

## Nothing is Simple. The Principle of Patient Autonomy in Almodóvar's Cinema

### Nada es sencillo. El principio de autonomía del paciente en el cine almodovariano

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#### Abstract:

This study investigates the representation of patient autonomy in the filmography of Pedro Almodóvar. Specifically, we analyze this bioethical principle in what might be defined as his “healthcare trilogy”: *All About My Mother* (1999), *Talk to Her* (2002) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011). Throughout the article, we examine how the filmmaker articulates the progressive erosion of patient autonomy in relation to power and gender dynamics, using artistic resources—literature, dance and sculpture—as metaphors to delve into the complex relationship between the caregiver and the patient.

The methodology adopted combines a qualitative content analysis with a hermeneutics-of-film approach. This involved the detailed study of the selected film’s screenplays, as well as their visual and narrative resources, alongside examination of relevant academic articles. In each of these works, key scenes have been identified that illustrate the evolution of medical authority and its impact on the autonomy of the characters/patients. This research concludes that Almodóvar employs artistic references as a metaphor for patient autonomy in relation to power and gender dynamics.

#### Resumen:

Este estudio investiga la representación de la autonomía del paciente en la filmografía de Pedro Almodóvar. Concretamente, analizaremos este principio bioético en lo que podríamos definir como su “trilogía sanitaria”: *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002) y *La piel que habito* (2011). A lo largo del artículo, examinamos cómo el cineasta articula la erosión progresiva de la autonomía del paciente con relación a las dinámicas de poder y género, utilizando recursos artísticos —literatura, danza y escultura— como metáfora que profundiza en la compleja relación entre el cuidador y el paciente.

La metodología adoptada combina un análisis cualitativo de contenido con un enfoque hermenéutico fílmico. Se ha realizado un estudio detallado de guiones, recursos visuales y narrativos en las películas escogidas, así como de artículos científicos en la línea de nuestra investigación. En cada una de estas obras se han identificado escenas clave que ilustran la evolución de la autoridad sanitaria y su impacto en la autonomía de los personajes/pacientes. Esta investigación concluye que Almodóvar utiliza las referencias artísticas como metáfora de la autonomía del paciente con relación a las dinámicas de género y poder.

**Keywords:** Spanish Cinema; Patient Autonomy; Illness, Almodóvar; Gender Studies; Women.

**Palabras clave:** Cine español; autonomía del paciente; enfermedad; Almodóvar; estudios de género; mujeres.

## 1. Introduction: Almodóvar's cinema and the principle of autonomy

“—Someday you and I should talk”.  
 “—Yes, and it will be easier than you think”.  
 “—Nothing is simple”.  
 [—Algún día, usted y yo deberíamos hablar.  
 —Sí, y será más sencillo de lo que cree.  
 —Nada es sencillo.]

(Geraldine Chaplin and Darío Grandinetti in “*Hable con ella*”, *Talk to her*)

Nothing is simple in life and especially not in Almodóvar's cinema. “Throughout his filmography, Pedro Almodóvar frequently uses illness as a theme: It is not particularly innovative that Almodóvar's cinema takes health as a topic” (Cabello, 2013, p. 36). As we can see in Table 1, Cabello's assertion is true.

Year	Title	Pathology
1980	<i>Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón</i> ( <i>Pepi, Luci and other Girls on the Heap</i> )	Aggression / Hospital
1982	<i>Laberinto de pasiones</i> ( <i>Labyrinth of Passion</i> )	HIV
1983	<i>Entre tinieblas</i> ( <i>Dark Habits</i> )	Drug addiction / Overdose
1984	<i>¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?</i> ( <i>What have I done to deserve this?</i> )	Drug addiction / Heroine / Amphetamines
1986	<i>Matador</i>	Vertigo/ Psychiatry
1987	<i>La ley del deseo</i> ( <i>The Law of Desire</i> )	Amnesia
1988	<i>Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios</i> ( <i>Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown</i> )	Psychosis/ Dysphemia
1989	<i>¡Átame!</i> ( <i>Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!</i> )	Psychiatric patient/ Drug addiction
1991	<i>Tacones lejanos</i> ( <i>High Heels</i> )	Heart disease
1993	<i>Kika</i>	Catalepsy
1995	<i>La flor de mi secreto</i> ( <i>The Flower of My Secret</i> )	Alcoholism
1997	<i>Carne trémula</i> ( <i>Live Flesh</i> )	Hemiplegia
1999	<i>Todo sobre mi madre</i> ( <i>All About My Mother</i> )	Organ donation / HIV / Drug addiction/ Alzheimer's
2002	<i>Hable con ella</i> ( <i>Talk to Her</i> )	Spinal injury
2004	<i>La mala educación</i> ( <i>Bad Education</i> )	Overdose
2006	<i>Volver</i>	Death / Old-age / Cancer
2009	<i>Los abrazos rotos</i> ( <i>Broken embraces</i> )	Blindness / Overdose / Mourning
2011	<i>La piel que habito</i> ( <i>The Skin I Live In</i> )	Cosmetic surgery/ Depression
2013	<i>Los amantes pasajeros</i> ( <i>I'm so excited</i> )	Alcoholism
2016	<i>Julieta</i>	Depression / Alzheimer's / Multiple Sclerosis
2019	<i>Dolor y gloria</i> ( <i>Pain and glory</i> )	Depression / Chronic pain / Mourning
2021	<i>Madres paralelas</i> ( <i>Parallel Mothers</i> )	Sudden Infant Death Syndrome
2024	<i>The Room Next Door</i>	Cervical cancer/ Euthanasia

Table 1. Pathologies present in Pedro Almodóvar's filmography. Author's own work

However, there are few examples of health professionals taking a leading role in Almodóvar's films. While doctors, nurses, and other medical technicians do appear in all his films, it is only in three that these professionals are the main protagonists of the drama. These films are *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All about my mother*; 1999), in which the main character, Manuela (Cecilia Roth), is a nurse who has just lost her son; *Hable con ella* (*Talk to her*; 2002), in which the principle role is taken by Benigno (Javier Cámara) a nurse of ambiguous sexuality who is so in the thrall of his mother that we are reminded of Norman Bates (Castro de Paz, 2012, p. 29); and finally, *La piel que habito* (*The skin I live in*; 2011), where Antonio Banderas takes the lead as Doctor Robert Ledgard, a surgeon who—taking clear inspiration from the character of Doctor Genessier, in *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes without a face* by Franju, 1960)—becomes obsessed by his experiments after the suicides of his wife and daughter. This set of films then, could be called Almodóvar's "healthcare trilogy".

