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Pedro Almodóvar and Non-Normative Death: *Ars Moriendi* in *Matador* (1986) and *The Room Next Door* (2024)

Pedro Almodóvar y la muerte no-normativa: el *ars moriendi* en *Matador* (1986) y *La habitación de al lado* (2024)

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Abstract:
This research analyzes the two films that Pedro Almodóvar has identified within his body of work as being centered on the theme of death – *Matador* (1986) and *The Room Next Door* (2024) – and examines their differing perspectives shaped by the 36-year gap between them. In both, the filmmaker explores the *ars moriendi* from a transgressive standpoint, distancing himself from traditional conceptions of death as a tragic or redemptive event and instead proposing an ambiguous and poetic vision. In *Matador*, death is observed through the lens of youth and passion, inscribing it within the world of bullfighting—a space symbolically tied to virility and ritualized violence. In *The Room Next Door*, Almodóvar revisits the theme of death from a contemporary and mature perspective, linking it to a friendly and considered yet still disruptive agreement: euthanasia. Cinema, in both films, emerges as a space of resistance against the antiseptic approach with which contemporary society tends to conceal death. This research brings Almodóvar's perspective on death into dialogue with reflections on death in cinema and the theoretical frameworks on the end of life from the social sciences.

Resumen:
Esta investigación analiza las dos películas que Pedro Almódovar ha señalado dentro de su filmografía como centradas en la muerte –*Matador* (1986) y *La habitación de al lado* (2024)– y sus diferentes perspectivas al respecto marcadas por la horquilla de 36 años que las separa. En ambas el cineasta examina el *ars moriendi* desde una perspectiva transgresora, alejándose de las concepciones tradicionales de la muerte como evento trágico o redentor y proponiendo, en su lugar, una visión ambigua y poética. En *Matador*, la muerte se observa desde la juventud y la pasión, inscribiéndola en el universo del toreo, un espacio simbólicamente ligado a la virilidad y la violencia ritualizada. En *La habitación de al lado*, Almodóvar revisita el tema de la muerte desde una óptica contemporánea y madura, vinculándola a un acuerdo amistoso y ponderado pero aun así rupturista: la eutanasia. El cine se erige en ambas películas como un espacio de resistencia frente a la asepsia con la que la sociedad contemporánea tiende a ocultar la muerte y esta investigación hace dialogar la mirada almodovariana sobre la muerte con reflexiones sobre la muerte en el séptimo arte y los marcos teóricos sobre el fin de la vida de las ciencias sociales.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; Death; *Matador*; *The Room Next Door*; Euthanasia.

Palabras clave: Pedro Almodóvar; muerte; *Matador*; *La habitación de al lado*; eutanasia.

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1. Introduction

Death is a recurring presence in the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar. In some cases, it becomes a symbol of female liberation, as in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (*Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!?,* 1984)—where the husband is killed with a ham leg—or in the famous dialogue from *High Heels* (*Tacones lejanos*, 1991) in which Marisa Paredes tells Victoria Abril to find another way to solve her problems with men besides killing them. It also appears as a crime of passion in *Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*, 1987), as a gag in *Kika* (1993), or as a ghostly grandmother in *Volver* (2006). His films include terrorists, as in *Labyrinth of Passion* (*Laberinto de pasiones*, 1982) and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988), murderers as in *Live Flesh* (*Carne trémula*, 1997), fraudsters who steal identities of the dead as in *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004), or suicide attempts as in *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995). Additionally, loss of brain function appears in *The Flower of My Secret*, *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999)—which also addresses the AIDS crisis—and *Talk to Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002), the latter presenting a much more problematic treatment through the awakening of Leonor Watling's character, triggered by a rape.

Almodóvar's perspective on death aligns with his artistic obsessions as a filmmaker and cannot be separated from his non-normative approach to all things social. His portrayals of death are rarely natural or conventional and often function as declarations of admiration for women and their capacity to manage suffering—something that has sparked criticism from certain feminist perspectives. This is evident in the collective mourning seen in *All About My Mother* following the death of a son, or in the almost musical way tombstones are cleaned in *Volver*. In contrast, male incapability to process grief appears in *Law of Desire* and *Bad Education*, a pattern that only breaks in *Pain and Glory* (*Dolor y gloria*, 2019), where the filmmaker centers his autofiction around the unresolved grief following his mother's death—almost two decades after it happened. One could say this film offers a definitive vision of a homosexual man's reckoning with aging and, consequently, with his proximity to death.

