

Objects that keep memories alive: the female characters in Pedro Almodovar's melodramas

Objetos que mantienen vivo el recuerdo: los personajes femeninos de los melodramas de Pedro Almodóvar

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Abstract:

Memories flesh out Pedro Almodovar's characters. Albeit a constant in his filmography, this aspect is more easily perceived in his female characters and melodramas owing to the emotional aspects of this narrative genre. Letters, diaries, photos –of their families and of when they were young– movie collectibles, novels, records and garments are all omnipresent in characters who treasure them because of their ability to transport them back to a past when they lived happily with their loved ones, some since deceased. Based on the hypothesis that the characters in his melodramas conserve objects relating to their past to keep those memories alive, a sample comprising seven melodramas released over the past three decades was selected: *Dark Habits* (1983), *Law of Desire* (1987), *High Heels* (1991), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Volver* (2006) and *Julieta* (2016). Specifically, the scenes and dialogues in which these objects appear are analysed to determine their vital importance. In these films, those objects construct the memories of the main female characters, connect them with their past and help them to survive in an uncertain present.

Resumen:

Los recuerdos determinan a los personajes de Pedro Almodóvar. Este tema es constante en su filmografía, pero se aprecia más en los femeninos y en las películas enmarcadas en el melodrama debido al aspecto emocional de este género narrativo. Cartas, diarios, fotografías –familiares y de juventud–, coleccionables de cine, novelas, discos o prendas de ropa, están muy presentes en unos personajes que los atesoran porque los transportan a un pasado donde fueron felices con sus seres queridos, algunos ya perdidos. A partir de la hipótesis de que los personajes de sus melodramas guardan objetos de su pasado para mantener vivo el recuerdo, se ha seleccionado una muestra compuesta por siete melodramas estrenados durante tres décadas: *Entre tinieblas* (1983), *La ley del deseo* (1987), *Tacones lejanos* (1991), *La flor de mi secreto* (1995), *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Volver* (2006) y *Julieta* (2016). Así, se abordan las escenas y los diálogos donde esos objetos aparecen para conocer la importancia vital que tienen. En estos filmes, los objetos construyen la memoria de los personajes femeninos de carácter protagonista, los conectan con su pasado y los ayudan a sobrevivir en un presente incierto.

Keywords: Spanish Cinema; Melodrama; Pedro Almodóvar; Female Characters.

Palabras clave: Cine español; melodrama; Pedro Almodóvar; personajes femeninos.

1. Introduction to the filmography of Almodovar

Pedro Almodovar's filmography stands out owing to the incorporation of a wide variety of cultural benchmarks, the hybridisation of genres and the creation of characters who evince his personality as an author. Although his films are normally framed in 'genres as solid as comedy, melodrama and thriller' (Durán Manso, 2017, p. 99), the second is the most commonplace in them, because they are either melodramas per se or possess some of this genre's features combined with those of others. According to Gubern (2016), his oeuvre involves 'a daring hybridisation of genres and an ironic mannerism in his reinterpretations of the blockbusters of Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, but freed from the Protestant normativism that has constrained Hollywood films' (Zurián and Vázquez Varela, 2005, pp. 50-51). There are frequent references to classic films (Perales Bazo, 2008), especially to those belonging to the melodrama genre which, moreover, include scenes in which the characters keep objects that allow them to revisit their past. Although this is chiefly the case of the main female characters, as will be seen in this analysis, in Almodovar's melodramas some of the male characters also follow suit.

Almodovar's fiction characters and his uninhibited way of addressing different topics were both novel in the Spanish film industry at the beginning of the 1980s. In this respect, when approaching that industry during the Spanish transition to democracy, Gubern (2016, p. 179) claims that 'the highest levels of absurd aplomb and moral and sexual irreverence were reached by Pedro Almodovar who, coming from the urban counterculture movement, made grating and frequently brilliant films'. This can be seen in his first film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980), in which he performed an 'underground analysis' using 'totally different references – fringe comics, consumer music and even soap operas' (Torreiro, 2005, p. 397) from the ones usually found in Spanish films at the time.

The title of this first film includes the names of its main characters, determining thenceforth the constant presence of main female characters in his films, barring some exceptions like *Bad Education* (2004). Indeed, women are the main characters in films whose titles refer directly to them, such as *Women on*

the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (1988), *High Heels* (1991), *Kika* (1993), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002), *Julieta* (2016) and *Parallel Mothers* (2021), as well as in others in whose titles there is no such indication, particularly *Dark Habits* (1983), *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) and *Volver* (2006).

Since his first films made between the last years of the Spanish transition to democracy (1975-1982) and the initial years of the socialist government (1982-1996), Almodovar focused on fictional female characters, unlike most of the male filmmakers of his generation. Similarly, he gave them 'the unusual ability not only to be main characters but also to drive the action' (Pérez Morán, 2022, p. 127), which he achieved by using very varied prototypes, from nuns to singers, through actresses, TV presenters, writers, nurses, housewives, hairdressers, teachers and translators.

