

## **Metacinema in the Filmography of Pedro Almodóvar: a Study of Cinematic Reflexivity Applied to his Films in which the Main Characters are Film Directors**

### **El metacine en la filmografía de Pedro Almodóvar: un estudio de la reflexividad cinematográfica aplicada a sus películas protagonizadas por directores de cine**

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#### **Abstract:**

The filmography of Pedro Almodóvar is prone to search for transtextual tools in order to narrate the stories of his films. Furthermore, the director from La Mancha, a historical region of Spain, deliberately chooses artists as the main characters of his narratives, with a clear preference for protagonists who make their living from writing or directing films. Almodóvar's experience in both activities undoubtedly enables the search for parallels between his own life and that of his characters. This article will address the key aspects of cinematic reflexivity in the films of Almodóvar whose main characters are film directors, based on the most recent studies conducted by Yacavone. The discourse of this author reveals how the tools proposed by Genette, Kristeva and Waugh, among other linguists who preceded him, play a leading role in this area. The aim of this study is to investigate how the use of metacinematic features in these films allows Almodóvar to describe himself, or what he believes the role of a film director should be. The findings reveal that these same, self-reflective tools are used in each of the four films analysed.

#### **Resumen:**

La filmografía almodovariana es proclive a buscar herramientas transtextuales para narrar las historias de sus películas. Además, existe una deliberada intención por parte del director manchego a convertir en protagonistas de las tramas a personajes artistas, con una clara predilección por aquellos que buscan su medio de vida a través de la escritura o en la dirección de cine. El conocimiento experiencial que Almodóvar posee de ambas actividades facilita, sin duda, la búsqueda de paralelismos entre su propia vida y la de sus personajes. En este artículo se van a aplicar a las películas protagonizadas por directores de cine, los elementos de la reflexividad cinematográfica según los estudios más recientes llevados a cabo por Yacavone, en cuyo discurso dirimen su protagonismo herramientas propuestas por Genette, Kristeva y Waugh, entre otros lingüistas que lo precedieron. La intención de este estudio es investigar de qué manera el recurso a lo metacinematográfico en estas películas, facilita la intención de Almodóvar de hablar sobre sí mismo o de lo que entiende que debe ser el desempeño de un director de cine. Los resultados arrojan conclusiones que señalan el uso de las mismas herramientas reflexivas en cada una de las cuatro películas.

**Keywords:** Metacinema; Cinematic Reflexivity; Film Director; Metafiction; *Mise en Abyme*; Intertextuality.

**Palabras clave:** Metacine; reflexividad cinematográfica; director de cine; metaficción; *mise en abyme*; intertextualidad.

## 1. Introduction

The thematic and stylistic complexity of Pedro Almodóvar's films has led to numerous analyses of his work from various perspectives. One study addressed the themes in his work and revealed that a recurring issue is the role of feminism and women in his films, which was approached from different points of view, including the following: loneliness opposite the male character; the idea of female cooperation in facing life's problems; the social class of the character, which varies greatly depending on the film; the profession of the female lead, whose work ranges from established artists to subordinated housewives; and finally, the director even addresses the way women experience their deepest feelings and how they deal with them. Other studies have addressed the subjects of Almodóvar's work and include the portrayal of mainstream religion in his films, along with his frequent use of the antagonism between two ways of life: rural and urban. Of course, as diverse as it is pervasive, we cannot forget the prominent role of sex in his films. On the other hand, from a stylistic point of view, some research has delved into the use of melodrama, film noir, and comedy as the preferred genres of this director for developing the plots of his stories. Likewise, Almodóvar's predilection for classic cinema, along with the clash between his cinematic tastes and his unique vision of staging, give his films an original and sometimes strange point of view, which highlights the rich tapestry with which the filmmaker from La Mancha weaves his stories. Another of the most researched aspects of his cinematic style is the repeated use of references and connections among diverse levels within the stories he tells, as well as with other texts, whether based on films, books, theatre, or music. By taking this approach, Almodóvar is able to achieve one of the key aspects of his filmmaking, known as cinematic reflexivity, by taking a narrative and artistic approach through the use of tools such as intertextuality, along with several consequential derivatives, an example of which is metafiction.

