

The influence of classical Hollywood cinema on the films of Pedro Almodóvar

El influjo del Hollywood clásico en el cine de Pedro Almodóvar

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Abstract:

Pedro Almodóvar has often talked in interviews and public statements about the influence that classical Hollywood cinema has had on his filmmaking. But how does that influence manifest itself in his work? This study attempts to answer this question based on the classification of Almodóvar's filmography into three broad film genres: comedy, melodrama and thriller. On this premise, the study considers the work of three filmmakers (understood as authors in a Foucauldian sense, i.e., as discourse producers) who are representative of these genres (Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk and Alfred Hitchcock, all of whom have been identified by Almodóvar as direct influences on his films). The stylistic features of these three directors are then compared and contrasted with basic elements of three Almodóvar films (*Broken Embraces*, *The Skin I Live In* and *I'm So Excited!*), as representative examples of these genres at a stage in the director's career well into the 21st century.

Resumen:

Pedro Almodóvar ha afirmado en diversas entrevistas y declaraciones la influencia que el cine clásico de Hollywood ha ejercido en su cine. Ahora bien, ¿en qué se traduce esa afirmación? Este trabajo pretende analizarlo partiendo de la clasificación, en términos de géneros cinematográficos, de la filmografía de Almodóvar en tres grandes dimensiones: la comedia, el melodrama y el *thriller*. A partir de esa premisa, se abordará la figura de tres cineastas (entendidos como autores en un sentido foucaultiano, como productores de discurso) representativos de esos géneros (Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk y Alfred Hitchcock, mencionados todos ellos por Almodóvar como referencias directas de su cine). La comparación finaliza con el contraste entre los estilemas de esos tres directores con los rasgos fundamentales de tres películas de Almodóvar (*Los abrazos rotos*, *La piel que habito* y *Los amantes pasajeros*), como ejemplos representativos de esos géneros en una etapa de la filmografía del director plenamente ubicada en el siglo XXI.

Keywords:

Film analysis; Comedy films; Hollywood; Melodramas; Pedro Almodóvar; Thrillers.

Palabras clave:

Análisis fílmico; comedia; Hollywood; melodrama; Pedro Almodóvar; *thriller*.

1. Introduction

A simple online search can reveal how commonly Pedro Almodóvar's filmography is associated with classical Hollywood cinema. The filmmaker himself has identified the relationship in numerous interviews and public statements (including the "*Carta blanca*" on the website of the Almodóvar brothers' film studio El Deseo: <https://www.eldeseo.es/carta-blanca/>), and critics have explored the connection on many occasions. There are even academics, such as Perales Bazo, who have carried out studies specifically aimed at "establishing the links existing between Pedro Almodóvar's work and classical Hollywood cinema" (Perales Bazo, 2008, p. 281) by exploring the work of various Hollywood filmmakers, including the three discussed in the present study.

Perales Bazo's article is a rather unique case in recent research on Almodóvar's films. Scholars have examined his work from the perspective of soundtrack studies (Buljancevic, 2022a; Buljancevic, 2022b), queer studies (García Pérez, 2024; Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2024; Muñoz Torrecilla, 2024; Pucci, 2024; Sancho Cardiel, 2024; Stefani, 2024), the issue of ageism (Gómez Gómez, 2023; Gómez Gómez, 2024), intertextual analysis (Iturbe Tolosa, 2020; Poyato, 2021a; Poyato, 2021b), film genres (Amaya Flores, 2023; Ortiz, 2021), the analysis of specific films (Amaya Flores, 2024; Davis, 2024; Gómez Gómez, 2021; Hernández Martínez, 2021; Martínez Pleguezuelos, 2017; Martínez-Expósito, 2021), the relationship of his films with photography (Parejo, 2020; Parejo, 2022), and even the connections between tourism and auteur cinema (Nieto Ferrando, Lozano Aguilar and Gómez Morales, 2024). In addition to these studies is a whole body of research by Hispanists of the previous generation, such as Acevedo-Muñoz (2007), Méjean (2007), D'Lugo (2006) and Smith (2000).

Drawing on the work of Perales Bazo, this article examines the relationship of Almodóvar's filmography with three key filmmakers of classical Hollywood cinema, based on the assertion that "Almodóvar's preferred genres are melodrama, comedy, and the thriller" (Maíquez Sánchez, 2020, p. 182). The

comparison of Almodóvar's films with the work of Douglas Sirk, Billy Wilder and Alfred Hitchcock (chosen based on their undeniable dominance in these genres during the classical era of Hollywood cinema, and for having been explicitly identified by Almodóvar as key influences on his work) is thus a useful means of exploring the extent to which features of classical Hollywood films can be identified in the Spanish filmmaker's filmography, how the Almodóvarian style has expressed that influence, and what kind of critical reading should be made of it.

