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# *La flor de mi secreto* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995): crisol de intertextos

# *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995): An Intertextual Melting Pot

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**Abstract:**

Revisiting *The Flower of My Secret* many years after its release, the perspective afforded by the passage of time enables us to discern how the film contains a wealth of elements and techniques that would later feed into Almodóvar's subsequent movies. One of the most important is intertextuality, which is used in the film in a wide range of ways, from incorporating texts written by the filmmaker himself or by others, to including references to famous directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, and even passages from the filmmaker's own life. This article focuses on the study of these variants of intertextuality via a textual analysis of the film, from the function performed by source texts to the evidence of their reincarnation in the target text.

**Resumen:**

Abordar actualmente *La flor de mi secreto* con la perspectiva que ofrece el tiempo, muchos años después de su realización, posibilita comprobar cómo en este filme quedan fijados un buen número de nutrientes y procedimientos de los que se alimentarán las películas posteriores de Almodóvar. Entre ellos cabe destacar los relacionados con la intertextualidad, y que este filme practica según una amplia gama de variantes, desde la incorporación de textos propios o ajenos a la obra del cineasta, hasta la inclusión de referentes rastreados en autores fundamentales de la historia del cine como Alfred Hitchcock, y pasando por la anexión de pasajes de la vida del propio cineasta. El presente trabajo se ocupa del estudio, a partir de un análisis textual del filme, de estas variantes de intertextualidad, tanto de las funciones que, con su incorporación, desempeña el texto de partida, hasta la revitalización acusada por el texto de llegada.

**Keywords**:
Cinema; Almodóvar; Intertextuality; Romance Novel; Noir Fiction; Autobiography.

**Palabras clave:**
Cine; Almodóvar; intertextualidad; novela rosa; novela negra; autobiografía.

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## 1. Introduction

Revisiting *The Flower of My Secret* many years after its release, the perspective afforded by the passage of time enables us to discern that the film contains a wealth of elements and techniques that would later feed into Almodóvar's subsequent movies. One of the most important elements is intertextuality, which is used in the film in a wide range of ways. Thus, in addition to incorporating texts – or fragments thereof – which are unrelated to the filmmaker's work, but ultimately prove to be narratively or visually profitable, as in the case of the songs *En el último trago* by Chavela Vargas and *Dolor y vida* by Bola de Nieve, the filmmaker also includes episodes and anecdotes from his earlier work, such as stories from his book *Patty Diphusa y otros textos*. Other iconographic references from famous films by important directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, have also been incorporated as well as passages from the filmmaker's own life, especially those relating to his village childhood. However, *The Flower of My Secret* also marks the genesis of particular *narrative outlines* which, although not featured heavily in the film, are transplanted or *grafted* into the filmmaker's later films, where they eventually *germinate*. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the film also embraces other arts, such as choreographies that hybridise flamenco and dance, which in this case takes the form of a performance by flamenco dancers Joaquín Cortés and Manuela Vargas, with the intention of enriching the visual aesthetics.

This article aims to address this veritable intertextual melting pot through a study of *The Flower of My Secret* using methodologies specific to film textual analysis, such as narratology and transtextuality.

## 2. The state of the question. *The Flower of My Secret*, a pivotal film

Many scholars of Almodóvar's cinema have agreed that *The Flower of My Secret* marks a turning point in the filmmaker's career. Indeed, with this film, Almodóvar's work would begin a new phase, the most fruitful and extensive to date. Víctor Fuentes, for example, highlighted that:

> After leaving comedy behind, Almodóvar sought new directions with *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1989) and *High Heels* (1991), without entirely succeeding. Despite the achievements of *Kika* (1993), his next film, Almodóvar's filmography reached a dead end. It was then, reacting to this situation, that the filmmaker from La Mancha directed *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), a film with which he found the path that would lead him to his most profound and successful films, such as *Live Flesh* (1997), *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Talk to Her* (2002), to name but a few (2005, p. 101).

