

‘Ghosts Don’t Cry’: State of Exception and the Mother(land) in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Live Flesh* (1997) and *Volver* (2006)

In the last segment of Pedro Almodóvar’s *Volver* (2006), Irene (Carmen Maura), who was assumed to be dead, travels clandestinely from La Mancha to Madrid before returning to her village a few days later. While in Madrid, Irene’s daughter, Raimunda (Penélope Cruz), accuses her of failing to protect her from her father’s abuse. When the two women reprise the conversation in La Mancha, Irene pleads for forgiveness, claiming that her tears witness her affect and her status as a living being because ‘ghosts don’t cry’. Given that *Volver* was released at a time when Spain’s memory associations became increasingly visible locating and digging up mass graves, the film’s narrative of paternal abuse, murder and trauma was soon mapped onto the country’s history.¹ These connotations, this article proposes, are as revealing as they are misleading.

Irene’s ‘return’ from the past provides a foil for Spain’s twentieth-century history, marked by its Civil War (1936-39), the long years of Franco’s dictatorship (1939-75) and the Transition to democracy (1976-82). In fact, it is her homecoming that triggers her daughter’s trauma, attesting to the fact that the crimes committed under Irene’s watch have neither been forgotten nor forgiven. This perspective resonates with the assumption that Spain’s Transition years entailed mutual pardoning, thereby implying reciprocity between the crimes of the dictatorship and those of the short-lived Second Republic (1931-39). However, such putative trade-off effectively erases the perpetuation of the civil war through the ‘states of exception’ that defined the dictatorship, as traced in the first segment of this article.

States of exception, as Giorgio Agamben has posited, are designed to exclude ‘entire categories of citizens’.² A cleaner and a rural migrant, Raimunda would be a paradigmatic example of those alienated citizens on account of her class and her gender. Almodóvar casts Cruz in a similar role in an earlier production that is also the focus of this investigation, *Live*

¹ On this topic, see Julian Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla’s ‘Returning to and from the Maternal Rural Space: Traumatic Memory, Late Modernity and Nostalgic Utopia in Almodóvar’s *Volver*’. *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 88. 3 (2011), 321–338. On the peculiarities of Spain’s ‘return’, see Jo Labanyi, ‘Engaging with Ghosts; Or, Theorising Culture in Modern Spain’, in *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Spain: Theoretical Debates and Cultural Practice*, ed. Jo Labanyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1–14.

² In Agamben’s words: ‘modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system’. See *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 2.

Flesh (1997). Cruz also takes a supportive role as a young mother in *All About My Mother* (1999), as well as in Almodóvar's quasi-biographical *Pain and Glory* (2019), while her maternity is the focus of *Parallel Mothers* (2021). In addition, mothers figure prominently in other Almodóvar's films, including *High Heels* (1991) and *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), and Maura stars as an abused cleaner in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984). Throughout these films, Almodóvar uses melodrama's conventions to project his idiosyncratic take on motherhood. However, the two films studied in this article articulate the dependence of Francoism's state of exception on the infantilisation and domination of low-class mothers. In addition, these two films show how the regime co-opted women's complicity in their subjugation, partly through the exaltation of customs and traditions that can be seen to be more misogynist than matriarchal. Women inhabited thus a dystopian motherland in which they created spaces of solidarity while also, paradoxically, legitimated, and even policed, conformity to the state of exception's chauvinism.

Volver and *Live Flesh* illustrate means used by the state of exception to control women, particularly lower-class mothers, in the present. This means that, in *Volver*, there is a generational disparity between Irene's 'complicity' with her daughter's abuse, and Raimunda's offering support to her daughter, Paula (Yohanna Cobo). By way of contrast, in *Live Flesh*, Isabel, the protagonist's mother, gives birth and dies within the last Francoist state of exception, whose repression contributes directly to her alienation. Isabel, a single mother who resorts to prostitution to survive, endures the patriarchal exploitation that is central to *Volver*, where women need to dispose of a 'body in the freezer' to bury a past of paternal abuse. This is a narrative arc that culminates in *Parallel Mothers*, where the maternity of the film's protagonist, Janis (Cruz), is entangled with the search for the mass graves of those who 'disappeared' during Spain's civil war and the early years of Franco's dictatorship. However, by contrast with the two films studied in this article, in *Parallel Mothers*, Janis, a mature photographer, manages to mourn and address this past by locating the remains of her executed great-grandfather.

This article concentrates on the ways in which women in *Volver* and *Live Flesh* disrupt the Francoist state of exception through the creation and maintenance of alternative spaces in which feminine solidarity can thrive.³ These processes are scrutinised through the

³ This domestic space, as Almodóvar notes, embraced children, for whom men were absent referents: 'The feminine universe unfolding before my child's eyes was very active and very baroque ... I remember men to be

close interpretation of relevant scenes that are mapped onto the contexts of the films' productions and, whenever pertinent, their historical referents. The article shows Almodóvar's peculiar deployment of melodrama's excesses through the archaeology of the films' mise-en-scène. Nostalgic yearning for a 'return' to the mother(land) is filtered in *Volver* and *Live Flesh* through the relationships between women, as well as the use of cinematic space. These films assign women largely to interiors, as befits melodrama, and use exteriors as the masculine domain, akin to twentieth-century Westerns and adventure films.⁴ This spatial segregation, as argued by Carmen Pérez-Riu in relation to *Live Flesh*, conveys 'a fairly traditional conception of "home" associated to female characters, as caretakers or as lovers'.⁵ In other words, despite the fact that these mothers are charismatic characters with whom the audience can identify, the illuminated and vivid interiors that they inhabit are as much refuges as they are prisons.

Life and Death in Franco's State of Exception

Volver and *Live Flesh* embed contradictions inherent in celebrating assertive motherhood through the 'costumbrista' tradition that Almodóvar has adapted throughout his career, which, as he has indicated, blighted his childhood.⁶ According to this lore, women revel in demeaning roles assigned to them, which are understood to be essential to the maintenance of a cultural identity under siege. While embodying matriarchal traits, these 'women' also reinforce masculinist codes through active policing of dissidence. This can be seen in *Volver*

distant. They were never at home and the time when they were not working, they were in bars. In addition, men represented authority and I distanced myself from them'. Interview by Ángel S. Harguindey, *El País*, 17 March 2006 (https://elpais.com/diario/2006/03/17/cine/1142550001_850215.html). María Rosón Villena's study of material culture and everyday practices of women during Francoism stresses those 'spaces of resistance' through the 'entanglement' between women and objects such as letters and photographs. See 'Memoria de las Cosas: Cultura Material y vida cotidiana durante el Franquismo'. *Kamchatka*, 18 (2021), 5-14 (p. 11 and *passim*).

