “traditional” camp would just glory in their grotesqueness. Unlike Margo Channing, who has become too old for the business that she has sacrificed her personal life for, or her character Blanche, Huma’s career continues to be successful even after her torrid romance with Nina ends.

**Political Maps**

The political is referenced in *Flower*, but as I have noted, elements like the student protest and Leo’s sense of betrayal at her husband’s involvement in NATO mainly serve to argue in favour of Leo’s narcissism and disconnection with the wider

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23 Garlinger is here not speaking of Agrado, but suggesting what camp means to a gay male spectator.
24 Though it remains significant that these relationships are professional as much as they are emotional.
world. The insertion of political elements do have a generic element, as noted above; as Acevedo-Muñoz notes, “it is as if Almodóvar is very self-reflexively violating the terms of Amanda Gris’ contract” by inserting politics into a melodrama (163). However, these overt mentions also serve the purpose of introducing a social conscience into the emotional-moral universe of melodrama. This is underscored in the story of Leo’s Romani maid Blanca and her son Antonio (celebrated flamenco dancers Manuela Vargas and Joaquín Cortés); they are shown arguing several times before Leo enters the kitchen, but Leo seems ignorant of Blanca’s problems, even as she scolds her mother for racist comments about gypsies. The point here is not merely to note that Almodóvar has inserted the political into a film where it might not seem to belong: it is that in doing so, Almodóvar argues in favour of adding a social conscience to the moral universe of postmodern melodrama.

In a scene that is consistently read by critics as optimistic, Víctor and Helena close the *Live Flesh* together, delivering their baby in a vehicle just like Víctor’s mother had in the film’s opening sequence. Their union has an element of the map in it as well in light of the motif of the journey in the film, in the aspect of exploration shown in the couple’s numerous positions, including the film’s famous shot of their symmetric buttocks. As Marsh puts it: “There is an element of erotic mapmaking,” in the sequence. “The two bodies are ‘discovered’ (in the sense of uncovered) in use and a relation is established between erotics and arquitectonics, between structures of human space and the surface of the human body” (64). Helena is at this point constrained to a marriage she will go on to admit she has entered in guilt; Víctor has, up until now, only had sex with Clara, which he admits is a kind of “training” for his romance with Helena; they have
redrawn their own sexual and romantic maps. In the film’s last scene, Victor announces that instead of the culture of repression into which he was born, his son is born in a Spain where people “stopped being afraid.” Acevedo-Muñoz reads the film as an allegory of national redemption: “Helena and Víctor’s new baby, also born in a symbolic transition [like Víctor], is evidence of life substituting for death, of hope overcoming fear, of the nation regenerating itself” (182). Paul Julian Smith reads Almodóvar’s clearly political framing of “personal melodrama” as showing “Víctor and Elena [sic] sanctified by a new ethics of care for one another” even as Víctor’s poor neighbourhood has been decimated by development (2000:185) “The structural device here is the circle: the son becomes a father, the daughter a mother” (Ibid.).

The perfect circle into which Víctor and Helena have been inserted, however, is precisely the problem with Live Flesh’s happy ending. It is too perfect. As with the apparent optimism that closes Tie Me Up! and Kika, the optimism feels forced after the oppressive darkness of the early portions of the film. Though Almodóvar moves his characters from the darkness of the Franco regime to the light of democracy, the shadows of fascism remain. Almodóvar has said that he included the voice of Manuel Fraga Iribarne in a very pointed manner: “I think it is impossible for Spain to go back to that awful past, but we are not so far from it either. That voice on the radio is still a live voice; it belongs to an active politician who in fact created the party that is now in power” (qtd. in Bohlen); Fraga Iribarne created the right-wing Partido Popular, then recently elected into government and was at the time the provincial president of Galicia. In this light, Víctor’s promise to his child – still in the midst of being born – that “in Spain we stopped being scared a long time ago,” still rings somewhat false. Though
Víctor, the poor prostitute’s son, and Helena, the Italian aristocrat, have found a way to come together, their union has literally pushed another man out of the country and left another two people dead, as Bersani and Dutoit observe (88). In *Live Flesh*, Víctor’s ability to travel outside his generic province of thriller villain is explicitly tied to the post-Franco era. Víctor is born on a night when civil liberties are withheld, and he inherits a dilapidated home that is scheduled to be demolished and is surrounded by rubble. These ghosts of the fascist past are contrasted with the sleek towers that stand all around it. The direct references to the oppression of fascism that begin and end the film underscore how much the generic freedom mentioned above is tied in Almodóvar’s work to political freedom.

There is another side to the political in *Live Flesh*: David’s “life on wheels” is not nearly as mobile as Víctor’s. David tells Víctor in their confrontation that before he met him, he looked up at the stars, but now he must constantly look down to avoid hazards: obviously David’s circumstances have shifted his personal “map.” Some have criticized Almodóvar’s portrayal of David’s inadequacies, including Maddison who notes that “the film makes unpleasant and inaccurate associations between sexual impotence and using a wheelchair” (274). However, others have been more positive about Almodóvar’s portrayal. Almodóvar appears to make strenuous effort in order to underscore David’s strength and masculinity: he is on a champion wheelchair basketball team – for which he practices constantly – and he is shown orally pleasuring his wife enthusiastically. Smith refers to the latter as a “delicious bath scene,” noting it as evidence that “the everyday lives of people with disabilities are at once represented and respected” (2000:184). Unfortunately, Almodóvar has essentially made a politically
correct gloss on an inherently politically incorrect story. Though we do see David making love with his wife, she halts his efforts rather early in the proceedings to tell him about having run into Víctor. And in the end, Helena does leave David for the more virile, more passionate younger man; her love scene with Víctor is romanticized with music and shot in a series of languorous close-ups. As several critics, including Perriam (105), have noted, Bardem was playing against the macho image he created in films like Bigas Luna’s Jamón Jamón (1992) both in this film and later in Amenabar’s The Sea Inside ([Mar adentro], 2004) in which he also played a disabled man. Perriam notes the shift in the way Almodóvar shoots David before and after the shooting, starting with his first appearance in his wheelchair: “Instead of the full, dark treatment of the male in the seductive streets of before, the image is now desperately mediated in crackly but gaudy colour and sound by television,” noting that the TV set in the prison is bolted in place (106). Perriam also sees a certain homosocial relation in Víctor and David’s rivalry noting that “if Víctor envies David Elena’s [sic] body, David envies Víctor his” (107). On the other hand, Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito see David as an example of an almost post-phallic man: “Whilst Víctor’s virility is trapped into a phallic economy, post-shooting David has learned to relocate his masculine identity beyond the phallic, as suggested by the oral sex scene with his wife” (105-06). But again, that sexual encounter is never completed, as it is interrupted by a conversation about Víctor; if, as they argue, David is some kind of Haraway-esque cyborg figure “that undoes the limits of what we are used to understanding as the human body” (108), then what does David’s apparent self-imposed exile at the end of the film, his body gone but his voice still remaining on the soundtrack in the form of a letter to Helena, tell us about cyborgs? The diversity of
critical reactions clearly shows David’s ambivalent status in the film: if his “post-phallic” masculinity is presented as a possibility, it is not one that can be integrated into society. David’s move to Miami takes him literally off of the map of Spain. Almodóvar’s ambivalent treatment of David is evident in the basketball practice sequence that follows Víctor and Clara’s first sexual encounter: upbeat music plays as a series of quick cuts show David and his teammates vigorously, energetically practicing. An overhead shot shows David sinking a difficult basket and then Almodóvar’s focus shifts from the court to the netting above them, implying that although the group seems mobile, they are in many ways trapped.