And Marvin D'Lugo commented that:

> In the period following the international success of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), in which his films were criticised for their sordidness and lack of connection with the national audience, *The Flower of My Secret* (1995) is a pause that allowed Almodóvar to reconnect with his own creative spirit, which for him is twofold: the maternal figure and the roots of the comedy traditions that have inspired him (2005, p. 90).

Paul Julian Smith described the film as a hinge that joins two dominant aesthetics in Almodóvar's cinema: the former, which he calls the 'rose' period, corresponding to his early dissident films, excessive in style and themes, and the latter, the 'blue' period, marked by more restrained, less colourful and less provocative works. Furthermore, for Smith:

> *The Flower of My Secret* marks Almodovar's entry into 'art house cinema' and does so based on the change in treatment of three of his key themes: sex, the city and literature. In terms of sexuality, *The Flower of My Secret* replaces the sexually atypical characters of his early films with conventional heterosexual couples; [...] the spontaneous and improvised language of his first period is replaced by intentionally literary dialogue and references (Smith, 2003, p. 150).

The director himself highlights that with *The Flower of My Secret* he had begun to focus on 'hard drama; on tears that don't provide relief but, instead,

suffocate' (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 155). Whether it was because Almodóvar found a new path with this film that led to his greatest achievements, or because it enabled him to reconnect with a creative spirit embodied in the maternal figure and the roots of comedy, or whether, indeed, he replaced the spontaneous and improvised language of his previous films with intentionally literary dialogue and references, the fact is that the above quotes coincide in highlighting the nodal character of the film. A film that, nevertheless, experienced a new conception of drama — 'hard drama' — interesting both for its unique arrangement and the unfolding of events and in its new visual and, above all, textual dimension, which stems from the incorporation of intertextuality (Poyato, 2015, p. 9). In this regard, *The Flower of My Secret* compiles a wide range of the types of intertextualities that Almodóvar would work with in a number of later films, as explained below based on a textual analysis of the film that follows the methodologies developed by Gérard Genette in his study on transtextuality (1999) and Pedro Poyato in his work on Almodóvar's oeuvre (2015).

## 3. How it all begins. Narrative outlines

The film starts with the opening credits that feature a series of handwritten and typed pages that move on the screen to the rhythm of the changing text, seemingly with the intention of drawing attention to the importance that literary writing will have in the film. However, this assumption is immediately dispelled by the opening scene, in which two doctors inform a mother that her 16-year-old son, the victim of a motorcycle accident, is brain dead and ask her to donate his organs. Shortly afterwards, the film itself reveals that the mother is in fact a nurse, Manuela (Kiti Manver), who, as part of a seminar organised by the Transplant Centre, is rehearsing, like the rest of her colleagues, the least traumatic way of communicating the sudden death of a family member to a loved one in order to request organ donation. However, Manuela does not appear again in the film and it soon becomes clear that organ donation and transplants are far removed from the film's central theme.

This is one of those beginnings in which the filmmaker plays a trick on the viewer. First, by contradicting the theme of the credits. Then, by leading us to believe that the story will be dominated by the drama of such a painful issue as organ transplants, in a scene that is ultimately revealed to be fictional. Moreover, neither Manuela, as already mentioned, nor the two doctors, nor any of the other participants in the roleplay reappear in the film, with the exception of Betty (Carmen Elías), a character who, curiously, is given little attention at the beginning, beyond this brief introduction in which she is seen leading the seminar.

However, it should be noted that the issue of organ donation and everything it entails, left here as is, *migrates* to an Almodóvar film made four years later, *All About My Mother*. Nurse Manuela (in this case played by Cecilia Roth) reappears in the same type of seminar as before, once again embodying a mother who has lost her teenage son. However, in this case, Manuela will soon have first-hand experience of the role she has previously portrayed, namely, that of a mother who is asked to donate her son's organs who has suddenly died in an accident; a theme that does take centre stage in this film. In terms of textual migration, the episode of a mother who is asked for permission to donate her deceased son's organs is an interesting *journey*. If *The Flower of My Secret* began by presenting as reality what later turns out to be fiction, *All About My Mother* operates in exactly the opposite direction, by presenting as fiction what later turns out to be reality. However, the aforementioned operation, whereby a segment with no narrative projection in the original film *migrates* to another film where it germinates narratively, is particularly noteworthy. It is important because we are witnessing the birth of a type of textual grafting that is typical of Almodóvar, which involves the genesis of a narrative outline destined to flourish in a later film.[1] More cases that display this same type of textual grafting are described later.