To this end, this article will offer an outline of the concepts of classical Hollywood cinema and the auteur filmmaker, followed by a description of the basic features of Sirk's melodrama, Wilder's comedy and Hitchcock's thriller, and a comparison between the way these filmmakers work with these genres and the way Almodóvar has developed them. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn about the similarities identified. This study aims to address a gap in the research related to cinematic and generic influences on Almodóvar's oeuvre, which has tended to focus mainly on his work in the 20th century while giving very limited attention to the 21st.

2. Some conceptual clarifications: on classical Hollywood cinema and the notion of the auteur filmmaker

Due to limitations of space, the notions that give this section its title can only be explored in a very partial way here. However, this partial approach may constitute an advantage, as instead of mapping a systematic and exhaustive definition, this section can present a conceptual distillation that draws on a vast and complex historiographical tradition to frame these notions in the most potentially useful terms for the purposes of this article.

2.1. An idea about film(making)

In general terms, classical Hollywood cinema could be summed up as "a type of filmmaking characterized by the use of all the resources of cinematic language to construct an intelligible narrative, aimed at a spectator for whom the order of the diegetic world is fundamental" (Galindo Pérez, 2019, p. 120).

At least, these are the features of classical Hollywood cinema that can be drawn from the work of authors such as Burch (2011), Bazin (2016), Zunzunegui (2016) and Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1997). Although they may occasionally be questioned or interrogated, as they have been by scholars such as Losilla (2003), Thompson (1993), Sánchez-Biosca (2004) and González Requena (2006), these features always comprise the conceptual core that constitutes the guiding discourse:

The description of the style of classical Hollywood cinema includes a number of characteristics that have varying degrees of impact on the importance of the story for the representation, on the weight of the psychological construction of the characters, on the cinematic composition configured in relation to the privileged gaze of the spectator, or on the widely used yet highly ambiguous notion of transparency. (Galindo Pérez, 2019, p. 125)

This tradition, related both to the nature of the films made in this production context and to the way films are made, has generated a very specific discourse on classical Hollywood cinema, which could thus be understood as a historical period in the evolution of filmmaking that produced both a large body of work and certain practices deemed worthy of imitation because it is considered a peak period (in aesthetic or even moral terms) in film history.

This conceptualization of classical Hollywood cinema is closely associated with cinephilia, understood as a particular relationship with films and ways of thinking and talking about cinema. Pedro Almodóvar, a filmmaker with a markedly cinephilic nature (as evidenced by both his public statements and some of the clearest stylistic markers of his work in the 21st century, such as his frequent use of explicit intertextual references), can thus be understood to be directly influenced by this idea of classical Hollywood cinema.

2.2. The auteur (filmmaker) as discourse founder

The notion of the auteur has become one of the most widely discussed concepts in film theory. Beyond the question of the acceptance of the terms of these debates, authorship has become a battlefield that at the best of times has

facilitated the development of potent, thought-provoking and productive ideas insofar as the interpretation of filmmaking is concerned.

Galindo Pérez (2015) proposes a classification of attitudes towards auteur cinema based on four main theoretical positions: (1) unconditional fidelity, as expressed by the writers for the film magazine *Cahiers du cinèma* and critics such as Andrew Sarris, underpinned by the conviction that a director's personality permeates the films they make; (2) qualified acceptance, represented by authors such as André Bazin and Peter Wollen, for whom the assertion of aesthetic personalities coexists with the consideration of the singular work; (3) the shift from the physical author to the discursive author, exemplified in notions such as Booth's implicit author, Eco's model author, or Foucault's author function (the most relevant to this study); and (4) outright denial, reflected in much of Barthes's work, where the text itself and the reader are placed at the heart of the textual process while the author is left out.

Of special significance among this tangle of perspectives is, as noted above, the approach of Michel Foucault (1999), who describes authors in a general sense as discourse producers, meaning, as Alonso García puts it, "initiators of discourses and practices that crystallize—precisely through their tensions and divergences—a particular cultural field" (2015, p. 51).

It could thus be argued that certain filmmakers are of interest as auteurs insofar as their filmmaking practices and the products thereof have led to the construction of a particular conception of (in this case) a film genre associated with classical Hollywood cinema.