## 2. State of the issue

Although the exploration of intertextuality and metafiction are by no means isolated studies in the analysis of Almodóvar's filmography, they have generally been limited to films that display clear relationships between the different narrative levels of the story, such as *Los abrazos rotos* [*Broken Embraces*] (2009), and *Dolor y gloria* [*Pain and Glory*] (2019). Thus, Broullón (2011) painstakingly analyses the intertextuality created between the different narrative levels of *Los abrazos rotos*, which result from the dialogue established between the different sections involved in producing a film, including the areas of art, photography, editing, and others, as well as staging. Regarding the same film, Poyato (2012) examines the dual nature of how images from the first level of the story relate to those of the second level. For example, on the one hand, this was accomplished in a metafictional way in the making of *Chicas y maletas* [*Girls and Suitcases*] by the character Mateo Blanco. On the other hand, it was also attained by using one of the tools of transtextuality proposed by Genette (1989), which refers specifically to hypertextuality. According to this author, the latter occurs when a text is derived from a previous one without being an exact copy, thereby showing the relationship between the fragments seen in the filming of *Chicas y maletas* and their resemblance to *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* [*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*] (1988). Gutiérrez Valencia (2020) also explores intertextual mechanisms, but focuses on the leading position of the artistic characters, highlighting the relationship between their creations and their personal lives. Along the same lines, yet with more precision, Martínez-Expósito (2021) searches for intertextual relationships between what he considers to be the key scene in the film *Dolor y gloria*, and other characters and scenes from the director's filmography, and even with Almodóvar himself as a consequence. García Catalán and Rodríguez Serrano (2021) propose a different approach to the same film. Their research links the concept of desire, which is based on Lacan's psychoanalysis, with the textual microanalysis of the symbols shown throughout the motion picture. In the last shot of the film, there is an epilogue upon which they reflect,

thereby giving it a meaning beyond the usual metafictional reference. Apart from these two films, Cabello (2014) studies the use of Louise Bourgeois' sculpture in the dramatic development of the story in *La piel que habito* [*The Skin in which I Live*], detailing the intertextual meaning of the objects carved by the French artist in relation to the main character's development. Cabrera (2020) focuses her research on female characters and the new family structures presented in *Todo sobre mi madre* [*All about my Mother*]. The author cites metafictional and intertextual aspects that appear in the film as narrative approaches that allow us to anticipate some of the events that Almodóvar develops during the film. In addition to the foregoing research, which focuses on case studies of specific films, other investigations take a more general approach to transtextual parallels in quite different ways. For example, Perales (2008) examines the links between Almodóvar's films and the numerous references to classic cinema scattered throughout the plots of his motion pictures. Parejo (2020) conducts a similar study, yet she starts with the photographic images that are common in the director's films, through which she analyses the interconnection between the past and present of the characters. Parejo (2022) goes on to analyse the role of professional photographers in Almodóvar's films, exploring how these characters evolve throughout the director's filmography, starting as people who make their living from photography, and later develop into characters who use photography as a domestic resource. Theatre has also been explored in terms of intertextuality, as evidenced by four studies that focus on this aspect. Moreover, all four papers present this facet by using a nearly perfect, dialogical interchange among them, as they were all written by one author, De la Torre-Espinosa, in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

### **3. Objectives, hypotheses and methodology**

This article intends to analyse the four films by Almodóvar in which the main characters are film directors. The objective is to carry out a detailed study of the different styles of narration that use *cinema within cinema*, with the aim of finding parallels between them. The first step is to create a list of the

different transtextual and metafictional categories in order to create a taxonomy. This will allow the different metadiscursive tools in question to be connected to the way each one is displayed in the corresponding scenes of the selected films.

To this end, the study at hand starts with a review of Genette's concept of transtextuality, which is based on a research paper by Yacavone (2021) entitled, *Recursive Reflections: Types, Modes and Forms of Cinematic Reflexivity*. In his study, Yacavone develops the concept of cinematic reflexivity originally proposed by Gerstenkorn, who suggested that “metacinema can be divided into two generic categories that describe the two basic practices that define it: cinematic reflexivity, and filmic reflexivity” (Gerstenkorn, 1987, p. 7-8). However, as will be seen further along, rather than separate the two practices, Yacavone includes filmmaking within cinematography, offering the following assertion:

There is notable consensus on cinematic reflexivity in broad terms [...]. However, beyond these general characterisations, one finds a marked diversity of views on the detailed functioning of reflexivity as a form of significance, communication, and artistic expression. These include their specific effects on viewers, their historical and stylistic evolution, their relationship with cinematic realism and illusionism, as well as the critical, political, and social dimensions of reflexivity (Yacavone, 2021, p. 85).

With the aim of establishing and clarifying the differences between the components that make up cinematic reflexivity, Yacavone undertook this task, but not without first offering the following warning: “As is typical in any classification endeavour, what these frameworks leave out is, in some cases, as valuable as what they include, and the points where they overlap are as enlightening as those where they diverge”. However, despite the difficulties that such an effort might entail, the present study aims to apply Yacavone's classification to the metacinematic content of Almodóvar's films. In this way, the research at hand aims to clarify the artistic and narrative use that the director from La Mancha bestows on reflexivity, thereby adhering to the

premise of the British researcher and professor, who states the following: “Only when we have a clear idea of what cinematic reflexivity really is, and how it relates to and differentiates from other characteristics of films, can we begin to better understand its various manifestations” (Yacavone, 2021, p. 86).