Furthermore, he depicted his characters differently from the filmmakers of the transition and even innovatively, for he had no qualms about criticising – sometimes comically – contemporary society through them, uniting the rural and urban worlds, resorting to the low-life, exhibiting sexual diversity – which was practically invisible in commercial films – and making his scripts revolve around main female characters. Likewise, his films also 'dismantle gender roles' (Martínez Serrano, 2019, p. 321), with behavioural patterns associated with women also being present in men, thus breaking with the usual construction of characters in Spanish films. This also evinces the importance that the director attaches to female education, for his main female characters offer a glimpse of both their different educational levels and the way in which they transmit their knowledge or popular wisdom to others, above all to family members and the people around them. In this connection, the objects that they tend to keep forge ties with their most personal and emotional self and, by conveying what they mean to them, they manage to link their past to their present, giving them an important place in their lives.

In line with the following classification (Durán Manso, 2023), Almodovar's female characters can be divided into six categories, although they can also display traits belonging to several of them: the successful woman, the

submissive daughter, the survivor, the aimless soul, the mother –a category that encompasses not only biological mothers but also those assuming a maternal role, like Manuela in *All About My Mother*– and the transexual. For their part, the male characters can be classified as the absent husband, the fragile ladies' man, the liberated homosexual, the repressed homosexual, the mentally disturbed man and the carer/saviour.

Even though the study of his fictional characters is one of the most diverse and interesting tendencies in research on Almodovar, other studies have focused on the style and narrative aspects of his films. Some of the main studies have addressed his film references, above all classic Hollywood movies (Perales Bazo, 2008; Rodríguez del Caño, 2004); the narrative genres he employs, featuring melodrama (Durán Manso, 2017) and film noir (Sánchez Noriega, 2017b); his literary references (De la Torre Espinosa, 2018; Amaya Flores, 2015); the music and folks songs in his films (Vernon, 2005); the photography and cinematographers (Parejo, 2020; 2022); and the study of the different settings (Martínez Serrano, 2017). The educational background of his characters is evoked in some of his recent films like *Bad Education*, *Julieta* and *Pain and Glory* (2019), with specific flashback scenes. Other interesting lines of research could include his characters' penchant for keeping objects, which is the object of study here.

2. Research objectives, hypothesis and methodology

The general research objective is to highlight the importance attached to objects that allow the main characters to connect with their past in Pedro Almodovar's films and, specifically, his melodramas. To this end, the following specific research objectives were established:

1. To identify the place that objects occupy in Almodovar's melodramas and the type of scenes in which they become the centre of attention.
2. To determine which objects are the most representative of the memories of the female characters appearing in these melodramas.

This study, which employs a qualitative-descriptive methodology, draws from the premise that the characters appearing in Almodovar's melodramas keep objects from their past, belonging to them or their families, to keep their memories alive. To this end, a literature review was first performed on studies of the history of Spanish cinema (Pérez Morán, 2022; Sánchez Noriega, 2020, 2017a) and of the director (Gómez Gómez, 2021; Martínez Serrano, 2019; Sánchez Noriega, 2017b; Strauss, 2011; Perales Bazo, 2008; Holguín, 2006; Vernon, 2005; Zurián and Vázquez Varela, 2005). In addition, the research conducted by Casetti and Di Chio (2007) on the construction of film characters was also regarded as pertinent to the object of study.

Secondly, a sample of Almodovar's feature films falling into the melodrama category was selected. Of the total of 23 films that he has directed since the release of *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* in 1980, 15 are melodramas or have melodramatic aspects, despite the predominance of another narrative genre. Additionally, the films of this genre with scenes in which objects that belong to female characters and around which dialogues revolve play a significant role were also included. In brief, the films making up the sample were as follows: *Dark Habits* (1983), *Law of Desire* (1987), *High Heels* (1991), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999), *Volver* (2006) and *Julieta* (2016). The films excluded from the sample included *Talk to Her* (2002) and *Broken Embraces* (2009) because it is the leading man who keeps objects belonging to his loved one, plus *Bad Education* (2003) and *Pain and Glory* (2019) since in both cases it is the mothers of the leading men who do so and play supporting roles.