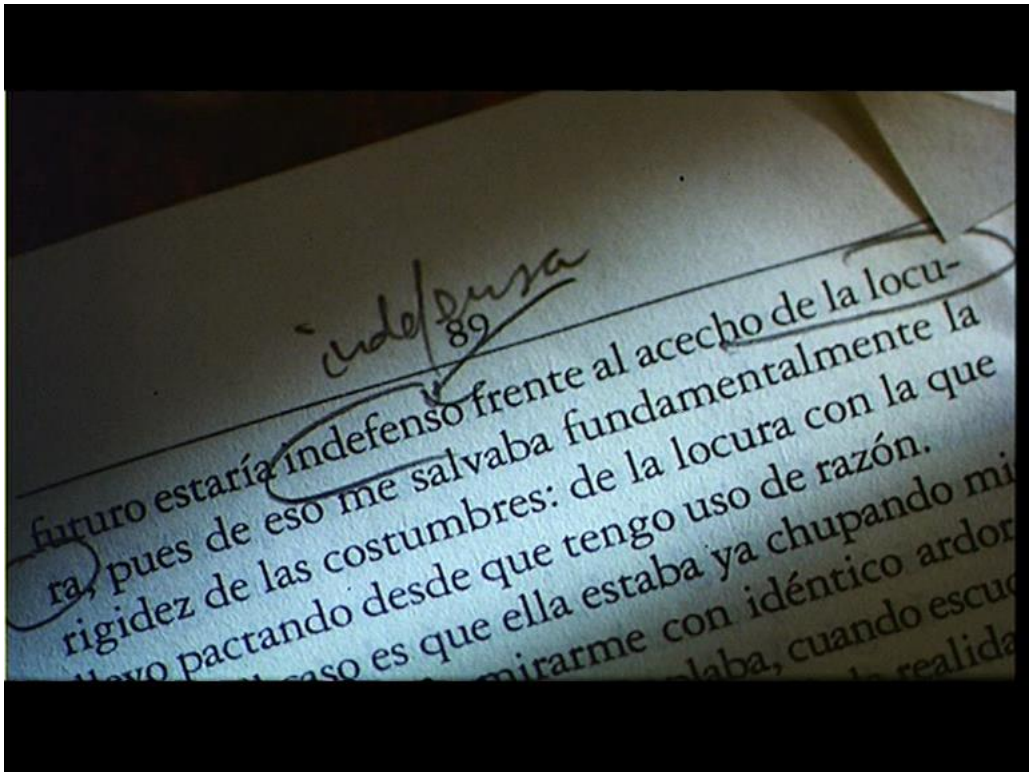
[1] A variation of this can be seen, for example, in *Broken Embraces* (2009), where Almodóvar revisits themes fully developed in previous films and rewrites them anew (Poyato, 2012, p. 17).

## 4. Ankle boots. Prolectic function

Leo (Marisa Paredes), the film's protagonist, is a writer who lives surrounded by books in a flat in Madrid's historic old town. Married to Paco (Imanol Arias), a NATO lieutenant colonel who prefers the war in Bosnia to living with her, Leo cannot bear her husband's absence, as she continues to love him with uncontrollable passion. In its opening scene, the film shows Leo in her bedroom surrounded by piles of novels, including *Ella imagina* by Juan José Millás, *Cuentos completos* by Julio Cortázar, *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, *An Angel at My Table* by Janet Frame and *The Tragic Muse* by Henry James, among others. Suddenly, one of the windows in the room flies open and the wind[2] turns the pages of *Ella imagina* until it stops at one where Leo has circled the phrase '*...indefenso frente al acecho de la locura...*' (defenceless against the madness lying in wait) and highlighted the word '*indefenso*', the masculine version of 'defenceless' changing it to '*indefensa*', the feminine version, thus implying that Leo has taken Millás' writing and made it her own (F1).