As might be expected of health practitioners, the Almodóvarian protagonists in the "healthcare trilogy" monopolize the action. How could it be any other way? They are, after all, charged with the care of the patient, and this forms the principal plotline in each one of these narratives. Nevertheless, adopting the words of Geraldine Chaplin as our own: *Nothing is simple*.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we intend to demonstrate how the Manchegan director, Pedro Almodóvar, uses the camera to examine the varying levels of patient consent their carers obtain and how this is reflected in his allegorical use of various art forms, specifically, literature, dance and sculpture. Patient autonomy decreases throughout Almodóvar's "healthcare trilogy" to the extent that, in the final film, "care" has become imposition and, indeed, an act of torture committed by the health professional against their victim/patient.

Of course, many valuable articles have been written concerning Almodóvar's work and its intertextuality with respect to other artforms (c.f.: Zurian and Vázquez (2005); Parejo (2021); Cabello Ruiz (2013); Fellie (2016); FaszermcMahon (2006); issues of gender (c.f.: Caballero and Zurian (2016); Gallegos (2008); Garrido Lora and Ramírez Alvarado (2020); Russo (2019)); and even its

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treatment of bio- and social politics (c.f.: Kinder (2005), Gutiérrez-Albilla (2017)). In this regard, the words of Gilles Deleuze seem particularly appropriate to Almodóvar: “the great authors of cinema could be compared to not only painters, architects, or musicians, but also to philosophers. They *think* with images-in-motion and images-in-time rather than concepts” (Deleuze, 1983, p. 12). The novelty of the present work lies in its focus the relationship between Almodóvar’s filmic narrative and the bioethical principle of patient autonomy.

The philosopher Adela Cortina divides bioethical principles into two main blocks: *minimum ethics* such as the concept of “do no harm” and “justice”, that might be seen as basic obligations to avoid iatrogenic harms and guarantee equity; and *maximum ethics* which include “benefit” and “autonomy”, and that represent the aspiration to do good while respecting the will of the patient (Cortina, 2000, p. 13). This work is concerned only with the last of these ethical blocks, specifically, autonomy, with the aim of making a rigorous analysis of the patient’s wishes versus the power of medicine as reflected in Almodóvar’s healthcare trilogy: “*Todo sobre mi madre*”, “*Hable con ella*” and “*La piel que habito*” (*All about my mother*, *Talk to her*, and *The skin I live in*).

Today, most authors agree that affirming patient autonomy is now the “star” theme of or the “default” reason for bioethical principles (Institut Borja de Bioètica, 2011).

Clinical bioethics, as ethics applied to the context of clinical practice, is a new term with an old reality: it is the moral dimension of Medical Practice since Medicine is not a scientific end but rather an ethical one [La bioética clínica, como ética aplicada al ámbito de la práctica clínica, es un término nuevo para una realidad antigua: la dimensión moral del ejercicio de la Medicina, porque el fin de la Medicina no es un fin científico, sino ético](Blanco, 2005).

This concept has been defined and interrogated by several authors. The etymological origin of the word autonomy lies in the Greek word αὐτός (of one’s own) and νόμος (a law or rule), but, according to Postigo Solana (2016), it was Immanuel Kant who first defined it: “as a concept tied to respect of the person and, in particular, in considering it as an end in itself and not as a means without prior consent” (Postigo Solana, 2016, p. 2). In the second half of the twentieth

century, Beauchamp and Childress stated that “all theories of autonomy agree on two essential conditions: a) freedom, understood as independence from controlling influences, and b) agency, that is, the capacity to take intentional action” (Siurana Aparisi, 2010, p. 123).

In opposition to this, Michela Marzano offers a different conceptualization which distances itself from the idea of the isolated individual seen in previous definitions and instead develops a notion of “relational autonomy”. Thus, the individual is always socially connected to a group, a family or a cultural tradition (Busquets, 2011, p. 2). Also taking this relational line of thinking, we find Herbert Marcuse, for whom the level of individual autonomy is determined dialectically within a dynamic system that constitutes a network of shared relationships (Bentivegna, 2009, p. 59). Another school of thought employs James Drane’s (1985) “sliding-scale” model which establishes autonomy and patient competency to consent not as something static and dichotomous (apt/not apt) but rather as dependent on the complex processes in which the patient is immersed.

Leaving the above definitions to one side, we shall limit ourselves to the albeit sanitized, dictionary definition of autonomy offered by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (*Royal Academy of the Spanish Language*): “the condition of an individual, who, in certain circumstances depends on no one” (DRAE, 2023) in parallel with that enshrined in Spanish law: Law 41/2002 concerning Patient Autonomy. Article 2, chapter 1 of this law establishes as a basic principle that: “the dignity of the human individual, the respect for his/her autonomous will and privacy will direct all actions” (Ley 41/2002, p. 5). In other words, “Every human being, thus, is free to choose what they judge to be best for their lives” (Mazo, 2011, p. 118). Effectively, this law favors the highest degree of autonomy for the patient in contrast to the classic paternalism that has ruled traditional clinical practice.