In this sense, Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk and Alfred Hitchcock produce discourse about what the comedy, melodrama and thriller genres represent, or more precisely, what these genres mean in the imaginations of cinephiles influenced by the notion of classical Hollywood. The ideas that have been consolidated around these auteurs are what will be compared and contrasted with the work of Pedro Almodóvar.

3. Wilder, Sirk and Hitchcock: discourses on comedy, melodrama and thriller

This section offers an outline of the characteristic features of the film genres associated with the three Hollywood filmmakers chosen for this analysis. From the outset, it is important to highlight two points: first, that all three filmmakers worked within the parameters of a system based on the primacy of the narrative and the consideration of the spectator as a privileged subject (both for the narrative construction and for the *mise-en-scène*), irrespective of the genre concerned; and second, that any generalization like the ones proposed here, especially when dealing with filmmakers as unique as these, necessarily involves overlooking a multitude of nuances and idiosyncrasies in order to sketch out an identifiable discourse in each of three extremely prolific and multifaceted filmographies.

Comedy is a genre that aims to elicit amusement based on a series of decisions related to the four elements of film praxis theorized by Alonso García (2013): scripting, staging, framing and sequencing. In this respect, Wilder enhanced the comicality of his films using two key elements: pacing and misunderstanding (Seidl, 1991). To develop these two key concepts, he made use of a range of cinematic techniques that have come to form part of the general repertoire of the comedy genre: rapid-fire dialogue (with ingenious retorts by characters whose lines practically overlap); the construction of the diegetic space in a way that allows the spectator to identify deceptions and misunderstandings while the characters remain unaware of them; composition of shots to show objects and bodies interacting with each other in humorous ways (and juxtaposing establishment shots with detail shots to show elements of particular narrative importance); and editing work that gives central importance to characters and dialogue.

Adopting a framework of analysis similar to the above, melodrama aims to exacerbate the passions on screen by means of a specific use of stylistic devices involving the same four elements of film praxis mentioned above. Sirk bases his approach to melodrama on a conception of cinematic mannerism that makes the filmmaking process one of the core elements of his films as

expressive artefacts, without neglecting the importance of the story. This aesthetic premise, described in admirable detail by González Requena (2007), is combined with a highly personal iconography that has come through a process of cultural sedimentation to form part of the iconography of melodrama itself, in which the motif of the mirror plays an especially powerful role.

Finally, the thriller (a somewhat ambiguous term intended somehow to bring together elements that share generic qualities, such as the crime drama, suspense film and sub-genres such as the spy film) ties in directly with the notion of “cinema of attractions” explored by numerous authors, including Eisenstein and Gunning. Its aim is to construct storylines revolving around some kind of mystery that the hero must overcome all manner of obstacles in order to solve. Hitchcock bases his entire poetics (and *poietics*) on the management of narrative information and on building effects and meaning by playing with sounds and images (Truffaut, 2002; Castro de Paz, 2012). The generation of tension in the spectator by means of a narrative decision (a character’s action seen by the spectator but not by the other characters in the story) or expressive strategies such as the complex web constructed out of the various points of view in films such as *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) and *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) constitutes the discourse marker that identifies the presence of this auteur, which has been incorporated into a kind of shared understanding of the genre in the cinephile imaginary.

These generic features can serve as a guideline to explore how these core ideas about comedy, melodrama and the thriller have been assimilated, reconfigured or subsumed into Almodóvar’s work, specifically in three films that serve as paradigmatic examples of his oeuvre: *Broken Embraces* (*Abrazos rotos*, 2009), *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*, 2011) and *I’m So Excited!* (*Los amantes pasajeros*, 2013).

4. Comedic influences

When Almodóvar (and many of his actors) mention Billy Wilder as an influence on his work, it is obvious that it is his comedies that should be compared to Wilder's films to analyse the relationship between the two filmographies. Of the ten films directed by Almodóvar in the 21st century, only two, *Volver* (2006) and *I'm So Excited!*, could be identified with this genre, although the former also has a very marked dramatic component. For this reason, as it constitutes the only example of pure comedy made by Almodóvar in this century, *I'm So Excited!* (a film that is also clearly connected to the tradition of Spanish comedy cinema established by Luis G. Berlanga, discernible from its ensemble cast, its sardonic humour and its attempt at a kind of social criticism) will be used in this section as the main case study.