Pedro Almodóvar's most recent film, *The Room Next Door* (2024), represents a face-to-face confrontation—or a chess match, evoking Ingmar Bergman—with death. In the director's own words (Almodóvar in Fernández Santos, 2024), it is, along with *Matador* (1986), his only film centered entirely on this theme. In both cases, his artistic and passionate gaze does not adhere to theoretical frameworks nor shy away from the natural coexistence of paradoxical concepts. Rather, it treats death as a new encounter between non-normative or queer elements intertwined with atavistic approaches or contemporary vices and, of course, filtered through cinematic references and intertextuality.

This research will focus on both films to contrast Almodóvar's view of death, a youthful, folkloric-Spanish, and orgasmic approach in the former versus a mature, stateless, and serene-friendship-oriented one in the latter. Despite their opposing perspectives, both converge in the pursuit of a chosen death that challenges social consensus. They also dialogue with—or even rebel against—the two pandemics that form the backdrop of their creation HIV/AIDS in the case of *Matador*, and COVID-19 in the case of *The Room Next Door*.

Although LGBTQIA+ identity is not explicitly present in the deaths portrayed in either film, this does not negate that Almodóvar's perspective on the end of life—even when affecting heterosexual characters—is inherently queer. This "queering of the text" translates semantically into tactile sensations, into the perception of something unseen, a trace of something absent or out of frame (Muñoz Torrecilla, 2024). Therefore, his queer approach to death represents a new barrier—the *in extremis* barrier—in the visibility of the community's complexity. As Judith Butler argued—although not specifically in reference to queerness—Almodóvar challenges the "division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives" (2009, p. 38).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. A Social Sciences approach

The contemporary debate in the Social Sciences is situated in the tension between tradition and progress—between the ritualized affective and social acceptance of the past (summed up in the expression *ars moriendi*) and the Anthropocene era's denaturalization and medicalization of the present. The great historian of death, Philippe Ariès, asserted that "for thousands of years

man was the lord and master of his death and the circumstances surrounding it. Today he has ceased to be so" (2000, p. 538). In contemporary times, the focus has shifted to the suffering family and the medical process:

> Without the progress of medicine, the pressure of family feeling would probably not have been sufficient to make death disappear so quickly and so completely. Not so much because of the real conquests made by medicine as because, as a result of medicine, in the mind of the sick man death has been replaced by illness. (Ariès, 2000, pp. 542)

In the Social Sciences, born in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the study of death has consequently been shaped by the taboo imposed by progress and by the rejection of the magical thinking of Christianity, according to which death is not the end of life, but the continuation into the beyond, where the Last Judgment awaits and the so-called *speculum mortis* reveals the mystery of individuality before the eyes of God (De Miguel, 1995). In their early studies, before questioning the Western construction of death, these disciplines focused on remote cultures, establishing yet another dichotomy—one that finds its correlation in closer contexts—that distinguishes between the "death of the other" and the "death of the self" (De Miguel, 1995).

In the 19th century, the "death of the other" gained prominence in Romantic currents that idealized cemeteries and the so-called eternal rest in contrast to the suffering caused by life. A culture of mourning was established—visible and recognizable. Yet with the arrival of the 20th century—the deadliest of centuries—death, funny enough, ceased to be visible. According to De Miguel (1995), society surrendered to pleasure, to youth, to travel, and death replaced sex as the new taboo—an argument particularly useful when analyzing Almodóvar's work. Being the only animal conscious of its own mortality, the human denial of death has a dehumanizing effect on social dynamics, to the point where this author speaks of two types of death, social death and natural death:

> Most people do not die suddenly; they decline gradually, being removed from social life. The dying suffers total marginalization from society. The isolation and loneliness of elderly or ill individuals is a clear phenomenon. Sometimes this is described as a premature funeral. (De Miguel, 1995, p. 119)

In response to this societal attempt to reduce the impact and visibility of the inevitability of death, another subdivision emerges, that of the good death and the bad death. According to Gayol and Kessler (2011), the good death becomes associated with old age—in contrast to the bad death of youth—and is caused "by a disease controlled by medical knowledge that does not involve a long agony" (2011, p. 71). This opens a further distinction between good pain and bad pain, as well as between acceptable and unacceptable deaths. Irresponsible, inconsiderate, or selfish deaths—especially suicide—become marked, as do those that intersect with class and hegemonic regions:

> From the South [of America], for example, new and interesting nuances may be suggested. Perhaps the most evident is the need to break with binary and singular frameworks: religious/secular; good death/bad death; visibility/denial, etc. Avoiding generalizations that ignore age, gender, class, and manner of dying is essential. (Gayol and Kessler, 2011, p. 71)