⁴ See Thomas Elsaesser's classic 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', *Monogram*, 4 (1972), 2-15.

⁵ Pérez Riu concludes that 'The self-sacrificing mother is a prevalent positive figure in his filmography ... which is sometimes similar to ... "the mother of National Catholicism," which Almodóvar would be assumed to reject'. See 'Transition, Circularity and Haptic Space in the Representation of the City: From Ruth Rendell's *Live Flesh* to Pedro Almodóvar's *Carne Trémula*', *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 31.5 (2017), 682-93 (p. 689).

⁶ On costumbrism and melodrama, see Mercedes Camino, "'Vivir sin ti": Motherhood, Melodrama and españolada in Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) and *Volver* (2006)', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 87. 5 (2010), 625-42.

through Irene's actions or her lack of action, as well as the 'comfort' offered to Sole by the village women to be analysed below. In the case of Irene, not only does she fail to 'see' her husband's abuse, but her revenge on his infidelity extends to his lover, 'the only hippy in the village'. In a similar vein, *Live Flesh* dispenses nonchalantly with two of its female characters, Isabel and Clara (Angela Molina), respectively the mother and lover of the film's protagonist. Isabel, who gives birth to Victor (Liberto Rabal) in the film's opening scenes, subsequently disappears, having died from cancer while her son is in jail. Victor informs the audience of his mother's demise when he talks to her grave, referring to the men with whom she would have slept to bequeath him a dilapidated hut about to be expropriated and a pitiful 150,000pts.⁷ While Isabel's death takes place offscreen, the agony of Victor's faithful lover, Clara, is displayed for all to see. A middle-aged victim of domestic abuse, Clara falls in love with Victor, teaches him how to please his partners and demands nothing from him. Towards the end of the film, Clara and her abusive husband, Sancho (Pepe Sancho), shoot each other while she is waiting for Victor. A wounded Sancho drags himself towards Clara to hold her as he dies next to her corpse, claiming possession of her in death as he had done in life. Remarkably, as will be seen below, the deaths of these women adhere to the cinematic treatment of 'impure' female characters in post-war fascist melodramas. In some of those films, women who were tainted by familial relationship with 'red' fathers, husbands, lovers, or fiancés met their death towards the end of the films. They were often murdered by the men in their lives in spite of the fact that all they had done nothing to merit their 'polluted' past was to have a loving or familial relation with Republican men.⁸ They were duly replaced by the domesticated, submissive, and reclusive wives and mothers that embodied the ideals of National Catholicism.⁹

⁷ The film was made when the transition from pesetas to Euros was taking place. The minimum wage was 66.600 pesetas monthly (€400,5), making 150,000pts equivalent to a two-month salary.

⁸ In Chapter 2 of *Film, Memory and the Legacy of the Spanish Civil War: Resistance and Guerrilla* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 'Francoism's Bandoleros (1954-1964)', Camino mentions films in which 'republican' women die or are killed (pp. 43-73). This is the case even when their supposed involvement was merely to be the fiancée of a republican, as happens in Leon Klimovsky, *La paz empieza nunca* (1960). Labanyi, however, sees Catholic redemption in films such as Florián Rey's *Carmen la de Triana*, which 'does not end, as in Mérimée's and Bizet's versions, with Don José killing Carmen, but with her redemption, true to the Spanish fascist (and Catholic) emphasis on incorporating the other'. See 'Race, Gender and Disavowal in Spanish Cinema of the Early Franco Period: The Missionary Film and the Folkloric Musical', *Screen*, 38.3 (1997), 215-231 (p. 222).

⁹ Even if some films were censored or included blatant Francoist propaganda, Spanish postwar cinema was, by no means, merely conformist. Indeed, José Luis Castro de Paz has challenged the Manichaeic division between subversive and conformist cinema of the 1940s. See 'La encrucijada de la historia del cine español', *Comunicar*, 29 (2007), 39-45 (p. 42 and *passim*). Along those lines, Labanyi proposes that: 'it was precisely

Almodóvar traces in minute the parameters outlined above through the association between women and Franco's 'state of exception' in the opening segment of *Live Flesh*. Although the film's main narrative is situated in the 1990s, close to the time of filming and more than two decades after the dictator's demise, a ten-minute prologue contextualises Victor's unusual birth in 1970. This prelude projects the fear and solitude pervading the era and is separated from the rest of the film by credits, non-diegetic music, and colour palette. The credits that locate the film's opening in Madrid are immediately followed by two informative frames that take nearly one minute of screen time. These frames painstakingly rehearse the official declaration of 'state of exception', using red to highlight its messages sequentially.

The dictator's last nation-wide 'state of exception', which rounded his repressive rule as it began, was designed to subdue a restive population. Besides the growing number of protests from workers and students, the 1960s years witnessed the vindication of the autonomy statutes of Spain's 'historic nations', the Basque Country and Catalonia. These claims spurred and were spurred by the creation of the Basque separatist group, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Freedom), in 1959. Nine years after its foundation, ETA committed its first murder when the car in which two armed members of ETA were travelling was stopped by a Civil Guard at a roadblock. His assassination was followed by that of high-ranking member of Franco's political police, Melitón Manzanás, in August of the same year. Those two murders announced ETA's objectives prior to relinquishing 'armed struggle' in 2011 and its dissolution in 2018. Whereas the young guard would be classed as an unfortunate or a despicable murder, the same did not apply to Manzanás, who started his career collaborating with the Gestapo in rounding up French Jews who escaped to Spain and was a notorious torturer. While ETA's targets would widen to the general population in the 1980s and 1990s, up to then, many saw their violence to be a response to the regime's institutional violence.

Francoism's answer to Manzanás' murder was the declaration of state of exception in Gipuzkoa, where the murder took place and where people started to be arrested indiscriminately. These detentions culminated in an infamous court martial, the Proceso de Burgos, held against eighteen men, including two Basque priests, in December 1970. The

Andalusia's 'foreignness' that enabled it to figure 'Spanishness' ... both the missionary film and the folkloric musical [of the 1940s], while certainly serving the regime's interests, to varying extents allow resistant readings'. See Race, Gender and Disavowal', p. 216.

arrests, the trial's preparation, proceedings, and eventual sentencing led to the intensification of protests within and beyond Spain, resulting in the eventual commutation of the death penalties for lengthy imprisonment. As the regime's opposition widened geographically and socially, it was countered with the extension of the state of exception to the whole country, as seen at the onset of *Live Flesh*. This state of exception effectively returned the country to levels of repression reminiscent of its immediate post-war environment and is evoked with suitable darkness in the credits, set against a black background. The first frame transcribes literally the words of the declaration in large capital letters with the putative reasons explained in smaller font below (Figure 1):



Figure 1: On-screen credits declaring 'State of Exception in All National Territory'

According to the declaration, the state of exception sought 'to defend the peace, progress of Spain and rights of Spaniards'. These rights, the declaration went on to add, would be upheld by suppressing them, a paradoxical avowal inherent in all states of exception. The regime sought to rekindle thus the climate of fear that punctured its timeline through peaks and troughs, alternatively raising and lowering repression, prohibitions, incarcerations, as well as executions. Almodóvar stresses the reach of this 'state of exception' through the selection of segments that are highlighted in red – an allusion to the regime's bloodletting and its blanket labelling of all opposition as 'reds'. Suitably punctuated by a slow, non-diegetic piano tune, these frames rehearse the regime's authoritarianism through the suspension of: 'freedom of expression', 'freedom of association' and *habeas corpus* (Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5).