This film will be compared with three canonical works of Wilder's from the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period that marked the peak of his career in terms of critical acclaim. The three productions in question are *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960) and *One, Two, Three* (1961).

How can the work of these two directors be compared? Given their importance in all of these films, it seems appropriate to focus the analysis on two specific technical aspects: the narrative structure (of which the dialogue is an essential component) and the construction of the visuals. These two aspects to a large extent underpin the two decisive elements of pacing and misunderstanding identified above as vital to Wilder's concept of comedy, which Almodóvar makes his own through his particular poetics.

In all three of Wilder's films and in *I'm So Excited!*, the comedy depends mainly on the characters' dialogues. All four films contain fast-paced verbal exchanges (sometimes verging on frenetic) that rely on elements typical of other types of performing that give a lot of weight to conversation (such as vaudeville shows): verbal wit, double entendres, clever comebacks and puns. All of these strategies are of course related to oral expression.

However, differences can be identified, the most important one probably being the relationship between the dialogue and the narrative structure of each film.

In Wilder's case, the construction of the dialogue is placed at the service of a rigid narrative structure, whereby the conversations provide information on the characters' personalities and the relationships between them, the dramatic conflicts they confront and the twists and turns that the story takes. It is important to bear in mind that Wilder's Hollywood productions (including the three films analysed here) all conform to what Burch (2011) calls the institutional mode of representation, which explains the meticulous care taken in his films with the development of the script in a broad sense.

For example, although each one is quite different, the opening sequences of the three Wilder films examined here display a similar, recognizable approach. In *Some Like It Hot*, a car chase with a shoot-out is followed by the scene of a police raid on a speak-easy in Prohibition-era Chicago. Just before the raid, two jazz musicians (played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon) are discussing their economic difficulties while playing their musical instruments onstage at the speak-easy. In this way, Wilder uses a short, humorous verbal exchange to provide his audience with key information on the two protagonists, their personalities and their problems, thereby laying the foundations of the film's narrative structure.

The approach is similar in the opening sequence to *The Apartment*, in which Baxter (Jack Lemmon), an office worker who lends his apartment out to different executives in his company so that they can meet with their extramarital lovers (in the hope that this might help him move up the corporate ladder), introduces himself in a voice-over with a light-hearted and mildly ironic tone. This introductory monologue is at once amusing while also serving to lay out the film's main storyline. Wilder accentuates this strategy in a subsequent scene, where a visibly ill Baxter has to juggle multiple phone calls with different company managers to organize the schedule of visits to his apartment, in an effort to reserve some time of his own there to rest and recover from his illness. The calls take place one after the other at a frenzied pace, and both the content of the conversations and Baxter's expressions as he speaks elicit hilarity while at the same time defining the protagonist's relationships with various characters and one of the story's main conflicts.

One, Two, Three also uses this technique: Mac (James Cagney) is an agile, fast-paced conversationalist, and his interlocutors keep up with his dynamic rhetoric in a context of verbal combat that often veers towards parody or screwball humour. But in reality, all these rapid exchanges serve Wilder's need to weave a narrative structure that ensures that the spectator, always the privileged subject in classical Hollywood filmmaking, understands any narrative developments and the characters' personalities and motivations.

In contrast, in *I'm So Excited!*, Almodóvar establishes his characters' dialogues in a much less controlled environment, with a much lighter narrative structure characterized by a design that is almost caricaturesque, bordering on the absurd. Like Wilder, the Spanish director uses the dialogue as a key source of comicality in the film, but unlike Wilder, he does not give them a decisive role in the construction of the narrative. Instead, they serve as direct manifestations of the characters' moods and personality traits, most notable for their extreme nature. What in Wilder's films is funny because it revolves around a misunderstanding, in Almodóvar's films is funny because of the frank and shocking nature of what is so explicitly expressed. Examples of this can be found in the dialogues between the three crew members played by Javier Cámara, Raúl Arévalo and Carlos Areces, which, while portraying the habitual nature of their interactions, above all serve to demonstrate their eccentricities and excesses.

An analogous contrast between the two filmmakers can be found in the way the visuals are constructed. Wilder plays with a composition based always on the position of the spectator, who has privileged visual access to the information provided (or withheld) compared to the characters. This premise is what largely dictates the interplay between wide shots and close-ups. Similarly, the editing provides a highly measured balance between the informational and the comical, so that the respective gags and humorous situations work both as pure amusement (eliciting laughter) and as a means of constructing narrative meaning (regulating the development of the story).