Death, in its paradoxical space of otherness and omnipresence, is increasingly consumed through fiction—Ariès already spoke of *bookish death* (2000)—and is overrepresented in the media and the arts, leading to the concept of the pornography of death, coined by Gorer, which prioritizes a very specific type of death:

> While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played and ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to the masses—detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction and, eventually, horror comics. (Gorer, 1965, p. 51)

On this foundation, the arrival of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s marked a collision for Western civilization in the 20th century. It initially affected individuals excluded from the social body (mostly homosexual men and intravenous drug users), struck the young, and was linked to the sexual act (and, in the collective imagination, to promiscuity). Medicine proved powerless—or perhaps indifferent—before it, and the failed attempt to render the victims invisible did not succeed in producing the desired social death. Faced with scientific uncertainty, care fell into people with no expertise. This pandemic also "generated particular attention to the life stories of patients, often in the form of

confessions, autobiographies (...) photographs of people dying, month by month, day by day" (De Miguel, 1995, p. 120).

From the heteronormative perspective, this continued to be perceived as otherness. But for the queer community, it generated a specific relationship not only with death—lived up close and unconcerned with age—but also with life itself (Sancho Cardiel, 2020).

For this reason, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in the 21st century—a crisis arguably managed from a heteronormative sense of care—the tics of the pre-AIDS 20th century reemerged with force. Extreme medicalization was imposed—even before appropriate treatment was fully developed—and a frantic "call to arms" toward a vaccine ensued. Patients were subjected to total, affectionless isolation—sometimes even within their own homes—and ageist discourse proliferated, especially in the media, which often regarded elderly lives as less valuable (Guarinos & Medina, 2023; Vázquez Guzmán, 2023).

2. 2. Audiovisual approach

Since its inception, cinema has represented death across multiple genres—drama, horror, noir, western, or science fiction—demonstrating its effectiveness as a narrative tool. As the young art consolidated its power as mass entertainment, Hollywood censors—with the so-called Hays Code written in 1930—saw the need to regulate it. As the Hays code stated: "Action showing the taking of human life, even in the mystery stories, is to be cut to the minimum" (Motion Picture Association of America qtd. in Doherty, 1999, p. 366). More specifically, suicide was considered "morally questionable" and "Bad theatre" (Motion Picture Association of America qtd. in Doherty, 1999, p. 366).

The Hays Code gradually lost influence in American cinematic storytelling until its complete dissolution in the 1960s. However, in Europe, Italian Neorealism had already begun to shift the rules in the 1940s, shocking audiences in 1945 with the unflinching death of Anna Magnani in *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945). A death, notably, that occurs halfway through the film—something Hitchcock would not dare to do until *Psycho* (1960). It wasn't until *Torn Curtain* (1966) that he allowed himself to linger on the death scene of Gromek. "I thought it was time to show that it was very difficult, very painful, and it takes a very long time to kill a man," he explained to François Truffaut (1974, p. 270).

One year earlier, Gorer had coined the term "pornography of death" (1965) to describe mass culture's relationship to death—a dynamic that continues into the present. In cinema, this has translated into entire genres—such as serial killer films or slasher horror franchises—and, in auteur cinema, into ironic or stylized approaches to dying, as seen in the work of Tarantino or Kitano.

Yet in line with the broader denial of reflection on death, there is relatively little literature analyzing death in film, beyond a specific scholarly tradition that emerged in 21st-century Italy, with thinkers such as Antonio Cavicchia Scalamonti, Barbara Grespi, and Flavio Vergerio. Cavicchia Scalamonti, for instance, dedicated a chapter to *The Dead* (John Huston, 1987)—a key intertext for *The Room Next Door*—where he examined the complementary roles of art and the everyday as "ways of escaping the anguish of death" (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2000, p. 200). He also explored suicide through films such as *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gilâs*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1997), concluding that taking one's life is an act "in which the true freedom of being human is concentrated (…) placing man, in certain aspects, above God" (Cavicchia Scalamonti, 2000, p. 210).

In terms of representation, more influential theorists have reflected on the paradox between cinema's repetitive nature and death's singularity. André Bazin, in his essay *Death Every Afternoon* (written in 1951)—a review of a documentary about the death of bullfighter Manolete—argued that cinema violated the essence of death as "the unique moment par excellence" (2003, p. 30). He opposed filming death on philosophical grounds, as it filled the seventh art with "the dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!" (2003, p. 31). In contrast, Benjamin (2017; 2018) suggested that technical reproducibility displaces art from its ritual function toward an exhibitionary one, resignifying images through montage and repetition. Film, then, also resignifies death. Finally, Barthes (1989) described photography as the trace of a "having-been-there," while Metz (2000) emphasized that cinema turns that trace into a "being-there," which again enters into paradox with a death that admits no continuous verb tenses, only perfect ones.