Naturally, medical professionals have an essential role in this model of patient autonomy. Indeed, in law they are “obliged to not only exercise their techniques correctly but also fulfil their duties of documentation and information provision in the clinical setting, and to respect the free and voluntary decisions of the patient” (Ley 41/2002, p. 5).

## 2. Research questions

Hegel said that the philosopher attempts to define their age in concepts, the artist attempts to define their age in images [Hegel decía que es filósofo quien acierta a poner su época en conceptos, el artista es quien acierta a poner su tiempo en imágenes](Pardo, 2016, p. 37).

First, the corpus of relevant films by Almodóvar must be assembled. In this case it comprises the “healthcare trilogy” of feature films unique among Almodóvar’s works as having a medical professional in the lead role.

We pose three research questions to answer in respect to these films:

First research question: How is the metaphor of art used in the representation of the principal of autonomy?

Second research question: How does the gender of the health professional influence the care received by the patient and the attention given to the principle of autonomy?

Third research question: How are patient dignity and agency depicted in these films?

In the following research article, we structure our results according to our three research questions. In each case our analysis begins with the scenes that might be considered “ignition points” (González Requena, 2015, p. 403) and proceeds through an examination of the principal “progressions” in the key healthcare-related plotlines.

## 3. First research question: art as a metaphor for the principal of autonomy

Metaphor works by association, by comparing non-associated entities with each other centering on the ways in which they resemble each other [La metáfora funciona por asociación, comparando entidades no asociadas entre sí centrándose en las formas en que se parecen entre sí](Lupton, 2006, p. 59)

The first research question we wish to answer in this work concerns whether or not Almodóvar’s “healthcare trilogy” shows evidence of art being used as a metaphor for patient autonomy. And, if this is the case, are such poetic means also effective in conveying the conceptual complexities Almodóvar wishes to communicate. Debra Fraszter-McMahon comments that:



In a film with a title specifically focused on communication, the juxtaposition of metaphoric and metonymic elements reflects concerns about sign systems by underscoring the symbolic, multi-layered, and troubling issues of interpretation [En una película con un título específicamente centrado en la comunicación, la yuxtaposición de elementos metafóricos y metonímicos refleja preocupaciones sobre los sistemas de signos al subrayar las cuestiones simbólicas, multifacéticas y preocupantes de la interpretación](Faszer-McMahon, 2006, p. 51).

Bearing in mind this point of view, it is clear that the “healthcare trilogy” does indeed use the narrative strategy posited. Thus, *Hable con ella*, evokes music and dance, *Todo sobre mi madre* directly mentions novels and theatre, meanwhile, in *La piel que habito* the pictorial arts but above all, sculpture are ever-present.

Without doubt, intertextuality among different art forms and aesthetic references are a constant element of Almodóvar's films. In the case of *Todo sobre mi madre*, Jorge Luis Gallegos (2008) notes four key sources for the narrative: the feature film, *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950), two plays, namely, Tennessee Williams's (1947) *A tramcar named desire* and García Lorca's (1933) *Bodas de sangre* and finally, the preface to Trueman Capote's (1980) collection of stories, *Music for Chameleons*.

The references to these works are by no means purely ornamental, rather they interact with the main plotline. Indeed, Poyato reflects that *Music for Chameleons* is not simply a dressing for the text but also has an important function in developing the character of Manuela's son, Esteban, by demonstrating his commitment to literature (Poyato, 2007, p. 36). A similar effect occurs in how the world of theatre is reflected in the film's staging. Thus, Esteba (Eloy Azorín) says to his mother: “if you were an actress, I would write parts for you” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 20). And the director himself has commented that the film emerged from an idea he had about a person unconnected to professional theatre who must act and appear as if on a stage (F1): “After shooting *La flor...* I made some notes about Manuela, the nurse who appears at the beginning. An unremarkable woman who in the role-plays [...] became an authentic actress” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 169).



F1. Manuela acts on stage. Stills from *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) Pedro Almodóvar. © Produced by El Deseo.

Indeed, the stage-like nature of the first two films in Almodóvar's "healthcare trilogy" is reinforced by the presence of a stage curtain in both: *Todo sobre mi madre* concludes with the falling of a curtain while *Hable con ella* begins with the raising of the same, providing a sense of continuity between these two films (F2):



F2. Stage curtain at the Lara theatre, Madrid. Stills from *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) and *Hable con ella* (2002) Pedro Almodóvar © Produced by El Deseo.

The importance of this stage curtain—and of other curtains and elements of the set that act as such—is particularly important in *Hable con ella*, as Fellie explains:

In addition to windows, which, like the stage curtains mentioned above, can be metatextual indicators in the sense that they frame scenes within scenes, several other physical frames or barriers appear within the film, most functioning to hinder, alter, or mediate communication: stage curtains, jail windows, doorways, and more [Además de las ventanas, que, como los telones de escena mencionados anteriormente, pueden ser indicadores metatextuales en el sentido de que enmarcan escenas dentro de escenas, dentro de la película aparecen varios otros marcos o barreras físicas, la mayoría de las cuales funcionan para obstaculizar, alterar o mediar en la comunicación: cortinas de escenario, ventanas de cárcel, puertas y más] (Fellie, 2016, p. 230).

In *Hable con ella*, Almodóvar turns to contemporary dance to express the patient's freedom, a device that involves agile, liberating movement but notably, no voice. Commenting on this, Zoila Clark writes: "The body of Alicia, who is a ballet dancer, is in contrast to the other female protagonist, the toreador, Lydia. Both are practitioners of physical artforms and show off their bodies, but while



Alicia's represents femininity through her costume, Lydia is a symbol of the androgenous since she wears a tie, a sword and breeches" (Clark, 2006, p. 124). Leaving aside bullfighting as a topic for another research project, here, we shall focus on dance. Ballet is so important for Alicia (Leonor Walting) that she says, at one point: "I could not live without dancing" (Almodóvar, 2002, p. 97). Furthermore, Benigno's obsessive love for her starts when he watches her from his window as she goes through her dance training routine (F3).