Figure 2. 'Suspension' is highlighted.



Figure 3. 'Freedom of Expression' is highlighted



Figure 4. 'Freedom of Meeting and Association' is highlighted



Figure 5. Highlight of suspension of *Habeas Corpus*

According to this declaration, threats to 'peace' had 'forced' the government to suspend 'freedoms', thereby tightening existing censorship and proscribing the 'associations' that were largely restricted to sports clubs and Catholic fraternities. More importantly, the decree's suspension of *Habeas corpus* allowed the indefinite detention and questioning of suspects without charging them in court, opening the door to extending torture beyond the maximum established by law, which was four days. This state of exception effectively reined back the timid *apertura* ('opening up') of the previous years when Spain sought to consolidate its international recognition and expand its booming tourist industry.

Live Flesh charges thus against a regime that had reified its legitimacy through state of exception measures that, from their origins in the civil conflict, entailed the victimization of large segments of its population. However, following the launch of five-yearly economic plans in 1959 meant the gradual improvement of the country's living standards through internal investment in construction, tourism, and remittances from migrants in the 1960s. The regime's discourse started to shift the discourse of being victorious over 'enemies' of the patria to becoming harbingers of 'peace' and 'prosperity'. Paloma Aguilar has charted this transition from what she describes as 'origin-based legitimacy', founded on victory over 'Judeo-masonic communism', to the 'performance-based legitimacy', grounded on welfare.¹⁰ Nonetheless, both visions rest on the regime's monolithic concept of a national-Catholic identity, classed as 'Spanishness', which rested as much on fear as on the stigmatising, loathing and exclusion of 'others', concurring with Agamben's imbrication of state of exception with civil war: 'One of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance'.¹¹

Live Flesh showcases the social consequences of this state of exception for low-class women. With Christmas approaching, the decree resulted in empty streets, such as the one with which the film opens. As a solitary worker atop a ladder lights up Christmas decorations, a diegetic scream, soon followed by others, catches his attention (Figure 6). He turns his head towards the origin of the woman's cries, which the camera cuts to identify in an apartment building with the sign Pension Centro (Figure 7). When the camera zooms in towards the window, a masculine voice, recognised as that of Minister of Information and Tourism Manuel Fraga Iribarne, rehearses the declaration of state of exception just shown in the preceding credits. The speech becomes more distinctive when the camera 'enters' the house, zooming out from the radio where the voice originates to show a middle-aged woman sewing in a cosy sitting room (Figure 8). The camera stops in a mid-close-up of this woman, soon identified as Madam Centro (Pilar Bardem), framed within a colourful décor in which yellow and red tones mingle. This creates a feeling of warmth and intimacy that is furthered by the shrinking of the filmic space, allowing us to focus on her intent listening to the speech that provides the diegesis for the intimidating atmosphere and the empty streets.

¹⁰ Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy*, trans. Mark Gordon Oakley (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2002).

¹¹ See Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 2.

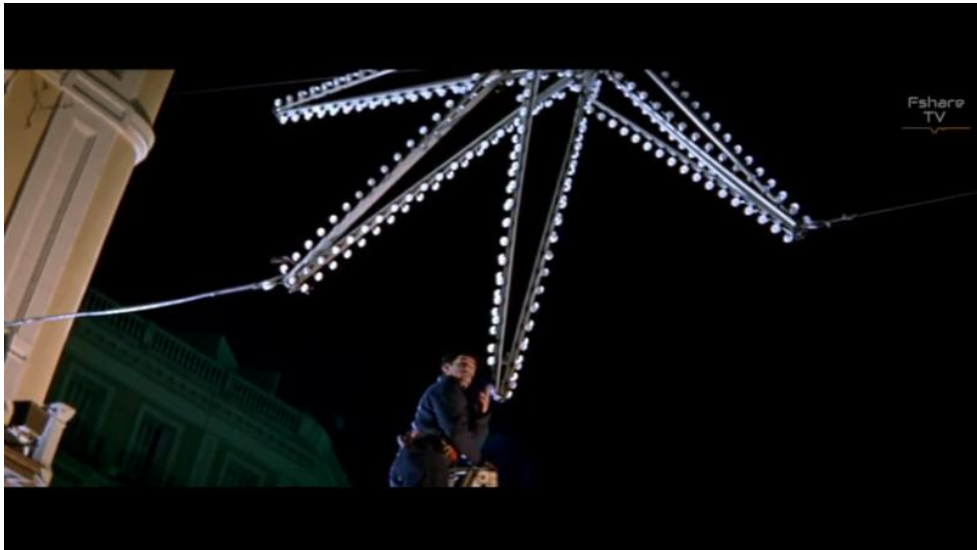


Figure 6. A municipal worker looks towards the sound of a woman's screams



Figure 7. The camera identifies the origin of the screams in Pensión Centro



Figure 8. Madam Centro listens to the radio

As emphasised throughout this opening sequence, the state of exception was presented as necessary to preserve ‘peace’, a message that was hammered home when labelling the twenty-fifth anniversary of the war’s end as ‘25 years of peace’ in 1964. The celebrations, which included exhibitions, publications, posters, festivals, and films, glorified the country’s accomplishments under the benevolent guidance of its patriarch, the aging Caudillo. The campaign deployed all available media to reinforce the union of the country and its autocratic ruler through ‘banal nationalism’, in Michael Billig’s definition of the concept.¹² This reductive view homogenised society through idiosyncratic cultural identifiers, the most prominent of which were bullfighting, football, flamenco dancing and the ritual commemorations of the Catholic calendar, such as Holy Week. It also alienated others, in accordance with the state of exception exclusion of ‘categories of citizens’.

