FOTOCINEMA, nº 32 (2026) | | E-ISSN: 2172-0150

# The Luminous Ghosts of *The Room Next Door* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024)

# Los fantasmas luminosos de *La habitación de al lado* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2024)

**Tecla González Hortigüela**
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain
teclabeatriz.gonzalez@uva.es

**Shaila García Catalán**
Universitat Jaume I de Castellón, Spain
scatalan@uji.es

**Abstract:**
The unrepresentable nature of death poses a major challenge at a cultural moment when rites and myths no longer accompany death, and science prolongs the life of bodies with no respect for the subjectivities that are perishing. Pedro Almodóvar has been weaving death in his work throughout his career, but in 1999, the year of both the release of *All about My Mother* and the death of his mother, the body in pain began to appear. From one film to the next, the filmmaker has confronted his own demise by returning, as evidenced by his filmography, to the exploration of first desire in *Pain and Glory* (2019) and memories of war wounds and an unwanted daughter in *The Room Next Door* (2024). An analysis of this film and its comparison with the novel *What Are You Going Through* (Nunez, 2020) reveals that Almodóvar approaches death not as something terminal but as something mythical and *original*, opening up a space for ghosts and constructing a *clear* distance from others through the shelter of the voice.

**Resumen:**
Lo irrepresentable de la muerte se presenta como un desafío mayor en un momento cultural donde los ritos y los mitos ya no acompañan hacia esta y la ciencia alarga la vida de los cuerpos sin respetar las subjetividades que agonizan. Pedro Almodóvar ha ido bord(e)ando la muerte a lo largo de su obra, pero a partir de 1999, año en el que coinciden el estreno de *Todo sobre mi madre* y el fallecimiento de *su madre*, aparece el propio cuerpo doliente. Obra a obra, el cineasta confronta su final *volviendo*, como constata esa trayectoria hacia el primer deseo en *Dolor y gloria* (2019) y los recuerdos de las heridas de guerra y de la hija que no se ha deseado en *La habitación de al lado* (2024). El análisis textual de esta y su comparación con la novela *Cuál es tu tormento* (Nunez, 2021) nos permitirá advertir que la escritura de Almodóvar no aborda la muerte como algo terminal sino mítico y *original*, abriendo un lugar para los fantasmas y construyendo una *buena* distancia con los otros gracias al abrigo de la voz.

**Keywords**:
Almodóvar; Spanish Cinema; Euthanasia; Desire; Film Analysis.

**Palabras clave:**
Almodóvar; cine español; eutanasia; muerte; deseo; análisis fílmico.

Received 2025/03/21 | | Approved 2025/04/17

*As far as memory can go, voluntary death forms part of the human condition*. (Vicente Mira, 2015, p. 14)

## 1. Introduction: two tracking shots and one hypothesis

In his talk 'Death and Us', Freud (1991) suggested that we behave as if we wanted to eliminate death from life, as if it were something unwonted, a fatal accident; as if we did not know that every one of us owes a body to nature. We do not believe in our own death, as it is impossible for us to imagine. 'At every attempt to picture how things might be after our death, by whom we might be mourned, etc., we might notice that we are still there as observers after all' (1993, p. 13). This is an interesting idea to consider when studying how a film director – an observer yes, but above all, a demiurge – uses filmmaking as a way of confronting death.

In the documentary mini-series about Almodóvar created by Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo, the filmmaker himself admits: 'My way of escaping the idea of death has been to tell stories. The screen doesn't just give meaning to my life; it has become my life. My only life' (Almodóvar in *Pedro x Javis*, Calvo & Ambrossi, 2025).

The filmmaker has been weaving eroticism, love and death together ever since he began his career, whether as a passionate sacrifice, as a violently cold indifference or as a fateful accident that snatches away the life of a loved one. However, it seems clear that his mother's death in 1999 marked a turning point in his filmography. As Herrera suggests, the loss of his mother plunged him into a darkness that triggered the first 'symptoms of a disease (terrible migraines) from which he has yet to recover' (2012, p. 69). In this way, orphanhood seems to give rise to a generational displacement that confronts us with a grief for which it is hard to find closure (Recalcati, 2025, p. 12) while placing the focus on the pain of the body.

It might be assumed that as he gets closer to *his* end, death for Almodóvar might raise a question about a bygone era. The idea that death points to our origins is expressed in the *Almodóvarian* enunciation in the opening tracking shot in *Volver* (2006). The film's title appears in bright red letters over the cold texture

of a gravestone, punctuating a movement with no hint of grief: in a brisk wind, widows are cleaning the graves and adorning them with flowers to the merry tune of the *zarzuela* song 'Las Espigadoras', while the camera, tracking from right to left, suggests a movement towards that time left behind and encodes the filmmaker's relationship with his own desire.

As many of Almodóvar's narrative structures show, subjective experience operates in two times: 'Time 1, the Time that passes, that moves into the future, is constantly duplicated by a Time 2, which moves into the past and constitutes meaning' (Miller, 2014, p. 20). We can narrate a biography chronologically, but to make meaning, we need to *go back* (*volver*) by means of a retroactive time.

In Almodovar's filmography, the flashbacks or dream moments become longer and longer, as occurs in his 'confessional text' (Parrondo, 2020).[1] But of all the movements in *Pain and Glory* it is the last that is of special interest here for its breathtaking precision. This final movement is the dolly out that pulls away from the mother and son at the station to reveal that it is not a memory that Salvador is recalling but the shooting of a scene for *El Primer Deseo*. The director's tears are signs of the grieving process. The tracking shot both creates and constructs this *clear* distance with its discomfort thanks to its glorious sublimation (García Catalán and Rodríguez Serrano, 2021), a sublimation that can be expected to continue in *Bitter Christmas* (Amarga navidad, 2026), where the filmmaker will return to the loss of the maternal object and the pains of the body.

The first tracking shot in *Volver* and the final dolly out in *Pain and Glory* (two films that deal with maternal grief) encapsulate the hypothesis for this study: namely, that Almodóvar's work explores death as something mythical or *original* rather than terminal. To confront the end, to look death in the face, we must go back to the mystery of our origins, to our loved ones and our wounds. In one of the most lucid studies of death in *The Room Next Door*, Sancho Cardiel and Muñoz Torrecilla suggest that the film reconfirms Almodóvar's stated admiration of women's ability to face suffering together. Almodóvar looks at the

[1] The absence of the late Eva Parrondo has been keenly felt during the writing of this article.

sterility of our age with sympathies of another time and turns death into what is practically an artistic installation (2025, pp. 201-204). This direction of analysis is taken up here to explore the surface of film's materiality and open up two lines of inquiry, focusing on the question of origins and desire on the brink of death, and on how accompaniment makes it possible to endure the decline of the body.