Thirdly, all the films in the sample were viewed. Considering above all the places in which the objects are kept, the moments at which they appear and the way in which the characters talk about them, it is thus possible to determine how they form part of the emotional past of the main characters insofar as they tend to be essential to the plots of the melodramas. This also helps to gain a deeper understanding of the fictional characters and their psychological construction, which, along with the iconographic, sociological and sexual dimensions, is one of the four involved in the analysis of characters as persons, according to Casetti

and Di Chio (2007). Lastly, the places where these objects are kept are relevant to the plots in that they facilitate the identification of the most intimate aspects of the characters, either in the public space linked to the professional world – mainly in offices –or in the private sphere associated with the home– such as rooms and bedrooms. This contributes to determine whether they keep objects because they are related to their hobbies, recall their childhood and youth, belong to –living or deceased– relatives, evoke a lost love or serve as an essential refuge.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. *Dark Habits* (1983)

Almodovar's third feature film, released the year after the transgressive and amusing *Labyrinth of Passions* (1982), includes several scenes in which characters who keep objects that are of vital importance to them appear. The first is the notebook in which, as if it were a diary, the drug addict boyfriend of the singer Yolanda Bell –played by Cristina Sánchez Pascual– writes about and demonstrates his deep love for her. When he dies from an overdose of heroine, the young woman keeps the notebook, taking it with her to the Convent of the Humiliated Redeemers, where she finally reads it, thus discovering his feelings for her. Yolanda ends up there because she has kept a card that the mother superior –played by Julieta Serrano– gave her in her dressing room one night after watching her perform, for the nun is a bolero lover, a musical genre in which the young singer stands out. The card reads, “Community Humiliated Redeemers. ‘Come to me. I am your refuge’. Pez Volador, 5. Madrid”. The nun has called on her to ask for an autograph, specifically a signed photo of Yolanda for her collection of photos and posters of actresses, giving her the card in exchange, should she ever need a place of refuge.

The scene that evinces the mother superior's penchant for keeping things takes place in her office. With the famous song ‘Encadenados’, sung by Lucho Gatica in the background and by the main female characters in a diegetic fashion, the objects she keeps are shown with a convenient camera movement which dwells

on them, above all on the images hanging on the wall: photos of Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth; others of the muses of French and Italian cinema, Brigitte Bardot and Gina Lollobrigida, respectively; and a black and white poster of Raquel Welch and another large colour one of Marilyn Monroe. The nun, whose name is Julia, offers Yolanda the following explanation:

They're among some of this century's greatest sinners. You're probably asking yourself what they're doing here. [...] It's in imperfect creatures that God encounters his true greatness. Jesus didn't die on the cross to save saints but to redeem sinners. When I look at one of these women, I feel enormously grateful towards them all because it's thanks to them that God continues to die and to be resurrected each day. (0:36:10–0:36:44)

With these words and the emotion with which she utters them, the mother superior makes it clear that her religious devotion and mythomania are closely linked.

In her office, she also keeps all Yolanda's records, crucifixes, several Virgins and religious calendars, in addition to typical office items such as a diary, a wooden stamp and another date stamp, an adjustable lamp and a stapler. Next to the photos mentioned above, there are some shelves full of books. Considering that it belongs to a nun, it is a very peculiar office but with enormous personality, where her passion for cinema and music melds perfectly with her mission as the head of a religious institution. With respect to her mythomaniac tendencies, she confesses to the singer, 'I love all music that talks about feelings: boleros, tango, merengue, salsa, rancheras.' To which Yolanda replies, 'It's the music that speaks, that talks about the truth of life, because, to a greater or lesser extent, everyone has had a love affair or a heartbreak' (0:35:14–0:35:30). Julia is not the only peculiar nun in the convent. Others include Sister Viper, who designs and sews garments for the Virgins in the chapel; Sister Manure, who bakes cakes and lives in the institution because she was formerly a murderer; Sister Alley Rat, who, under the pseudonym of Concha Torres, is a successful authoress of romantic novels; and Sister Lost, who is obsessed with cleaning and has a pet tiger. Their humiliating names are perfectly in keeping with the

mission of the congregation to which they belong: the Humiliated Redeemers. The actresses playing their parts are Lina Canalejas, Marisa Paredes, Chus Lampreave and Carmen Maura, the last three frequently appearing in Almodovar's films.

3.2. *Law of Desire* (1987)

Pablo, Juan and Antonio – played by Eusebio Poncela, Micky Molina and Antonio Banderas – establish a love triangle with tragic consequences for all of them. At the beginning of the summer, Juan leaves Madrid to work in Conil (Cadiz), while Pablo remains in the capital because, although he misses him, he understands that their relationship does not have much of a future. For his part, Antonio springs into action to win the heart of Pablo, who is a filmmaker. The correspondence in which the first two engage makes the third very jealous. Accordingly, Antonio convinces Pablo to write to him during the summer months, asking him to send him his letters addressed to a girl called Laura P. to his parents' house in Jerez de la Frontera, because he has yet to accept his homosexuality. This young man starts to become obsessed with the film director, to the point that he buys a very trendy shirt because it is identical to one that the latter has – even though it clashes with his classic style – and keeps the letters he receives from him. However, it is Tina, Pablo's sister – a transsexual woman played Carmen Maura, who has a real passion for keeping things. Indeed, she even admits to her spiritual leader at Ramiro de Maeztu College that 'memories are the only thing I have left'. (0:21:27)