The women in Centro’s ‘Pensión’ are alienated citizens on account of their class and their gender, thereby linking the political with the domestic arena. Once the screams catch Centro’s attention, she switches the radio off, drops her sewing, and walks along the corridor while putting a silky dressing gown on. Before reaching the source of the disturbance, Centro meets a scantily clad woman who comes out of a room to enquire, reassuring her and suggesting that she ‘return to her job’, which confirms the Pension to be a brothel. On

¹² As Billig notes, nationalism is embedded in everyday practices that may pass unnoticed, ‘the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced ... these habits are not removed from everyday life ... Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry’. See *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 6.

reaching the last room, Centro reprimands heavily pregnant Isabel for not coming to the house ‘alone’, implying that Isabel had migrated from her village to hide her pregnancy. When Centro realises that they need to go to hospital urgently, a cut shows the two women in winter coats walking gingerly downstairs. Centro, sporting the red wig that was seen in the sitting room and holding a cigarette between her lips, helps Isabel, who justifies her ignorance about her due date because she does ‘not how to count’. Humour notwithstanding, Centro’s reply, ‘Illiteracy is too bad!’, stresses how lack of education affected the lower classes, especially women who, like Isabel, had to resort to domestic service or to prostitution as a means of survival. Isabel’s acknowledged illiteracy, like her poverty, encapsulates Francoism co-ordinated attack on women and members of the lower classes, especially those from areas which had supported the Spanish republic in the 1930s.¹³

On reaching the empty street, Centro hails the only car on sight, cursing the driver for not stopping. In desperation, when she sees the next vehicle, an empty bus on way to the depot, she walks to the middle of the road and kneels before it, forcing the driver to break and helping Isabel onto it. A handful of humorous details, including Centro’s faux fur coat, ostensibly red wig, and the cigarette hanging from her mouth, only lighten slightly the sense of foreboding that pervades this sequence. From the resonance of the screams in the desolate neighbourhood to the voice on the radio, this environment encapsulates a ‘state of exception’ that ended Franco’s rule in the same spirit of vengeance with which it had started. In this case, the regime targeted those leading civil society’s renewed unrest, including workers’ unions, students, and neighbourhood associations, often supported by Catholic fraternities and clergy.¹⁴ The irony of a regime proclaiming ‘state of exception’ when, as suggested above, the civil war had been extended through ebbs and flows of a ‘state of exception’ that continued the civil war did not escape its critics. However, it was the first time that Almodóvar had joined that chorus in his productions, which he would emphasise in public declarations.

While *Live Flesh*’s credits and first sequence speak of the regime’s repression, the setting of Victor’s birth alludes to its opposition. This can be seen when the bus in which the

¹³ These areas included Asturias and the bordering mining areas of Leon, Extremadura, Andalucía, Catalonia, Valencia’s region, the Basque Country, and Madrid.

¹⁴ These groups increased their activities in the early 1970s, culminating in the establishment of the Junta Democrática, an amalgamation of centre and left-wing parties and unions which charted a path to democratic freedom.

women travel stops as Isabel breaks waters and we hear the diegetic voices of the women inside the bus. A crane shot that zooms in towards the bus frames it against a wall in which graffiti calling for ‘freedom’ (‘Libertad’) can be read (Figure 9). To emphasise the message, after Isabel delivers the baby the bus exits the frame to reveal the message in full, with the camera lingering a few seconds on the words ‘Down with the state of exception’ (Figure 10). The graffiti’s misspelling the word ‘excepción’ as ‘escepcion’, reflecting its pronunciation, corroborates the socio-political dimensions of Spain’s ‘illiteracy’, linking it with Isabel’s ‘inability to count’.



Figure 9. The bus is framed between Christmas lights and graffiti



Figure 10. Graffiti linking illiteracy with opposition to the regime

This lengthy prologue is followed by intertitles that locate the action ‘twenty years later’ as a tracking shot follows a motorbike in Madrid to the rhythm of a non-diegetic flamenco rumba. We are re-introduced to young Victor, whose birth had opened the film and whose incipient paternity will close it with a reflective view of the past and a hopeful look at the future. This ‘epilogue’, six years later, has Victor’s partner, Elena (Francesca Neri), starting labour at work, and a colleague offering to drive the couple to the hospital through Madrid’s centre. A cut immediately takes us to a perpendicular shot of a street with a red car stuck in traffic underneath Christmas lights (Figure 11). From this perspective, we hear two screams reminiscent of the film’s initial sequence, and another cut transport us to the front of the car, framing Victor and Elena together in the back seat (Figure 12).



Figure 11. The car is caught in Madrid’s traffic



Figure 12. Victor comforts Elena

While Victor comforts Elena, he addresses his unborn child, who, he reminisces, is ‘in the same situation’ that he was but whose world is unlike Victor’s, when people were ‘scared shitless’ under state of exception. Their child is ‘luckier’, he adds, because Spanish people are no longer afraid, and the ‘difference’ can be seen in the colourful crowd in Madrid, the capital and epitome of his country. A fast tempo non-diegetic piano tune underscores the joyfulness of the present and the hope for the future (Figure 13). The blunt message of the film’s bookends was remarked upon by the director, who explained away his prior silence as a form of ‘revenge’ on the dictatorship: ‘I had not made such a direct comment about Francoism until now ... The beginning of my cinema denied Franco’s presence, but I recover its memory here in a very concrete, punctual manner’.¹⁵ Although, as Almodóvar remarks, to pretend that the past had not existed could be classed as a form of retribution, it is also a form of acquiescence that populates the present with ‘ghosts’, as seen in *Volver*.



Figure 13. *Live Flesh*'s note of hope

Ghosts from the Past and *Volver*

As delineated in *Live Flesh*, a dialectics between memory and oblivion informs transitions from civil conflicts, as well as their perpetuation through states of exception. Degrees of selective forgetting, however, perpetuates the victimisation of segments of the population who are treated as ‘collateral damage’. Such collective silencing, as Dominick LaCapra

¹⁵ Almodóvar, Interview by Juan Cavestany, ‘Las adaptaciones hay que hacerlas con absoluta infidelidad’. *El País*, 13 October 1997 (https://elpais.com/diario/1997/10/13/cultura/876693605_850215.html).

observes, forecloses the ‘memory-work’ that can help overcome the paralysing effects of melancholia through mourning and ‘the symbolic provision of a proper burial’.¹⁶ LaCapra’s observations are especially pertinent for Almodóvar’s Spain as a country in which the dialogue between the dead and the living has traditionally been integrated into everyday life. These parameters are nowhere better illustrated than in the gendered narrative of mourning that the director expounds in *Volver*.