Based on this hypothesis, cinematic reflexivity consists of the following five aspects: metafiction, metalepsis, self-consciousness, *mise en abyme*, and intertextuality.

### **3.1.1. Metafiction**

This term is commonly used to refer to specific scenes in a film that depict the filming of the motion picture itself. Thus, the scenes narrate a film story within a film. As such, the concept of metafiction could be associated with the definition of the term in which it is encompassed: cinematic reflexivity. However, Yacavone argues that there is a difference between the two, which he outlines as follows:

Although [...] cinematic metafiction has a clear reflexive aspect, not all, or even most, reflexivity in films is metafictional. Since works also foreground medial, formal, stylistic, or contextual features that do not turn on fictional reference making and storytelling (Yacavone, 2021, p. 88).

In a more direct and clearer way, yet along the same lines as Yacavone, Waugh points out that metafiction is a concept used to identify “fictional writing that systematically and self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artefact, with the aim of asking questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 2003, p. 2). However, if we go back ten years, one can see that there was hardly any difference between the two terms. Thus, when Stam defined the reflexive phenomenon, it was clear that its meaning was similar to the concept of metafiction acknowledged by Waugh and Yacavone. In fact, according to Stam, “reflexivity is identified in those works, literary or filmic, that precisely ask questions about cinematic or literary conventions, which break with art as enchantment and reflect on

their own condition as textual constructs” (Stam, 1992, p. 11). This situation created confusion in terminology, which was later resolved by Yacavone, as mentioned above.

In other words, the difference between the two concepts is that metafiction becomes self-aware and reflects on the creative process. By contrast, while reflexivity also causes the work to become self-aware, it remains on this level, without reflecting on the film itself. Therefore, the concept of metafiction has a more specific scope than reflexivity, which is more general and inclusive, as pointed out by Yacavone.

### **3.1.2. Metalepsis**

Metalepsis consists of the intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator into the world of the diegesis, or vice versa. In other words, it involves any interruption of the diegesis in one way or another. Consequently, it implies “a narrative breach by which narrators transgress their status and unjustifiably interfere in the metadiegetic narrative” (Sánchez Noriega, 2012, p. 48). Thus, metalepsis occurs when actors either step out of their roles, or when real people appear as themselves in films, thereby disrupting the narrative in both senses. Likewise, metalepsis also occurs when there is a non-diegetic insertion of an object that interrupts the chronology of the story.

### **3.1.3. Self-consciousness**

Reflective self-consciousness involves a mechanism whereby the plot of a film reflects on the cinematic event itself, yet without interrupting the narrative. This occurs in metafiction, which prolongs the phenomenon of illusion in the audience, which is characteristic of the entire narration. An example of this concept is long takes of highly elaborate travel shots. In other words, this only includes sequence shots that incorporate complex camera movements.

To clarify this issue, which can nonetheless be quite complex due to the degree of self-awareness in this type of film, Yacavone resolves the question by illustrating a quite simple case:



Consider the relevant differences between the equally unconventional and attention-drawing, long-take traveling shots that open Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, 1958, as well as the *The Player* by Robert Altman, 1992; regarding the films' variable coefficient of reflexivity, as a matter of degree, the latter is considerably more reflexive, quantitatively and qualitatively (that is, self-aware), than the former. (Since) *The Player*'s traveling shot also depicts a film studio, occurs in a film explicitly about filmmaking, and includes characters discussing the length and intricacy of *Touch of Evil*'s opening shot.

### **3.1.4. *Mise en abyme***

Another phenomenon resulting from cinematic reflexivity is *mise en abyme*, which “traditionally refers to images embedded within identical or similar images, as in some heraldic symbols, or stories within stories. In a broader sense, within the world of filmmaking, *mise en abyme* refers to images, screens, and frames within the film image” (Yacavone, 2021, p. 90).

However, this context can be broadened. For example, beyond the repetition of components contained in a type of *matryoshka* doll on the cinema screen, part of the meaning of *mise en abyme* also includes a definition “by which a passage, section, or sequence reproduces on a micro-scale the processes of the text as a whole” (Wolf, 2009, p. 60). In other words, in any given film, this occurs when thematic or narrative parallels are established between the plot of the main characters in the first narrative level, and the plot represented by other characters/actors, or by the protagonists themselves, if they become actors in a fictional story belonging to a second narrative level. This style would also involve a *mise en abyme*, and would therefore be connecting the concepts of this technique with those of the metadiegetic narrative, as this appears when a story unfolds within another story and is similar to the first.

To confirm the concomitance between *mise en abyme* and metadiegesis, scholars often turn to Vilches, who argues that “a narrative included within an initial narrative can give rise to direct causality, (when) the second-degree



(or second-level) narrative takes on an explanatory function [...] and it can also give rise to a contrast or analogy such as *mise en abyme*” (Vilches, 2017, 588).