Seamlessly, the camera then moves over the same words written on a sheet of paper that is struck by the keys of the typewriter while we hear Leo's voiceover read what she is writing to Paco, her husband: 'Every day I wear something of yours. Today, the ankle boots you gave me... Sometimes the memory of you weighs heavily on my heart and prevents me from breathing...' The film's script thus juxtaposes the phrase from Millás' book, which – and this must be highlighted – Leo has made her own, with what she herself has written in the letter, in a literary hybrid that links her helplessness in the face of the madness that hangs over her life with the absence of her husband. Madness that, despite everything, she tries to mitigate by wearing the ankle boots he gave her.

[2] According to Jean-Claude Seguin, wind in Almodóvar's films is associated with imbalance, possible breakdowns and madness. This wind that violently penetrates through the window is 'the first sign of madness that, passing through bodies, is inscribed on the keys of the machine' (Seguin, 2009, pp. 277-278), as, in fact, it is.




F1. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

Suddenly, Leo notices that her boots are too tight, yet she cannot take them off. After unsuccessfully locating her domestic help, she decides to visit her friend Betty. However, while walking through the streets of Madrid, Leo offers a junkie a thousand pesetas to help her take off her boots. When this is also unsuccessful, she locates her friend Betty at work, who, just as Leo arrives, is talking about the "crisis of grief" in the seminar she is teaching. After the seminar, Betty is finally able to help Leo by taking off her boots.

In 2011, Almodóvar published a book of short stories under the title *Patty Diphusa y otros textos* (*The Patty Diphusa Stories and Other Writings*). In one of the stories, *Ecos y esquinas* (*Echoes and Corners*), Almodóvar recounts that, during a trip to Paris, he went with Rossy de Palma to buy some ankle boots which, later at the hotel, he was unable to take off (Almodóvar, 2011, pp. 181-182). In another story from the same book, *Botines de punta chata* (*Square-toe Ankle Boots*), the protagonist, unable to take off their ankle boots, offers a junkie a thousand pesetas to remove them (Almodóvar, 2011, pp. 110-111). The construction of the above scene echoes the anecdotes from these two episodes in *Patty Diphusa*, namely the inability

to take off a pair of boots and, in relation to this, the character of the junkie. Even though these self-references could be thought of as mere *amusing* anecdotes, especially that involving the junkie,[3] these episodes serve a structure that aims to go much further. Thus, if we start with the premise that the boots acquire the gift of metonymy by representing Paco – because Paco gave them to Leo, who wears them to *feel* closer to him – and take into account that it is Betty – after the junkie's futile attempts – who finally takes Leo's boot off, continuing with the previous association, we could interpret that by taking off the boots, Betty is also taking Paco away from her friend Leo. This is reinforced by the fact that Leo appears just as Betty is talking about the 'crisis of grief', a crisis that Leo experiences when she later finds out that Betty is Paco's lover. Thus, the boots worn by Leo, a metonymy for Paco, are also a metaphor for the relationship that both women have with him. The boots thus foreshadow a crucial moment that has not yet taken place (in the story), thereby performing a function that, in the words of Daniela Aronica (2005, p. 59), could be called 'proleptic'.

## 5. Romance novels and noir fiction. Amanda Gris and *The Cold-Storage Room*

In a later scene, Leo visits Ángel (Juan Echanove), editor of the *El País* literary supplement, with the aim of securing a position as a literary critic for the newspaper. During their meeting, Leo explains her background as a reader and writer:

> I was about ten years old. For economic reasons, my family emigrated to Extremadura…We lived on a street full of illiterate people…The neighbours would come to my house, and for a few pesetas I would write their letters…and read those they received…Since then, I've never stopped reading or writing…

[3] Agustín Gómez referred to these correspondences as the basis for the construction of Almodóvar's characters, echoing the filmmaker's own life.
(2021, p. 417).