The political is less at the forefront in All About My Mother — one can hear it in Manuela’s mention of the arrest of an Argentinean general and see it in the contrast on Manuela’s arrival between Barcelona’s magnificent architecture and the poverty and violence of the prostitutes’ field where she goes to look for Lola, not to mention the prominence of AIDS (Smith notes that this “integration into Almodóvar’s chain of solidarity is hardly casual in a country where HIV transmission is far higher than in the UK” (2000:194)) — but the overriding political statement Almodóvar makes is one about gender identity, through Agrado and Lola, neither of whom entirely occupy the province of “male” or “female” clearly. Though in the film both characters are meant to be male-to-female transsexuals who have kept their penises, they are played by actors of different gender identifications. Lola/Esteban is played by male-born, male-identified actor Toni Cantó, while Agrado is played by fully transitioned transgendered actress Antonia San Juan. That Almodóvar thought nothing of casting these entirely different types of performers — blurring the line between character and actor (as he had in the past casting
Carmen Maura as a male-to-female transsexual in *Law of Desire* — suggests that the borders between genders do not matter any more.

Agrado’s famous speech on “authenticity,” is given as part of her “life story” performed after Huma and Nina cannot come onstage: in it, she outlines the various monetary costs of her body parts, from her almond shaped eyes to her breasts. She tells the audience: “And one can’t be stingy with these things because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed of being.” It is frequently discussed in light of camp and performativity, but the presumed other half of the “performance” is the idea that there is some kind of “natural” state from which she has deviated. If we follow Judith Butler’s intent in *Gender Trouble*, she argued not just that “gender is performative,” but that if *all* gender is performative and discursively created by the existing symbolic laws, then there is, for all intents and purposes, no “natural” sex. Agrado’s statement that authenticity means resembling one’s dreams is not merely in praise of performance or artifice, it denies the very concept of artifice. Nothing can be “artificial” if nothing is natural. Though Agrado obviously radically crosses a border of gender, it is worth noting that she does not actually *erase* the gender binary in her existence; she maintains a conventionally feminine appearance, staying within those borders even as she is a testament to their non-existence. Butler winds up arguing that this destabilization of identity can be politically productive:

For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. That the constituted status of identity is misconstrued along these two conflicting lines suggests the ways in which the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism (187).

The idea that “free will and determinism” are an “unnecessary binarism” helps explain many of the ambiguities of the map trilogy.

Agrado is only the most extreme example of this kind of instability of identity in All About My Mother. Mark Allinson hints at as much in his discussion of the film: “In Almodóvar, the self-conscious foregrounding of gender constructions forms part of a more generally self-conscious mode of representation that lays bare the ‘constructed’ nature of all art, and perhaps, of social identity” (2005:236). Indeed, throughout All About My Mother, gender is not the only facet of “identity” that is ill-defined and unstable. Manuela herself is rootless in several senses of the word: she lacks a “real” home – shifting easily between Barcelona and Madrid not to mention her apparent lack of interest in her birth country Argentina – as well as any other fixed identity. Manuela is at various times in the film a cook, a nurse, an actress, and a full-time assistant. These professions de-naturalize many of the skills associated with motherhood, but they also make Manuela somewhat of a cipher. Her apparent lack of a stable identity – exemplified in how easily she goes from middle-class nurse in Madrid to pretending to be a down-on-her-luck prostitute taking charity in Barcelona – is freeing, allowing her to walk out of her job as Huma’s assistant and become Rosa’s “sister” and full-time caretaker as easily as she rents an apartment. Huma’s identity is self-created as well: not only is she an actress who transforms herself with wigs for each role, but she literally takes her name from the word for smoke. All this room for self-definition does, as noted, allow the women to design their own lives, to draw their own maps, but it is also somewhat disturbing. Without the directions of a clear social role, one is likely to get lost.
CHAPTER 5: “Ghosts Don’t Cry”: Melodrama and The Past in Almodóvar’s

Ghost Trilogy

In the twenty-first century, Almodóvar’s cinema has turned backwards, both toward his own oeuvre and toward the past in general. Talk To Her (Hable con ella, 2002), Bad Education (La mala educación, 2004), and Volver (2006) are all in a sense “haunted” by images of the past, by fragments from his past films, and even by literal and figurative “ghosts.” Almodóvar had begun to engage with the political and with history in the 1990s – particularly with Live Flesh’s beginning in the Franco era and the figure of Lola/Esteban who haunted All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre, 1999). However, the past begins to dominate the narrative, both thematically and formally, in his three most recent films, his ghost trilogy. This preoccupation with the past is more complicated than nostalgia – there is no easy idealization of the past – but it does tie back to melodrama’s drive to return to a place of innocence and moral clarity. Everyone is haunted, by ghosts and traumas. The films themselves try to make peace with a past that produces both pain and longing.