Thus, cinematic representations of death—whether realistic or emancipated from reality—pose ethical, aesthetic, and emotional challenges. And because death is an ineffable experience, it can only be narrated from the perspective of

those around it (Marzabal and Marijuán, 2004). In this sense, cinema uses metaphors or medicalized strategies to render it comprehensible, thereby becoming an educational and empathetic tool (Torres Lana, Conde & Ruiz, 1999; Conde & de Iturrate, 2003).

Finally, from a queer theoretical perspective, the representation of death acquires a critical meaning in opposition to sexual, affective, and existential normativity. Rather than focusing solely on LGTBI+ identities, the queer approach interrogates dominant narrative forms, destabilizing models of life and death imposed by the heteronormative imaginary (Epps, 2008). For scholars such as De Lauretis (1994, 2007) and Sedgwick (1993), sexuality—and by extension, desire and death—exceed regulated categories and operate from unstable margins. In cinema, this dissidence manifests through narrative strategies that challenge traditional psychoanalytic frameworks and question the symbolic authority of the normative (Lindner, 2012). According to Mira (2011), such difference activates the subversive potential of sexual heterodoxy. As Zurian (2023) and Warner (1993) warn, *queer* should not be reduced to an identity label, but understood as a critical attitude that resists all forms of normativity.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines film analysis with a sociocultural perspective. Critical content analysis is employed as a qualitative tool to break down the formal and narrative elements of the films, with attention to their symbolic and contextual dimensions (Greimas and Courtés, 1982; Casetti and Di Chio, 1990). This approach draws on Abril's (2007) concept of "visual semiotics," which is useful for uncovering the implicit ideologies in the visual representation of death, as well as on film analysis tools proposed by Stam (2001), Colaizzi (2007), and Zurian (2011).

Following the methodological framework of Zurian and Caballero (2014), the analysis is structured around three interrelated axes that combine audiovisual materiality with sociopolitical context:

1. **Critical Review:** Includes data on the film, a bibliographic and contextual analysis of the author, and a review of previous studies.

2. **Hermeneutics of Images:** An interpretative analysis is conducted of the images in the selected films, paying special attention to visual composition, mise-en-scène, and intertextual references. This includes semiotic, grammatical, and narrative systems, as well as the dialectic between comprehension and explanation.
3. **Audiovisual Analysis:** Film analysis techniques are applied to examine the understanding and meaning of selected sequences.

Pedro Almodóvar's filmography is considered the work of an auteur-filmmaker, making it essential to engage with the primary source through his interviews and statements, situating them within the context of his own bibliography and other influences that shape his creative process.

Although the analysis will integrate all three dimensions, offering a critical text that interconnects these areas of study in its writing, special emphasis will be placed on the representation of different types of death in his films from a sociological perspective. The study will analyze how these cinematic narratives engage with social constructions of death in contemporary Spain, particularly in relation to historical memory, gender-based violence, and the pathologization of desire.

This methodological approach enables a comprehensive analysis of death in Almodóvar's work, establishing a link between cinematic form and its sociocultural implications. By integrating film analysis with a sociological lens, this research aims to contribute to the study of death in audiovisual media through a truly interdisciplinary perspective.

4. Analysis of the Films Under Study

4.1. *Matador*: Iberian Deaths, Passionate Deaths, Machista Deaths, and Queer Deaths

Matador, Pedro Almodóvar's fifth film, opens with a scene of Diego Montes [Nacho Martínez], a retired bullfighter, masturbating in front of the television as he watches images of women being mutilated and killed. The film then shifts to show him as a respectable teacher at his own bullfighting school, where that same afternoon he will talk to his students about "the art of killing" (00:02:03).

Among those students is Ángel [Antonio Banderas], watching him with fascination and admiration.

Diego's voice, discussing the bullfighter's thrust and the correct way to kill, is intercut with images of María Cardenal [Assumpta Serna] having sex with a man whom she then murders with a hairpin as he has an orgasm. Using a pin turned into a sword, she penetrates her lovers.

The name of the Almodóvarian femme fatale, María Cardenal, subtly introduces a religious connotation—and at one point she even dresses like a praying mantis—that complements the character of Berta [Julieta Serrano], Ángel's overprotective mother. She is surrounded by gory religious martyrdom scenes both in her speech and in the decoration of her home, which provoke a mystical ecstasy comparable to the bullfighter's erotic excitement in front of the cinema of *gore*. The phallic mother also imposes a castrating dynamic toward her son, which ultimately acts as a spark that leads Ángel to rape—or attempt to rape—Eva. In this sense, Ángel can be read as an example of failed masculinity, as his name suggests, he is an asexual, somewhat childish angel, perpetually infantilized and incapable of sexual agency.