Tina's house clearly reflects this idea. Next to the front door there is an altar with all those things that nurture her spirituality. They include prints of different Virgins, a Barbie doll, a small figurine of Marilyn Monroe, a print of St. Lucia, another of St Francis of Assisi surrounded by animals, an Immaculate Conception inside a snow globe, a miniature float typical of the Baroque Easter Week in southern Spain, a print of the Miraculous Virgin and a figurine of a crocodile in shorts and T-shirt. All adorned with different types of flowers, placed at different heights forming a triangle whose tip is crowned by an Our Lady of the Sorrows which is larger than the rest. On the other side there is a figure in relief of Mary Immaculate and, lastly, a conch shell. Tina picks it up

and, placing it over her ear, listens to the sound of the sea with a smile on her face. In sum, she has created an altar with everything, both religious and profane, combining divine images –the majority– with elements of popular culture, that for her is marvellous. Moreover, she has converted it into her refuge, the place where she prays and asks for assistance whenever she feels desperate, contemplating it with fascination. Even though her spiritual leader abused her when she was a child and, consequently, she became estranged with the Church, Tina is still a devout believer.

Unlike Pablo, she has kept most of the family photos and loves doing so. In fact, when her brother gives her several photos of when they were young, which are among the very few he still possesses, she is delighted because she does not have them. Following the classification proposed by Parejo (2020), they are identifying photos in that their aim is ‘to reveal the past, to introduce characters to the audience and to make discoveries’ (p. 55). Following the accident which leaves the filmmaker with amnesia, these photos acquire an unexpected importance. To help him recover his memory, Tina takes them with her to the hospital and, showing them to him, talks to him about his childhood. She confesses that she slept with their father and, when their mother found out, their parents separated: she accompanied the former to Morocco, whereas Pablo stayed with the latter.

At this point in her horrifying account, she says to him with desperation, ‘Your amnesia leaves me without a past. If you don’t recover your memory, I’ll go mad’ (1:19:18–1:19:21). Next, she shows him a black and white photo of Pablo and her when they were boys, for Tina did not have a sex change until she moved to Morocco. She then explains that after abandoning their father, she travelled to Paris and that she returned to Madrid for their mother’s funeral. That is when the siblings met again and reestablished their relationship. In another of her hospital visits, Tina gives him his typewriter to make him recall what he likes doing most: writing scripts. Another object thus helps the character to recover his memory, his recollections and, ultimately, his life.

3.3. *High Heels* (1991)

The need for her mother's affection has marked Rebeca's character since she was a child. Becky del Páramo is a famous bolero singer, played by Marisa Paredes, who lives in Mexico and has not seen her daughter, a successful Spanish news anchor played by Victoria Abril, for 20 years. While waiting for her at the airport, Rebeca recalls the trip they made together to Isla Margarita (Venezuela) in 1972, together with Alberto, the former's boyfriend. Once on the island, Becky bought her some plastic earrings which she still has and which she wears to welcome her on the off chance that she still remembers them, despite the time that has since elapsed. Both have an identical pair, but whereas Rebeca has treasured them, as if they were made of gold or were studded with precious stones, simply because they were a gift from her mother, for Becky they are just another pair of earrings among the many she has bought on her multiple trips. This suggests that Rebeca has treasured them for two decades because they constitute an invisible link between her and her absent mother who, nevertheless, she loves.

In another scene, the young woman explains to her mother that, to feel her close, she started to frequent the Villa Rosa concert hall to see the singer Femme Letal performing her greatest hits. In other words, Rebeca is not content with listening to her mother's records –something she can do at home with objects that transmit her voice and that certainly make her feel her presence deeply– but needs to see her, even in the shape of a person imitating her. Rebeca tells her this with absolute sincerity, for she has a real need to be with her.

Although the news anchor connects with her mother through material elements like earrings and other immaterial ones such as music, in the film there is a supporting character who devotes all her time to keeping things: the mother of Judge Domínguez. As acknowledged by her son – played by Miguel Bosé, who is also Femme Letal by night – ‘the poor woman's mad. She hasn't left her room in 10 years’ (1:36:06–1:36:40), where she lives surrounded by all sorts of objects that are her best companions. Played by Mayrata O'Wisiedo, she is bedridden and spends her time contemplating or reviewing all the possessions she keeps in her room. As a mythomaniac, she has an album devoted to Becky del Páramo,

another to Brigitte Bardot and yet another to Mother Theresa of Calcutta, for she is a devout believer. She uses them to keep photos and press cuttings that have allowed her to learn about, and remember almost by heart, their lives and careers. She also reads fashion magazines like *Elle* and gossip magazines like *Semana*, of which a number with a photo of the singer Rocío Jurado on the frontpage is shown. As to religious objects, there are plenty of them distributed all around the room, featuring a painting of the sacred heart of Jesus hanging over the bed.