Ghosts, Metaphorical and Literal

In Talk To Her, there are no ghosts in the sense of spirits with no bodies, but there are bodies with no spirits. As the doctor explains to Marco (Argentinean actor Darío Grandinetti) shortly after his matador girlfriend Lydia (Rosario Flores) falls into a coma, though she might occasionally blink or move, the action is only mechanical. Lydia’s body might still be alive, but her brain is turned off, incapable of thought or
feeling. Lydia and the film’s other coma patient Alicia (Leonor Watling) are, basically, the “living dead.” Though their lives have (seemingly, in Alicia’s case) ended, their bodies linger in the present, as physical tokens of history. Marsha Kinder writes about obsessed nurse Benigno’s (Javier Cámara) point of view, of his treatment of Alicia as if she was just any normal woman, as a heroic refusal of the kinds of linguistic binaries proposed by the law: “[Benigno] resists other binaries (like gay or straight, male or female) and reductive definitions of key words like *brain-dead, psychopath, and rape*” (2005:20). Almodóvar emphasizes one of those reductive discourses when he has the clinic’s doctor (Roberto Álvarez) repeatedly tell Marco that “scientifically” there is no hope for Lydia, even as he shows him a magazine article about one woman’s miraculous recovery; Marco asks again, if there is any chance for Lydia to recover. “Scientifically,” the doctor says, “no.” But his specificity of the “scientific” possibilities points to the fact that there are possibilities outside of science. Benigno’s refusal to hew to reductive definitions allows him to conflate Alicia’s body with Alicia’s spirit. I write of Alicia’s “spirit” advisedly: in a way, the miracle of Benigno’s revival of Alicia hearkens back to the “longing for the numinous” I alluded to in Chapter 2. Adriana Novoa suggests that Almodóvar’s “sleeping beauties” owe something to a fairy-tale version of “sleeping death” (226). Alicia’s recovery can only be explained by looking beyond the rationalist discourse of science: if not necessarily to religion, than certainly to some kind of spiritual force existing outside of rational thought. Benigno’s belief that Alicia’s body still holds some element of herself is proven to be correct: the emotional wins out over the rational. So *Talk To Her* very literally shows the triumph of the spiritual or the numinous over the “scientific” possibilities; the emotional wins out over the rational.
Paul Julian Smith describes it thusly: “Almodóvar is suggesting that the meaning of his film cannot be reduced to rational discourse, that the ‘eloquence of the body’ (his phrase) must take precedence in aesthetics as in ethics” (2004:368). The melodramatic miracle of Alicia’s recovery follows that of baby Esteban in *All About My Mother*, similarly occurring offscreen, but it is, as we will see, somewhat more unsettling in its implications.

In *Bad Education*, the ghost in the film is the figure of Ignacio, the abused schoolboy turned transsexual drug addict turned murder victim. He haunts – and is haunted – both in life and in art. In *Bad Education*, Almodóvar examines how film, art and memory interact. The complex plot revolves around the direction, by Enrique Goded (Fele Martínez) of *The Visit*, set in 1977 with flashbacks to 1964, in the Spain of 1980 (the year Almodóvar made his first film). So the film is firmly positioned in the past. The film begins with Enrique in his office, trying to think of a new film, when his old friend Ignacio appears (Gael García Bernal), bearing a theatrical resume, a new stage name, and a story he wrote about his time at school with Enrique, when the two boys fell in love. When he leaves, he pauses next a poster for *La abuela fantasma* (presumably a film of Enrique’s, and apparently a hint at the plot of *Volver*). Enrique reads the story, about a now-grown and cross-dressing Ignacio (who now calls himself Zahara (still played by Gael García Bernal)) returning to school in 1977 to blackmail the priest who abused him as a schoolboy in 1964. Inspired, Enrique decides to adapt the story, but changes the ending, so that Zahara is killed by the priests instead of walking away from his blackmail attempt successful and unscathed to meet his old lover. Shortly after deciding to make the film, Enrique discovers that Angel is not Ignacio, but his brother
Juan, and that Ignacio died three years ago (in 1977, the year his version of the story has Ignacio being killed). Enrique asks Angel to “audition” for the role (which means, both men know, to have sex with Enrique). When the film has just been completed (with the filming of Zahara’s death), the “real” Padre Manolo, who now goes by Mr. Berengeur (Lluís Homar), appears on the set to tell Enrique the true story of Ignacio’s death. The real Ignacio (Francisco Boira) did try to blackmail him, at which point Berengeur became smitten with Juan; the two men eventually conspired to kill Ignacio by giving him “deadly pure heroin” so he will overdose. So Ignacio is first figured as a ghost from Enrique’s past by the poster, but the truly ghostly moments occur once Enrique – and the audience – learn that Ignacio is dead. The first is when Ignacio’s mother gives Enrique the letter her son had tried to send him before he died; it includes a copy of “The Visit,” and a note that it would make a great film. Metaphorically speaking, it is a message from beyond the grave – as is, the viewer realizes, the whole story that Enrique spent the first part of the film reading (and was shown to the spectator as Enrique would film it, with vertical black bars framing it as fiction). The incomplete letter (which Ignacio was writing when he died) that Angel hands him at the end of the movie brings that part of the story to a close. Given Almodóvar’s predilection for Hitchcock references, I would be remiss to ignore the resemblance to the plot of Vertigo in Enrique’s relationship with Angel – a man he continues to allow to pretend to be his dead lover (D’Lugo 126). Both films feature a protagonist in love with a dead person, and desperately trying to recreate them in the present: both Scottie (James Stewart) in Vertigo and Enrique try to fool themselves into believing that they can recreate their past passion, with people they know are pretending. Ignacio’s ghost is also in Enrique’s film: he recreates their
childhood romance and failed reconnection as a set of cinematic images that echo in the
“real life” section of the film. For instance, after Enrique gets the letter Ignacio wrote
before he died, he is shown asleep with the page on the pillow next to him, just as
“Enrique” was in the film of the story.

The ghost in Volver – the Spanish title translates as “to return” (as in, from the
great beyond) – is not metaphorical. The ghost of Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) and Sole’s
(Lola Dueñas) mother cares for their aging Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave), is manifested
in her smell, and appears in the trunk of Sole’s car after the old woman’s funeral. The
spectator does not see Irene (Carmen Maura) until Sole does, but Almodóvar does hint
that Aunt Paula’s “delusions” that Irene is still about might have some basis. She first:
appears to Sole as a shadow coming down a staircase in a spooky, empty house; Sole
runs away screaming. Sole spends some time trying to hide the ghost (whose long white
hair she cuts and dyes) from the skeptical Raimunda, but eventually she tells her sister
the truth. Irene confesses to Raimunda that she is not a ghost (which is obvious to the
practical daughter), but that she pretended to be dead after she burned Raimunda’s father
and his lover (their neighbour Augustina’s (Blanca Portillo) mother, who has been
“missing” for years, as everyone had assumed the bodies in the fire were Irene and her
husband). At the end of the film, Irene essentially allows herself to become a ghost, as
she decides to care for the cancer-stricken Augustina through her illness as penance for
her crime. Irene is able to both “come back from the dead” to finish things that were
undone and be there for her daughters, and also, by appealing to the superstitions of the
people in her village, is able to remain in the role of ghost – in a kind of transitional state
between life and death that Irene herself describes as a “living purgatory.” At the same
time, Maura, an icon of Almodóvar's early career is able to return herself, becoming a
ghost of Almodóvar's as an auteur.