### **3.1.5. Intertextuality**

According to Yacavone, the last term included in the broad conceptual framework of cinematic reflexivity is intertextuality. However, there is some divergence among authors regarding this point, as Yacavone is prone to include intertextuality as an idea contained within the broad definition of reflexivity, which places the referential role of intertextuality on the same level as the other four concepts discussed above. In a similar vein, Genette refers to transtextuality as a general concept that includes “everything that links a text, either openly or secretly, to other texts” (Genette, 1989, pp. 9-10). Under this blanket term, the author includes intertextuality along with four other categories that evolve in meaning from specific to the most general, such as paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality. The purpose of the present article is not to delve into Genette's transtextual phenomenology which, in his day, updated Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, as the latter researcher defined the term as an inherent and involuntary characteristic of texts, according to which “any text is assembled as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66).

However, it bears mentioning that although Genette re-formulated the intrinsic meaning of intertextuality that is commonly accepted today, Canet had a different view. As can be inferred from his study entitled, *El metacine como práctica cinematográfica: una propuesta de clasificación* [*Metacinema as cinematic practice: a proposal of classification*] (Canet, 2014), this author draws away from the French theorist, moving closer to Kristeva's postulate by framing intertextuality as an autonomous practice that does not belong to any group, and is therefore independent. Furthermore, Canet went on to coin the term filmic reflexivity, in order to distinguish his concept from that of the corresponding cinematic version. To establish this segmentation, Canet assigned the following purpose to each of

the two terms: “While the first (cinematic reflexivity) focuses on the processes and mechanisms of film creation and reception, the second (filmic reflexivity) turns its gaze toward filmic heritage” (Canet, 2014, p. 18).

Nowadays, however, Yacavone once again includes the postulates of intertextuality within the group that comprise the rest of the tools of reflexivity, because for him, “Whether it is described as allusion or intertextuality, the reference of one film to another, an example of which is *Touch of Evil* in *The Hollywood Game*, is *ipso facto* reflexive within the general definition I have offered” (Yacavone, 2021, p. 91).

#### **4. Metacinema in the filmography of Pedro Almodóvar**

The research at hand focuses on classifying the scenes in which transtextuality has been clearly identified in Pedro Almodóvar's films. This classification is based on Yacavone's studies of cinematic reflexivity which, as we have seen, are summarised in five practical applications: metafiction, metalepsis, self-awareness, *mise en abyme*, and intertextuality.

However, due to the issue of space, it is impossible to apply the methodology to the entire corpus of Almodóvar. The reason is that some of these five features have been found in nearly all of his films. Only *I'm So Excited!* (2013) does not use any of the five practices of reflexivity in its story. However, Almodóvar's constant use of artists as the main characters in his films allows us to consider this criterion of division when selecting a sample on which to apply the proposed methodology. Thus, the films selected are those in which the protagonist is linked to the world of cinema and, more specifically, to the profession of film director. In this way, the aim is to establish a parallel between Almodóvar himself as a creative visionary and his leading actors, who are also film directors. These four films include the following: *The law of desire* (1987), *Bad Education* (2004), *Broken Embraces* (2009) and *Pain and Glory* (2019). Although *I'm So Excited!* features the role of an actor among its main characters, the film was excluded from the analysis for the reasons outlined above.

Thus, films that have characters related to the world of cinema, but whose roles are professions other than that of a director, were not included in this study. These films include the following: *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), whose main characters are dubbing actors; and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989), whose protagonists are actresses. Although a film director appears in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, whose name is Máximo Espejo, he is not the main character. Nor was *Parallel Mothers* (2021) included in the selection, as one of its characters is a theatre actress.

In this regard, films that feature reflective practices, yet whose main characters make their living from professions other than directors, were omitted from the sample and comprised the following list – Writers: *Kika* (1993); *The Flower of My Secret* (1995); *The Room Next Door* (2024). Aspiring writers: *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980); *Dark Habits* (1983); *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984); *All About My Mother* (1999). Singers: *High Heels* (1991). Bullfighters: *Matador* (1986) and *Talk to Her* (2002). Dancers: also, in *Talk to Her*. Photographer: in *Kika*.

Only five of the twenty-three films that currently comprise Almodóvar's entire filmography do not feature any artist as a character in the plot. Three of these are the following: *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), *Live Flesh* (1997), and *Return* (2006). Although a film crew goes to eat at Raimunda's improvised restaurant in *Return*, none of those characters have a leading role in the plot. The other two among the five mentioned include *The Skin I Live In* (2011), and *Julieta* (2016). It bears mentioning that although some of the five components that comprise reflexivity have been found in those films, their presence is scarce. In other words, there is much less narrative profusion and impact than in films whose main characters are artists.