The Francoist dictatorship's Catholic-nationalism imposed a rigid delineation of gender roles, a legacy reflected in the film, the bullfighting world as a symbolic space of power and masculinity; overprotective mothers unable to contain their sons' criminal impulses; and a police force stripped of its traditionally violent and masculine attributes. Altogether, these elements construct a universe where the influence of Catholic-nationalism resonates as a past to be resisted—one that Almodóvar, although he denies it until his later works, portrays here as a macabre, almost necrophilic culture that also haunts artistic expression in democracy. This is symbolized in the fashion show featured in one of the film's scenes, by a filmmaker who would not make explicit political references to the dictatorship until *Live Flesh*, and would ultimately address it more directly through the excavation of mass graves in *Parallel Mothers* (*Madres paralelas*, 2021).

In *Matador*, however, Almodóvar prefers to speak of death through ritual and folklore, which already hinted at his own denial of death and his desire to reframe it, as Benjamin (2017) might say, through cinema:

> I wanted to make a movie about death, because I don't accept it. It's obvious that tragedies happen every day, but it's still very hard for me to accept it, even if that's childish. So I wanted to see how I could talk about death. That's why I put in a bullfighter and a serial killer. It's a film about the art of killing, which is what they call bullfighting. An art that's taught in a school. (*Almodóvar, 2021, 3'30"–3'58"*)

Even from his queer perspective, Almodóvar constructs a gender conundrum that is still grounded in traditional gender roles. He himself explains:

> The woman, the lawyer who imitates the bullfighter, embodies the masculine role. The bullfighter, on the other hand, in terms of courtship, takes on the feminine role (…). In a bullfight, although no one questions the bullfighter's sexuality (…), he wears such tight silk clothing that he literally cannot walk. He walks almost like a ballerina, skipping. (*Almodóvar, 2021, 4'50"–5'35"*)

The third point of this gender triangle is Ángel, who ultimately assumes the guilt of his mentor. In this dance of genders between the male and female leads, Ángel subverts traditional masculinity. Yet Diego advises him: "You have to treat women like bulls" (00:06:45). Ángel ends up confessing to murders he did not commit, considering it a lesser evil than being accused of homosexuality. The film not only exposes mechanisms of exclusion within male camaraderie but also highlights how deeply destructive they are for those like Ángel who cannot fully conform to its codes.

Matador thus explores the folkloric dimension of death in Spain through bullfighting—a national ritual that defines the protagonist and gives the film its title. This bloody, virile celebration carries into *Talk to Her*, where the first successful female bullfighter, Lydia [Rosario Flores], embodies a fusion between beast and human. And in this violent, religious, and passionate Spain, the only possible Almodóvarian ending is a sexual suicide pact. María presents this encounter as instinctual and inevitable, for both characters are of the same species. The film climaxes with a shared, lethal orgasm between the protagonists. A pleasurable death. "I love you more than being dead myself" (1:41:13), she declares—a phrase that encapsulates the fusion of desire and destruction. A finale where the animalistic and uncontrollable prevails over progress and rationality, culminating symbolically under a solar eclipse.

This ending is not only a metaphor for normative Spanishness but also connects to the AIDS crisis—the pandemic that ravaged and stigmatized the gay community at the time the film was made. It is telling that those who try to stop the sexual suicide fail because they protect their eyes (as if with a condom) from the harmful concentration of sunlight during the eclipse. A "bad death," culturally speaking, that Almodóvar celebrates in the midst of youthful effervescence and as a response to the prudish reaction to death by sexually transmitted disease.

It is no coincidence that Almodóvar would later explain *Matador* as his least realistic film. For him, at that time, death could only be a fantasy—even an erotic one—filtered through his passion for a genre, noir cinema with Hitchcockian and Freudian influences, which he rewrites almost as a *MacGuffin* to explore international prudishness about AIDS, but especially the queer underside of Spanish patriarchy. A kind of suicidal reading of Iberian machismo that tumbles, in its extremity, into homosexuality: "For me, the only way to understand or justify death (back then) was for it to be part of sexual pleasure." (*Almodóvar, 2021, 1'35"–1'40"*)

To approach this queer death, Almodóvar draws not only on Hitchcockian tone—with *Vertigo* (1958) as the central reference in the cinematic dance between sex and death—but also on two cinematic references, one is the aforementioned *gore* film, which the protagonist watches while masturbating; the other is the film shown at the cinema where the chase unfolds, *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), which also ends with an allegorical orgasm as Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck succumb to irrational passion. Blood and arousal with an ethnic component—Jones's character, Pearl Chavez, is Romani—set within the traditionally masculine American genre of the Western.