F3. Benigno spies on Alicia from his window. A sequence from *Hable con ella* (2002) Pedro Almodóvar © Produced by El Deseo.

This film starts and ends with, respectively, Pina Bausch's dance pieces *Café Müller* and *Masurca Fogo* (*Fiery Mazurka*) (F4). It is noteworthy that a poster advertising Bausch's work appears in *Todo sobre mi madre*—on the wall of Roja's (Marisa Paredes) dressing room—here, her choreography directly inspires Almodóvar's plot development. Thus, Gutiérrez Albilla points to the essence of dance as a form of hypertext in this feature: "Dance allows us to understand the body in its connection with other bodies" (Gutiérrez Albilla, 2003, p. 383). From *Mazurca Fogo* we come to *Trincheras*, the new creation of Alicia's teacher, Katerina (Geraldine Chaplin) which she describes to Benigno, unknowingly anticipating both his fate and that of Alicia: "It's beautiful. Because death emerges from life [...] From masculinity, femininity emerges" (Almodóvar, 2002, pp. 87-88).



F4. Dance pieces choreographed by Pina Bausch: *Café Müller* and *Mazurca Fogo*. Stills from *Hable con ella* (2002), Pedro Almodóvar. © Produced by El Deseo.

Almodóvar is conscious of how Bauch's choreography provides the film with a perfect narrative circle: "If I had requested it on purpose I could not have obtained anything better. Without realizing, Pina Bausch had created the perfect

doors through which to enter and leave *Hable con ella*" (Almodóvar, 2002, p. 227).

As Almodóvar's "healthcare trilogy" progresses, the freedom of the protagonist-patient becomes more and more limited while the protagonist-health-practitioner takes on an ever-darker role reaching a terrifying climax in one of Almodóvar's most sinister productions: *La piel que habito*. Gone is the voice and interpretive freedom of the theatre seen in *Todo sobre mi madre*; gone is the liberating dance of *Hable con ella*. In *La piel que habito*, the patient is literally imprisoned.

In this last of the "healthcare trilogy", the patient no longer has even a trace of free-will. Here, Almodóvar gives us Vera (Elena Anaya) completely at the mercy of some kind of modern Pygmalion or "Mad doctor" character. Furthermore, Vera is aware of her objectification and her role as the blank canvas or block of marble ready to be sculpted by her creator. Indeed, she acknowledges her helplessness in the last moments of the film: "So, am I done for now?" (Almodóvar, 2012, p. 39). In keeping with this torturous patient-health professional dynamic, the intertextuality with other artforms is, perhaps, at its most complex in this last film of the trilogy.

As Cabello notes: "All paintings, all books and all songs present in *La piel que habito*, have a dual purpose: as filmic ornament and as symbolic references for the narrative" (Cabello, 2013, p. 35). This is apparent from the first time we see the inert form of the patient:

We see a body, we know it is a she as the slowly moving camera has shown us every detail. On one hand she reminds us of the sinuous silhouettes of the ballerinas beloved of French artist Edgar Degas and on the other, of the sinister figures, dolls stitched in gauze, made by the French-American feminist artist, Louise Bourgeois [Percibimos este cuerpo, que la cámara nos detalla con tanta precisión a través de su lento movimiento, como un cuerpo femenino, y nos recuerda, por un lado, las siluetas de las bailarinas nervudas del artista francés Edgar Degas y, por otro lado, las figuras siniestras, muñecas hechas de gasas y costuras, de la artista feminista franco-americana Louise Bourgeois](Russo, 219, p. 163).

Almodóvar himself points us in the same direction in the film's titles: "Thanks to Louise Bourgeois, whose work not only moves me but is also Vera's salvation" (Almodóvar, 2011, 1h:58min:01seg), meanwhile, in the prologue to the edited screenplay Vicente Molina Foix also observes: "She has something of the mannequin or the marionette about her" (Molina Foix, 2012, p. 7). Not only this, Almodóvar also refers to a mannequin in his text: "The mannequin has no head, it finishes at the neck [...] the effect is as if the mannequin had grown from a head, Vera's head" (Almodóvar, 2012, p. 31). This last image reminds us of the creation of María in Fritz Lang's *Metrópolis* (1929), and we should note, in *Hable con ella*, a poster for this film hangs in Alicia's room.

For Cabello, the use of art, specifically the paintings of Titian and Louise Bourgeois's doll-sculptures are fundamental to the interpretation of the film:

The choice of Titian's work is no more arbitrary than Vera's passion for Louise Bourgeois is coincidental. The French painter's infancy and adolescence were marked by his differences with his womanizing father. His experiences made him reflect on the role of women in society making use of a symbolic language to invoke the concepts of female repression, sexuality and the problems of patriarchy [Si no son arbitrarias las obras de Tiziano, tampoco es casual la pasión de Vera por Louise Bourgeois. La artista francesa vivió una infancia y adolescencia marcadas por las diferencias con su progenitor, quien era infiel a su esposa. Esta situación le hizo reflexionar sobre el papel de la mujer en la sociedad haciendo uso de un lenguaje simbólico que remitiese a la represión femenina, a la sexualidad o a los problemas del patriarcado](Cabello, 2013, p. 40).

Almodóvar's fascination with painting and sculpture is such that it is he himself as the director who now uses Vera's body to represent and reference other works. Examples include Diego Velázquez's *Venus del espejo* (*The Rokeby Venus* 1647) and the *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) by Louise Bourgeois.