The four selected films from Almodóvar's filmography have been analysed in chronological order by date, and the metacinematic tools used in each story have been identified. The placing of a scene in one of the categories of cinematic reflexivity will be highlighted with a brief description of the scene, along with an explanatory analysis of the narrative, thematic, and/or artistic rationale used to define it. Likewise, when references need to be established

based on the phenomenon of intertextuality, the audiovisual framework is broadened to include references to other arts with which the film also interacts, such as literature, theatre, music, and the more traditional visual arts.

#### **4.1. *La ley del deseo* [*The Law of Desire*] (1987)**

The protagonist of this motion picture is a film director, Pablo Quintero. He is being harassed by a fan, Antonio Benítez, who has developed an unhealthy obsession for the director, as he is completely in love with him. However, his feelings are not returned. The film has no metalepsis nor self-consciousness.

##### **4.1.1. Metafiction**

The film opens with an erotic scene, and as the action unfolds, it turns out to be a dubbing session of the scene in question. However, after seeing the expression THE END superimposed on the image, it is revealed that the scene has moved to a cinema screen on the day of the film's premiere, where the completed motion picture has just been screened to a packed audience.

##### **4.1.2. *Mise en abyme***

The rehearsal of the theatrical adaptation of Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice* is being carried out by Pablo along with his sister Tina, who is playing the role of a woman waiting for her husband to return home after having abandoned her, and she has already packed his suitcase with his belongings. The staging also features the girl that Tina has adopted, who sings Jacques Brel's *Ne me quitte pas* on a mobile platform that moves from left to right across the stage, while Tina, who is behind her daughter, destroys the set with an axe. The diegesis of *The Human Voice* and the rehearsal being witnessed create an association on the second narrative level with the plot of the film's first narrative level. This connection focuses on the relationship between Pablo and his unrequited love for Juan, and also on the unreturned desire that Antonio feels for Pablo.

This also occurs when the police officer investigating the murder of Pablo's object of obsession, or Juan, reads a script written by Antonio, which

accurately reflects Juan's death and establishes a parallel with the place where it occurred: a cliff near a lighthouse. Furthermore, the woman who is the murderer in the story, Laura, matches the description of Pablo's sister, Tina. Consequently, as Laura is suspected of the crime, the police believe that Tina is also the suspect in real life. Antonio uses this strategy to divert attention toward Tina as the perpetrator of the crime of passion, yet Antonio committed the crime on his own accord, driven by his jealousy of Pablo, with the idea that from that moment on he would turn his attention toward him.

#### **4.1.3. Intertextuality**

A literary intertext is produced in the reference made to the writing in *The Human Voice*, starting with a close-up of the book. Its plot features a woman as the main character, and the story establishes emotional and sentimental parallels with the life of Pablo Quintero, rather than narrative correlations.

There is also a musical intertext in the girl's performance of *Ne me quitte pas* during the rehearsal of the play, as the song is an intertext of the diegesis of the play described in *The Human Voice*, which they are rehearsing.

Another intertext, also musical, is the song to which Antonio forces Pablo to listen after he is kidnapped by Antonio in his own house at the end of the film. The song is entitled *Lo dudo (I doubt it)*. The lyrics of the song clearly refer to Antonio's feelings for Pablo and illustrate his unrequited love for him.

#### **4.2. *La mala educación [Bad Education] (2004)***

Enrique Goded is a film director looking for his next project when he receives a visit from someone claiming to be Ignacio, a childhood friend and his first love. However, the visitor is Juan, Ignacio's brother, who is responsible for his his own sibling's death. Juan hands Enrique a script entitled *La visita [The visit]*, which is ostensibly based on his own life, although it actually narrates the life of his brother, and the script is destined to become Enrique's next film. The story lacks metalepsis and self-consciousness.

#### **4.2.1. Metafiction**

At one point in the film, Enrique tells Ignacio (actually Juan) that he is fascinated by the story he has read (*The visit*) and has decided to start shooting it. In another scene, the audience learns that Zahara, who is actually Ignacio in drag, is being detained in the office of Father Manolo, the school principal who, after reading the story of *The visit* realises that the events described by Zahara/Ignacio refer to the sexual abuse the priest himself perpetrated on Ignacio as a child. To prevent this abuse from coming to light, Zahara/Ignacio's story suggests that the priest has confined him with the intention of killing him. When the murder scene ends, the audience discovers that it was actually the filming of a fictional scene that Enrique Goded is shooting for *The visit*, and all the technical equipment involved in the filming slowly becomes visible. Enrique then declares that the scene is finished, and the actors step out of their roles. This is how metafiction is developed, as the audience of *Bad Education* is able to extrapolate the meaning of this scene to the other scenes they have viewed in the film from the past, and conclude that they are all part of the filming of the motion picture directed by Enrique Goded. Almodóvar's intention is clear: He wants to encourage reflection on the creative process. Just as Enrique is reminiscing about his childhood through the story of his best friend, Almodóvar is doing the same, as the metafiction allows us to imagine that both the director and the character are narrating the same story.