Albeit cultured, talkative and abreast of news, she is a hypochondriac who never goes outdoors. Nonetheless, she is in the habit of helping her son with his investigations, much more than he himself believes. Thanks to a press cutting in the album devoted to Becky, in which there is a photo of the singer with Manuel, the husband of her daughter, in a loving attitude, the judge realises that both had been in a relationship before the deceased married Rebeca. This allows him to gain a better understanding of the case he is investigating and, moreover, stresses the importance of keeping things.

Lastly, the lady owns a place on the outskirts of Madrid, where she has hoarded many objects, like lanterns containing religious images, stacks of furniture, a fan, several leather suitcases and an old TV set. It is thanks to this apparatus that she sees a news flash: Becky has had a heart attack on stage during a performance at the María Guerrero Theatre. Yet again, an object of the past acquires importance in the present by conveying a message that can change the main character's future completely.

3.4. *The Flower of My Secret* (1995)

Leo Macías is a successful author of romantic novels who writes under the pen name of Amanda Gris. Played by Marisa Paredes, her literary surname perfectly reflects the difficult moment she is going through in her private life. It is possible to say that, more than pink, her soul is grey, bordering on black, and this is what she is transmitting unintentionally through her characters, to the displeasure of Editorial Fascinación, her publishers, with whom she must fulfil a strict agreement. As she loves reading, next to her bed there are piles of books

that serve as inspiration, including Julio Cortázar's *Complete Short Stories*, Janet Frame's *An Angel at My Table*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Henry James' *The Tragic Muse*, Barry Gifford's *Wild at Heart: The Story of Sailor and Lula*, Jean Rhys' *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Juan José Millás' *Ella imagina* and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. All these works help her to develop her work as a writer who, like Pablo Quintero in *Law of Desire*, uses a typewriter she keeps in the corner of her sitting room, which serves as a study. This is her real refuge.

A photo in which she is kissing her husband Paco, a high-ranking military officer who is stationed in Brussels, takes pride of place. Played by Imanol Arias, he is the reason for her unhappiness, for she is no longer in love with him. Nonetheless, she clings to the relationship with all her strength. Albeit a revealing photo, it could be classified as 'metaphoric' because, following her last argument with Paco, she threw it on the floor, breaking its frame and thus transmitting the idea that everything between them has been shattered. As Parejo (2020) has explained, this marks the end of their marriage:

Several of Almodovar's films repeat the same pattern in which the photo of a smiling couple is initially shown (moment of presentation), after which that image is used by one of them (normally the woman) to indicate their separation.

Leo also writes letters to him, as if she were keeping a diary. Although she never sends them, they help her to find relief and, unknowingly, to do therapy. In one of those letters, she describes her feelings for him through another object:

Every day, I wear something of yours. Today, I am wearing the booties you gave me two years ago. Do you remember that one night you had to take them off because I was incapable of doing so on my own? On seeing them this morning, I remembered you and I wore them in your honour. Your memory, like these booties, sometimes causes me such heartache that I am left breathless. (0:04:43–0:05:04)

Leo displays a fragility deriving from disaffection which is consistent with that of some of the characters of her favourite novels. Indeed, in a notebook she

writes, “You see before you, madame,” he said, “one who was created in anxiety” (Barnes 1936, p. 55). In this respect, the film’s score plays an essential role. She uses Bola de Nieve’s bolero ‘Dolor y vida’ as a title for the essay she writes for *El País*. Furthermore, when she is disheartened after Paco has left her, Chavela Vargas appears on TV by chance singing ‘En el último trago’ (The last drink); undoubtedly a perfect reflection of the difficult situation she is going through.

Although Leo does not really like the novels she writes, her sister Rosa and the *El País* journalist Ángel love them. Played by Rossy de Palma and Juan Echanove, both represent stability amidst the maelstrom in which she is immersed. The former, who lives with their mother, Jacinta – played by Chus Lampreave – in a modest flat on the outskirts of Madrid, keeps Amanda Gris’ books on a simple bookcase in her sitting room. For his part, Ángel helps her to fulfil her agreement with Fascinación by writing all the pending novels for her. However, it is not the books that help her to overcome her crisis but something immaterial. When she tries to commit suicide, it is the affectionate voice of her mother, who does not know what has happened to her, on her answering machine that brings her back to life. That voice leads her to the origin, the essence, of her most deep-rooted self. Indeed, she does not come round after all the pills she has taken until she hears her mother’s voice.