The Formal and Thematic Importance of the Past

The jumbled, non-linear plots of Bad Education and Talk To Her follow the
successes of international art films like Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Pulp
Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), and Run Lola Run (Tom Tykwer, 1998), described by
Jonathan Eig as “mindfuck films,” described as a new set of films that “intentionally lie
to the audience and manipulate viewers' emotional investment in the heroes.” Eigman
notes another Spanish auteur and cinematic trickster, Buñuel, as one of the trend’s
forefathers. Though Almodóvar does not set out to fool the audience the way a film like
Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999) or Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001), he does
follow these films’ tendency to withhold narrative information and then force the
audience to reevaluate prior scenes. Because of the popularity of these films,
Almodóvar’s disjointed narration would not have been a jarring move. Viewers were
used to piecing together narratives that were presented out of story order and designed to
be unscrambled.26 However, it marks a major formal shift in Almodóvar's own
filmmaking. Though his films have contained brief flashbacks (such as High Heels
(Tacones lejanos, 1991)) and brief instances of nonlinear plot (such as the disjointed
beginning of Kika, which then settles into a more or less linear narrative), Talk To Her
and Bad Education are both entirely structured around complicated sets of flashbacks.

26 David Bordwell refers to these as “puzzle films” and suggests their popularity can be
linked to the growing availability of DVDs and the encouragement of an active
spectator: “Now that we can rake every frame at leisure, we may expect more puzzle
films and forking-path plots, more details demanding a freeze-frame” (103).
This structure allows for the past to be given formal as well as thematic prevalence. The story of Marco and Lydia’s relationship is initially told in a chronologically straightforward manner, but their problems are revealed in flashback. The first is Marco’s dream-flashback to the party – where he remembers his old girlfriend running out of their tent in Africa, double-exposed so that it is clear that his past is still with Marco – and the second is a cut back to the couple driving to the bullfight before Lydia’s goring. She tells him she needs to talk to him after the fight; this part of the scene is shown before the audience sees her gored and turned comatose. However, later in the film, Almodóvar reveals what happened before this exchange: Marco attends his old girlfriend’s wedding and explains his propensity for crying – he would cry because he could not share things with the girl. So Lydia’s dissatisfaction with the relationship stems from Marco’s obsession with his past, unsettled romance. This insertion of past moments later in the film changes the audience’s view of Marco and Lydia’s relationship.

The film also recontextualizes Benigno’s nurturing relationship with Alicia through flashbacks. His sweet inacceptance of the “rational” fact that Alicia is braindead may appear charming at the film’s outset – despite the camera’s frankly sexual gaze at the utterly immobile Alicia, treating her body as, quite literally, an object of the gaze of Benigno and later Marco (Novoa 240) – but the whole relationship is given a much more sinister cast by the flashbacks to her first meeting. Benigno is first shown gazing out the window of his apartment at the pre-coma Alicia practicing in the dance studio across the street, while his mother’s voice shouts at him from offscreen. The mother is never shown, and Benigno explains over a dissolve to him in the exact same position outside
the window that his mother, who he had spent his whole adult life caring for, died. After he uses her dropping her wallet as an excuse to walk her home, Benigno makes an appointment with her therapist father (as an excuse to see her again). His discussion with the doctor is itself illuminating, as it reveals that Benigno’s nurse training comes from caring for his mother, and that other than her, his life has been very isolated – he has never had sex, and he admits that he is seeing the doctor because he is “lonely.” After the appointment, Benigno leaves the “office” part of their residence and enters the “home” part; the music swells as he sees Alicia’s silhouette in the shower, echoing Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960). He walks into Alicia’s room – which is painted a similar orange-yellow to the hospital’s walls – and steals the hairclip, running into Alicia on the way out. She shivers for a moment as he walks away; though Benigno is narrating the flashback, Almodóvar’s camera stays with her for a moment, as she watches him leave and watches the receptionist come back from the bathroom, talking on the phone as if nothing had happened. This choice emphasizes Alicia’s point of view over Benigno’s, only for a moment, but it allows the spectator the insight that a purely Benigno-identified narrative would not: that Benigno’s love for Alicia is somewhat less than pure or innocent. This flashback to Benigno’s first encounters with Alicia sets Benigno up as a disturbed, Norman Bates-like villain; Benigno has a similarly inappropriate relationship with his mother (Novoa 232). This sequence makes readings of Benigno like Kinder’s seeing him as a bold challenger of paradigms more challenging and more fraught with questions about whether challenging paradigms has a dark side, a development that marks how deeply Almodóvar’s films have changed since the playful transgressions of Pepi, Luci, Bom (1980).
In *Bad Education*, key scenes are placed within framing narratives that re-create a version of the past—sometimes doubled, as in the moment Ignacio loses his innocence; the boy's split face reveals Father Manolo (Daniel Giménez Cacho) reading *in* the story, and then there is a brief cut to Enrique, who is reading the story, before going back to Manolo's discussion with Zahara. As D'Lugo puts it, "The doubling of the 'reading present' emphasizes the emotional lure and dramatic impact of the past on the characters" (123). The unfinished business of the past becomes a source of fascination for both men, and the revelation-containing flashbacks generate the sense, in this film, that the present is already "fallen." Angel played Adam in a production of Mark Twain's *Diaries of Adam and Eve*, but in *Bad Education*, there is no way to return to a prelapsarian innocence: life is divided between the time before Ignacio was raped and the time after. Enrique knows that Angel is not Ignacio when he starts shooting *The Visit*, but he makes the movie anyway, as—he claims—a "homage" to Ignacio; the film both looks back to Ignacio’s and Enrique’s past, where Enrique himself is a figure of nostalgic longing. Essentially, the film jumps between the two men reaching out to each other in an attempt to somehow return to their boyhood romance, but the other always remains at a remove.

In *Volver*, there are no flashbacks, but the film nonetheless is set in a present in which characters operate with an incomplete knowledge of the past, which needs to be revealed before the story can resolve itself. Though Irene turns out to not be a literal ghost, her return to the land of the living is motivated by a need to set things right. When Sole asks if there is anything that Irene wants her to do, she replies: "People always leave things undone, or done badly, and I'm no exception. But I don't know if they can
be fixed. And if they can, it's up to me to fix them." Irene's reply is somewhat of a truism: everyone leaves things undone, and Almodóvar's story allows the second chances that are so rarely afforded in real life. The turning point in the story is the mutual mother-daughter confession scene, in which Irene and Raimunda finally clear the air about the problems in their past that led to the bitterness in their relationship. Irene apologizes for not seeing that Raimunda's father (who is never named in the film) was abusing her, and confesses to burning down the house where Raimunda's father and his lover (Augustina's mother) were sleeping together. Her confessions point to the potency of the past in the character's lives, a past that seems to be constantly repeating itself.