#### **4.2.2. *Mise en abyme***

Before the idea of metafiction settled in with the audience, Almodóvar's film had already led them through a story that created a triple narrative level of scenes. In fact, at the beginning of *Bad Education* it seems that they are part of two flashbacks contained within each other. The first flashback regarding the scene where Enrique reads the text, with Zahara as the main character, comprises the second narrative level of the story. A third narrative level emerges from the moment Zahara gives the same text of *The Visit* to Father Manolo in his office, and the priest starts to read it. At the same time, the images of the film shift to the childhood of Ignacio and Enrique, the

attraction Enrique feels toward his friend, and the moment of sexual abuse by Father Monolo. In fact, the scene in which Father Manolo starts to read *The Visit*, and the flashback within the flashback begins, is the one that is prolonged later in the film, which gives rise to metafiction, as indicated in the previous section. This establishes a metadiegetic relationship between the three levels that connects all of them.

#### **4.2.3. Intertextuality**

Intertextuality occurs in two ways. On the one hand, it takes place cinematographically when the two friends, Ignacio and Enrique, attend a screening of the film *Esa mujer* (Mario Camus, 1969) as children, in which a nun who has been raped and abused decides to leave the order to which she belongs and becomes a successful singer. Later, she is brought to trial for murder. The cinematic intertext that arises between the reference and Almodóvar's film is clear in terms of the issues of sexual abuse, murder, and religion, although there are some differences between the two plots. On the other hand, intertext is introduced a second time based on film posters hanging on a notice board in the lobby of the cinema. Manuel, who is no longer a priest, and Juan, Ignacio's brother, have gone there to escape a reality that is weighing heavily on their conscience, which is the murder of Ignacio that they planned together. The posters in question refer to *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *The Human Beast* (Jean Renoir, 1938), and *Teresa Raquin* (Marcel Carné, 1953). The three films portray the remorse and guilt of a number of characters who, together with their lovers, plan the murder of a third member of their love triangle. In fact, the highlight of the scene is when Manuel says, "It's as if all the films were about us", which he utters as he leaves the screening and passes by the posters with Juan without paying any attention to them.

#### **4.3. *Los abrazos rotos* [*Broken Embraces*] (2009)**

The main character in *Broken Embraces* is Mateo Blanco, a film director who goes blind after suffering a traffic accident and later becomes a screenwriter under the pseudonym Harry Cane. Lena is the star of the last film he



directed, *Chicas y maletas*, which is where they fell in love. In this film, Almodóvar does not use metalepsis nor self-consciousness of cinematic reflexivity.

#### **4.3.1. Metafiction**

The film begins with several shots of the preparation of a scene, where the viewer can see the director of cinematography taking measurements on the face of a stand-in for the lead actress before she takes her place. These opening moments shatter the illusion and create a distancing effect typical of this type of reflective practice, making it clear that we are watching a film by revealing the cinematic artifice.

#### **4.3.2. *Mise en abyme***

Two meta-narrative levels are created when the character played by Lena in the film has to simulate a fall down the stairs in *Girls and Suitcases*, in order to justify breaking her leg and needing to wear a cast for the rest of the film. Strangely enough, this is exactly what happens to Lena in real life when she is pushed down the stairs of her house by Ernesto in an act of revenge, as a result of the emotional humiliation she had inflicted upon him just moments before by rejecting his love.

The *making of* scene filmed by Ray X, Ernesto's son, is actually proof that Lena is cheating on him with Mateo. The fact that Mateo and Lena are filmed without realising it, and that Ernesto is a clandestine witness to the love they share when he sees these images, confirms Lena's infidelity. This means that the video recording confirms the situation, and its images become a second-level narrative, because despite the lack of interpretation in Mateo and Lena's hugs and kisses, they occur in the diegesis of the first narrative level.

Both levels come together in the scene where Lena enters the living room. Ernesto is watching the *making of* footage and, from the doorway, Lena utters the same words that she is saying on the video recording.

### 4.3.3. Intertextuality

A literary intertext is created when Mateo, or Harry, recounts the story of Arthur Miller and his son who had Down's syndrome. The writer narrates how the father rejected his son during his entire life, and how the son, now an adult, approaches his father to forgive him for the humiliation he suffered due to his disgraceful behaviour. The reference between this story and Ray X's experience with his father is the same, yet on this occasion, the son is not trying to approach his father with a conciliatory spirit, but rather with a thirst for revenge.