3.5. *All About My Mother* (1999)

After watching Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *All About Eve* (1950) on TV, Manuela and her son Esteban, played by Cecilia Roth and Eloy Azorín, discuss the character of Eva Harrington, played by Anne Baxter. The 17-year-old jots things down in a small notebook because he wants to be a scriptwriter and is a great film buff. He takes his notebook with him wherever he goes, noting down many things, as can be seen when, sitting in a bar in front of a large poster of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, depicting the face of Huma Rojo – played by Marisa Paredes – he writes enthusiastically while waiting for his mother. They are going together to see that play by Tennessee Williams starring Huma – who is one of his favourite actresses – as Blanche DuBois, the ill-fated leading woman. When attempting to obtain Huma Rojo’s autograph in the rain he is hit and

killed by the car in which she is travelling, the notebook becomes Manuela's most treasured possession. As a matter of fact, even when she is working as a nurse in the intensive care unit at the hospital, she carries his notebook on her person. In sum, it is as if she were bringing it to him. Moreover, in the flat she subsequently rents in Barcelona, she places it carefully on a table next to a photo of the boy in the foreground. He was writing a story about his mother.

From that moment onwards, the photos of Esteban also form part of Manuela's most treasured possessions. In addition to the photo she keeps on the table in her flat, she always carries another framed one of him smiling broadly in her handbag. When she finally tracks down her son's father, Lola –played by Toni Cantó– she shows her the photo of the boy she kept on the table, as well as his notebook. Showing her some of the pages, she says, 'He wanted to be a writer. This is his notebook. He took it with him everywhere.' Thereupon she opens it randomly where he wrote in pencil: 'Last night, mum showed me a photo. It was ripped in half. I feel like my life is missing that same half.' Manuela informs Lola, 'He wrote this on the morning he died. Read it.' After starting to read it, Lola has her doubts but Manuela urges her to continue: 'This morning, while going through her drawers, I have found a bundle of photos. They were all missing one half. My father, I assume. I want to know him. I must make mum see that I do not care who or what he is, or how he behaved towards her. She cannot deprive me of that right.' Manuela then gives the photo to Lola as a keepsake (1:29:39–1:30:53).

Huma's dressing room at the theatre in Barcelona, where *A Streetcar Named Desire* is to be performed after its run in Madrid, is decorated with photos of her, her lover, Nina –played by Candela Peña– and performances of the play. In addition, there is also a black and white photo of Bette Davis smoking. At one point in the film, she confesses to Manuela, 'I started to smoke because of Bette Davis, to imitate her. By the time I was 18, I was smoking like a chimney. That's why I chose Huma [from the Spanish *humo*, meaning "smoke"]' (0:39:46–0:39:56). After becoming acquainted with her tragic story, Huma gives Manuela a piece of paper on which she has written the following: 'Dear Esteben, this is

the autograph I never managed to sign for you, and not because you didn't try. I suppose you adore your mother.'

Two years later, Manuela returns to Barcelona, where Huma is performing Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* at the same theatre. In her dressing room there is now a photo that is indispensable for her: that of Esteben which she gave to Lola who, before dying, passed it on to Huma for safekeeping, until Manuela returned. As could not be otherwise, Manuela allows Huma to keep it, thus linking Esteben, together with photos of Huma herself and Hollywood stars like Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz, 1963), to the theatre world forever.

3.6. *Volver* (2006)

In this film there are several characters that dwell on the past because they are suffering from some or other age-related mental illness, like Aunt Paula –played by Chus Lampreave– or because time has stood still for them owing to a tragedy. This is the case of Agustina –played by Blanca Portillo– who appears in the first scene carefully tending her own grave. Following this, it is clear to all that she is a person who cares for, keeps and protects things. She lives in a house located in the fictional village of Alcanfor de las Infantas, in the central region of Castile-La Mancha, which has the highest incidence rate of mental health disorders in Spain. The distribution of the objects in her house has a purpose, as is observed when her friends Raimunda and Sole –played by Penélope Cruz and Lola Dueñas– pay her a visit accompanied by the former's daughter, who is also called Paula. On the walls of her large patio, Agustina has hung paper images of the Virgin Mary, numerous flowerpots and ceramic plates, plus some family photos. One is of her mother in her youth, when she was a hippie, which she approaches and kisses with emotional affection. At that moment, she says to young Paula, 'See how modern she was? The only hippie in the village. Look at the plastic jewellery. [...] Very Good plastic. Every time I smoke a joint, I remember her' (0:08:46–0:09:08).

These odds and ends, including long necklaces in different colours, striking brooches, beaded headbands and several huge bracelets, are kept in two boxes on top of a table under the photo. Next to the boxes there is a white and blue tin

which seems to be older. Picking it up, Agustina takes it to where Raimunda and Sole are sitting. Lifting the lid, she reveals threads, small pieces of knitting and coloured spools, for it is a typical sewing box, when there is no seamstress available. She also keeps tobacco in the tin. As Agustina has not seen or heard from her mother for three years, it is her way of keeping her memories alive, looking after the objects she cherished most, like the jewellery. She was extremely attached to her mother and above all appreciates that she was an independent and modern woman before her time. Even though Agustina is not like her mother, for she wears old, dark clothes, almost widow's weeds, she likes the fact that her mother was a hippie and had a positive outlook on life. Nevertheless, with short, cropped hair, which lends her an unmistakable air and displays her personality, her hairstyle is a lot more modern than that of the village womenfolk.