Here we find the first autofictional episode of the story. The filmmaker has repeatedly confessed that this is how he himself acted with the neighbours who visited his mother's house (Almodóvar, 2023, p. 128). In this regard, Leo becomes Almodóvar's alter ego transformed into a novelist. At this point in the film, the viewer already knows that Leo is an avid reader – as is often the case in Almodóvar's films, the names of the characters, especially the protagonists, are by no means random, and this extends to Leo, in that her name, short for Leocadia, is also the first person singular of the verb *leer* (I read),[4] and, if we look at the titles of the books stacked up in her house, even what she likes to read. Leo herself is quick to point out that, in addition to letters, she read romance novels to her neighbours, but she clarifies that what she really likes to read is literature by women, 'adventurous women, suicidal women, victims of themselves and of the society of their time, such as Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf, Janet Frame…'. Cristina Martínez-Carazo argues that:

> Leo presents herself as a carbon copy of the tormented writers she admires, suggesting that it is not only these women's novels that attract her, but also their personalities, their marginalised and torn lives, their alcoholism, their addiction to tranquillisers, their suicidal tendencies, their heart-wrenching loneliness and, above all, their embrace of writing as a space for survival (2011, p. 384).

However, even when Leo dedicates herself to the type of noir literature created by her role models, she is still linked to the romance novels her neighbours read. This is an interesting dialectic that the film begins to explore immediately. Thus, when Ángel brings up Amanda Gris,[5] whom he considers a practitioner of 'typically feminine literature ranging from Barbara Cartland to Venezuelan soap operas…', Leo, clearly upset, dismisses it as 'literature without feelings, that only reflects complacency and sentimentality, without pain or heartbreak…'. Therefore, although for Ángel

[4] However, Ángel's name could well be a tribute to Ángel S. Harguindey, who, in addition to being deputy editor of *El País*, was responsible for the newspaper's cultural sections and supplements.

[5] The fact that Ángel is interested in Amanda Gris' literature is evidenced in the scene by the pile of books on his desk; the author's famous anthology appears at the top of the pile.

Amanda Gris is merely a writer of sentimental romance novels, as can be deduced from the references he uses to characterise her, on the one hand, Cartland – a prolific writer of romance novels – and on the other, Venezuelan soap operas – an extremely long and melodramatic *telenovela* – for Leo she is a monster – 'Amanda Gris horrifies me,' she concludes in her reply.

What is striking is that Leo chose the pseudonym Amanda Gris as the author of the type of romance novel Ángel refers to, which have so far given her success. The name, 'Gris' is Spanish for grey, which, in relation to the colour spectrum, is almost antonymous with the colour that characterises the type of novel – 'rose' – which she writes. The disparity between the author's name and the genre makes this connection dubious. This is corroborated by the fact that what Leo really likes is not romance novels but noir novels, a colour much closer, on the colour scale, to the grey of the pseudonym. This is explored further in the following scene.

In the scene, Leo goes to the Fascinación publishing house. There, among piles of books from the Amanda Gris Anthology, Alicia (Gloria Muñoz), the manager, reproaches Leo for the latest novel she has submitted, which she believes is the antithesis of what a true 'Amanda Gris' novel should be. After reminding Leo that the collection is called 'True Love', Alicia begins to scold her, ironically verbalising the noir novel:

> How could you possibly come up with a story about a mother who discovers that her daughter has killed her father after he tried to rape her? And, so no one finds out, the mother freezes him in the cold-storage room in a neighbour's restaurant!

The novel is *The Cold-Storage Room*, the same text that Leo had given Ángel, along with two articles, following their earlier meeting. Leo responds that all she was trying to do with the novel was to narrate reality. Alicia's immediate response is:

> Reality! We have enough reality at home! Reality is for newspapers and television…And look at the result. Because we see and read so

> much reality, the country is on the verge of exploding. Reality should be banned!