F1 y F2. Frames from the endings of *Duel in the Sun* and *Matador*, with Pedro Almodóvar's evident visual and thematic reference to King Vidor's film. © TCM y El Deseo.

Thus, as a major representative of modernity in Spain and the *Movida Madrileña*, Almodóvar challenges tradition with his embrace of a 'bad death'—due to age and disobedience—no matter how much it is, without a doubt, a 'good pain'—a pleasure, an orgasm. Yet he ties it to the quintessential Iberian art, bullfighting. As always with Almodóvar, there's another twist, animal passion also emerges as the way in which the director kills the sorrow of the traditional *ars moriendi* in the hands of modernity and cinema, which for Almodóvar always improves life (a step further in that 'imitation of life' of Douglas Sirk) and, therefore, also improves death.

4.2. *The Room Next Door*: Stateless Deaths, Contemplated Deaths, Feminist Deaths, Queer Deaths

The qualitative—and age-related—leap in Almodóvar's approach to death comes with *The Room Next Door*, thirty-six years after *Matador*. On a personal level, the filmmaker still refuses to accept death and once again addresses it through fiction. Proximity changes everything, and he confesses that with his first English-language film—which seems no coincidence in creating a sense of otherness—he wants to "understand and accept death":

> I don't understand death, nor do I have the reverence that, for example, my mother's generation had, who naturally and healthily would place little oil lamps called *pasavidas* in the hallway of the deceased's home in case they returned the night after their passing. I wish I believed in that, but no, for me death is the end, something I still can't accept. *(Almodóvar to Fernández-Santos, 2024)*

The Room Next Door is his attempt to create an *ars moriendi* in his own image, and his dream-funeral-ritual is marked above all by companionship and friendship. It tells the story of the reunion between Martha [Tilda Swinton], a journalist and war reporter, and Ingrid [Julianne Moore], a writer who has just published a book about death. Former colleagues at a New York magazine in the 1980s, they reconnect when Ingrid learns that Martha is hospitalized with cancer that becomes terminal. Martha then asks Ingrid to join her at a countryside house—like a vacation—where she plans to take a pill to end her life painlessly.

In his first English-language film, Almodóvar displaces death—filming it in El Escorial—to explore his deepest reflection on the end of life. Yet even in an

Anglo-Saxon context, his perspective and characters remain unmistakably Spanish. In a way, he redefines or personalizes the "good death," crafting his ideal death with a certain on-demand flavor that fits within—but clearly goes beyond—euthanasia, which is illegal in New York State but was recently legalized in Spain through Organic Law 3/2021, known as the Organic Law on the Regulation of Euthanasia. Thus, the film–mostly set in a peaceful *locus amoenus* where birds chirp–bridges the two historically opposing versions presented by Ariès (2000), the serene, pre-industrial confrontation with death and the absolute medicalization of it in the contemporary, scientific, and neoliberal framework. Almodóvar seeks a conciliatory, temporally transcendent death.

The death of Swinton's character becomes the climax of what can essentially be understood as the director's definitive manifesto on the subject. Throughout the first hour, the film presents a catalog of attitudes toward dying that intersect with key concepts in the sociology of death. From the opening scene, in which Julianne Moore introduces the book *On Sudden Deaths* and defines death as "unnatural"—"I can't accept that someone alive has to die" (00:01:09), she says—a contemporary view of mourning is proposed, focused more on the death of others than on one's own.

Through flashbacks, we meet Fred [Alex Høgh Andersen], father of Martha's daughter, who in some way represents the difference between social death and biological death. He buries his original and social self in the Vietnam War and later dies in flames in a ghostly act of heroism, trying to rescue someone who exists only in his imagination. Without explicitly linking it, Tilda Swinton's character—his ex-partner and mother of his daughter—becomes a war reporter, a special envoy to the epicenter of collective death.