In *I'm So Excited!*, the visual composition is much more chaotic, even playing with the angle of certain shots (foregoing the usual frontal perspective in

favour of a much more disruptive oblique point of view), using an accelerated editing style and combining wide shots crammed with bodies and close-ups notable for the idiosyncratic expressions of numerous characters. Particularly striking in this respect is one of the sequences in the cockpit where, in an undisguised tribute to the Marx Brothers' famous cabin scene in *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935), various passengers and crew members wander in, exchanging absurd remarks while a wide shot from the perspective of the aircraft control panel (providing an image crowded with bodies and objects in the very limited space) is combined with close-ups of the characters engaged in the bizarre conversations.

In short, it would be possible to trace a line of influence from Wilder to Almodóvar consisting mainly of the comicality of the dialogue, with a pacing and style based on verbal exuberance and rapid changes. However, there are significant differences, both at the level of the script, where Wilder's rigid narrative structure, largely grounded in the dialogue, contrasts with Almodóvar's frivolous and chaotic style, and the visuals, where Wilder's classical virtuosity is quite distinct from Almodóvar's playful, light-hearted approach.

5. Melodramatic resonances

The elements identified as central to Douglas Sirk's melodrama are noticeably present in Almodóvar's 2009 film. With an original screenplay written by the Spanish filmmaker himself, *Broken Embraces* aligns with Sirk's style of melodrama with some interesting traces of what is probably most emblematic title of the genre (and of Sirk's style), *Written on the Wind* (1956), although this does not preclude the possibility of identifying in Almodóvar's film the influence of other melodramas by Sirk, or by other directors such as John M. Stahl. Both films depict a tragic love triangle, with a fourth figure who lurks in the background but is of notable importance to the development of the story and who, significantly, acts in both films as the facilitator of the happy ending following the tragic denouement. The exacerbation of passions, especially in the form of sexual desire and as a source of the emotional agonies that afflict

the female protagonists, is a common denominator not just of this film and Almodóvar's other melodramas, but of his entire filmography. In *Broken Embraces*, again, the various passions that overcome the three main characters doom each of them to a different fate: death in Lena's case; despair, violence and paranoia in the case of Ernesto Sr.; and for Mateo, disability (blindness) and a close encounter with death.

The cinematic mannerism so characteristic of Sirk's classical melodrama is also a common feature of all of Almodóvar's films. From the psychoanalytical perspective posited by González Requena (2007), many of the Spanish filmmaker's works contain the kind of symbolism of repression and of the sublimation of sexual instinct found in *Written on the Wind*, like the phallic oil tower to which Marylee (Dorothy Malone) clings when her beloved Mitch (Rock Hudson) leaves town with Lucy (Lauren Bacall), although in fact Almodóvar's filmography could be split into the titles in which the representation of the sexual instinct is clearly symbolic, and those in which it is represented much more explicitly, in which case *Broken Embraces* would probably belong to the latter group.

Among the iconographic elements that Sirk integrates into his mise-en-scène, the most significant is the mirror. In *Written on the Wind*, this motif emerges as the key feature of the staging in the crucial scene where Kyle (Robert Stack) takes up drinking again, upsetting the balance in the love trio/quartet and bringing out the latent tension between the characters. His personal weakness, just barely contained throughout the story by his sobriety and the support he receives from the other two protagonists, surfaces in the mirror at the club bar where a broken Kyle arranges to meet the other three for dinner to reveal to them the secret that he dares not speak, and which will lead him to a fatal end. Almodóvar's taste for this visual and narrative device is evident in *Broken Embraces*. The main scene in which it appears is the one where Lena (Penélope Cruz) and Mateo (Lluís Homar) make the decision to flee from their lives in Madrid and the film they have been making, which has entangled them fatally with Ernesto Sr. (José Luis Gómez) in a perverse web of obligations, debts, loyalties and exploitation. In that mirror, Lena, semi-naked, bruised

and injured, renounces everything she has been pursuing to escape with Mateo and start a new life in which she can just be herself. A similar web of shifting interests, loyalties and abnegations underpins the plot in Sirk's 1956 film. Indeed, in the portrayal of the characters in both films, the conflicts are complicated by economic inequalities and obligations to the business (oil in one case, filmmaking in part of the other) on which the four main characters depend.