Alicia thus champions escapist, sentimental literature, i.e. romance novels, as opposed to realistic literature, and she does so with such emphasis that she ends up confusing fact with fiction. Some scholars have interpreted Alicia's words as an attempt by the film to reflect the state of tension that the country was experiencing at the time:

> The love affair between Spain and the PSOE government that had blossomed after the Transition period was dying. Unemployment, corruption, the GAL scandal and its consequences, such as Roldán's grotesque escape and 'resign, Mr. González' heated up the atmosphere in the streets [...] All this tension was clearly reflected in the film: a demonstration by health workers chanting 'now Felipe is going to cure the flu', a typesetter at *El País* printing a play on words about a country that doesn't work, graffiti criticising PSOE in the streets...(Penderton, 2020, translation mine).

However, the film soon returns to the subject of the romance novel. Tomás (Juan José Otegui), the publishing house's contract manager, reminds Leo of the type of story that, according to the written agreement, she is obliged to write:

> Romance novels set in cosmopolitan settings...suggestive sex that is only hinted at...winter sports, bright sunshine, luxury apartments, undersecretaries, ministers, yuppies...no politics...no social conscience...as many illegitimate children as you want...and happy endings.

*The Flower of My Secret* insists, then, on the detailed characterisation of the type of stories that the publisher demands from Amanda Gris, stories far removed from reality, the further away the better. Stories of love and luxury, but always with a happy ending. Tomás tells Leo that just as the publisher has respected her requests, such as writing under a pseudonym, not giving interviews, etc., she must respect the contract, that is, she must continue to

write *romantic* novels, not *realistic* ones. Finally, Leo risks her career by saying: 'The problem is the colour. I don't know how to write romance novels; they turn out dark. I try, but every page turns out darker'. Here we see the transformation undergone by the novelist's writing, shifting from 'rose' to 'black'. The scene ends with a very upset Leo leaving the publishing house. On her way out, she crosses paths with a pallet full of her books, which is being brought into the warehouse, she takes one direction and the pallet the other. The staging is sufficiently clear: Leo is leaving Amanda Gris behind; their directions diverge.

Martínez-Carazo referred to the causes behind this divergence:

> The cultured and sophisticated woman who arose from this professional success [achieved through the substantial sales of her romance novels written under the pseudonym Amanda Gris] is devastated by the major emotional crisis caused by her husband's physical and emotional distance, and as a result, she changes her style (2011, p. 385).

Therefore, in addition to reflecting the state of the country, revealing the writer's dissatisfaction with her literary persona, questioning the writer's freedom and exposing the tyranny of the market, these scenes are important for other reasons of greater textual relevance. They highlight the dialectic between the romance novel, which the publisher demands of Leo as Amanda Gris, and the realistic or noir novel, which Leo wants to write. Almodóvar summarises this as follows:

> If a romance novelist, whether out of absent-mindedness or pain, contemplates herself in the black mirror of reality, she will have misplaced her gaze (a writer's gaze is essential) and crossed the boundary that divides two genres as different yet similar as romance and noir (1995, p. 173).

Moreover, these scenes are important because they introduce *The Cold-Storage Room* – Leo's noir novel whose plot is summarised by Alicia – which ultimately suffers the same fate as the opening segment on organ transplants,

namely, that it becomes a mere anecdote with no narrative projection. Nevertheless, it is a storyline that, eleven years later, is transplanted and germinates into the core subject of one of the filmmaker's later films, *Volver*. Thus, *The Flower of My Secret* gives rise to a seedbed of narrative outlines destined to blossom in subsequent films where they are skilfully grafted. Within this paradigm of intertextuality, there is a category that involves revisiting narrative outlines generated in the original film, *The Flower of My Secret*, that are transplanted and developed in subsequent films, such as *All About My Mother* and *Volver*.