Finally, John Turturro's character gives lectures on climate change—the death of the planet—and confronts the world's naysayers. A denialism that Swinton's character, upon being diagnosed with cancer, individually rejects. Her character essentially conducts a comparative study between the death of others in war and her own in a hospital, concluding that in both cases, the most important thing is to avoid loneliness: "I think I deserve a good death" (00:28:22), she says explicitly. For her, this is the contemporary capitalist death, one that involves choosing every last detail, but with the fundamental premise that it must be

accompanied, "It's something that goes beyond solidarity, it's being beside someone in silence, nothing more, because often that's what we all need" (Almodóvar to Fernández-Santos, 2024), the filmmaker would say. In the same interview, Swinton referenced Raymond Williams' thoughts on Western death in solitude:

> The purpose of this film is the opposite, because one of the greatest forms of companionship and friendship that exists—and yes, also of love—is to accompany someone as they leave this life (…) It's one of the most beautiful experiences there is, and it has nothing to do with death. *(Swinton to Fernández-Santos, 2024)*

In this female-led death, a much more evolved Almodóvar in terms of gender roles avoids the stereotype of the woman as traditional caregiver in a single line of dialogue: "You are not my caretaker, you are my guest" (00:47:57), Martha tells Ingrid.

Through these deaths—Fred's two deaths, Martha's, and the planet's—a differentiated social reading emerges:

a) **Fred's (social) death in Vietnam**: symbolizes patriotism, the glorification of war, and heroic masculinity, framed by duty and honor, reflecting traditional war imagery.
b) b) **Fred's (biological) death in the burning house**: reveals the real aftermath of conflict, exposing the invisible scars of war, from psychological trauma to institutional neglect of veterans.
c) c) **Martha's death**: euthanasia as an act of resistance against a system that imposes the obligation to live, turning her dignified death into a crime she must face legally. It also symbolizes both self-death (for Martha) and the death of the other (for Ingrid), a medicalized death but in non-expert hands. A more feminine death.
d) d) **The death of the planet**: the climate crisis as an irreversible catastrophe caused by capitalism, plunging Damian [John Turturro] into despair and projecting a future marked by devastation, surpassing even the tragedy of war.

Thus, faced with this catalog of deaths, Almodóvar chooses the one that unites his two protagonists in a foreign, luxurious house—once again, beautifying pain and turning death into a sort of an art installation—and it is through the

aesthetics and intellectualization of the process that he manages to illuminate the room where death was lived within order to dispel its fears or at least filter them. Ultimately, breaking the pornographic approach and making death something close and natural again, even within its representation and medicalization. "I never imagined it would be something so light" (00:56:52), Ingrid summarizes. Martha, on her end, asks to exile herself from her own life to meet death without being "surrounded by familiar things" (00:34:38), focusing instead on friendly coexistence. A partial social death, then, chosen by herself.

The film revisits the idea of mourning and female community in the face of death, already present in *Volver*, where Almodóvar explored his own experiences in La Mancha with his mother and her neighbors as protagonists. In the Anglo-Saxon context, where there once was a village with open doors and a network of women who supported each other through grief, there are only two women in an isolated house in the middle of the forest, one waiting for the moment to take the pill, and the other who, at any moment, will discover that the upstairs room remains closed—a sign that everything has happened. The *ars moriendi* has a very detailed script.

Almodóvar then asks what death is like for those who are, in a way, alone in the world. Martha has no partner, no parents, and no relationship with her daughter. In search of support, she turns to an old—and, crucially, not very close—friend, and the film focuses precisely on that, a celebration of friendship as the chosen bond for crucial moments, an affirmation of a non-solitary, legitimate, and deliberate death. All this without losing sight of the desire for a death without pain, without deterioration, and above all, without suffering.

In the context of a filmmaker who has personally experienced the HIV/AIDS crisis and who sees queer death as a still-relevant lesson—both in its political dimension and its ability to challenge normativity—Pedro Almodóvar crafts in *The Room Next Door* a reflection that dialogues with death in pandemic times. The film contrasts the HIV/AIDS crisis with how heteronormativity has interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the ideological weight behind how illness and death are managed. Prioritizing the chosen family—so central to the LGBTQIA+ community—it presents a sovereign, non-biological bond of a very different nature, less toxic and more respectful. A bond articulated through the idea of the embrace, so often denied not only during the recent pandemic

but also, as the film shows, by the non-committal juxtaposition demanded by political correctness.

But within this dialectic between normativity and transgression, the film addresses "sovereign death" without denying its double edge. a somewhat one-directional self-determination and emotional detachment. The coldness with which the protagonist's daughter replies, "It's your choice" (00:06:22), when she expresses her wish to stop medical treatment, illustrates a radical autonomy that nonetheless becomes the driving force behind her decision to die. The protagonist articulates the conflict clearly: "You're not the owner of yourself when you're dying" (00:27:44). Almodóvar introduces here a paradox in which American normativity, which prohibits euthanasia in New York State, forces the protagonist to resort to highly regulated clandestine methods.