Agustina goes out of her way to find her mother, even participating in the TV programme *Wherever You Are*, but to no avail. For this reason, and owing to her delicate health, she seeks refuge at home, where she spends her time in her bedroom. In this regard, she tells Irene – played by Carmen Maura – forcefully, 'I was born in this bed, my mother slept here and in this very bed we mourned your sister Paula' (1:50:25–1:50:33). She is certainly faithful to the past and to the people who preceded her, especially her mother, until her dying day.

Another character who keeps the belongings of deceased relatives is Sole, Paula's aunt. On Irene's initiative, she gathers the few pieces of jewellery that the old woman possessed, plus old dolls and clothes, from the house in the village, puts them in her car and takes them to her flat in Madrid, to prevent the neighbours from purloining them during the wake. Unlike Agustina, who proudly displays her mother's objects, Sole hides these belongings in a wardrobe, without taking them out of the battered suitcase. The different ways in which both confront the past are thus evidenced by how they treat those objects. Lastly, the score also indicates the emotional state of the characters. It is a song that unites the past and the present, the flamenco version of Carlos Gardel's tango 'Volver', which Raimunda emotionally performs.

3.7. *Julieta* (2016)

The main female character of the director's twentieth film is marked by a painful episode that she decides to keep to herself, not even telling her partner Lorenzo Gentile. Played by Emma Suárez, she keeps many press cuttings and a crumpled, blue envelop in her office desk, which she throws away without opening it. In addition, on the shelves in her sitting room there are a variety of books which she regards fondly and wants to take with her to Lisbon, where she is going to live with Lorenzo for a time. However, after bumping into Bea, the best friend of her daughter Antía, who tells her that she has recently seen her in Lake Como (Italy), she decides to recover the envelop from the wastepaper basket and to remain in Madrid.

The most telling scene occurs immediately afterwards, when Julieta returns to the block where she lived with Antía, after being widowed, to seek refuge in her recollections and to write about the pain she has experienced since her daughter decided to sever ties with her 12 years before. This has been utterly devastating for her and, indeed, she writes: 'Your absence completely fills and destroys my life' (1:22:35–1:22:39). She tries to rent the flat where they lived together but, as it is unavailable, rents another similar one in the same block. The décor and the views transport her back to that past in which she is trapped.

The blue envelop is full of pieces of a photo of her with Antía in which both are smiling happily. With a contrite expression, she tries to piece it together but is overcome with grief. Ripped up photos (Sánchez Noriega, 2017b) represent the sad present of characters who are incapable of becoming reconciled with a past plaguing them. They rip up photos in anger but then cannot part with them, for which reason they keep the pieces, for their soul has been rent apart. Julieta also keeps a bronze sculpture covered with a layer of terracotta of a seated naked man which her friend Ava –played by Inma Cuesta– gave to her before her death. This sculpture recalls the happy time she spent in *Redes* (Corunna), where she met Ava and lived with her daughter and husband, Xoan –a fisherman played by Daniel Grao– until he died in an afternoon storm when he was out fishing. This tragedy marks the beginning of her deep depression.

When she travels to the Pyrenees on the spiritual retreat that leads to the rift with her mother, Antía takes several photos decorating the walls of her room with her: there is one of her friend Bea, another of Chavela Vargas and yet another of her as a small girl in her father's arms. She puts them in a transparent plastic envelope, which she then places in her luggage. Likewise, she takes with her an object associated with her childhood: her father's fishing net. During the first three years after her daughter's departure, Julieta has kept her room just as it was, with her clothes in the wardrobe, the photos on the cork board, her schoolbooks, her music centre and her basketball, which was the sport that Bea practiced, until fed up with waiting for her, she throws it all away. Her memories and the separation, as well as the total silence, are so painful for her that they trigger a fit of anger, for three years without a word from her daughter are too much. Hitherto, Julieta has done the same as Manuela with Esteban's room, leaving it as it was, converting it into the main vestige of the girl's existence. In this way, she carefully conserves both Antía's bedroom and the flat itself to maintain that close link to her daughter, who finally gets in touch with her through a letter in which she informs her that she has just lost one of her three children and now understands the grief that her mother has felt over the past 12 years.

The following table offers a summary of the identified objects that evoke memories and the films in which they appear.