It is important to note that, from this point onwards, this new intertextual category appears with some regularity in Almodóvar's work. For example, in the aforementioned *All About My Mother*, a poster for *Café Müller*, a dance choreographed by Pina Bausch, adorns one of the walls of Esteban's (Eloy Azorín) room. Although the poster is a mere set decoration in this film, in *Talk to Her* (2002) it is recreated and brought to life to feature in the film's important prologue (Poyato, 2015, pp. 134-136). Similarly, the aeroplane that follows the opening credits of *Bad Education* (2004) comes to life in *I'm So Excited* (2013), becoming one of the film's central motifs. This unusual intertextual transplant, where a theme or motif outlined in an initial text is grafted onto a subsequent text that germinates into an essential part of the story, is another reason why the films are connected, and inevitably culminates in making Almodóvar's work more compact.

## 6. The power of the centre. Hitchcockian references and television intertexts

What are undoubtedly the most significant scenes are right in the middle – at the centre – of the film. The filmmaker himself has referred to these scenes as the triggers of the story: 'The first thing I wrote for *The Flower of My Secret* was the husband's visit, from the moment the husband rings the doorbell until he disappears down the staircase' (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 156). For the viewer, however, the fascination of this central part of the film continues in later scenes. But first things first.

A very excited and nervous Leo awaits the arrival of Paco, her husband, who has finally decided to visit her. When the doorbell rings, she quickly runs down the apartment's long hallway to the door wearing high heels and a tight red dress for the occasion. The reverse shot, which has been delayed until now, shows her husband who is as listless as he is tired. Paco has a serious expression on his face at all times, in keeping with the military uniform he is wearing. Just as Leo kisses him, one of the mirrors that adorn the entrance to the apartment reflects back to the viewer, as if it were an avant-garde painting, the image of a broken kiss (F2), shattered, fragmented; a visual technique similar to that employed by Alfred Hitchcock in *The Wrong Man* (1956) where the protagonist sees his own reflection shattered in a broken mirror when he is attacked by his wife (Poyato, 2023, p. 10). In *The Flower of My Secret,* it reflects the broken image of the couple's kiss, in a frame reminiscent of Hitchcock.

F2. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

In addition to its aesthetic relevance, the image in the mirror also has a proleptic function, given that, just like the boots worn by Leo, it foreshadows a crucial event – in this case, the couple's breakup – that has not yet

manifested itself clearly but which the viewer now begins to *discern* in the rude gestures of displeasure that Paco displays for any reason, such as, for example, the paella, which he loves, that Leo has cooked for him. The story continues with a scene in which Paco takes a shower. He rinses his soapy body inside the shower with the curtain between them, while she waits impatiently on the other side for him to finish.

When Paco gets out of the shower, the couple go to the bedroom, where they have a heated argument full of recriminations. The bed becomes a witness to the situation. When Leo realises that, at one point in the conversation, Paco is not even listening to her, she is overcome with rage and throws a photo of the couple kissing, which is on one of the bedside tables, onto the floor. As a result of the strong impact, the photograph frame breaks apart and the glass balls that adorned the frame scatter across the bedroom floor, in what can be interpreted as a new version of the couple's kiss shattered into pieces.

The breakup is consummated when Paco, claiming he has a mission to fulfil, decides to leave. Leo goes out onto the staircase landing. After confirming that there is no possibility of salvation for the couple, he in the foreground, she in the background out of focus, Paco begins to descend the stairs until we see him disappear around the first bend. A close-up then captures the remorseful face of Leo, broken by grief (F3), a shot that lingers as we hear Paco's footsteps going down the rest of the stairs, in a sort of countdown that ends with the sound of the door closing. A sudden burst of dramatic music underscores the intense drama of the moment. Then Leo, stifling a cry that finally ends in tears, turns around and enters the apartment. In another seamless sweep of the camera, the red of Leo's dress gives way to the red of the cross on the first aid kit. From here on, a succession of close-up shots uncompromisingly depict her attempted suicide: a hand opening the medicine cabinet and taking out a bottle of pills, the same hand first emptying the pills onto a tray, then filling a glass with water, and finally putting each of the pills from the tray into her mouth.