When Irene confesses her crime, Raimunda has only just come from burying her husband Paco (Antonio de la Torre), who was killed while attacking Raimunda's daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo). At this point, the family of women goes back to their hometown and the other threads of the story — Raimunda's cover-up of her husband's death, her taking over the restaurant and employing her prostitute neighbour — are abandoned, adding to a sense of chronological disjunction.

When Jameson describes postmodern culture losing the capacity "to organize its past and future into coherent experience," he means that the postmodern subject becomes overwhelmed by the present (71). But in Volver, the past is just as present. That past that keeps repeating itself can be seen as a conflation of time periods, reflecting larger postmodern problems:

The crisis in historicity now dictates a return, in a new way, to the question of temporal organization in general in the postmodern force field, and indeed, to the problem of the form that time, temporality and the syntagmatic will be able to take in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic (Jameson 70).
Almodóvar’s varying temporal organizations and circuitous stories point to the fact that
time itself has become a problem, and like so many other factors once taken to be natural
(gender, identity, the provenance of images), its depiction is always complex. The ghost
in *Volver* is assumed at the beginning of the film to be a hallucination of Aunt Paula,
who is “living in the past.” The whole village, however, seems to have this problem: the
population is stuck in the past with their belief in spirits and ghosts, *and* dwells on their
inevitable futures, regularly cleaning the cemetery plots that will someday hold their
bodies. In an interview included on the English-language DVD, Almodóvar says that the
village women live more comfortably with death, but the prominence of the windswept
graveyard shows a preoccupation with the past and the future that overwhelms the
present. When Raimunda and her daughter’s story repeats that of Irene – with the abused
daughter, the murdered patriarch, and the lack of investigation into the man’s appearance
– it seems that time has begun circling back upon itself.

**Authorial Ghosts**

Almodóvar’s own directorial past repeats itself in the ghost trilogy as well. In
many ways, *Talk To Her* would seem to belong to the map trilogy discussed in Chapter
4: Marco is a lot like Leo in *The Flower of My Secret*, a writer who needs to forget his
lost love, and (as Marsha Kinder points out (2005:11)) the film continues and expands
on the brain-dead thematics of both *Flower* and *All About My Mother*. Marco is also a
travel writer whose constant travel carries symbolic weight, much as the geographic
movement in the “map films” does. But while in those films movement is figured as
positive growth, Marco’s travel is always running away from problems. However, what
separates *Talk To Her* from those films is primarily that that travel is in Marco’s *past*:
his story of traveling to Africa with an old girlfriend is presented in a double-exposed flashback within a flashback. More broadly, the whole film subtly rewrites the ways that its characters are crossing generic borders: while Live Flesh’s (Carne trémula, 1997) Victor is a classic thriller villain who is narratively redeemed, Talk To Her’s melodramatic portrayal of Benigno asks the viewer to make somewhat more of a sympathetic leap. As noted, the flashback to Benigno’s first encounters with Alicia establish him less as a lovelorn, sensitive hero (or a prince whose kiss awakes a sleeping beauty) and more as a Hitchcockian villain: the film refuses to reconcile the two different pictures of Benigno it paints. Rather than have his potential villain stop short of rape – as he did with characters like Ricky in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (¡Átame!, 1990) or with Victor – Almodóvar has Benigno carry out the act and then tries to “redeem” him through a series of melodramatic, teary-eyed encounters with Marco, wherein the two men reach out to each other despite the glass that separates them in the prison visiting room.

It seems, more than anything else, that Talk To Her is haunted by Almodóvar’s past films. On Lydia’s first night in the clinic, Marco falls asleep and dreams of a party he and Lydia had gone to at some point in time before. The scene is introduced with the image of a man swimming across a small pool, and then a singer is shown performing. Almodóvar’s camera pans across the audience and lingers on the smiling faces of Cecilia Roth and Marisa Paredes, the stars of All About My Mother and Labyrinth of Passions, and of The Flower of My Secret, High Heels, and All About My Mother, respectively. The actresses’ appearance, in the same shot that shows Marco tear up at the song, links him with those actresses and their emotional heroines and mothers in Almodóvar’s
earlier films. The brain-dead aspect of the story also – as noted – draws on *Flower* and *Mother* as well: Almodóvar’s naked self-references here point to the differences of *Talk To Her* from his earlier films, to his evolution from the carnivals of *Labyrinth of Passions* to *Talk To Her*’s more complex, more contemplative tone.

*Talk To Her* represents a major shift toward the abstract in the representation of sexual violence. If his earlier films always made a great deal of the fact of showing the acts themselves (and certainly led to controversy), and this was a subject he avoided in the *map* trilogy, *Talk To Her* avoids this minefield by abstracting the act to the point that it is not shown at all. The sequence begins with Benigno untying Alicia’s nightgown to massage her as he tells her about a film he just saw, “The Shrinking Lover.” Almodóvar cuts to the film itself, with Benigno still narrating. The film is about a female scientist, Amparo (Paz Vega), whose boyfriend Alfredo (Fele Martínez) drinks her diet potion, which does not work as planned, causing him to shrink until he is only a few inches high. Alfredo leaves her to avoid causing her pain, but the couple is reunited, and run away to the Hotel Youkali (significantly, a reference to the house in *Kika* and to Kurt Weill’s song about a dreamy utopia; the *Kika* reference stands out here, given the importance of the representation of rape in that film and the line’s placement here). After Amparo falls asleep, Alfredo traverses her naked body, eventually diving headfirst into her – from his persepective – giant vagina. Though Almodóvar apparently uses a blue screen to show Alfredo traversing his love’s breasts in a semi-realistic manner, the vagina model he climbs into advertises its falseness, missing as it is such anatomical properties as the clitoris; it would be easy to read the appeal of this scene in terms of some kind of Oedipal return to the womb, especially given the way it results in a
pregnancy, but I would rather keep the focus on Benigno’s own consumption with women’s bodies – first his mother’s, then Alicia’s. Benigno finishes the story with “…and Alfredo stays in her forever,” at which point there is a cut to an extreme close-up of the lava lamp, showing some red wax float horizontally across the screen. When it is revealed that Alicia is pregnant, this scene can be retroactively decoded as marking the moment Benigno oversteps his bounds with Alicia. Shortly after this, he will tell Marco he wants to marry Alicia. This is a far cry from the cartoonish screams of Pepi, Luci, Bom, the ambivalent tableau of Matador, or the confrontational bongo drums and video cameras in Kika. The effect of abstracting the rape is twofold. On the one hand, this representative circumspection cannot be accused of either glamourizing or using the rape scene for the purposes of sensationalism. In leaving out the representation, Almodóvar forces the viewer to consider only the act’s moral implications. On the other, in not actually compelling the viewer to watch the rape of the comatose woman, Almodóvar allows the act itself to become abstracted, leading to critical interpretations like this:

Only the dancer is brought back to life—through acts of love, both verbal and physical, that reawaken her body as a motherland. Though such acts would ordinarily be called “rape,” the maternal Benigno performs them as part of his tragic devotion to his beloved, with whom he identifies and to whom he willingly donates his vital organs, even at the risk of his own life (Kinder 2005:18).