Volver’s focus on death and burial dramatises the attempt to move from trauma caused by ‘the father’, charting different responses to masculine abuse from three generations of women. Whereas Irene and, to a lesser extent, Raimunda, belong to generations for whom patriarchal domination was part of life, Raimunda’s daughter, Paula, is willing and able to confront her ‘father’, Paco (Antonio de la Torre). In addition, Paula can count on her mother’s commitment to shield her, as Raimunda takes responsibility for Paula’s crime, as well as hiding and disposing of Paco’s corpse. Gutiérrez-Albilla’s study traces quite precisely the ways in which this ‘domestic’ narrative is aligned with that of Spain through the deployment of ‘incest as a political allegory of repression’:

Raimunda’s rape by her father, or her husband’s failed attempt to rape Raimunda’s daughter, events which are identified as personal traumas, can also be allegorically read as the violence perpetrated on Spain, and the wound made in the social body and psyche, by the totalitarian regime of Franco in our recent past, which, as embodied in the figure of Paco, is still perpetuated by the dominant patriarchal ideology in Spanish society.

As Gutiérrez-Albilla remarks, the attempt to move on from a patriarchal past applies as much to the individual as to the collective: ‘Almodóvar’s *Volver* does attempt to “act out” and/or to “work through” personal traumas perpetrated by dead paternal figures (Raimunda’s father and husband), or, in a more allegorical and oblique manner, the collective traumas perpetrated by the Francoist regime’.¹⁷ Efforts to ‘work through’ its past have been led in Spain by ‘memory’ associations whose archaeological work came to light at the turn of the twenty-first century, as they attempted to find the remains of victims of extra-judicial executions who had been thrown into mass graves during the war or its immediate aftermath.

¹⁶ LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25.4 (1999), 696-727 (p. 713).

¹⁷ Gutiérrez-Albilla, ‘Returning to and from the Maternal Rural Space’, p. 326.

The labours of volunteers and relatives have been successful in locating and identifying some of these remains and re-burying them. These ritual commemoration and burials have provided solace to relatives, allowing them to shed the weight of the past or, in Freudian terms, to overcome the arrested mourning of melancholia.¹⁸ These tasks have also been censored as a step backwards with the potential to reignite the past conflict, a perspective typically adopted by those politically or familiarly related to the winners of the civil war. A visible site in which this contest has been played out is the Valley of the Fallen, a grandiose monument containing a mass grave with remains of around 34,000 victims of the war, some of whom were transferred there from collective graves. In addition, the dictator himself was laid to rest there, and was only exhumed following a protracted court case on 24 October 2019. Court cases are open from relatives who were not consulted, normally because of their classification as enemies of the people in accordance with the measures of state of exception imposed by the winners.

Volver's 'return' to one's place of origin constructs the mother(land) as an umbrella encompassing the home (in an ancestral village) and the tomb (in the village's cemetery). It is, therefore, apposite for the narrative to open with the ritual commemorations of All Saint's Day with a tracking-short that moves across a cemetery to show middle-aged women scrubbing and adorning tombs (Figure 14). Their rhythmic movements are punctuated by the non-diegetic sound of 'Canción de las espigadoras' (Song of Female Gleaners), a theme from a 1930 zarzuela, *La Rosa del Azafrán* ('Saffron Rose'). Based on Lope de Vega's play, *El perro del hortelano* (The Dog in the Manger), this zarzuela focuses on a wealthy landlady, Sagrario, who is in love with a peasant, Juan Pedro, and objects to his wedding with one of the gleaners, Catalina.¹⁹ At the play's end, Juan Pedro marries Sagrario after being falsely recognised as the lost son of a nobleman who has no descendants, thereby climbing up a fossilised caste system without challenging it. Located in La Mancha, some of this zarzuela's songs have become part of the area's folklore. Out of context, as they are often sung, the songs evoke nostalgia for the putative harmony between the land, the people working it, and its landowners. Such pastoral view dissipates in the face of the unsubtle conservatism pervading an idea of social concord that rests on the maintenance of hegemonic relations of

¹⁸ See Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in Volume XIV of *The Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 243-58.

¹⁹ Lope de Vega's play was published in 1618 and the zarzuela was first performed in Madrid in 1930. The song is interpreted by Conchita Penedes.

power. In this vein, the song alludes to God willing the never-ending work of the gleaners who, grudgingly but cheerfully, accept their fate, as indicated in the coda: ‘Aye, aye, aye, aye! The Lord commands so much work!’.



Figure 14. Women clean and decorate tombs

Through this non-diegetic tune, the activities of the gleaners, fulfilling God’s will, are linked with those of the women cleaning graves in *Volver*, which are essential to one of the most important commemorations of the Spanish calendar. On 1 and 2 November, All Saints’ Day and Day of the Dead, Spanish cemeteries host religious and familial celebrations that connect the living with the dead through ritual memorialisation. These rites are, as *Volver* shows, mediated by women who act as bridges across generations, cleaning and decorating tombs with fresh flowers and preparing food and sweets to share. While villagers tend to organise and prepare these festivities, urban migrants often return to their ancestral village to visit tombs of relatives, as signposted in *Volver*’s initial scene with two generations of women attending a grave.

The camera’s tracking is interrupted by a wipe, showing the film title, ‘Volver’, in red on a granite background, reminiscent of a tomb (Figure 15). A cut removes the title to zoom out from a tomb stone with a couple’s oval photographs to show Raimunda and her sister, Sole (Lola Dueñas), scrubbing while reminiscing about their parents’ love and the fire in which they died. They are accompanied by Raimunda’s daughter, Paula, who stands next to the grave, staring intently at her phone (Figure 16). After Raimunda insists that her mother died with the person that she loved the most, a cut shows Agustina (Blanca Portillo), walking past cleaning women who salute her before she greets the sisters.



Figure 15. A wipe introduces the film's title



Figure 16. Raimunda cleans her parents' grave while Paula stands next to it

Agustina's broad acquaintance with all the women, and her subsequent references to rites of passage, provide information to viewers about the traditional customs that are shown on screen. Her character and attitude also project the feminisation of caring duties for the living, as well as the dead. This is shown initially by the fact that she looks after the sisters' aged Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave) and will, in turn, take charge of the wake and funeral rites after her death. Her familiarity with these rituals is spelled out when she tells the sisters that she has come to clean her own grave and we learn that she has planned her own burial. This accords with the Spanish tradition of buying one's tomb in the familial village and making funeral arrangements during one's lifetime, a custom that is also adhered to by urban migrants who return to the village's cemetery every year on All Saint's Day and, eventually, to be buried there.