By analysing the film and observing its parallels and divergences with the novel, this article considers how Pedro Almodóvar's oeuvre links death, origins and desire, and endures the 'dense and compact instant of ceasing to be' (Mira, 2015, p. 24) thanks to the word – spoken, shared, written - and to listening. If the sensory form orients us towards an understanding of the ethical relationship of death (Lacan, 2003, p. 352), an exploration of visual forms in *The Room Next Door* may shed some light on how a filmmaker processes its farewells and goodbyes.[2]

## 2. From macabre enjoyment to caressing and listening

Throughout his career, Pedro Almodóvar has celebrated the body as artifice and as orifice. He finds joy in the grotesque, pulsional body: the golden rain in *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980), or the surreal intrusion of the waning man into the vagina in *Talk to Her* (2002). He celebrates the enjoyment of the macabre while his oblique gaze pairs it with the picaresque in the Spanish literary tradition (Zunzunegui, 2018, p. 355; Amaya Flores, 2023). The body is a disguise that keeps watch over the void. From the carnivalesque to the hyperbolic, from transplanted organs to the body hurled (all his *discreet* suicides), raped or violently transsexualized (Zurian and Caballero, 2017), his characters are caught between lack and alienation.

As time passes, however, physical appearances seem to become increasingly inadequate to the task of concealing the pains of the soul. In 'Muerte y cine' (*Pedro x Javis*, 2025), Almodóvar confesses that his fear is not so much of death

[2] 'I wouldn't mind ending my days like John Huston,' Almodóvar tells us, 'in a wheelchair, but filming!' (in Montoya, 2024). As it happens, the last lines from Huston's last film, *The Dead*, adapting Joyce's short story of the same name (1914), are recited, repeated and rephrased to punctuate the three parts of the film analysed in this article.

but of decline, degeneration, the loss of all he has lived. 'Those moods,' as Kristeva called them, 'that impurity,' those things that 'life barely stands' (1988, p. 10).

> I admire people who believe in God, in any kind of God, because He is the great shield. The best support for confronting the idea of death. But I don't have that support. I believe that the individual has to be master of his own life and live it freely. And master of his own death too, when all that life offers you is pain. (Almodóvar in *Pedro x Javis*, Calvo and Ambrossi, 2025)

Fortunately, however, everyone ages with their own scars. There is no *universal body*; 'each body falls in its own way.' At each step 'it comes undone, sinks or breaks apart [...]. We don't really know what life is, unless we get a pinch every now and then' (Vaschetto, 2025, p. 31).

In Almodóvar's work, this pinch is found in the sleeping, anaesthetised or tormented body of the protagonist in *Pain and Glory*. At the beginning of the film, a tracking shot caresses the scar on Salvador's back and triggers the flashback, from the stillness of the pool to the unconscious waters of the stream where his mother used to wash clothes with him on her back. This tracking shot-caress leaves post-modern cinema (Gutiérrez Valencia, 2019) behind to enter the realm of the metamodern (Rodríguez Serrano, 2024).

*The Room Next Door* continues this beautiful *direction* of the ethics of listening which, as is explored below, entails listening to oneself from the perspective of the Other. Listening involves asking what the Other is *going through*, the unconscious colours of the Other that tinge our own.

## 3. The body that speaks will never be carrion

Meribah Rose argues that death in Almodóvar's films opens up spaces for the revelation of a community that can offer connection, refuge and comfort, turning it into a shared experience (2016, p. 39). On this point, in contrast to the idea of death posited in Nunez's novel as 'the most solitary of human experiences,

one that separates rather than unites us' (2020, p. 123), the *Almodóvarian* view, more in line with that of the French anthropologist Georges Bataille, proposes that death binds us together, weaving the very fabric of community. Bataille suggests that although we are '*discontinuous* beings', as we are born alone and die alone, each of us different from the other, it is death that introduces continuity precisely because 'death means continuity of being' (Bataille, 1986, p. 13).

While it is not possible for us to imagine death, our experience of it also gets redefined – cordoned off, silenced or denied – by each era and its biopolitics. The historian Philippe Ariés argues that in our era, the focus of our angst has shifted from death itself to incurable disease (2000). Today 'prolonging life means prolonging the body' (Krasnogor, 2024, p. 56), understood as an organism, not as the seat of subjectivity. In a world in which political stances on euthanasia encapsulate civilisation's attitude towards death, Almodóvar opts for a Socratic position.[3] 'The being sustained in a body does not know that the body gives that being a language [...]. The body inhabited by the word is always a *corpse*; it will never be carrion (Vicens, 2024, pp. 24-25)

In contrast to the continued suffering of the pulsional body due to the denial of its limits by the science of capitalist discourse, euthanasia offers the dignity of a farewell to the body that could express something about the beauty of its finite nature, and could construct something out of the symbolic dimension that will transcend it. If there is a name that awaits us before we are born and a lullaby to soothe us, why shouldn't we expect a final word before we *close our eyes*?

## 4. From the novel *What Are You Going Through* to the film: on rewriting

Pedro Almodóvar adapts Sigrid Nunez's novel, *What Are You Going Through* (2021), into a powerful product of cinematic rewriting that gives birth to an *Other* work.

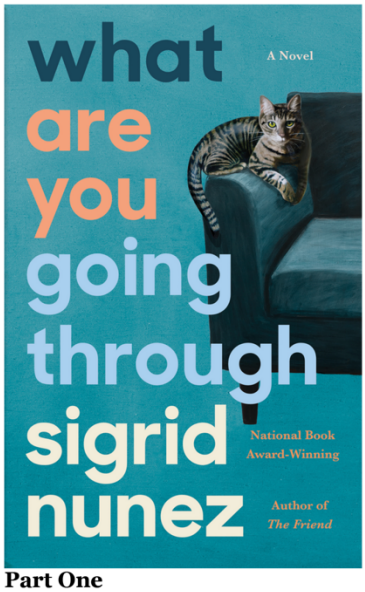
[3] Socrates was talking and discussing myths right up to his final moment (Plato, 1982, p. 32).