In contrast to the digital sterility of the *dark web*, cinema operates as a refuge. Intertextuality—mostly in the form of cinematic references—thus functions as an emotional and discursive counterpoint to contemporary death, stripped of ritual and aestheticization. Cinema appears as a final window into a somewhat vitalist death, the protagonists watch *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948), in which Louis Jourdan's initially frivolous character comes to terms with his own mortality when he realizes the depth of the love he inspired in Joan Fontaine's character. This revelation leaves him defenseless before those seeking his death, closing his arc with a surrender to the inevitable.

But if there is one film that permeates *The Room Next Door*, it is *The Dead*, based on the short story by James Joyce. The final monologue, recited several times in Almodóvar's film, exemplifies the metaphor linking snow to the universality of death:

> The snow is falling, falling on the lonely churchyard. Falling faintly through the universe, falling faintly like the descent of their last end, on all the living and the dead (1:15:00).

However, Almodóvar intentionally omits the previous line from Joyce's text, the one that expresses the tension between life and death as an existential dilemma: "Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age" (1:14:20).

In *The Dead*, Donal McCann's character faces the certainty that he cannot compete with the idealized memory of his wife's deceased lover. His impotence,

stemming from the impossibility of mythologizing his own existence in everyday life, resonates with the conflict of the protagonist in *The Room Next Door*, caught between the impersonal normativity of assisted death and the desire for a meaningful farewell. A good death that, in the director's universe, can only end in a green fade-out, like in *Vertigo*—but instead of resurrecting a torrid fantasy like Hitchcock, Almodóvar gently buries his fears of death.

F3 y F4. Frames from *Vertigo* and *The Room Next Door*, Hitchcock's necrophilic fantasy and Almodóvar's reconciliation with death, united by the color green. © TCM y El Deseo.

Through these cinematic and narrative games, Almodóvar crafts a meditation on contemporary death that challenges (but also integrates) medical asepsis and emotional detachment, while reclaiming cinema as a space of resistance against the dehumanization of dying. He establishes an intertextual dialogue that reimagines the "good death" in aesthetic and existential terms—an *ars moriendi* in the Almodóvarian style, relevant from cinematic, sociological, and queer perspectives.

5. Conclusions

The two opposing Almodóvarian deaths—*Matador* as the most unreal of his films, and *The Room Next Door* as the most naturalistic and intimate narrative in his filmography—offer a fertile ground for reflecting on the social and cinematic norms that shape the end of life. Drawing on dichotomous sociological concepts such as good and bad death, the taboo of death in contemporary society versus the pre-industrial *ars moriendi* described by Ariès (2000), or Gorer's (1965) "pornography of death," Almodóvar enriches the debate with his ability to naturally hold paradoxes and his attempt to understand death by re-signifying it through the camera.

His cinema, always in dialogue between tradition and rupture, portrays a dark Spain overshadowing the joy of the *Movida Madrileña* in *Matador*, while in *The*

Room Next Door, it blends contemporary clinical detachment with solidarities from another era. All of this is seen through a non-normative lens, as a queer filmmaker advocating for heterodox yet sovereign ways of dying—whether through orgasmic pleasure or peaceful friendship—and reconfiguring gender roles, diversifying pleasures, and reinventing emotional bonds.

From a queer theory perspective, the representation of death in Almodóvar's cinema takes on dissident dimensions that challenge both sexual and biopolitical norms. On one hand, sexual death—linked to desire, pleasure, and risk—embodies a rupture with affective and vital normativity (Lauretis, 1994; Sedgwick, 1993); on the other, sovereign death in the form of euthanasia implies agency over one's own body, subverting medical and legal discourses of life control (Warner, 1993; Zurián, 2023). Both configurations, through a queer aesthetic, allow us to think of death not as a natural end, but as a political and narrative space of resistance (Mira, 2011; Epps, 2008).

As a third pillar of Almodóvar's contribution to the discourse on death, the intertextual nature of his cinema turns the analysis into an intersectional reflection on death, shaped by his generational and geographical experiences—as a Spanish homosexual man who has lived through dictatorship, democracy, and pandemics. His visual grammar, always tied to his cinematic references, also makes the analysis of these two films a brief and sui generis journey through the representation of death in Hollywood cinema, exploring bold discourses on the subject in filmmakers like Hitchcock, Vidor, Ophüls, and Huston.

These three layers—the sociological, the queer, and the cinematic—reaffirm Almodóvar's stature as an artist of enduring relevance in contemporary aesthetic, identity, and social debates. He offers the world two opposing but complementary *ars moriendi* that cry out for diversity until the last gasp.

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