Again, Cabello supports this interpretation:

At the beginning of *La piel que habito*, Vera is shown doing yoga. That her bodily contortions mimic those of that sculpture is not something to be ignored. The explanation is clear: "Arch of Hysteria" shows a naked figure arching over, convulsed due to a pain traditionally associated with the

feminine, however, Bourgeois has decided to represent a castrated male figure. And what is Vera? [Que al principio de *La piel que habito* aparezca Vera practicando yoga y contorsionándose de igual modo que lo hace esta escultura no es una cuestión baladí. La explicación es clara: “Arch of Hysteria” presenta una figura desnuda arqueándose convulsa a consecuencia de una dolencia tradicionalmente asociada a lo femenino, sin embargo, Bourgeois decide representar a un hombre de genitales amputados. ¿Y qué es Vera?](Cabello, 2013, p. 42).

We close this section with a quote from Andrei Tartovsky on cinema: “the set is the work of hands, as is sculpture; but what is modelled is the temporal flow of scenes, registered according to the reality of events and of the director in this regard. [...] the director sculpts time highlighting the rhythmic possibilities contained in its substance” (Aumont et al, 2019, pp. 281-282). Thus, Almodóvar is the sculptor who manipulates his universe at his leisure.

#### 4. Second research question: from mother to kidnapper

With this film, as in all of them, Almodóvar celebrates the female being, and liminally, seems to express the evolution of feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. [...] *La piel que habito* breaks social and gender hierarchies to dissolve order and create a malleable, fluid reality that allows the creation of new ways of being and thinking [Con esta película, como en casi todas ellas, Almodóvar celebra el ser femenino, y parece expresar, liminalmente, la evolución del feminismo en el siglo XXI. [...] *La piel que habito* rompe las jerarquías sociales y de género, para disolver el orden y para crear una situación maleable y fluida que permite la creación de nuevas maneras de ser y pensar](Gascón-Vera, 2016, p. 59).

Continuing the discussion we now address the second research question: How does the gender of the health professional influence the care received by the patient and the attention given to the principle of autonomy in the “healthcare trilogy”? It is well accepted that Almodóvar's cinema contains numerous references to gender. Here, we do not wish to complete a new analysis of this topic, but rather, with due attention to the existing bibliography, justify our thesis and reflect how the freedom of the female patients in this trilogy is undermined (or otherwise) depending on the gender of their care-giver.

In the published screenplay of *Todo sobre mi madre*, the director describes Manuela as: “from 35 to 40 years old, Manuela is an attractive, blonde woman.

She possesses that solidity of people who have had to look after themselves for a very long time. A sweet, Argentine accent and easy but sad smile” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 18). As we have mentioned before, this character is the same nurse who makes an appearance in *La flor de mi secreto* (1995). In *Todo sobre mi madre*, she loses her son, Esteban, when he is run over by a car as he pursues the actress, Huma Rojo’s taxi. We should point out that a car accident is also responsible for Alicia’s coma in *Hable con ella* and for the disfigurement of Gal, Doctor Ledgard’s wife in *La piel que habito*. In fact, it is even the way that the Ledgard manages to kidnap Vicente.

After losing her son, Manuela travels to Barcelona to tell Esteban’s father, Lola (Toni Cantó) of his son’s death. En route, she meets Sister Rose (Penélope Cruz), who is pregnant and HIV positive. Once in Barcelona, she comes to know Huma Rojo personally and starts working as her assistant while also caring for Rosa during her pregnancy. Not wishing to spend too much time on the film’s synopsis, we should return to the character of Manuela, who Gallegos Vargas describes thus: “Manuela is a nurse, a job which, due to the tasks she undertakes establishes a strong connection with motherhood, later, as Huma’s assistant, she provides care” (Gallegos, 2008, p. 100). Manuela’s motherly character is thus clearly defined, but where is patient autonomy in this? To explore this element, we take Sister Rosa as the principle recipient of care. Manuela had decided to tell Esteban the truth about his father—reflecting her respect for him—however, this happens on precisely the day he dies and it is Rosa who enables her, finally, to fulfil her commitment to respecting patient will. On the birth of her son, Rosa requests: “Manuela, promise me one thing. If anything happens... Promise me that you won’t hide anything from the boy” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 108). Sister Rosa’s worst fears do, in fact, come to pass and in a clear act of respect for patient wishes and commitment to the autonomy of the individual, Manuela hides nothing from the baby or, indeed, from his father, Lola. This results in the newborn being rejected by Rosa’s family: “The situation with Rosa’s parents has become unbearable. His grandma thinks the baby could infect her with any little scratch” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 119).

The film ends, as noted above, with the fall of a red curtain printed with flowers (see F2), onto which Óscar Mariné’s closing credits are superimposed (Cartelle,

2021, p. 183). The second film in the trilogy analyzed here begins with an identical event in reverse. It is the same red curtain, which as Sánchez Castrejón notes, is that from the Lara theatre, Madrid (Sánchez Castrejón, 2024, p. 176), except that now it appears darker. The curtain opens and we see an extract from *Café Müller* which leads to our introduction to Benigno:

The devoted Benigno has come to the theater so that he can describe this performance to the comatose Alicia, whom he has been nursing for the past four years, and (like Esteban in the prologue to *Todo sobre mi madre*) so that he can get an autograph from the diva: a photograph of Pina Bausch dedicated to Alicia [El devoto Benigno ha venido al teatro para describir esta actuación a la comatosa Alicia, a la que ha estado cuidando durante los últimos cuatro años, y (como Esteban en el prólogo de *Todo sobre mi mama*) para poder conseguir un autógrafo de la diva: una fotografía de Pina Bausch dedicada a Alicia](Kinder, 2004, p. 19).