As Pérez Bowie suggests, it is a work that *reads* and *interprets* its source (2010, p. 25). The filmmaker feeds on the novel, savouring it; but he also forgets it for a while to write his screenplay; he trims, expands, and embellishes it. The result is a fertile exercise in which the writer buries himself in his own subjective division and conjures up his own luminous ghosts of death and (re)birth.

The novel is narrated from the point of view of the protagonist, a writer who accompanies an old friend with cancer on her journey towards death. Nunez's characters are unnamed, suggesting a symmetry between them which, as is made clear at the end of the novel, runs the risk of turning into a *'folie à deux*' (2020, p. 209). Almodóvar, however, gives his female characters names and thus not only rescues them from the threat of sinking into a specular relationship but also expresses their desire to become who they want to be (Zurian and Caballero, 2017, p. 75). His work is a hymn to difference and utmost uniqueness. Ingrid is almost an anagram[4] of Sigrid, the writer of the novel, who occasionally accompanied Almodóvar on the film set during shooting. But above all, the name conjures the aura of Ingrid Bergman, who portrayed a woman horrified by the sight of the pair of cadavers discovered in *Journey to Italy* (Roberto Rossellini, 1954), a film watched by the lovers in *Broken Embraces* and that appears again as a film showing at the cinema in *The Room Next Door*.

Structurally, both the novel and the film are divided into three narrative segments. However, Almodóvar carries out a number of transformations that can be examined to expose the inventive approach that underpins his rewriting. The novel is filled with memories of other conversations that come to the narrator's mind, giving rise to a multiplicity of voices, some the impassioned voices of people close to her, others the distant voices of vague acquaintances. However, the filmmaker filters out this polyphony to focus entirely on the voices of two women who, as Sancho Cardiel and Muñoz Torrecilla suggest, seem to be alone in the world (2025, p. 201).

[4] Salvador Mallo, the protagonist's name in *Pain and Glory*, is also almost an anagram of Almodóvar, reflecting the filmmaker's taste for mixing up letters and masks.





| | |
|---|---|
| **Part One** | |
| | *Colour layers over a freeze-frame and credits* |
| The ex's talk: The end of the world. | Ingrid is launching her novel. |
| She knows about her friend's illness. | She learns about her friend's illness. |
| The past: the mother-daughter estrangement and the father's death. | The past: the mother-daughter estrangement and the father's death. |
| Internal stories with more characters. | |
| The treatment has failed. | The treatment has failed. |
| | *Martha's face fades to yellow* |
| Pink snowflakes fall. | Pink snowflakes fall. |
| Internal stories with more characters. | Martha recites from *The Dead*, gazes to camera |
| | *Martha's face fades to black* |
| In a "dive bar" | At the Lincoln Center |
| the friend asks the narrator to be in 'the next room'. | Martha asks Ingrid to be in 'the room next door'. |
| She accepts, but she is disconcerted. | She confesses fear; she will think about it. |
| **Part Two (p. 109)** | **Scene 45 (00:43:37)** |
| They arrive at the rented house in the city. | They arrive at the rented house in the woods. |
| They note a portrait reminiscent of John Singer Sargent's Madame X. | They note a good copy of Edward Hopper's *People in the Sun*. |
| She keeps a journal for her friend's daughter. | Ingrid goes to the room downstairs. |
| Her friend has forgotten the euthanasia pill and they return to her home. | Martha has forgotten the euthanasia pill and they return to her home. |
| Literature, music and cinema (Keaton...) | Literature, music and cinema (Keaton...) |
| The agonising world. | Last film: Ingrid recites from *The Dead* |
| The closed door: false death. | The agonising world. |
| The (desired) death fails. | The closed door: false death. |
| | The (desired) death occurs. |
| | *Martha's face fades to green.* |
| **Part Three (p. 167)** | **Scene 100 (01:27:00)** |
| The friends return to their own homes. | Martha returns from the dead transfigured into her daughter, Michelle. |
| Internal stories with more characters. | Ingrid and Michelle resignify the past. |
| The friend dies. The narrator is left alone: | Ingrid reinvents using lines from The Dead: "The snow is falling [...]. Falling on your daughter and on me, falling upon the living and the dead." |
| 'Blessed are they that mourn [...] What does it matter if I failed.' | |
| | *Colour layers over a vivid shot and credits* |

T1. Parallels (black) and divergences (red) between novel and film. Source: prepared by authors.

Moreover, Almodóvar makes a number of modifications both to the order of events in the story and to the logic governing the places occupied by the different characters, as is explored in the analysis below. He also introduces a new plot point: at the end of Part Two, the peaceful death desired but thwarted in the novel becomes the death that actually occurs in the film; a death that is not accidental, but truly *accomplished*. This change from *failed act* to *successful act* allows the filmmaker to invent the entire third part of the film, absent from the novel, to depict the return and transfiguration of Martha's ghost as her daughter Michelle: a new 'mythographic filiation' (Thibaudeau, 2013, p. 193) that brings mother and daughter together again, metamorphosed into a single being.

The changes that Almodóvar makes to the narrative structure thus begin to reveal the *desiring* direction and meaning of the film's discourse: a meaning that can be reconstructed retrospectively and that resignifies Martha's death as an act which, far from bringing an *end* marked by the gloomy trace of solitude that concludes the novel, acquires the quality of a vibrant call to the future.

## 5. Film analysis of *The Room Next Door*

### 5.1. The inclined position

> The division of the subject is the engine of linguistics, especially when it includes the poet: eaten by the *vers* (a word that means both verses and worms). [...] The verses work things out among themselves, whether the poet knows it or not. (Vicens, 2024, p. 22)

After the opening credits, an overhead shot with a markedly geometric quality places us inside the bookstore where Ingrid (Julianne Moore), a stark contrast from the character in the novel, is launching her latest book, *On Sudden Deaths*. Ingrid claims to have written the book 'in order to better understand and accept death.' Death is frightening, alien, 'unnatural', she says: she refuses to accept that 'something that's alive has to die.' Ingrid's rejection of death stems from her

lack of awareness that it is not a question of 'life or death' but of 'life and death' (Mira, 2015, p. 20). She is unaware that life is a 'tributary of death, which makes it a place' (Bataille, 1997, p. 59). It might be argued that Ingrid is still unable to *consent* to death, and thus the news of the illness of her friend Martha (Tilda Swinton) serves not only to confront her with her atavistic fears but also to offer her an *Other* perspective: 'If we wish really to live,' Freud tells us, 'we must be prepared to meet death' (1993, p. xxiii).