Kinder’s description of Alicia’s rape as an “organ donation” demonstrates the power of the film’s emotional appeal. Without the disturbing image of the rape of the sleeping woman, it becomes easy to justify what is normally seen as an unjustifiable act. However, the film can be read as arguing for an exception in Benigno’s case. Because Alicia is in a coma, she cannot remember the rape, so there is no psychological trauma. And her pregnancy not only did not lead to the birth of a child, but it miraculously
awakened her. So not only did the rape not cause any lasting harm, but it appears to have done its victim good. Almodóvar's fiction of the "good rape" is an extreme construction, but it challenges the "everything is permitted" morality of his first films. If a rape actually has positive results, does the selfishness of its perpetrator matter? This is a disturbing question, and one that the film does not attempt to answer. It is difficult to come up with "rational" objections to the rape itself; the spectator's own discomfort is entirely premised on emotion, complicating the rational-emotional binary discussed above. Marco appears to forgive Benigno – and possibly even to be transformed into him, taking over his house and his longing gaze at the dance studio across the street – but this conclusion, while it provides "closure," remains somewhat unsettling. Novoa suggests a fairly dark interpretation of the union of Marco and Alicia: "When the sleeping beauty awakens, her man is waiting for her. Lydia and Benigno, with their conflicted gender identities, must die to make room for the relationship between the two "normal" characters" (242). In this way, All About My Mother follows the discomfort of the "happy ending" of Live Flesh, where Víctor and Helena finally unite after the death of Víctor's older lover and the timely exit of the transgressive body of Helena’s disabled husband: it is hard to be simply happy with the characters after all this carnage. Almodóvar has always treated the crimes of his heroes as if they might not "count" (think of Ricky's attack on Marina in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, Rebeca's murders of her husband and stepfather in High Heels, Angel's attack on Eva in Matador (1986), or even Antonio's crimes in Law of Desire (La ley del deseo, 1987)); however, in Talk To Her, the moral quandary is heavier in absence of other thematic considerations. While Almodóvar was never a more stylish filmmaker, the visceral shocks of his first films,
even the undeniable affect of *All About My Mother*'s tearful death scenes, are dulled. Replacing – or running along with – the affect is a sense of moral uncertainty.

In *Bad Education*, Almodóvar showed that his new moral complexity did not necessarily mean that sexuality could not be depicted. However, it takes on a darker dimension than it has in any of his earlier films. The “big trauma” of *Bad Education* is the young Ignacio’s rape by Father Manolo, and it is still abstracted in much the same way the rape was in *Talk To Her*. The lead-up is a scene of the boys at school on a day trip, with the rest of the class swimming as Father Manolo accompanies on guitar Ignacio (Nacho Pérez) singing “Moon River” (with alternate, Spanish lyrics). As he sings, the image track shows slow motion images of the rest of the boys playing in the water. The lyrics of the Spanish version refer to a search for meaning that eerily echoes Brooks’ characterization of the melodramatic mode as responding to desires for moral clarity in the post-sacred world: “Moon and river/ tell where to find/ my God and good and ill, tell me/ I'm longing to know what is hidden in the dark/ and you'll find it” (emphasis mine). At the word “hidden,” there is a cut to the bush that the priest and the boy are sitting behind. The guitar accompaniment disappears, hinting that Father Manolo’s hands are now otherwise occupied. Ignacio is heard crying “no!” and he is seen running away from the bush and falling in a long shot, before a cut to a close-up of his face. The act itself is represented with a drop of blood running down the boy’s forehead, and the actual vertical cutting in half of his image, and paired with a voiceover in the boy’s voice, saying: “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.” It is actually depicted within two levels of “framing” as well – it is in
the story Ignacio-Zahara gives to Father Manolo within Ignacio's story. The sexual violence in *Kika* quickly became as much about the representation of violence as about the violence itself. Here, Almodóvar's decision not to portray it directly avoids these controversies. If Almodóvar can be seen as revising himself in the ghost films, his treatment of sexual violence has become more serious. However, even this is undermined in *Bad Education* with more graphic images of sexuality: Enrique and Angel are shown having sex that does not appear to be especially happy for either (after the rape scene and Enrique's learning Angel's true identity), and before that, in Ignacio's story, Zahara meets "Enrique" in a bar and the two men have a sexual encounter that seems designed to make the spectator uncomfortable. After Enrique falls asleep while Zahara is orally pleasing him, Zahara goes through his wallet to rob him and realizes who he is. Noticing that his penis is still erect, Zahara is shown lowering himself onto it – Almodóvar only shows him from the waist up, but showing licking his hand for lubrication makes it clear what is happening. Though this scene is "only" in the story, the framing matches the later scene between a different Enrique and a different Ignacio. In both cases, the consent is – at least – questionable, with Zahara and Enrique, respectively, using the other man in an attempt to recreate a thwarted adolescent romance.

*Bad Education* also borrows much of its plot from *Law of Desire*: Tina's encounter with the priest who abused her has clear similarities with Zahara's encounter with her priest, right down to both boys who grew up into women murmuring "por tu culpa" ("by your fault") over the priests' "por mi culpa" ("by my fault") in the service. Though Tina's conversation with the priest does not spin into blackmail and murder the
way Zahara’s does in La Visita or Ignacio’s does in “real life,” Almodóvar reworks some of his old themes in a much darker tone. While Law of Desire’s Tina certainly was preoccupied with memory, she was not weighed down by trauma, seeing the priest and her father as “the men in her life,” not her abusers. Tina is never a victim – unlike Ignacio, who is the victim and dupe in Juan and Berengeur’s film noir plot.

Finally, Bad Education’s reflexivity refers to Almodóvar himself. Enrique Goded is a filmmaker in 1980 Madrid who bears some resemblance to Almodóvar (Acevedo-Muñoz 263). Enrique’s office is full of references to Almodóvar’s career – including a production company logo similar to Almodóvar’s for El Deseo, a poster for a film starring Carmen Maura and Antonio Banderas, and the aforementioned “Ghost Grandmother” movie poster, a reference to Almodóvar’s next film, Volver. In “La Visita,” Zahara sports a Gaultier dress with nipples on it reminiscent of the famous gown he made for Victoria Abril in Kika (1993). Almodóvar’s production of a version of himself as a film noir hero is a much darker vision of self-invention than he has previously allowed, as is Angel – whose insistence on remaking his own identity is frightening and hides a series of deceptions and crimes. D’Lugo certainly sees Almodóvar’s self-recrimination in Bad Education: “We may read Bad Education as a self-conscious acknowledgement […] of where he was in 1980 and how, through the evolution of a style and conception of filmmaking, he has moved to a critique of his own past and the culture out of which his cinema has taken shape” (129).