In *Lo indisponible*, Hartumut Rosa describes desire as “always directed at something unobtainable: we desire that which we (presently) do not have or (at least) do not possess entirely or cannot completely control” (Rosa, 2021, p. 150). Desire is precisely what moves Benigno’s actions towards Alicia; however, Benigno’s gender identity and sexuality are sources of doubt throughout the film, as noted by Caballero and Zurian: “Benigno is not portrayed as the stereotypical Iberian male who imposes his power and force over women, but rather as having somewhat feminine characteristics: he cares for his mother until she dies and subsequently cares for Alicia. Moreover, his sexuality is ambiguous since it refuses to be defined as either homo or heterosexual” (Caballero and Zurian, 2016, p. 864). By way of illustration, in the scene where Alicia’s father is visiting, Benigno confesses to homosexual preferences: “well, I think I am oriented more towards men” (Almodóvar, 2002, p. 82), something that his female nurse-colleagues reiterate: “Benigno doesn’t like women, he prefers guys” (Almodóvar, 2002, p. 116). However, Benigno’s attraction to and obsession with Alicia are clear to the cinema audience who are privileged to see certain events hidden from the view of the film’s protagonists. Only Marco knows the truth, and he reproaches Benigno when he expresses his intentions to marry Alicia:

— Benigno, are you mad?



- Why would it be strange for a man in love with a woman to want to marry her?
- Because the woman is in a coma. Because Alicia can't decide with any part of her body (Almodóvar, 2002, pp. 161-163).

Garrido and Ramírez (2020) summarize the issue well:

In *Hable con ella*, Benigno develops an obvious obsession with Alicia. As his story is told, it has a temporal axis with two key moments: the present and four years ago, just before Alicia is involved in the car accident that leaves her comatose. In that moment, driven by his voyeurism, Benigno engineers numerous circumstances in which he can spy on her: he discovers where she lives, and even to become the patient of Doctor Roncero, psychiatrist and father of Alicia whose consulting room is in the very house where he lives with his daughter. In addition, he arranges things such that he is contracted as the nurse in sole charge of her care [...] During one of her routine check-ups, the doctors discover that Alicia has not menstruated for two months... and that Benigno is responsible, his obsession for her being such that he raped her repeatedly. The outcome for Benigno is tragic as he commits suicide. Alicia loses the baby she was expecting but wakes from her coma during the labor [En *Hable con ella*, Benigno desarrolla una clara obsesión por Alicia. Su historia es presentada en un eje temporal con dos momentos claves: el presente y cuatro años atrás, justo antes de que Alicia sufra un accidente de coche que la deja en coma. En este momento la conducta voyeur de Benigno le lleva a espiarla en varias circunstancias: se las ingenia para averiguar dónde vive e, incluso, para ser atendido por el doctor Roncero, psiquiatra, que es padre de Alicia y que tiene la consulta en la misma casa en la cual vive con su hija. También se las arregla a fin de que se le contrate en exclusiva como enfermero para cuidarle [...] Como parte de los controles rutinarios, los médicos se dan cuenta de que Alicia lleva ya dos meses sin menstruar... y en ello había tenido mucho que ver la obsesión de Benigno que llega a violarla reiteradamente. El desenlace es trágico para él: se quita la vida. Alicia perderá al bebé que espera, pero despertará del coma en el momento del parto](Garrido & Ramírez, 2020, p. 524) (F5).



F5. Sequence of stills from *Hable con ella* (2002). Benigno surprises Alicia at her house. © Produced by El Deseo.

To all appearances, Benigno is an excellent nurse from the professional point of view. Until he commits the crime. This seems to exemplify Garrido and Ramírez's point that: "Domination is not always explicit, but it is present implicitly in many of his [Almodóvar's] films" (Garrido y Ramírez, 2020, p. 525). Indeed, this ambivalent and reprehensible attitude expressed in Benigno's personality is precisely what stands out for Clark:

The scenes in which they talk with these comatose women are marked by a binary structure separating the spoken language associated with men and a bodily language related to women. [...] The vegetative state of these women is somehow a symbol of masculine desire: it is enough that the men select them as objects of love, they do not have to hear what these women have to say [En las escenas en que ellos hablan con estas mujeres en estado vegetativo se marca una estructura binaria entre el lenguaje hablado asociado al hombre y el lenguaje corporal relacionado con lo femenino. [...]] Estas mujeres parecen estar en estado vegetativo como símbolo del objeto del deseo masculino, pues basta con que ellos las elijan para quererlas, sin oír lo que ellas tengan que decir](Clark, 2006, pp. 125-126).

Turning now to the third film in the "healthcare trilogy", this stands apart from the semi-serial nature of the other two. Indeed, the ten year period separating this film from *Hable con ella* may be at the root of its sinister plot turn. As Elena Gascón-Vera notes: "*La piel que habito*, belongs to the cinematic genre of *body horror* in which we are invited to watch the graphic destruction of several bodies, although, in this case, the film presents itself as a commentary on scientific possibilities and their moral perils" (Gascón-Vera, 2016, p. 57).

In her book, *Regarding the pain of others*, Susan Sontag writes: "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for those showing bodies naked" (Sontag, 2003, p. 21) and there are abundant examples of both in this film. For her part, Andrea Pajón comments that: "the cinematic discourse of this film oscillates between extremes of passion and medical science; on one hand

there is doubt and vengeance and in contrast, the most orthodox deployment of the tools of a scientific spirit devoid of any principle” (Pajón, 2015, p. 96). Nevertheless, we see this immense scientific spirit as a metaphor for a machismo of the highest order, represented here by Doctor Ledgard. In this regard, Castro de Paz makes the following observation on the evolution of Almodóvar's cinematic narratives: “A way of writing films that is, absolutely, so baroque and *constructed* as desiring and desperate, that it still could offer us a new item of his painful and non-transferable masculine discourse in this raving, atrocious dark thriller entitled *La piel que habito*” (Castro de Paz, 2012, p. 39).