The next morning, Ingrid goes to see Martha at the hospital. In this first meeting, the editing speaks volumes: Ingrid's uneasiness as she enters the hospital with a lost and disoriented look contrasts with the serenity of a peacefully sleeping Martha. The lighting divides the close-up on her sleeping face in two, marking a boundary between light and shadow, life and death. Ingrid's arrival brings her to life. In response to the knock at the door, Martha opens her eyes and looks at us.

F1. Enunciative inclination in Martha and Ingrid's reunion.

In the conversation between them, Martha raises the upper end of her bed and Ingrid leans towards her. While Martha says she feels like 'a guinea pig for an experimental treatment,' an overhead shot makes her look upright, and then the camera frames the two of them on an angle that balances the image (F1), as if the enunciation were raising Martha to the same level as Ingrid. This angle builds on the poetics of inclinations of Adriana Cavarero (2022), denouncing the rectitude of a healthcare system that erodes the autonomy of patients – a subject

explored by Guerrero Muñoz and Deltell Escolar (2025). Ingrid lowers her body to a listening position, 'ousted from the internal axis of its balance, from the plumb-rule of its stability' (Cavarero 2016, p. 31). She has to stop and bow down – the gesture of reverence – to give time and space to that which is not straight, to that which is a symptom or 'point of digression where life ceases to be like the life of others and instead becomes a unique life' (Recalcati, 2018, p. 53).

In contrast to Ingrid's initially defensive attitude towards death, Martha not only accepts it but embraces it: 'It might sound absurd, but after all the accepting and preparing to face the end, survival feels almost disappointing.' It is thus made clear that if Ingrid is going to incline herself towards her friend, it will not be to 'save' her from an act that Martha has no qualms about facing, but rather to become her support in its accomplishment. On the journey, thanks to her listening attitude, Ingrid will give dignity to Martha's words and silences. Martha prefers verbs: she is a war journalist; she does not invent stories. Ingrid, on the other hand, prefers verse: she is a novelist. Verbs and verse are the best that these friends can offer one another.

### 5.2. Choice and coagulated meaning

In the hospital, Martha soon begins to find words for her discomfort, for what she is *going through*, which, as is also the case in *Julieta* (2016), involves a distance between a mother and daughter ('I never interested her as a mother') and its intimate relationship with the death of the father. The daughter's response to her mother's illness – 'it's your choice [...] as if it were something trivial, something that had nothing to do with her' – echoes and resonates with Martha's other 'choices' in the past: she had Michelle when she was a teenager, when she 'didn't know what to do with a baby.' She started working – first as a journalist, then as a 'war correspondent, travelling constantly' – and became an 'absent mother'. But Martha's most significant choice, the choice that has opened up the abyss of hatred and resentment between mother and daughter, was to deny her the possibility of filiation: 'She couldn't bear not having a father.'

Three flashbacks recount the story of the father and the familial misadventure. In the first, when Fred returns from the Vietnam War he is a 'broken toy', carrying

all the horror and death 'inside [his] head', and suffering from constant hallucinations. Just before they break up, the couple conceives a daughter. In the second flashback, Martha tells Fred she is pregnant and Fred leaves her before their daughter is even born. In the third, Fred is travelling home with his new wife when they catch sight of a burning house on the side of the road. Fred gets out of the car, claiming he can hear someone inside the house crying for help; he runs into the fire and dies of smoke asphyxiation.

Michelle's story is thus written *between* two wars: the war from which her father never really returned, and the war to which her mother fled to escape her maternal role. In this way, Michelle is in a sense deconstructed, with no place in the Other, and so her answer to hold herself up is precisely to go out to find her desired father. While language screams at Fred, cries to him for help, and in his delirious attempt to solve it – to save (himself) – he sacrifices himself and dies with no one to save, his daughter identifies herself with the voices of the madness of the father she never met in an attempt to make a place for herself in the Other's desire: 'It was me he tried to save. It was for me for whom died.'

The risk involved in Michelle's response, to live inside that 'burning house', is that it will trap her forever in the logic of trauma. Trauma gives coherence to her suffering but, at the same time, it has something that closes up, a meaning that coagulates. How then do we emerge from *having been ruined* by the Other? How do we leave behind the *symmetries and doom* of the family circuit of which we form a part?

### 5.3. Symmetries and doom

The fear of repetition, that compulsion beyond the pleasure principle, emerges as a central theme in the Jefferson Market Garden scene. Ingrid is researching a book about Dora Carrington's 'insane love' for Lytton Strachey, who also pursued Virginia Woolf. Strachey died of stomach cancer eighteen years after meeting Dora. She 'survived him by barely two months before she shot herself in the stomach.' Both Martha and Ingrid, who themselves shared a lover in the past, are struck by the 'symmetry' of the two deaths, 'a kind of warning' of the doomed nature of a specular relationship.

Martha, confronted with the imminence of death, recoils from symmetries and mirrors; she fears deaths that repeat themselves (even if each death is unrepeatable), and faces that look the same (hers and her daughter's), and so she wonders whether she too will be doomed by a kind of family curse by the goddess Ate.

Although Almodóvar's style, as Castro de Paz points out, involves an approach often orchestrated by 'centripetal, geometric images, tending towards symmetry', intended to shape what could be described as the doom of 'imaginary passions' (2012, p. 28), the bucolic, pictorial wide shot that opens the garden scene encompasses the friends in a setting free of mirrors or symmetries. Ingrid and Martha are sitting *side by side,* surrounded by lush natural scenery that foreshadows the beauty of the house in the woods where they will stay later in the film. The alignment of their bodies *warns* us that they will adopt a less imaginary or specular position – without dualities or doom – almost as if they were embracing the symbolic, that which is able to appear and disappear, that which recognises gaps and differences. This is also why the mirror in Martha's room, which bears witness to the last conversation between them, never frames their figures, but because of its angle shows the lush green of the forest instead. It is more a window than a mirror.