It is of course impossible to overlook the obvious influence on two intersecting elements of cinematic expression: the photographic use of colour and the musical score. In the first case, Pedro Almodóvar is well-known for his recurring interest in using the technology currently available to reproduce the saturated colours of Technicolor, the motion picture process used to produce *Written on the Wind*. In the second, the Basque composer Alberto Iglesias's score is notable for its evocation of the melodramatic style of Sirk's films and other classical melodramas of the 1950s, especially in the section of *Broken Embraces* covering the earlier time-frame, from 1992 to 1994. This aspect will be further explored below. Finally, with respect to the narrative strategy used to structure the script, the importance of the criminal element and the burden of guilt for the resolution of the tragic fate of the love triangle in both films results in a non-linear narrative and two more or less happy endings, both of which, although different in focus, have forms similar to epilogues. However, one way in which Almodóvar's scripting differs from the classical melodramatic formula is his frequent use of a character voice-over, either explaining its source diegetically (for example, with visuals of the character writing a letter or a journal), or presenting it directly as the character's internal monologue, a narrative strategy that the director has consolidated over the last two decades of his career.

The notable presence of stylistic features drawn from Sirk's melodrama identified in Almodóvar's film can also serve as a starting point for exploring the strategies employed by the Spanish filmmaker in films of other genres. It is especially interesting to observe how, among the features with a marked similarity to Sirk's classical Hollywood melodrama, Almodóvar applies a series

of clearly distinct strategies associated with different genres. To begin with, his innovative use of successive mise-en-abyme or meta-staging strategies in *Broken Embraces*, manifested on different levels, could be described as an original kind of cinematic mannerism. One example of these is the film that the filmmaker protagonists (director, actress, occasional producer and production manager) are making in the early-90s time-line, which also reproduces the aesthetics and storyline of Almodóvar's first major international success, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988), constructing a world that is at once intertextual and thought-provokingly self-referential. Another is the "making of" footage compulsively filmed by Ernesto Jr., the producer's son, to spy on Lena and Mateo, which will provide, first, the evidence that reveals to Ernesto Sr. that they are in a relationship, and later, the recording of Lena's tragic death, which also serves as proof that it was not a murder but an unprovoked accident. This representation of the scopic drive, which, as will be discussed below, would reappear in *The Skin I Live In* (2011), is turned into an auditory experience through the blindness of Mateo, who will be able to re-edit his finished film by listening to the soundtrack of the raw footage from the film shoot. The series of mises-en-abyme in *Broken Embraces* construct a motif of the double (in Sirk's mirror, which here becomes a film camera) and a reflection on the film's central themes of absence, identity and representation, right from the very first shot during the opening credits. This shot, which re-frames the field monitor for the film that is being made in the film, shows the face of the stand-in for Lena (Penélope Cruz), before the actress herself takes her stand-in's place in order to film the shot, in a scene that thus serves to foreshadow the cathartic moment in front of the mirror described above. The introduction/credit sequence ends there, and the screen is reconfigured in the format used to introduce us to the lives and fates of the characters.

In this first shot, music also operates on two levels. In the background, the string section plays a clearly classical melodramatic passage in Sirk's style. Simultaneously, in the foreground we hear the piano, with Alberto Iglesias's recognizable touch, evoking the same concept of the stand-in that presents

Lena's character as split into two, or even into three parts: the character, the actress, and her stand-in.

In addition to allowing plot information to be delivered in doses, the use of two time-lines (one beginning in 1992 and the other in 2008) is used by Almodóvar to create a kind of generic diptych that can be clearly identified in different aspects of the staging, framing and sequencing, such as the music. The story set in the 1990s unfolds in clearly melodramatic terms, while the early 21st-century time-line has more of a thriller quality. The conclusion to the second time-line, with the development of the typical sub-plots of abandonment, secrecy and the revelation of filial relations (Diego, it turns out, is Mateo's son), picks up the melodramatic tone again with certain lines of dialogue such as when Judit (Blanca Portillo) says to her son (Tamar Novas): "forgive me for the bitterness I've shown towards you all these years." This addition and combination of features associated with the classical thriller and melodrama genres stands in telling contrast to the backdrop of stylistic elements typical of Almodóvar's work, which the filmmaker develops in his films across all genres. Thus, the narrative economy of the thriller, where ellipsis is used for both strategic and stylistic purposes, operates differently in the style of the Spanish director. In all his films, Almodóvar shows us the actions of his characters repeatedly and even overtly. Taxis arriving at homes, characters ringing doorbells or walking around rooms in search of an object, etc., all contradict the principle of narrative economy or the creation of gaps in the horizon of expectations that typifies the thriller. In the typical Almodóvarian narrative model, what it takes from the thriller (and not so much Hitchcock's cinematic model as Agatha Christie's literary version) is the accumulation and disclosure of all kinds of character information and secrets through key scenes in which the characters engage in long, detailed conversations and confessions, often sitting comfortably face-to-face, explaining and revealing the plot of the film.