Another intertextual moment occurs when Mateo and Lena sit down to watch *Te querré siempre* [*I will always love you*], titled in Italian as *Viaggio in Italia* [*Travels in Italy*] (Roberto Rossellini, 1954). They watch the film on television, specifically the scene where the two protagonists walk through the ruins of Pompeii and observe the figures of two people who were incinerated and cast in lava, to remain embraced for eternity. This scene is clearly a reference to the love between Mateo and Lena, which they constantly express with hugs and kisses, and it refers to the title of the film as well. There is also an intertextual reference when Mateo, now Harry, wants to "listen" to the film, *Lift to the Gallows* (*Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, Louis Malle, 1958). This is a clear reminiscence of the moment when he was imprisoned in his blindness, after the accident that caused Lena's death, just as the protagonist of the film does in the lift.

The last film that Mateo had shot, which led to his encounter with Lena and was financed by her lover, Ernesto Valverde, is entitled *Girls and Suitcases*, and its scenes contain clear references to *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. The latter was the Almodóvar film that establishes intertextuality with the former, yet this time it is not created with the same diegesis of *Broken Embraces*. Nevertheless, in this case *Girls and Suitcases* acts as a hypertext for *Women on...*, which becomes a hypotext for the former, which in turn is a hypotext for *The Human Voice*, which acts as a hypertext for *Women on....* The references are established with the *gaspacho*

and the *orfidal* tranquilizers mixed in, as well as the burning bed and the suitcase from the title.

#### **4.4. *Dolor y Gloria* [*Pain and Glory*] (2019)**

The story of this film involves a film director, Salvador Mallo, and an actor, Alberto Crespo, who have not spoken to each other for many years. Salvador is going through a physical and creative crisis that has resulted in artistic block. The film contains neither metalepsis nor self-consciousness.

##### **4.4.1. Metafiction**

The use of reflexivity is evident at the end of the film. The viewer sees Salvador filming a scene at the train station in Paterna where a mother and son, who is a reflection of himself as a child with his mother, spend the night waiting to catch the train back to their hometown the next morning. The scene opens with a shot from the film that the viewer is now watching, directed by Almodóvar, but as the shot slowly zooms out, it becomes clear that what the audience was seeing just moments before was Salvador filming that scene.

This technique produces an effect comparable to that of *Bad Education*, where in view of the facts, the audience extrapolates what they have seen and realises that the scenes from the past, which reflect Salvador's childhood and the discovery of his homosexuality, are nothing more than scenes filmed by Salvador for his new film. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the title of the new film is *El primer deseo* [*The First Desire*], in clear reference to the scene of Salvador's sexual awakening. Furthermore, all the characters who appear in the scenes from the past are merely actors. Once again, this reveals the art of creation and the expertise of the filmmaker, who recreates a story about himself by using a character through whom he pours out his life.

##### **4.4.2. *Mise en abyme***

Thus, just as *The First Desire* operates metacinematographically by resorting to the practice of metafiction, the story of *La adicción* [*The addiction*], a monologue discovered by Alberto on Salvador's computer when he visits his

home, is a *mise en abyme*. In essence, the monologue tells the same story as *The First Desire*, which describes Salvador's past, yet this time it emphasises two different moments of his life: the moment when his love for cinema first emerged, which appears in the part of the monologue rehearsed by Alberto; and several scenes later, during the premiere of the monologue in front of an audience, which is the part where he tells the story of how he met the love of his life, Marcelo. The theatrical depiction of Salvador's life involves producing, once again, a second-level narrative, which is witnessed by other spectators along with the film's audience, thereby creating metadiegetic relationships between the second and first levels of the story. This storyline differs from that of *The First Desire*, whose plot does not produce two narrative levels, but instead unfolds as a story contained within another story, or in other words, it has been told through another story on the same narrative level.

#### **4.4.3. Intertextuality**

Although the film features several clips from classic motion pictures such as *Splendor in the Grass* and *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954), in this case they are not intertextual references, but merely memories from Salvador's childhood. Salvador places his mobile phone next to him while he types the story of *The First Desire*, and at the same time he listens to the film *Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962). These sound and images of the film are the only signs of a possible intertextuality based on the parallelism established between Salvador as a child, who is writing the story of his homosexual awakening, and the son of a prostitute in the film who is initiated into the arts of love by another prostitute.

Likewise, Alberto's insistence that Salvador direct Jean Cocteau's play, *El bello indifferente*, whose plot is very similar to that of *The Human Voice*, is a clear reference to the first and only love of his life, Federico, whom he has been unable to extricate from his mind since he decided to leave Federico, thereby creating literary intertextuality.