Once again, Almodóvar's casting choices are well-made. In this film, Antonio Banderas's performance is contained and calculating so reinforcing the impression of Doctor Ledgard as implacable and methodical, while also highlighting how this Almodóvarian paradigm of toxic masculinity is driven by dominance and control. Ledgard's obsessive and perfectionist character is most beautifully illustrated in a sequence that might otherwise seem anodyne: the care of his bonsai trees. Almodóvar could have chosen any scene in which to set the conversation between Ledgard and his colleague, Fulgencio (Eduard Fernández), but by selecting this one in which the doctor is tending to his bonsais (F6), the director shows us the doctor as an arch-manipulator of nature be that of simple trees, or human beings. Under the care of the good doctor, patient and bonsai tree alike are reconstructed losing all autonomy and identity in the process.



F6. Series of stills from *La piel que habito* (2011). Trimming the bonsai tree. © Produced by El Deseo.

The use of this resource is a stark illustration of the total suppression of autonomy and the inhumanity of the domination Legard exercises transforming the act of care into one of unilateral and absolute power. Yet, even from the beginning of the film, we are aware that Vera is confined living in a Cigarral which while luxurious is reminiscent of a prison: it has bars over the windows, security cameras, and locked doors. As we have mentioned, the references to *Les Yeux*

*sans Visage* are obvious, and Almodóvar himself does not deny this influence. However, there is one important difference between the villa inhabited by the protagonist of the earlier French film and that where Vera is imprisoned, specifically, the doors of the former are all open. The patient in Franju's film thus preserves her autonomy—demonstrated metaphorically in her freedom to wander—while Vera is literally locked up and deprived of any form of power. Furthermore, in the words of Pascale Thibaudeau: “Her transplanted transgenic skin is, for Vera, an even more formidable prison than the room in which she is locked” (Thibaudeau, 2013, p. 196).

One of the more controversial sequences of the film is that in which Zeca (Roberto Álamo) appears. This scene constitutes, perhaps, the most absurd of the whole film; nevertheless, it does bring together the two main elements of the plot and serves to reinforce Vera's feelings of being a prisoner at the mercy of her oppressor. Cabello describes this scene and Zeca's personality in the following way:

A pantomime tiger pulls the spectator back into Almodóvar's universe [...] his condition as a tiger, a predator that must trap his prey so that the narrative can proceed [...] However, he is not the only one. There is another predator: a hunter that jealously guards Vera in the same way that a pet might be guarded in a cage [Un fantoche atigrado que devuelve al espectador al universo almodovariano [...] su condición de tigre y depredador debe atrapar a su presa para que la trama prosiga [...] Sin embargo, no es el único. Existe otro depredador: un cazador que guarda a Vera celosamente del mismo modo que se guarda una mascota en su jaula](Cabello, 2013, p. 38).

As Quian Shen rightly observes, this scene provokes a change in how Ledgard sees his prisoner: “Robert's power castrates Vicente physically and Zeca's rape [of Vera/Vicente] is a psychological castration. When Vera/Vicente is raped by Zeca they feel the delicacy and the fragility of their body and spirit and this strips them of the last traces of virility” (Shen, 2019, p. 393).

## 5. Third research question: dignity and self-determination

Doctor–patient relationships were viewed as relationships of trust only because a paternalistic view of medicine was assumed, in which the dependence of patients on professionals was generally accepted. The traditional doctor–patient relationship, so its critics claim, may have been one of trust, but not of reasonable trust [Las relaciones médico-paciente se consideraban relaciones de confianza solo porque se asumía una visión paternalista de la medicina, en la que la dependencia de los pacientes de los profesionales era generalmente aceptada. La relación tradicional médico-paciente, según afirman sus críticos, puede haber sido de confianza, pero no de confianza razonable](O’Neill, 2002, p. 18).

The last part of our analysis focuses on the question: How are patient dignity and competence depicted in these films? To answer this question, we must briefly summarize the denouement of the plotline for each of the films considered. Taking first *Todo sobre mi madre*, here the patient, Rosa, dies but her last wish, that the third Esteban should know the truth, is respected; meanwhile, in *Hable con ella*, the second of our patients, Alicia, recovers from her comma. Here Hawkins’ (1999, p. 33) observations are perhaps relevant: “The myth of rebirth, which is central to autobiographies about conversion, is also the organizing construct for a good many pathographies”. In this respect, we do not know the extent to which she is aware of what has happened to her, however, taking as a reference the last conversation between Marco and Katerina in the theatre, while she does not know everything, she is at least happy and alive in contrast to her rapist who has committed suicide. The last image we have of Alicia is of her in the theatre’s auditorium sharing a conspiratorial look and smile with Marco. There is an empty seat separating them; it is the vacuum left by Benigno which is now the point that unites them (F. 7).



F7. Sequence of stills from *Hable con ella* (2002) showing Marco and Alicia watching a performance of *Masurca Fogo*. © Produced by El Deseo.

In the last case, we have Vicente/Vera the patient in *La piel que habito*. Of the three women studied, Vera monopolizes the greatest screen time, as a result, analysis of this character is more complex. Indeed, attempting to examine Vera exclusively as a woman is misleading since her original identity is as a man. For this reason, we shall refer to Vera using neutral terms.

At the beginning of the film they are presented behind bars, imprisoned and coerced. However, by the end, they are transformed into a woman of cine noir, with a dark overcoat, strong and serene; similar to the *femmes fatales* who aim their revolvers in classic cinema, not unlike her counterpart in *Tarantula* [Al principio del film es presentada entre barrotes, encarcelada y manipulada. Sin embargo, acabara convertida en una mujer de cine negro, con gabardina oscura, fuerte y serena; similar a esas mujeres fatales que apuntan con un revolver en el cine clásico, semejante a su homóloga en *Tarántula*](Cabello, 2013, p. 37).