Throughout Spain, it is women who, like Agustina, have remained in their village, who take care of familial tombs, as well as their own, ‘like a second home’ (Figure 17). However, Agustina’s reference to the time ‘flying by’ sitting next to her grave ‘freaks out’ cosmopolitan Paula, alienated from these rites. As Dean Allbritton notes, Paula ‘is a clear stand-in for an audience disconnected from village superstitions and traditions’, and voicing the audience’s questions.²⁰ By contrast, Allbritton continues, Raimunda, Sole, and Agustina find meaning and comfort in these rituals:

in the richness of the film’s initial scene, which asynchronously stacks modernity and tradition on top of each other, we see the teenaged Paula’s horror that Agustina would visit her own grave. Her Aunt Sole’s insistence that it is the custom of the village does nothing to assuage Paula. As a representative of urbanity and modernity, Paula becomes a stand-in for any member of the audience who would read this act as similarly unfathomable, as old-fashioned, or superstitious.²¹



Figure 17. Agustina talks about sitting by her grave

Throughout *Volver* women sustain life’s rites of passage, tasks that customarily included helping with births, facilitating life’s end, as well as cleansing and preparing corpses for burial and organising wakes in which women were present as ‘plañideras’ (‘crying mourners’). These were and remain as much cherished rituals as onerous duties, shown when

²⁰ Allbritton, ‘Timing Out: The Politics of Death and Gender in Almodóvar’s *Volver*’, *Hispanic Research Journal*, 16:1 (2014), 49-64 (p. 56)

²¹ Allbritton, p. 54.

Sole hears that Raimunda will not be able to travel to the village to attend her aunt's wake. Sole, who is afraid of the dead, also fears the neighbours' gossip, demonstrating the flip side of female solidarity to be women monitoring other women to maintain sexist customs. As the director has emphasised, the country of his upbringing is one in which women's subjugation was enshrined in strict laws and codes of practice that were often policed by institutions linked to the Catholic Church or their social agents, some of whom were women.²² These women, in other words, offer a salutary reminder that the repressed often contribute to power dynamics that buttress the status quo, as argued eloquently by Michel Foucault.²³

The asphyxiating dimensions of these rituals are revealed when Sole goes to the village to attend her aunt's wake and funeral. Rushing to enter the house, she opens the wrong curtains to be welcomed by the silent stare of men who seal their homosocial bonding over a glass of wine (Figures 18 and 19). Sole's distress is soothed by Agustina who holds her tenderly while directing her to a room full of women all dressed in black (Figure 20). On entering the room, the camera shifts to a vertical take from the ceiling that captures the mourning women as they stand up to kiss Sole, encircling her and rendering the atmosphere claustrophobic (Figure 21). In a scene evocative of Lorca's rural trilogy, the women sit in a circle while hearing how Agustina had found Aunt Paula dead after hearing knocks and voices by her window, which all assume to be from ghosts (Figure 22).²⁴

²² The most visible organisation policing women during the Franco era was the Sección Femenina of the fascist Falange, which administered compulsory 'domestic' training in the form of the Servicio Social. On this topic, see Kathleen J.L. Richmond, *Women and Spanish Fascism: The Women's Section of the Falange 1934-1959* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²³ Foucault argues that 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere'. See *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 63 and *passim*.

²⁴ Lorca's famous trilogy, *Yerma* (1934), *Blood Wedding* (1932) and *House of Bernarda Alba* (1936), concentrates on the plight of women from rural Spain in the early twentieth century.



Figure 18. The men's homosocial bonding is disrupted by Sole's entry



Figure 19. Framed between curtains, Sole laments her intrusion



Figure 20. Agustina comforts Sole



Figure 21. The women kiss Sole



Figure 22. Agustina rehearses the supernatural announcement of Aunt Paula's death

This scene transports the action to a timeless past in a film that juxtaposes tradition and modernity, which, as in *Live Flesh*, is signposted by the colour palette. A hallmark of the director and one of *Volver*'s most salient features is the use of vibrant tones in interiors or in the clothing worn by different characters or by the same characters at different points of his films film. Two contrasts serve to illustrate this theme in *Volver*. Firstly, the difference between Raimunda at home and in public and, secondly, the disparity between Raimunda's clothes and those of her mother, Irene. Throughout the film, Irene remains dressed in dark, neutral, or soft blue tones, and the first bright clothes that she wears is a sky-blue cardigan when the two women embrace, signalling the healing process (Figure 23). By contrast, in most of the scenes were Raimunda wears dull clothes, she is either in the house or in a scene concerning death, demonstrating an element of her life that is closed off from the world. Colour, therefore, helps the director to project the division between a generation that experienced the dictatorship and those who, like Raimunda, lived primarily in its shadow. For

John C. Hawkins, *Volver*'s 'colouration' corresponds with the Baroque aesthetics that the director has embraced throughout his career, as well as Almodóvar's peculiar treatment of gender. Hawkins suggests this to be a means to challenge concepts of purity and taboo associated with femininity, transvestism, and non-binary sexuality:

Pedro Almodóvar ... appears on the other side of Franco's repressive attempts at managing Spain's multiplicity of cultures and sexualities with a baroque sensitivity to melodrama and bright, rich colouration. The over-the-top theatricality of the performances in his films and his relentless insistence on the joyously obscene fluid and skin of the human body results in a baroque confrontation with sanitation and purity. In doing so, Almodóvar asserts the power of communities of women and queer subcultures in a way that defies the Franco regime without ever acknowledging him.²⁵



Figure 23. Irene wears blue when embracing Raimunda

Raimunda's subversion of 'purity and sanitation' is expressed using red, a colour associated with women through menstruation, childbirth and, in this film, murder. These parameters are connected when Raimunda soaks the blood of her husband's corpse using kitchen towels, reminiscent of menstruation pads (Figure 24). The message is hammered home when her cleaning is interrupted by a doorbell when Emilio, the owner of a restaurant downstairs, asks her to keep the key in case potential buyers show up. While he stands at the

²⁵ Hawkins, 'Displaced Persons and Returning Mothers: Flannery O'Connor, Pedro Almodóvar, and the Post-Fascist Baroque', *English Studies*, 100.5 (2009), 511-525 (p. 512).

door, Emilio calls attention to blood spots on Raimunda's neck, which she dismisses nonchalantly as 'woman's things' (Figure 25). Raimunda's oblique reference to menstruation not only challenges the taboos associated with female bodily fluids but also relates them to 'killing the father'.²⁶ As with rites of life and death, menstruation attests to the notion of purity and the bodily functions that Julia Kristeva has classed as 'abject', which are hereby appropriated and vindicated.²⁷ It is, therefore, pertinent that all objects associated with Paco's murder, from the knife, to the kitchen towels and to the fridge in which the corpse is hidden connect the domestic realm with the patriarchal politics that those actions disrupt.