## 5. Conclusions

Although not specifically a part of this study, it is nevertheless important to emphasise a defining characteristic when approaching this type of exegesis on Almodóvar's work: namely, his preference for always using characters connected to world of art for some of his leading roles, whether in the area of cinema, literature, music, or even bullfighting. Furthermore, among all these domains, cinema and literature are the areas where his characters most frequently appear throughout his filmography. As we have seen, only five of Almodóvar's films do not use any artistic profession to define his characters. There might be two reasons for this proclivity: The first could be related to Almodóvar's close ties to the art world at all levels, including cinema, literature, painting and music, which naturally leads to the creation of these types of characters. Specifically, he chooses film directors, actors, and writers, as they are all part of the professional world he knows so well; The second reason might be the fact that he is attracted to these types of professions, which allows him to more easily create metadiscursive ventures, which he clearly prefers when telling a story. In Almodóvar's entire filmography, not just in the films analysed in this article, the number of connections and references based on the tools that create cinematic reflexivity suggest that Almodóvar is interested in experimenting with the possibilities of cinematic language.

In this regard, the analysis of these four films, where he explores the work of film directing in depth, reveals that three of the motion pictures are closely linked to his own personal experiences, which include *Law of Desire*, *Bad Education* and *Pain and Glory*. Thus, metacinematic language offers Almodóvar many alternatives for connecting with the characters and depicting them as alter egos. The last film to mention is *Broken Embraces*. Although its autobiographical connection is not as strong as the others, it enables emotional links to be established between Almodóvar and the character who plays the role of the film director, Mateo Blanco, especially in the strong emotions he feels when expressing love in the most heart-rending and effusive way. Although the film does not specifically mention *The*

*Human Voice*, a text with which Almodóvar strongly identifies and which he turned into a short film in 2020, it has a strong presence in *Broken Embraces*, and in many of his other films as well.

It is worth noting that all four films use the same three reflective techniques: metafiction, *mise en abyme*, and intertextuality. The first two practices allow the creation of images that suggest associations between reality and different levels of fiction in two different ways. However, by fragmenting fiction, along with the resulting illusory phenomenon that captivates viewers, metafiction induces reflection on the creative process, in this case related to cinematography, behind which Almodóvar does not hide. This suggests that what you are seeing has happened to him, though in greater or lesser detail.

Nevertheless, the use of *mise en abyme* allows Almodóvar to create several narrative levels that function as mirrors to each other, yet without neglecting diegesis, which is a procedure that metafiction does indeed perform. In this regard, Almodóvar does not resort to *mise en abyme* in order to conceive and develop cascade-effect reflections of the same image projected into infinity. Instead, he uses this reflexive phenomenon to establish parallelisms between the plots of one level and those of another, so that they act as a type of *matryoshka* doll. Therefore, metadiegetic narratives are suggested and embedded within each other throughout the story at each level, which are the same in the end. However, several distinctions should be made in this regard: Firstly, in *Law of Desire*, the metadiegesis of the second-level narrative is based on the rehearsal of the play *The Human Voice*; Secondly, the *making of scene* of the film *Girls and Suitcases* acts as the second-level narrative in *Broken Embraces*; Thirdly, the filming shoot does the same in *Bad Education* and *Pain and Glory*. In all of these, with the exception of *Broken Embraces*, the protagonism of the second-level narrative falls on actors other than those of the first level.

Regarding intertextuality, this concept reveals Almodóvar's knowledge of classic cinema, dating back to when he was eight years old. In his own words, the director made the following comments: "I went to see double features of all kinds of films. The cinema I went to was called Capitol [...] that was where

I received a real education in what I genuinely loved and identified with” (Various authors, 1995, p. 76).

Consequently, Almodóvar displays the ability to find references and establish connections between the plots of his films and those of classic films he has seen, thereby increasing the possible interpretations of his films. And the same goes for the songs he uses, whether they are sung by the main characters or heard on a recording. In one way or another, music also creates a narrative intertext with the feelings and circumstances of the protagonists.

In this study, the use of metalepsis was not found. Nevertheless, Almodóvar used this tool extensively in his early films, when his themes were more groundbreaking and spontaneous, although he has always tried to maintain this feature, especially when directing actors. However, one thing is clear: Although Almodóvar has been evolving more towards melodrama, his intrusive style as an extradiegetic narrator in the diegesis of a story has gradually disappeared.

Finally, it should be mentioned that although the practice of self-consciousness is commonly found in films that focus on the world of cinema, none of the four motion pictures analysed contain a conversation about a shot, performance, camera movement, etc., in which the protagonists, and we must remember that they are film directors, discuss or reveal their opinions with other members of the film crew about their preference, or lack thereof, for certain films or performances in the history of cinema. In the same way, self-consciousness is not created in the sense that Almodóvar himself does not shoot scenes which, due to their technical complexity, captivate the people who watch his films, thereby making them aware of the film's reflexivity, yet without leaving aside its narrative.



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