	<i>Dark hab</i>	<i>Law of Desire</i>	<i>High Heels</i>	<i>The Flow of My Secret</i>	<i>All About My Mother</i>	<i>Volver</i>	<i>Julieta</i>
Records and music devices	Mother superior		Rebecca				Julieta
Film posters (films and actresses) and collectibles	Mother superior		Mother Judge Domínguez		Huma		
Photos	Mother superior	Tina	Mother Judge Domínguez	Leo	Manuela Huma	Agustina	Julieta Antía
Diaries	Yolanda						Julieta
Books	Mother superior			Leo			Julieta

Jewellery			Rebeca			Agustina	
Letters				Leo			
Notebooks					Manuela		
Clothes				Leo	Manuela	Agustina	Julieta
Bedroom furniture					Manuela		Julieta

Table 1. Main objects evoking the memories of the female characters
Source: Own elaboration

4. Conclusions

In Almodovar's melodramas, the most predominant objects summoning up the memories of the characters are photos, which appear in all the films in the sample. By and large, they are photos of deceased loved ones, including partners, parents – above all mothers – and children. The mother superior and Leo fall into the first group, Tina and Agustina into the second and Manuela and Julieta into the third. On other occasions, it is photos, and even posters, of actresses – especially those starring in Hollywood classics and in Italian and French films released in the 1950s and 1960s – who they admire, that stand out. This is so in the nun's office, the bedroom of the mother of Judge Domínguez and Huma's dressing room, namely, in spaces that have become refuges for these characters who, moreover, share their mythomania for the seventh art. Curiously, they have often been ripped up and pieced together by the characters themselves who destroyed them in a fit of rage brought on by loss. That they gaze at the pieces nostalgically is the clearest indication that they still harbour the hope of a reencounter, of becoming reunited with the person posing with them in that photo, of recovering lost time. This prompts them to soldier on, the best example of this being Julieta with respect to Antía.

Music is an immaterial element that connects the characters with their deepest emotions, especially through the records of their favourite singers or using devices like radios and music centres. This is mostly the case with the mother superior, as can be seen in her office, when she confesses this and even sings. The second group includes Rebeca, who listens to her mother singing the bolero

‘Piensa en mi’ on the radio in prison, and Antía, whose music centre is among the objects that Julieta keeps in her now abandoned room. The combination of images and music is highly effective in those scenes in which the director depicts the inner universe of the characters, for, while they look at the photos, they activate their memories to a greater extent and transmit their emotions more clearly.

In addition to the omnipresent photos, other objects also occupy an essential place because they once belonged to people they loved most. They do not only keep them but, as in the case of jewellery and clothes, also wear them. In the first case, Rebeca and Agustina keep them merely for the fact that they belonged to their dear mothers and not because of their economic value, for they are made of plastic. The former even wears some earrings of which both have an identical pair, despite possessing other more valuable ones, as can be observed in different scenes in *High Heels*. In the second case, Leo wears the booties that Paco gave her, whereas Agustina and Sole keep clothes and odds and ends that once belonged to their mothers. The cases of Manuela and Julieta are more striking because they keep the clothes of their children – Esteban and Antía, respectively – in their wardrobes, as if they expected them to return at any moment. In this sense, they are the only ones who leave the furniture and contents of their children's bedrooms just as they were.

The third most predominant group of objects are those that contain the written expression of the characters' emotions. The diaries in which they express everything that they feel for the absent person – Julieta for Antía – and the letters addressed to loved ones – Leo for Paco – become the main channel through which both vent their emotions. For them, this exercise is a catharsis and evinces all the melodramatic potential of the films in which they appear, namely, *The Flower of My Secret* and *Julieta*. For their part, the notebooks in which deceased people noted down their concerns become the most treasured objects of the fictional female characters outliving them. That is where they can read and reread their ideas, expressed in something that makes people unique and which tends to reflect their personality: the type of handwriting. The clearest case is that of Manuela, who hangs on to both the photo of her son

Esteban and his notebook to continue to feel him close. In this respect, it is possible to claim that the objects are valuable for the leading women when they belonged to the dearly departed.

The moments at which they talk most about these objects are intimate conversations in which they tell the people around them about the role that they play in their lives and how they connect them with the people they love and who are physically absent. This also occurs in moments of solitude, especially when they write to give free rein to their emotions, as with Leo and Julieta. On the other hand, the memories associated with those objects often move the characters to action. For instance, Manuela travels to Barcelona to meet Huma Rojo, to fulfil the desire of her son and to honour his memory, whereas Julieta returns to a place that she previously shared with her daughter, after receiving a piece of news that makes her regain hope of seeing her again. This is a significant case because it is there that Julieta receives the letter that will lead to the reencounter, something which perhaps would not have happened if she had accompanied Lorenzo to Lisbon or if she had remained in her previous flat. Both characters show the importance that Almodovar attaches to mothers in his melodramas, above all to those who have lost their children in the broadest sense of the word, highlighting self-sacrifice and patience as their main traits. Becky, whose artistic temperament has made her lose touch with her daughter, is the exception.

All considered, the research hypothesis –the characters appearing in Pedro Almodovar's melodramas keep both personal and family objects from their past to keep their memories alive– has been borne out.

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