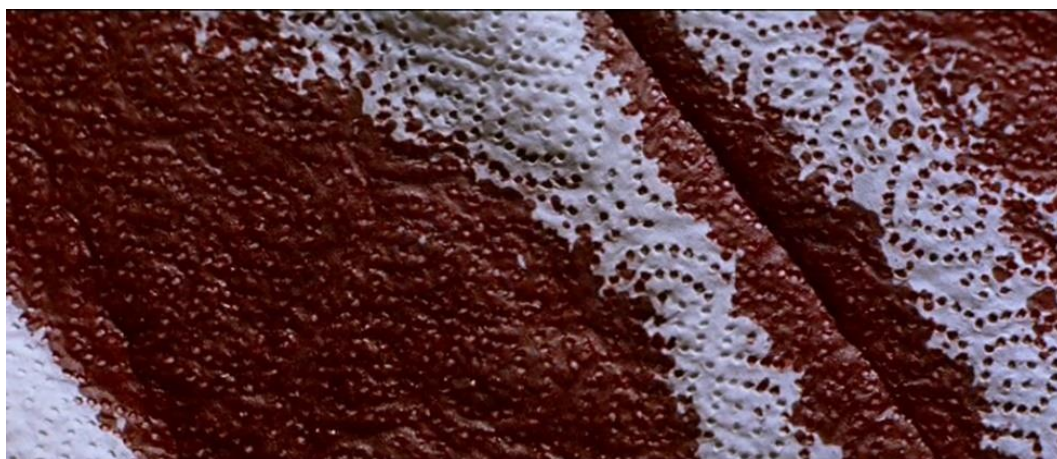


Figure 24. Kitchen towels soak Paco's blood



²⁶ On this topic, see Camino, "Madrid me Mata": Killing the Husband in Alex de la Iglesia's *La comunidad* (2000) and Pedro Almodóvar's *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!!* (1984), *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 41.3 (2005), 332-341.

²⁷ Kristeva defined the 'abject' as the horror resulting from the erasure of boundaries between self and other, subject and object, exemplified by, for example, corpses. See *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Figure 25. Blood staining Raimunda's neck

The connotations of red, this time mitigated by being combined with white and sky blue, are furthered by the clothes that Raimunda wears at a party that she gives in Emilio's restaurant, which she had opened to feed a film crew (Figure 26). This is the point at which Raimunda sings and begins to address the pain of her past, which will culminate in the film's final sequence. Paula's acknowledgment of never having heard her mother sing, corroborates that Raimunda had effectively blocked her memories. Raimunda lip-syncs a flamenco adaptation of the Carlos Gardel tango that gives the film its title, *Volver*, originally written by Alfredo Le Pera and interpreted here by Estrella Morente. The tango's lyrics allude directly not so much to longing as to fear of the past. This is emphasised by the elision of the song's opening stanza, with Raimunda starting in the second's focus on fear of the past: 'I am afraid of the encounter / with the past that returns / to meet my life'. Walking in 'the old street', the traveller recalls fleeting time, lost love and the destruction caused by oblivion as each stanza offers an apt metonymy for the political and geographical 'return' to the director's past under Franco's state of exception.



Figure 26. Paula watches Raimunda about to sing

The song's coda rehearses the return of a 'traveller' after 'twenty years', establishing a link with Raimunda's past. This is not just because, as she sings, Raimunda directs her view to Sole's car where her mother, Irene, watches the scene, overcome by emotion. It is also because the song revisits her childhood, when Raimunda sung it in castings to which she was taken by her mother. It is, therefore, not surprising that Irene, who is listening intently while hiding, breaks down when Raimunda directs her view towards her. As Steven Marsh stresses, Irene returns to redress the 'unfinished business' of supporting her daughter but is, at this point in the film, still unable to do 'reveal' herself:

As in tango or flamenco, the film's rhythm [. . .] is syncopated; its syntax is irregular and incomplete, full of skipped beats and surprises, disturbed as in ... the unfinished business that Irene — an unseen witness to her daughter's performance — has returned to finish, which in turn reflects the repeated game of concealment and revelation, of veiling and unveiling, that the film plays upon the spectator.²⁸

Volver's many 'returns' are thus brought together through calculated nostalgia. Self-indulgent longing aside, the tango provides not only the film's centre of gravity but also a privileged perspective from which to revisit individual and collective memories that are as emotional as they are traumatic. These are mapped onto Spain's history, foregrounding the challenges of redressing internal conflicts, and the ways in which cultural productions can help construct (or deconstruct) the foundational narratives on which identity is built. It is suitable, then, that Paco's corpse remains hidden in a freezer in Emilio's restaurant for most of the film. His location, for Stephanie Golob, acts as a reminder of Spain's suppression of its Francoist past:

Like the body in the freezer in Pedro Almodóvar's 2006 film, *Volver*, Francoist repression during the decades after the civil war is hidden in plain view in contemporary Spanish society, with the question of when – and how – it will be brought to light, confronted and ultimately laid to rest causing more than simply the frisson of morbid curiosity inspired by the film.²⁹

The 'deep freeze' of Spain's and Raimunda's past is, therefore, one of abuse and trauma, resulting in murder and hidden corpses. Notwithstanding the coincidence in the name of Raimunda's husband, Paco, with the dictator's, these scenes corroborate Almodóvar's association of masculinism with totalitarianism and femininity with solidarity. However, Raimunda ultimately buries the corpse of her murdered husband next to a river in which she had spent summer days as a child, taking care to signal the location by carving dates on a

²⁸ Marsh, 'Missing a Beat: Syncopated Rhythms and Subterranean Subjects in the Spectral Economy of *Volver*', in *All About Almodóvar: A Passion for Cinema*, ed. Brad Epps and Despina Kakoudaki (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 339–56 (p. 349).

²⁹ Golob, 'Volver: The Return of/to Transitional Justice Politics in Spain', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 9.2 (2008), 127–141 (p. 127).

tree. With these finishing touches, Raimunda obliterates her daughter's crime and creates a site of memory in which the past can be acknowledged.

By contrast with Irene, then, Raimunda straddles across between two generations: one for whom abuse was an immanent part of life and another who is equipped to challenge it. Thus, while Raimunda suffered abuse herself, she never hesitates to offer her full support to Paula, to the point of assuming agency for her murder (Figure 27). The generational gap is closed by Paula's murder of her intended abuser, which contrast sharply with Irene's unconscious complicity and Raimunda's victimhood. Paco meets Paula's active resistance and is murdered with a knife that we had seen Raimunda cleaning in an earlier scene when a perpendicular shot had aligned it with her cleavage. Raimunda's breasts, a symbol of femininity and motherhood, are extended by the phallic weapon with which her daughter will defend herself (Figure 28). Thus, when extracting the knife from her husband's corpse, Raimunda places it before her eyes as a symbol of empowerment, with his blood replacing that of Paula's defloration (Figure 29).