In the evocation of both genres, the 21st-century Almodóvar displays a notable taste for the use of detail shots showing the actions of his characters and for visual compositions with overhead angles at moments of tension that are emblematic of dramatic developments. While the emphasis on the detail shot

is a common feature of the classical style he is referencing, the overhead angles notably reflect the influence of Alfred Hitchcock, which is the focus of the next section.

6. Echoes of suspense

Two particularly interesting aspects that emerge in an analysis of *The Skin I Live In* are the diversity of genres it evokes (including family melodrama, speculative science fiction, psychological horror and suspense thriller) and the numerous allusions to different cinematic, literary, pictorial and musical works identified by Pedro Poyato in the film, in a highly complex “operation of transtextuality” (2015, p. 284), all of which begins with the Thierry Joquet novel *Tarantula*, originally published in 1984, on which the film is based. Both of these characteristics (but especially the first) make it possible to identify the technical and thematic influence of some of Alfred Hitchcock’s most emblematic titles in this picture. Perhaps the clearest of these influences is *Vertigo* (1958), although traces of other titles by the British filmmaker, such as *Rear Window* and *Psycho*, are also easily identifiable. The relationship with the plot to *Vertigo* is evident in the attempt by Dr. Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) to reproduce the face of his dead wife on another human being, whom he turns into the double of his fetish. As Peña Ardid (2020) points out, there are clear traces here of the storyline to Hitchcock’s film, although Almodóvar introduces a few twists: the kidnapping, the change of sex, the plot of revenge on his “patient” and the added sub-plot with the character of El Tigre (Roberto Álamo) and his family connection. Most of these additions do not come from the novel on which the film is based, and some were already tested out by the Spanish filmmaker in previous titles such as *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (*¡Átame!*, 1989), where the protagonist (also played by Antonio Banderas) kidnaps the woman he desires with the aim of making her fall in love with him—a storyline this is itself obviously inspired by another classical thriller, *The Collector* (William Wyler, 1965). While *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* introduces the kidnapping motif, Almodóvar also previously made use of the idea of plastic surgery transforming a character into an idolized other in

Labyrinth of Passion (Laberinto de pasiones, 1982), in a plot that brings different types of exacerbated passions into play (Perales, 2008, p. 294). *The Skin I Live In* combines numerous elements of Almodóvar's broader repertoire with the various genre markers and intertextual references mentioned above to compose a thriller-melodrama of expansive dimensions. The question of the scopophilic drive identified in the discussion of *Broken Embraces* is relevant to the analysis of the influence of classical filmmakers and genres on Almodóvar because *The Skin I Live In* reconstructs their technical mannerism in the film's scripting and staging by means of various devices, such as the surveillance camera system used by Dr. Ledgard to keep watch over his prisoner. This device operates on two levels: on a narrative level, involving interactions between the characters and also their discovery of and reaction to plot twists (such as when Ledgard sees his brother, El Tigre, raping Vera); but also (and even more interestingly) on a thematic and evocative level, through the digital colour screen that Ledgard has installed in his bedroom to watch his prisoner, zooming the camera in constantly to see her up close. With this idea the Spanish film offers a fierce twist on its Hitchcockian referent to the self-absorbed gaze of the male protagonist who transforms another person into a double of his lost love. The intensity provided by the digital mediation serves to emphasize the configuration of the psychological viewpoint of the observing character, who takes this obsession and the themes associated with it much further than Hitchcock's *mise-en-scène* in *Vertigo*, whose mannerist style involved different techniques to frame and highlight the image of the reproduced, reformulated woman in the eyes of her creator-observer. In fact, it could even be argued that the surveillance cameras in *The Skin I Live In* serve a narrative function similar to the binoculars and telephoto lenses used by Jeff (James Stewart) to spy on his neighbours in *Rear Window*, while Ledgard's bedroom screen is similar to the various photographic devices used by Scottie (James Stewart) in his surveillance of Madeleine (Kim Novak) in *Vertigo*. Hitchcock's well-known style of photographic mannerism (exemplified by the camera flashes in the final sequence of *Rear Window* or the famous "vertigo effect" in the film of the same name) is reworked by

Almodóvar in this thriller style so specific to the films cited, which could be described as “peeping tom” or “voyeur” thrillers.