The plot of Volver has “returned,” as well, being drawn from Leo’s dark novel in The Flower of My Secret, which also features a woman who kills her husband and stores the body in a restaurant freezer. However, it also draws on Flower in other ways: both
films centre the “return” of a daughter to the village where she was born in a movement of healing. However, while Flower’s heroine Leo needs the village to be able to move forward with her life, Raimunda’s return is based on an embrace of tradition. Though many of Almodóvar’s heroines have troubled pasts, Raimunda is the first to look back.

There is also a shift in the depiction of sexuality in Volver. As in Bad Education, sex is key to the film’s plot, but none of it is presented as appealing. Both of the film’s sexual assaults occur offscreen – Raimunda’s past abuse at the hands of her father is revealed through dialogue and Paco’s attack on Paula is also recounted through dialogue, as Paula tells the story straight to the camera. In both cases, the story is kept secret between the mother and daughter in question: Paula does not know the truth about her own parentage, though Raimunda does confess that Paco was not her real father. Raimunda and Irene keep the dark portions of their family history hidden from Sole and Paula. Given Almodóvar’s past lighthearted approach to incest, the darkness with which sexuality is treated here (and in Bad Education) is significant. Unlike his early films – from Pepi, Luci, Bom up to even Kika – where characters were ruled by the law of desire, here the only person who manifests sexual desire is Paco, whose uncontrolled lust sees him buried and forgotten without investigation. There are no more rules in Volver’s universe than in earlier Almodóvar films – Irene expresses surprise that no one investigated the mysterious deaths, or punished her – but this film lacks the licentiousness of the 1980s films. Paco’s desire is treated as frankly disgusting. His staring at her crotch and spying on her changing are both shown from his subjective point of view, placing the audience in the position of sexualizing the adolescent girl, and rendering him completely unsympathetic. Though his death is a surprising plot twist, it is
difficult to imagine even Raimunda mourning for Paco, after he is shown masturbating in bed next to her upon her refusal to have sex, to her horror. The source of Almodóvar’s new negativity toward sexuality — as opposed to his ambivalent, pluralistic treatment in the earlier films — is unclear, but it represents a major revision of his old, unserious portrayals.

Nostalgia/Film

The interrelationship between the cinema and the past is as old as the cinema itself.

Photography and cinema contributed in large part to the secularization of history, to fixing it in its visible, “objective” form at the expense of the myths that once traversed it. Today cinema can place all its talent, all its technology in the service of reanimating what it itself contributed to liquidating. It only resurrects ghosts, and it itself is lost therein. (Baudrillard 48).

As is suggested in Baudrillard’s statement, cinema and photography are always linked to the past: film images are, quite literally, reproductions of past events. Baudrillard’s account laments the loss of certainty in this relationship. In the era of the simulacrum, he argues, the image precedes the referent — a claim that rings increasingly true with the development of computer-generated images. Almodóvar’s first thirteen films took a more positive view than Baudrillard does — the early films celebrate a sexuality that is produced through performance and the free-floating signifiers that went along with it; the fashion films plumb the possibilities of clothing-as-costume in rewriting gender; the map films propose that redrawing maps means the power to redraw territory — but the ghost films begin to consider what is lost in this exchange. One of the ghosts in the ghost films is, without a doubt, the ghost of the real.
Almodóvar’s engagement with the cinematic in these films is deeply concerned with the moral implications of the precession of the image. In Talk To Her, Benigno’s violation of Alicia is literally preceded by a cinematic fantasy. D’Lugo argues that this represents one of many acts of performative storytelling in Almodóvar’s oeuvre, that Benigno is, in telling the story, “constructing a new identity for himself” (11). However, it is significant that this act of storytelling does not involve Benigno’s production of himself from whole cloth – he, like so many postmodern subjects, constructs himself after a film image. Not only that, but he is constructed with an image from an older era, pointing to the kind of nostalgia-for-the-historical that Baudrillard describes.

Cinema is at the centre of Bad Education – being a film about the making of a film – but it also attempts to recreate history. Almodóvar’s only period piece, it sets transition-era freedom against the restrictive boarding school life the boys suffer in the Francoist 1960s. The (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to resolve the past through cinema is doubled, as Enrique tries to remake the past and get to the truth about Ignacio even as Almodóvar remakes his own past. Even in the flashbacks, cinema is important: in “La Visita,” the cinema is the site of Enrique and Ignacio’s first sexual encounter, watching camp star Sara Montiel as they masturbate each other. The shot of the run-down building that used to house the theatre is the first thing seen in the story as the spectator sees it (and presumably, as Enrique films it): the ripped posters on either sides of the door echo the ripped collage of the credits, but also suggest stained-glass windows. Fittingly for a melodramatist who attempts to bring about a “return” of the numinous through cinema, the movie house is posited as an alternative to the church. The movies come up again toward the end, when in 1977 Juan and Berengeur go to the
movies to kill time before Juan will act out finding his brother dead. Pointedly, Almodóvar sends the seductive Juan and the dupe villain Berengeur to a film noir festival. Even more pointedly, he has Berengeur walk by a *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) poster and proclaim “It’s like all the films were talking about us.” Along with being his only period piece, *Bad Education* is also as close to a neo-noir as Almodóvar gets. Certainly, we are dealing with what Jameson would call a “nostalgia film,” which “approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion” (67).27 Jameson’s prime example is the neo-noir film *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), a vague remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946, based on a novel by James M. Cain, who also wrote the book on which Wilder based *Double Indemnity*):

The word ‘remake’ is, however, anachronistic to the degree to which our awareness of the pre-existence of other versions, previous films of the novel as well as the novel itself, is now a constitutive and essential part of the film’s structure: we are now, in other words, in ‘intertextuality’ as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of ‘pastness’ and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history. (67)

As in *Body Heat*, the spectator’s sense of awareness of the cinematic tropes on display is central to the film’s structure. Almodóvar makes this point obvious, even to the point of parodying the nostalgic mode, with Berengeur’s naïve comment: he is the opposite of

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27 The appeal of Jameson’s “pastness” is suggested by Slavoj Žižek, who suggests that part of the appeal is “the gaze of the ‘other,’ of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the ‘40s who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the universe of *film noir*” (112). However, as Žižek goes on to point out, *noir* itself is a post-hoc name for a set of American B-films embraced by French critics in the 1950s – so the viewer’s nostalgia is for a purity of identification that never really was.
Jameson’s aware spectator, even as he unwittingly tries to win back Juan/Angel’s femme fatale, as if things might turn out differently for him.