Vera's trajectory represents, thus, the climax of autonomy and victory over the oppressor. As Pascale Thibaudeau comments in his article *El cuerpo, la piel y la pantalla: los territorios habitados por Pedro Almodóvar* (*The body, the skin, and the screen: the territories inhabited by Pedro Almodóvar*), the symbolism of Vera's metamorphosis overcomes the limits of rationality so converting Doctor Ledgard into a new demiurge: "Not only have they changed sex but also their skin and face, and not by their own decision but because they have been the victim of a terrible revenge, comparable with those of Antiquity conceived by the gods of Olympus to punish human beings" (Thibaudeau, 2013, p. 193). However, before arriving at their point of affirmation, we should consider Vicente/Vera's journey. First, they resist change, they fight and when they realize there is no escape, they attempt suicide: "Action for these subjects is Defence as a priority for a grandiose self that will not tolerate fragility" (López Mondéjar, 2022, p. 63). Later, after being violated by Zeca and being rescued by Ledgard, Vera's attitude alters entirely and she becomes an accomplice, a collaborator and even promises not to flee: "You promised me I was free, and I promised you I'd never leave you [...] it's the only thing I have, Robert. Your promise and mine" (Almodóvar, 2012, p. 130). Nevertheless, it is a coincidence, accidentally seeing their old face in a newspaper, that brings them back to a sense of themselves showing the importance of personality in Almodóvar's narratives: "as a keystone demonstrating the permanence of 'I' despite physical transformation" (Sahagún and Deltell, 2022, p. 457). Finally, after murdering their captor, Vera is physically freed and, arriving back at their mother's shop, they recover their true personality: "I am Vicente" (Almodóvar, 2012, p. 150) (F11). As Chatman notes, "the personal name



in this sense is precisely the identity or the quintessence of individuality” (Chatman, 1980, p. 131).



F8. Stills from *La piel que habito* (2011). “I am Vicente”. © Produced by El Deseo.

Vera’s autonomy and freedom restored, we conclude this section by reflecting on the words of the philosopher, Byung-Chul Han: “All stories end with the scene in which the main protagonist rips out their implant with a shaving blade” (Han, 2023, p. 48)”. Of course, Vera could never retrieve that implant since in contrast to La Agrado in *Todo sobre mi madre* who says: “A person is most authentic when they most resemble what they dreamed themselves to be” (Almodóvar, 1999, p. 104), Vera/Vicente does not resemble what they wish to be. However, they have managed to find themselves and by retreating into their true identity they allow themselves to start a new life and follow a new destiny. This is the core of autonomy: “Having a destiny means expressly taking charge of oneself” (Han, 2023, p. 41). In this sense, having found their destiny and their freedom, Vera like their predecessor in *Les Yeux sans Visage*, escapes their captor. Although, unlike Christiane, Vera’s revenge is not mediated by another agent—Dr Genessier is devoured by his dogs (Franju, 1960, 1h:26min:20seg)—rather she must exact it for herself: dressed to kill, they themselves wield the gun that initiates their fresh start.

## 6. Conclusions

All narration is a way to continuously bring us, by artistic means, into the presence of a sinisterness in which the real and the fictitious weave together with such ambiguity—and wisdom—that the artistic effect is always preserved [Toda la narración es un continuo traer a presencia, con medios artísticos lo siniestro de tal suerte que lo real y lo ficticio se hilvanan con tal ambigüedad —y sabiduría— que el efecto artístico queda siempre preservado] (Trías, 1982, p. 52).

This analysis of Almodóvar’s “healthcare trilogy”—*Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002) y *La piel que habito* (2011)—enables us to determine the narrative evolution of his representation of medical authority and patient

autonomy. Using a hermeneutic, interpretive focus and qualitative approach, we have identified a progressive erosion of patient autonomy closely linked to gender dynamics and mediated by a variety of artistic disciplines.

In *Todo sobre mi madre*, Manuela is an empathetic, supportive authority figure that respects patient autonomy. Literature and theatre are used as metaphors to reinforce the concept of individual freedom so establishing a solid foundation where autonomy is valued and protected. This starting point contrasts markedly with later works in the trilogy where autonomy becomes increasingly compromised.

Benigno in *Hable con ella*, embodies an obsessive medical presence that transcends ethical boundaries and this is reflected in the diminution of patient autonomy in this film. Dance and music function here as metaphors for the internal fight between liberty and oppression and to emphasize conceptually how authority can subvert patient autonomy. Meanwhile, the character development of Benigno serves to underline the dangers of excessive control and coercion within patient/carer relationships.

Finally, in *La piel que habito*, the trilogy culminates with the representation of a medical authority that is entirely authoritarian and dehumanizing. Doctor Ledgard symbolizes an extreme of oppression where patient autonomy is annulled completely and Almodóvar uses sculpture and painting as metaphors for his depersonalization of and absolute control over Vera. Vera/Vicente's transformation at the hand of Doctor Ledgard underlines their complete loss of identity and self-determination and, thus, acts as a profound criticism of paternalistic medical practices.

To conclude, through its metaphorical use of various artistic disciplines, the "healthcare trilogy", enriches Almodóvar's narrative and enables a critical exploration of the principles of biomedical ethics, particularly, patient autonomy. As a set, these films reflect a growing preoccupation with the moral implications of medical care and the genuine need to respect individual self-determination demonstrating how excellent healthcare professionals can be transformed, paradoxically, into oppressors who grossly violate patient autonomy. These three films thus offer a complex cinematic representation which invites us to reflect on medical practices and their ethical dilemmas.

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