Another prominent shared feature is the aforementioned transformation of a character into someone else as an effect of one plot twist and the cause of another. The double and identity theft are constant fixations in the filmographies of both Hitchcock and Almodóvar. What makes these themes particularly interesting in the scripting, staging, framing and editing processes is the way this theoretically thematic feature articulates the mystery of the thriller. The obsessive tactics employed by Scottie (Stewart) and Ledgard (Banderas), respectively, to transform Kim Novak’s Judy/Madeleine and Elena Anaya/Jan Cornet’s Vera/Vicente are a response to past tragedies that have probably traumatized the male protagonists, which in both cases precipitate the horrific events with which both films conclude. It is clear that the genre being characterized here as thriller is based on the strategic delivery of information in doses to advance the story towards the solution of a particular mystery. This strategy, with its corresponding construction of tension to hold the spectator’s interest, is founded in both cases on questions about the motives of the male protagonists, and on the effect of their actions on the women they victimize. Rather than building the suspense on the basic Hitchcockian premise of giving the viewer information that the characters lack, both *Vertigo* and *The Skin I Live In* adhere to a principle associated more with drama, of giving the character and the spectator the same point of view. This narrative strategy associated with Hitchcock’s film also allows Almodóvar to adopt the stylistic features of classical melodrama he so admired to create the cocktail of genres identified above, in a thriller that also bears the hallmarks he had so clearly established by this point in his career, which have made him a recognizable auteur in any genre. Practically all the traits attributed here to the classical melodrama of Douglas Sirk are recognizable in *The Skin I Live In*, but in *Broken Embraces* it is also easy to identify (as noted above in relation to the film’s musical score) many of the features of the thriller genre, especially in the later time-frame (beginning in 2008), which brings the two genres together until they are firmly intertwined. Almodóvar’s predilection for scenes in which two characters exchange verbal explanations

of the plot is also evident in both films. The sub-plots and the portrayal of the supporting characters in both cases reflect the filmmaker's recurring themes, such as abandonment, identity crisis, lost loved ones and severed family relationships, all of which, it should be remembered, are themes included in the classical films identified here as influences.

The Skin I Live In supposedly ends well for Vicente/Vera (Jan Cornet/Elena Anaya), who manages to escape and introduce him/herself to his/her mother as Vicente, albeit in Vera's body. The ending even hints at a potential relationship with his/her lesbian companion, Cristina (Bárbara Lennie), a relationship that paradoxically may be made possible by Vicente/Vera's dramatic transformation. This ending is one of the many ways in which Almodóvar's film deviates from the novel that inspired it, Thierry Jonquet's *Tarantula*, which is a much rawer and simpler story with a much more squalid setting and characters who are far less complex and far less traumatized by their previous experiences. From the perspective of this analysis, Almodóvar's adaptation is noteworthy for the elements he draws on to construct new characters in line with his thematic interests, and his use of Jonquet's story as a pretext to create a wholly original film that brings together the influences of classical cinema that have haunted him since he first fell in love with cinema (thanks to his ability to combine the styles of the genres and filmmakers that have influenced him) with the predominant recurring stylistic features that have become hallmarks of his oeuvre since he established himself, by the decade of the 2010s, as a cinematic auteur with his own universe of themes and techniques.

7. Conclusions

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that Pedro Almodóvar maintains a unique relationship with classical Hollywood cinema. On the one hand, there are numerous examples of connections between his films and the work of different classical filmmakers identified by Almodóvar himself as influences, while on the other, there are also many cases where the

Spanish filmmaker adapts or deviates from the styles that have so influenced him.

Thus, while Almodóvarian comedy bases its comicality on the frenetic pacing of the dialogues and the various possibilities for verbal exchanges that characterize Wilder's films, his melodrama shares multiple thematic interests with Sirk, and in his thrillers he uses strategies evocative of Hitchcock's concepts and techniques. Yet in all three cases there are also clear differences, such as his loosening of the rigid narrative structures typical of classical cinema through more open and seemingly chaotic approaches, his use of stylistic features quite alien to the classical canon, and his tendency to hybridize different film genres so seamlessly.

In this way, Almodóvar offers an excellent example of how a filmmaker can be understood as the product of the unique coexistence of their prior influences (which constitute their cinematic education) and their modes of expression (which articulate the meaning their films convey).

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