Melodrama and Nostalgia

It is fitting to begin the end of this study with Linda Williams’ notion that “Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence” (1998:65). Going back to melodrama’s post-sacred theatrical origins, the search for innocence in an apparently “fallen” world has always been at the heart of the melodramatic mode. Gledhill writes that melodrama’s propensity for the domestic is linked to its vision of the proper order of things “as a return to a ‘golden past’: less how things ought to be than how they should have been” (1987:21). In Hollywood film, this often set up as a rural “maternal place of origin” (Williams 1998:65); think of Marylee sitting by the river in Written on the Wind, hearing voices from her childhood. In Talk To Her, the past is made up mostly of painful memories, but there is an attempt on Almodóvar’s part to create a new innocence out of an experience typically figured to be traumatizing. Unlike his previous heroines who seemed to emerge from sexual traumas unscathed (from Pepi, Queti from Labyrinth of Passions, and Eva from Matador), Alicia’s lack of affect around her rape stems just not from a postmodern flattening of the “specialness” of sex, but by her not being aware that it happened. Innocence in this case comes from having no ownership over her past experiences. Though what would be a trauma actually winds up being a net positive for Alicia, her ability to meet Marco with an innocent smile at the end of the film requires that she be “innocent” in its other meaning – unknowing – implying that the only way to

28 The idea that the postmodern is tied to a “waning of affect” can be attributed to Jameson, who sees the ruling power of the image as emptying it of all emotional charge.
happiness is amnesia. This quest for innocence is failed completely in *Bad Education*, as returning to innocence is, in this film, impossible. Ignacio tries to remake his body and to “get even” with Father Manolo for the damage done to him, Enrique tries to reproduce his childhood romance cinematically, and Bernegeur and Enrique both try to recapture their idealized love for Ignacio through his handsome brother. In all of these cases, the attempts to either return to the past or correct past harms result in failure. In *Volver*, the possibility of a return is affirmed through the bonds of family. Instead of the tenuous, easily formed bonds of Almodóvar’s earlier films (such as the easily-formed “family” Carmen Maura heads at the end of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1989)), *Volver*’s family works at their relationships with each other; as Acevedo-Muñoz notes, unlike in *High Heels*, the mother-daughter reunion between Irene and Raimunda is not neatly concluded with an ecstatic death, but that their relationship is built on promise (202). When she finds out she is alive, Raimunda walks away from her mother, but then she returns. Irene, who describes herself as living in “purgatory,” atones for her sins by seeking her daughter’s forgiveness and in caring for the ailing Augustina. The quiet ending of the film suggests that the idealized space of the village can be returned to: Almodóvar lets his characters go home again.

This tendency is easy enough to spot and to define in the ghost films; all are so dominated by stories of regret and an insistent backward glance. The larger question of what this turn to the past, this quest for innocence means to Almodóvar’s work is much less easily settled. Never one for nostalgia, Almodóvar creates innocence more as an idea than as something that really existed – though the men in *Bad Education* all reach
back toward the past, the past itself is figured mainly as traumatic – but the impulse toward this ideal is unmistakable. So what is Almodóvar trying to achieve here? Let us return to Williams:

This may sound as if I am equating melodrama with the most egregious false consciousness. In one sense I am. Melodrama is by definition the retrieval of an absolute innocence and good in which most thinking people do not put much faith. **However, what we think and what we feel at the “movies” are often two very different things.** We go to movies not to think but to be moved. In a postsacred world, melodrama represents one of the most significant, and deeply symptomatic, ways we negotiate moral feeling (1998:61, emphasis mine).

Williams suggests that melodrama works *despite* any reservations even a “thinking” audience has to ideologies of a pure innocence. In other words, for Williams, “thinking” and “being moved” are separate impulses that require separate consideration. However, in Almodóvar’s work, they do not necessarily need to be separated: the knowledge that the “absolute innocence and good” that melodrama tries to return to is an unattainable fiction only increases the pathos. Melodrama’s drive toward moral feeling often presents as a drive toward moral purity – those sensations Brooks describes as “[tasting] too strong” (42) – this drive’s reach often exceeds its grasp.

The melodramatic mode is typically theorized as an essentially *modern* mode, one that relies on the woes of the post-sacred subject who keenly feels the absence of the divine and the injustice of a world that can no longer be seen as being divinely ordained. Most filmic discussions of melodrama use Peter Brooks’ account as a starting point, as I have done throughout this work. Melodrama’s pleasures are, thusly, linked to its investment of meaning in a moral occult in a post-sacred. It is, then, nostalgic for a time of pure guilt and innocence, for a sense of divine moral clarity. However, melodrama’s continued prevalence in postmodernity suggests that melodrama’s form is more flexible.
than that. Its ability to express nostalgia, not so much for past times, but for past beliefs makes it so resilient. When Baudrillard regards the “historical” film as an attempt “to resurrect the period when at least there was history,” the impulse he describes is one that is often fulfilled by melodrama (44). If the present is empty, melodrama at least tries to fill it up again, with an abundant past.
CONCLUSION

Almodóvar is often described as an optimistic director, whose treatment of postmodernity is positive. However, his relationship to the postmodern is deeply ambivalent. Using melodrama to elaborate some of postmodernity’s problems and contradictions, Almodóvar’s cinema allows viewers an outlet for their own confusions. At the end of his book Laws of Desire, Paul Julian Smith diagnoses Almodóvar’s genre as the “moral melodrama” (203), but in the sixteen years since he wrote the book, no one has expanded on his claim. In filling this gap in the scholarship, I have elaborated the way Almodóvar has used melodrama to explore the postmodern moral universe.

In the first six films, discussed in Chapter 2, sexual freedom is complicated by the problems of representation. As Chapter 3 shows, Almodóvar tackles the instability of gendered identity through the discourse of fashion. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Almodóvar expands his vision to the political – using the distinctly postmodern metaphor of the map. Finally, in Chapter 5, I consider how Almodóvar brings in one of melodrama’s defining traits: a desire to return to an idealized past, even if it is an imagined one. Never content to posit a hegemonic morality or an easy answer, Almodóvar raises contradictions and opens up avenues of inquiry.

In a project of this length, I was not able to consider some of the minute ways that these key themes – sex, fashion, geography, and history – run through all sixteen of his films so far. There are still many questions raised by Almodóvar, one of the most complex and challenging filmmakers working today – a director who sits at the divide between art and popular cinemas, and of postmodern irony and melodramatic sincerity. But this can be the groundwork for further consideration. Recognizing Almodóvar’s
deep ambivalence certainly starts conversations. Further scholarship will be able to go through some of the doors this thesis has opened.
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