Figure 27. Raimunda comforts Paula



Figure 28. Raimunda cleans the murder weapon



Figure 29. Raimunda contemplates Paco's blood

While Paula and Raimunda are capable of 'handling' a masculine weapon, the camera's fixation on Raimunda's breasts in relation with the knife is as much a celebration of her body as an objectification, especially given the fragmentation of her anatomy. This constructs Raimunda as an object of desire for viewers, very much in line with the universalisation of the masculine cinematic gaze analysed by Laura Mulvey.³⁰

At the film's end, three generations of women face up to the future, showing the strength arising from feminine solidarity. In Irene's case, this solidarity extends to caring for Agustina, the daughter of the woman that she murdered, who returns to the village with palliative medication for her terminal cancer. In the final scene, Irene shuttles between two neighbouring family homes whose wide corridors, lined with potted plants, create a secluded oasis against the heat, the wind, and the destruction wrecked by time. This tranquil setting reinforces the notion that the pain of the past can be countered through a return to a feminine, secluded environment (Figures 30 and 31).

³⁰ See Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975): 6–18.



Figure 30. The house as women's space



Figure 31. Irene in her home as a fade to black closes the film

Irene's retreat to La Mancha signals the simultaneous acceptance of and challenge to the past's grip on the present. Irene has returned as a ghost 'from the past' to heal past wounds by 'talking about it all' with Raimunda, in their home, away from the trappings of urban modernity. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, two important murders will remain hidden: Paula's murder of her adopted father and would-be rapist, Paco, and Irene's murder of her husband and his unnamed lover, Agustina's mother. After the abusive father is dispensed with, familial relationships are restricted to those of working-class mothers who, like Raimunda, are modelled on Italian neo-realist films.³¹ Once all the fathers

³¹ The paradigmatic 'mother' of neo-realism was Italian actor Anna Magnani, in, for example, Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951).

are gone, the film suggests, feminine camaraderie will sustain the mother(land). As Allbritton observes, this amounts to a reimagining of ‘familial bonds’:

Almodóvar loops the normative generational time of the family back in on itself, and in doing so he clearly indicts bad figures of paternity, while also highlighting the transformative potential of reimagined familial bonds. The removal of the bad father through murder emphasizes sorority and redirects the generational time of the family so that it is no longer forward-moving but returning backwards — through time, tradition, and death.³²

The setting of *Volver*’s final scene, the familial home, showcases melodrama’s focus on the domestic arena as a site of conflict that not only stands in for the political but personifies it.³³ Cinematic ellipses notwithstanding, *Volver*’s end implies that the incest committed by Raimunda’s father would neither be publicly revealed nor tried in a court of law. His crime, however, is not the only one to remain unpunished, as Irene could be prosecuted on two counts. Firstly, because her failure to assist Raimunda made her an accessory to abuse, though she would allege her ignorance to contest those charges. Secondly, and more notably, Irene’s status as a ‘ghost’ had resulted from having gone into hiding after setting her husband and his lover on fire. Irene’s arson resulted in a couple’s unrecognisable ashes, assumed to be hers alongside her husband’s, as we are informed in the film’s opening scene. A ‘pact of silence’ about past crimes seals thus the relationship between mother and daughter within the nostalgia of the ‘return’ to which the film’s title alludes. Paradoxically, Irene’s silences will be cathected through the verbal exchanges with Raimunda that will allow her to transcend her melancholia, in Freud’s understanding of this process.

Volver charts precisely Raimunda’s transition from the ‘arrested process’ of melancholia to ‘the possibility of engaging trauma’ through mourning and ‘talking about it all’. Returning, according to the film, entails the acceptance of past injustices to move on

³² Allbritton, p. 57.

³³ As Hawkins notes the individual and collective wounds have ‘profound political significance to Spanish audiences’: ‘Raimunda’s rape by her father, or her husband’s failed attempt to rape Raimunda’s daughter, events which are identified as personal traumas, can be allegorically read as the violence perpetrated on Spain, and the wound made in the social body and psyche, by the totalitarian regime of Franco in our recent past, which, as embodied in the figure of Paco, is still perpetuated by the dominant patriarchal ideology in Spanish society’ (p. 523). On this topic, see also Gutiérrez-Albilla, p. 326.

from them to reach a mythical maternal space. In other words, while the absence of justice contains the possibility of the past encroaching into the present, the talking cure suggested by Raimunda will enable her to work through trauma and overcome the ‘arrested process’ of melancholia. The potential circularity of melancholia in which Raimunda was caught, as Freud proposed, is to be addressed through mourning, which LaCapra argues, ‘brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life that allows one to begin again’.³⁴

Trauma, Mourning and Dissidence

Mourning is, in *Volver*, an individual form of grieving and a social ritualisation that allows circumventing the compulsion to revisit trauma. This is seen through the rites of death with which it begins and to which it returns at the end when the past is blown away as the litter bin, blown by the ‘viento solano’ (east wind). Affect and communication prevail and provide grounds for forgiveness once Raimunda can grieve and resume her relationship with Irene. With this resumption comes a personal sense of renewal, very much like that experienced by the end of the journey from Victor’s birth to that of his child in *Live Flesh*. Both Raimunda and Victor leave behind a past of abuse to inhabit the present and hope for their children’s future. Their progression, however, relies on the elimination of ‘dissident’ women, such as Agustina’s mother in *Volver* and Victor’s mother and lover in *Live Flesh*.

The article has argued that, despite the constraints that surround them, Almodóvar’s women create spaces of solidarity and resistance that negotiate the determinism of their masculinist environments. Nevertheless, these spaces remain part of a domestic and domesticated sphere whereby the subaltern acquires a voice that can be used as an endorsement of the status quo. In concrete, within the Spanish tradition deployed by Almodóvar, this means the upholding of masculinism through appeals to folklore and cultural identity. Consequently, even when disrupting important mores, Almodóvar’s colourful mothers often fit quite precisely the archetype of gendered division consecrated by Francoism’s National-Catholicism.

³⁴ LaCapra, p. 713.

Almodóvar's idiosyncratic projection of women as embodiments of the motherland challenges the patriarchal state of exception and the totalitarianism of National-Catholicism in *Live Flesh* and *Volver*. However, as this article has argued, the return to a motherland supposedly utopian entails the acceptance of feminine segregation and the obliteration of 'dissident' women. Women like Isabel, Clara or Agustina's mother were punished and stigmatised by the Francoist state of exception and are, intentionally or casually, dismissed from Almodóvar's post-modern *civitas*. *Volver* and *Live Flesh* reveal thus ghosts of the past that haunt the present, including a misogyny that cannot be buried as easily as the corpses of fictional or real Pacos. The feminine spaces of resistance of these two films, this article has shown, embed nostalgia for a motherland clearly defined by the 'state of exception'. However colourful, this motherland remains a secluded and segregated space of resistance to which neither dissident women nor abused daughters would ever wish to return.

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