In his book *The Last Dream,* Almodóvar tells us that his mother 'would have been delighted by the number of bouquets and wreaths on the altar' (2023, p. 96) at her funeral. Is this why in his free adaptation of Nunez's novel, he has filled the scenes with flowers? These flowers, like funeral sprays, appear surrounding Martha in the hospital, in a painting (by Almodóvar himself[5]) in her house (F2) or growing on her terrace. These flowers are not the only additions Almodóvar makes to the novel; he also adds the light (F2) that foreshadows the appearance of *luminous ghosts*.

While Ingrid gives Martha words, listening, flowers and books, Martha gives Ingrid light: 'I'm living expecting to find Martha's body in her bed any day,' Ingrid tells Damian. 'But that doesn't stop me from enjoying every minute with her, just the opposite. I'm learning that from her.'

[5] The painting in the hall looks like one of many of the monumental portraits of flowers featured in Almodóvar and Jorge Galindo's exhibition, *Flores*, in Madrid in 2019.

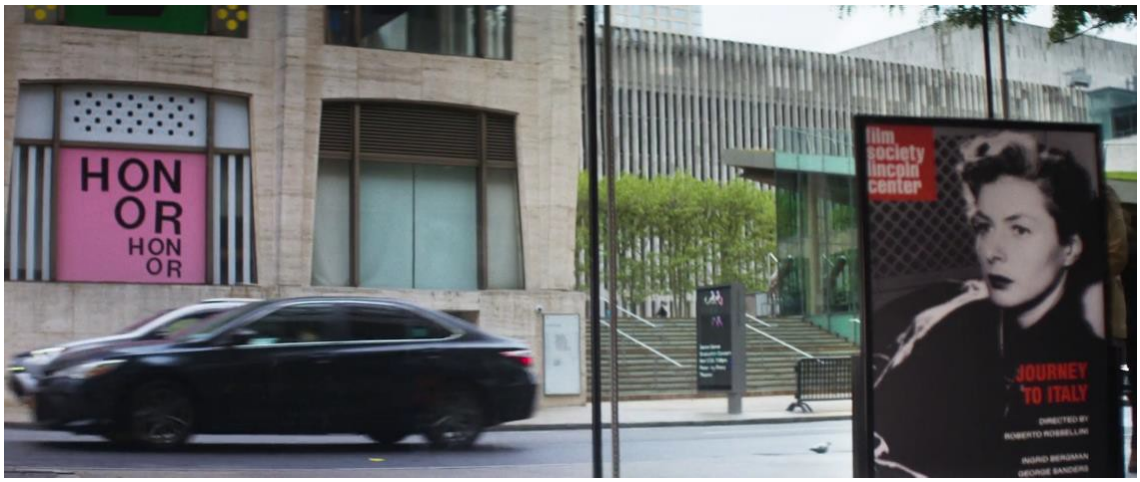
F2. Martha is dying, but she is blooming incessantly as she does.

## 5.4. Consenting to death… accompanied

The end of the first part of both the novel and the film is marked by the failure of Martha's treatment. In *The Room Next Door,* this moment is punctuated by the snow falling outside the window, Martha's recital of the lines from *The Dead* and a close-up on her face, which fades to black, like death casting its shadow. Martha's gaze and the fade to black represent 'that abyss which is, in a certain sense, death' (Bataille, 1997, p. 17) and leads to what is described in the novel as 'the most important conversation of our lives' (Nunez, 2020, p. 98). Martha asks Ingrid for the first time to help her die. In the novel, the friends meet at their old 'dive', today a gentrified bar 'with every ounce of character erased', where they used to go every night to get drunk when they were young. In the film, however, Martha and Ingrid have agreed to meet at the Lincoln Center to see *Journey to Italy*. But they will not go in: the cinema lobby is the symbolic frame in which Martha, after a POV shot in which her intense gaze meets Ingrid Bergman's on a poster in the street (F3), gathers the strength to speak.

In contrast to the alienating discourse that compels the subject to accept and submit to the demands imposed by society to deal with disease, Martha appeals to death as an act of separation both from the natural order that imposes its laws and from the ideals that cause us to worry about how others will see us: as

victims, as weak, as quitters: 'If you survive, well, you're a hero. And if you die, well, perhaps you didn't fight hard enough.'




F3. POV shot from Martha's perspective: Ingrid Bergman's gaze into the Lincoln Center gives Martha the strength to face the most important conversation of her life. Horror will turn into honour.

However, although Martha has chosen to die, asserting herself as the 'master' of her *own* life, her resolve is shaken slightly by the fact that she does not want to do it 'alone'. Her need to be accompanied – whether by the 'mobile family' she formed with other reporters in the war, or now by Ingrid – directly names the empty space left by her daughter, Michelle. Martha's request of Ingrid – 'I'm just asking you to be in *the next room*' – silently designates and encapsulates the core of the family wound: an empty space encoded in the mother she never was and the daughter of whom Ingrid remarks: 'it's like [she] doesn't even exist.'

### 5.5. Rooms and stanzas

> Stanzas are rooms, they say.
> A paragraph, too? (Christle, 2019, p. 84)

The construction of the topological space of the house in the woods, a place where they can let themselves go, far removed from familiar things and also from the 'aesthetic ignominies of warfare' (Freud, 1974, p. 3215), acquires its full meaning at a key moment in the film. After the friends enter the house, like two girls enchanted by a magical spell (Almodóvar, 2024, p. 95), Ingrid decides not to cross the threshold of the *room next door* (F4), which is thus established as

the vital off-screen space – a place we will never see – that gives the film its name. Could it be that Martha's darker ghosts inhabit that room, the ghosts of the war she ran away to in order to escape motherhood?

F4. Martha crosses the threshold of her room, dressed in blue with winged forms. Ingrid does not enter *the room next door*: she chooses the room downstairs instead.

Ingrid thus does not occupy the room next door, and this decision positions her significantly. This *Almodóvarian* displacement facilitates a *Hitchcockian* suspense: a POV shot from Ingrid's perspective up the stairs or lifting her gaze from the room she has chosen will have something of an eerie effect. The fact that Ingrid decides to stay in the *room downstairs* represents a subtle and complex shift. At no time does Ingrid victimise Martha or adopt a role of servitude, but with her desiring movement she introduces an unexpected twist. Only one who understands desire knows that the other's request must not be obeyed. In other words, refusal brings us closer to desire than assent. This is something they both celebrate in lively fashion.

> – INGRID (I): You don't mind that I'm not in the room next door?
>
> – MARTHA (M): I can hear you breathe… and yell!
>
> – I: Okay! (laughs)

In any case, there is light and shadow. Some of the joy of the word has been lost for Martha. She also seems to have lost her appetite for food – something that

recalls the last words of Almodóvar's mother: "'*Precious little smoke will come of putting food in this body*." [...] Three hours later she died' (2023, p. 98). She tries to write, but she cannot. She has tried to re-read her favourite books, but 'the spell just isn't there anymore.' Music unsettles her: 'Maybe the chemo is affecting my hearing.' She has experienced a loss of enthusiasm, a loss of the exaltation and eroticism associated with creation and art and its consequent soothing effect. Her mind 'flies off into the void.' But Ingrid gives her the gift of her voice ('If you're too tired, I can read you') and her listening ear ('Talk all you want; I love listening to you.').

F5. Ingrid to Martha: 'It's daytime and you're alive.'

It could be argued that the basic question the film asks is how to accompany the other. Ingrid is a body present in the background – as underscored by the composition of the shots – allowing Martha to construct a language that humanises the journey towards death: 'You have accompanied me as much as any human being can accompany another,' she says in her farewell letter. What makes the void bearable is having a place in the Other. Listening and the word offer company and cover, just as much as or more than the wool of her capacious sweaters does (F5).

### 5.6. Farewell and transformation

In the middle of the film, the 'goodbye' envelope in which Martha hid and then forgot her euthanasia pill is discovered under a vibrant image of butterflies that seem to presage her death and luminous transformation.

In the novel, when her friend asks her to be *in the next room*, she has an almost terminal appearance: she is 'haggard and jaundiced', 'short of breath', and feels that things have gone '*off the rails*' (2020, p. 98-99), foreshadowing that her plan for her death – 'a beautiful death in a nice house', 'a calm, clean, graceful [...] death' – will be thwarted at the end of Part Two of the book, being reduced to a 'hideous, humiliating farce': 'I wanted to die in peace, and now it's turned into this nightmare' (2020, pp. 175-176). Ingrid's friend *loses* the chance to *lose* her life on her own terms. However, as noted above, the novel's unhappy *failure* is turned in the film into the calm, graceful *success* she wanted. Martha takes the leap dressed in a yellow suit, made up with passion-red lipstick, lying like Edward Hopper's *People in the Sun* or like the stretched-out bodies of women in *Talk to Her*. However, in contrast to Hopper's painting, Martha decides to be *alone*, accompanied only by the beautiful music of Alberto Iglesias, and by us, the spectators, who have been her final mirror: after putting on her make-up facing the camera, she says goodbye to us with a smile.

The final moment of calm solitude is the gesture with which Martha embraces Ingrid's life: 'I'm almost happy that, while I fade away on the lounger, you're out in the world, experiencing something different to my death.' When Ingrid finds her, we see her behind the window in an impossible POV shot from where Martha lies, as if Ingrid were a ghost looking at a dead woman about to revive.

F6. Martha's death is pictorial.

The beauty and serenity of the scene envelops Martha's death in a mythical aura. She is material for a painting that smoothly *merges* (F6) with the green colour[6] of the lounger, like the canvas on which Alfred Hitchcock begins to draw the world in the opening credits for *North by Northwest* (1959) or the curtain of light through which Madeleine *comes back* from the dead in *Vertigo* (1958). In contrast to the many photographers in Almodóvar's films who are invariably working against time (Parejo, 2022), the image is eternalised, but not frozen: Martha consents to her own disappearance.

### 5.7. A call to the future

Martha's death is an intentional death, but what is intended in death? Perhaps, despite the gaps imposed by illness, those who want to die do not really know what they want: 'Nothing can be known about death,' stresses Mira, because 'by seeking death' we escape the 'logic of life', as Epicurus said: 'death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here, and when it does come, we no longer exist' (2015, pp. 15-16). So if death points to this space outside meaning, to *non-life*, nothing prevents us from invoking a certain horizon of meaning while we are alive. What if that horizon were the desire that drives so much of Almodóvar's filmography? The meaning(lessness) of Martha's act, unlike what happens in the novel, which tells us repeatedly that the 'meaning of life is that it stops' (Nunez, 2020, p. 196), finds its place in the Other and takes on the quality of a *call* to the future: 'Call my daughter and tell her I'm sorry,' Martha writes in her farewell letter. Ingrid's call, at the very moment when Martha fades into green, generates an intrusion of death into life and brings the mother back from the dead a few minutes later, reincarnated in her daughter, Michelle.

In the story, the (re)encounter between mother and daughter was not possible before the mother's death; if it had been, it would have required a radical, sinister symmetry in the mise-en-scène, given that Michelle is played by a rejuvenated Tilda Swinton, challenging the film's credibility. Only an encounter

[6] While for Víctor Erice in *Close Your Eyes* (2023) death is a fade to black, for Almodóvar it is a fade to colour.

*out of time* is possible between them, after the mother is already gone from the world. Thus, the mother-daughter metamorphosis so familiar to pagan mythologies (Lacan, 2003, p. 317), rather than being a harbinger of eternal doom, allows a return to the origins, the chance to (re)visit the question 'Do you think I was totally mistaken about Martha?' and to allow for the possibility of an *other* answer.

In the final scene, Michelle, finding a degree of relief from the devastation of Martha's absence, follows in the wake of her mother's desire: she wanders around her house, eats her strawberries, sleeps in her bed, between her sheets, and wears the same shirt, giving her a ghostly aura. At dawn she rises, stretches out on her mother's green lounger, listens to the birdsong that evokes the dawn, and it begins to snow.

That snow, that death, has been recited three times using the final lines from *The Dead* (T1): 'one by one, we're all becoming shades. Snow is falling, falling…' The first time, it is recited by Martha in the hospital after her treatment has failed and before the fade to black. The second time, it is recited again by Martha after watching *The Dead* and shedding her last tear. A third time, it is spoken by Ingrid for Martha, now dead: 'The snow is falling […]. Falling on your daughter and on me, falling upon the living and the dead.' And 'when that body falls, the whole universe falls' (Vaschetto, 2025, p. 27).

F7. The mother returns to the surface of the world in the form of snow and caresses the bodies.

In the Almodóvarian oeuvre, the mother always returns as a support, as a life-giving impulse, as a guarantee of a place in the Other. While at the beginning of

*Volver*, the wind sweeping over La Mancha foreshadows Irene's resurrection, and in *Pain and Glory*, it is the mother who guides the search for beauty and light, in *The Room Next Door*, Martha's return is not as a shadow, like the shades of *The Dead,* but as a luminous ghost in the form of snow (F7) that caresses the bodies of those that remain. The world slowly changes colours as the credits roll. A life departs and is given to the earth.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions: it is not meaning, it is voice

Almodóvar's most recent films have left behind the post-modern abandon of a camp and kitsch aesthetic celebrating a body in constant transformation to embrace a metamodern approach that *goes back to the cinema* (Rodríguez Serrano, 2024), inhabiting us and accompanying us on the journey towards death. Almodóvar's oeuvre explores death not as something terminal, but as an opportunity to go back (*volver*) to the ghosts of the past. The filmmaker knows that life is a succession of losses that enable us to process death by way of desire, and thus to go back (*volver*) means not only to settle unfinished business, but to accept that which can never be settled.

This analysis of *The Room Next Door* and its comparison with Sigrid Nunez's novel *What Are You Going Through* exposes a number of poignant additions and inventions introduced by Almodóvar. He gives the characters names, introduces patterns (such as the recitations and variations of the quote from *The Dead*), and brightens the story with fades into colour (T1): those three fades on Martha's face, whose body falls and moves from gloom to light. Martha's face appeals to us with different gazes to camera, positioning us in the place of her last mirror, as tranquil witnesses of and accomplices to a gentle euthanasia. Almodóvar achieves this through the cover of boundaries and symbolic frames that adopt the form of gateways, curtains, passages and intersections that make 'the threshold a founding element of his creations' (Seguin Vergara, 2009, p. 48). In *The Room Next Door* he establishes a clear distance between Ingrid's and Martha's rooms, serving as a kind of *entredós* (a lace insertion between two fabrics) that makes the accompaniment possible.

*The Room Next Door* is both the film's name and its vital off-screen space, as Ingrid knows not to obey Martha's demand, taking the room downstairs instead of *the room next door*. In this *clear* distance from the other woman, essential to the ethics of inclination towards the other, she must be willing to listen to the unspeakable matters of sex and death, as expressed in the Louise Bourgeois quote 'I have been to hell and back. And let me tell you it was wonderful,' embroidered on a cloth in a frame on a wall in Martha's home, next to the Cristina García Rodero photograph *Duelo* (2000), which shows women in mourning walking arm in arm. Ingrid's body thus unbalances her ego and descends (to the room downstairs and to listening) so that Martha's body can ascend into the fog and then fall gracefully.

Ultimately, the mise-en-scène of Martha's death, so far removed from the thwarted desire to die in peace in the novel, allows Almodóvar to reconstruct a colourful epilogue that creates a place for ghosts and a call to an unknown future. Almodóvar continues to break the traditional scopophilic gaze of cinema (Zurian and Caballero, 2017, p. 81) and to flirt with the gaze of the dying (Poyato, 2007, p. 95), but he is no longer working with the mummified time of *Broken Embraces* (Herrera, 2012). In light of Freud's argument that we can only think of our death by attending it as observers, Almodóvar's latest film shows us a woman who, fated to die before her time, is able to watch from behind the glass as another woman weeps for her. But Martha smiles. Almodóvar has previously asserted (through Carmen Maura's character at the end of *Volver*) that 'ghosts don't cry'. And as Anne Dufourmantelle points out, 'ghosts are not afraid of death; they are beyond it, looking at you from the other side [...], they make signs at you from the edge of life' (2025, pp. 79-80).

Before Martha disappears, the mirror does not show her reflection; instead, nature is filtered and it is not clear which of the friends has more life. In any case, even when one is alive and the other dead, it is as if they are still together on the same side, thanks to Martha's daughter, who is the spitting image of her mother. The enunciative decisions of the composition – especially the light and colour provided by Martha – generate a kaleidoscopic bouquet of encounters

out of time, reclining bodies, phantasmagoria, laughter, tears and embraces between dawns, which instead of collapsing into the destructive rivalry of symmetries, offer glimpses of love and forgiveness at the end.

Almodóvar goes back to cinema to confront decline and death; he goes back to the names and gazes of Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini, Huston, Bourgeois and the art that surrounds him. But he also goes back to the Lincoln Center (F3), a symbolic space through which the filmmaker entered the United States to win over American hearts. In 1988, the Lincoln Center screened *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, nominated for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film that year, and Almodóvar returned to the Center in 2025 to receive the Chaplin Award for *The Room Next Door*.

However, declaring that he has no interest in posterity,[7] Almodóvar teaches us that if there is anything consistent about the living being it is the indomitable nature of desire: 'desire not merely as the spur and inspiration for my films, but as madness, epiphany, a law to which one must submit, as though we were characters in the verses of a bolero' (2023, p. xvii). If every life begins with a heart-rending wail, the hummed tune of the song marks the time of life's passing. Yet the taste of words is not in their meaning, but in that sound that *subjects* the subject. In *The Room Next Door*, the body falls, the universe falls, but the thread of the word between two women remains, just like the end of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. The camera allows them to forge an intimacy while establishing distance with a wide shot. To accompany the other, we might listen to the echo of Heather Christle; it is important to have a time to fit out a *stanza*, a space that allows us to construct a clear distance and to offer verses: to gift a book, to share a film, to cede the singularity of the voice... There is salvation in the word, but what really saves us is the shelter of the voice.

[7] In the chapter 'Muerte y cine' by *Pedro x Javis* (Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo, 2025)

## Bibliographical references


Almodóvar, P. (2023). *The Last Dream*. Harper Via.

Almodóvar, P. (2024). *La habitación de al lado. Guión basado en la* novela Cuál es tu tormento *de Sigrid Nunez*. Reservoir Books.

Amaya Flores, F. J. (2023). El astracán, lo grotesco y el esperpento en la comedia de Pedro Almodóvar. *Fotocinema*, (26), 187-209. https://doi.org/10.24310/Fotocinema.2023.vi26.15517

Ariés, P. (2000). *Morir en Occidente*. Adriana Hidalgo.

Bataille, G. (1986). *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. City Lights.

Castro de Paz, J. L. (2012). Sangre, fetiche, ceguera: deseos y abrazos rotos. *Fotocinema*, (5), 24-40. https://doi.org/10.24310/Fotocinema 2012.v0i5.5894

Cavarero, A. (2016). *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Stanford University Press.

Christle, H. (2019). *The Crying Book*. Catapult.

Dufourmantelle, A. (2025). *Un caso de amor. Psicopatología de la vida amorosa*. Lumen.

Freud, S. (1974). El porqué de la guerra. In *Obras Completas. Vol. 8* (pp. 3207-3215). (Original document published 1933)

Freud, S. (1993). 'Death and Us.' *Freud and Judaism*, ed. David Meghnagi, Karnac Books, pp. 11-39 (original document published 1915).

García-Catalán, S. and Rodríguez Serrano, A. (2021). La pantalla fetiche. Deseo y sublimación en Dolor y gloria de Pedro Almodóvar. *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies, 22*, 95-110. https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2021.1880815.

Guerrero Muñoz, A. and Deltell Escolar, L. (2025). Nada es sencillo. El principio de autonomía del paciente en el cine almodovariano. *Fotocinema*, (31), 111-135. https://doi.org/10.24310/fotocinema.31.2025.21494

Gutiérrez Valencia, C. (2019). Metaficción y autoría en *Los abrazos rotos* y *Dolor y gloria*, de Pedro Almodóvar. *Cuadernos de Aleph*, (11), 132-153. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/oaiart?codigo=7579781

Herrera, J. (2012). Tiempo momificado y coqueteo con la muerte en los abrazos rotos de Pedro Almodóvar. A propósito de la cita de *Viaggio in Italia* de Roberto Rosselini. *Fotocinema*, (5), 62-75. https://doi.org/10.24310/Fotocinema 2012.v0i5.5896

Krasnogor, R. (2024). Ya no se puede ni morir en paz. *El flechazo. Dossier Eutanasia*, 1, 55-57.

Kristeva, J. (1988). *Poderes de la perversión*. Siglo XXI.

Lacan, J. (2003). *Seminario 7. La ética del psicoanálisis*. Paidós. (Documento original publicado 1973)

Miller, J.-A. (2014). *La erótica del tiempo y otros textos*. Tres Haches.

Mira, V. (2015). *Algunos apuntes, clases y escritos sobre Psicoanálisis, Cultura y Arte*. Colegio de Psicoanálisis de Madrid.

Montoya, À. (2 October 2024). Entrevista a Almodóvar. *Time Out*. https://www.timeout.es/madrid/es/noticias/pedro-almodovar-no-me-importaria-terminar-mis-dias-como-john-huston-en-silla-de-ruedas-pero-rodando-100224

Nunez, S. (2020). *What Are You Going Through*. Riverhead.

Parejo, N. (2022). Los fotógrafos y el acto fotográfico en la filmografía de Pedro Almodóvar. *Cuadernos.Info*, (52), 266-284. https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.52.36267

Parrondo, E. (2020). *Tecleando sobre "Dolor y Gloria" (Pedro Almodóvar)*. https://evaparrondo.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Tecleando-sobre-dolor-y-gloria.pdf

Pérez Bowie, J. A. (2010). Sobre escritura y nociones conexas. Un estado de la cuestión. In J. A. Pérez Bowie (Ed.), *Reescrituras fílmicas: nuevos territorios de la adaptación* (pp. 21-43). Universidad de Salamanca.

Plato (1982). *El Fedón [Phaedo]*. Gredos. (Original document published ca.

387 BCE) Poyato, P. (2007). *Todo sobre mi madre*. Nau Llibres.

Recalcati, M. (2018). *La fuerza del Deseo*. Spirito.

Recalcati, M. (2025). *La luz de las estrellas muertas. Ensayo sobre el duelo y la nostalgia*. Anagrama.

Rodríguez Serrano, A. (2024a). Hacia un cine metamoderno: elementos críticos para el debate entre metamodernismo y escritura fílmica. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, (39), 165-179. https://doi.org/10.63700/117

Rodríguez Serrano, A. (2024b). *Volver al cine. Pensar, escribir y analizar las películas*. Solaris.

Rose, M. (2016). Death and la Chica Almodóvar, *Revista Latente*, (14), 25-42.

Sancho Cardiel, M. y Muñoz Torrecilla, N. (2025). Pedro Almodóvar y la muerte no-normativa: el *ars moriendi* en Matador (1986) y *La habitación de al lado* (2024), *Fotocinema*, (31), 185-207. https://doi.org/10.24310/fotocinema.31.2025.21510

Seguin Vergara, J.-C. (2009). *Pedro Almodóvar, o la deriva de los cuerpos*. Tres fronteras ediciones.

Thibaudeau, P. (2013). El cuerpo, la piel y la pantalla: los territorios habitados por Pedro Almodóvar. *Fotocinema,* (7), 192-208. https://doi.org/10.24310/Fotocinema 2013.v0i7.5931

Vaschetto, E. (2025). *Formas en las que un cuerpo cae*. Xoroi.

Vicens, A. (2024). Una lectura del escrito de Jacques Lacan "Radiofonía". In A. Vicens & M. Bassols, *Radiofonía y Lituratierra. Dos goznes en la última enseñanza de Lacan* (pp. 15-60). RBA.

Zunzunegui, S. (2018). *Historias de España. De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de cine español*. Shangrila.

Zurian, F. A. and Caballero Gálvez, A. A. (2017). Género y cuerpo en construcción. Representación audiovisual de la violencia física y psicológica en *La piel que habito* (2011). *Iberic@l*, (11), 73-84. hal-03790897

## Funding and Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Luis Deltell Escolar and the ESCINE (Complutense Film Studies Group) Research Group. This article has been made possible by a research stay at Universidad Complutense de Madrid funded by the Valencian regional government (call: CIBEST-2024 for 2025).

This article has been funded by the Audiovisual Media and Hypermedia Recognised Research Group (GIR), through a grant from the Castilla y León regional government Ministry of Education (Project VA008G24).

This article has been developed as part of the research project '*Las creadoras en el audiovisual y sus redes. Un estudio de los vínculos como elemento de transformación y consolidación en la industria*' (CIAICO/2024/103), funded by the Valencia regional government (2025-2028) Ministry of Education, Culture, Universities and Employment and directed by Jessica Izquierdo Castillo of Universitat Jaume I.

Translated from the Spanish by Martin Boyd