F3. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

F4. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

The scene continues with a very low-angle shot showing Leo lying on the bed, as if she had crashed onto it, while Paco's underwear can still be seen scattered on the floor (F4). Underwear he took off, not to undress ready to make love, but to shower and then make a getaway that ultimately became unbearable for Leo. In an extreme change of scale, the wide shot gives way to a close-up of one of Leo's eyes struggling not to close completely but, inevitably, closing while the screen fades to black.

In addition to ending the scene, the fade to black represents the character's inner state that penetrates the darkness – in other words, the black, non-light of death. This is not so far removed from Buñuel who used the presence of the bed to represent sex and death in his images. Similarly, Almodóvar turns the bed not into the place of sex it promised to be – Leo, while helping her husband undress, unbuttoning his shirt, button by button, expresses her sexual desire: 'First you shower, then we fuck, then we rest, then we fuck again…' – but rather a place of death, to which Leo seems inevitably doomed. The bed thus becomes not only a *witness* to the abyss that opens between the couple, as Almodóvar himself indicates (1995, p. 169), but also a *participant* in their relationship, as evidenced by the images showing Leo lying on it, a woman without light, penetrating the very abyss of death.

Immediately afterwards, over the same fade to black, we hear the telephone ringing several times in the living room. The call is from her mother, whose message we hear as it is recorded on the answering machine: 'Leo! My Leo, are you there?' A faint light then returns to the shot, undoing the fade to black and illuminating the scene and Leo's face, who half-opens her eye. Then she mumbles: 'Mamá, Mamá…' The camera focuses on the answering machine while her mother's voice replies: '…I'm going to the village…Call me…I would have liked to unburden myself with you…it's your mother' – the shot then moves to the long corridor which it travels down until reaching Leo, who jumps out of bed, as if pushed by an internal spring, and crawls, vomiting, to the bathroom.

The presence of the mother – in this case embodied by her voice – brings back the light to the scene, and with it, to her daughter. The superb metaphor deployed in the scene is particularly precise and materialises the journey of the mother's voice reaching her daughter to pull her from her deathbed and bring her back to life. The formalisation process deployed here is again based on Hitchcock, specifically on *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) where the film uses a long tracking shot to materialise the journey of the mother's singing voice reaching, in this case, her kidnapped son, a connection that leads to the child's liberation.

The scene continues, cutting back to the bathtub in a shot that, due to its cold lighting, reminiscent of a hospital or morgue, is now unsettling. From inside the bathtub, we see Leo's body emerge, first her hand grabbing the side, then her head and shoulders, as if she were rising from the dead, her body dripping wet (F5).

F5. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

Ascending from the depths of the abyss, Leo seems to rise from the dead, as emphasised by the prolonged scream of terror that comes from an indetermined off-screen source which culminates the scene. This alludes once again to Hitchcock, however, not to the famous shot in *Vertigo* (1958), but *Psycho* (1960), a reference that goes back to Paco's shower scene.

Pascale Thibaudeau (2003, p. 198) argues that in *The Flower of My Secret*, Almodóvar actually reverses the famous Hitchcockian shower scene from *Psycho* both in the gender of the characters and in the function performed by the shower curtain. In *Psycho* it was the woman who was showering and the man who, lurking on the other side of the curtain, attacked her, and in *The Flower of My Secret* the opposite happens: he showers while she, apparently, is the sexual predator lying in wait. In *Psycho* the shower curtain makes Marion (Janet Leigh), who is showering, vulnerable to Norman's (Anthony

Perkins) sexual/death (murderous) desire; in *The Flower of My Secret*, the curtain protects Paco by separating him from the sexual desire of the other, in this case Leo. This reversal effect is also reinforced in the bathtub scene with Leo when we see her crawl out alive, unlike Marion, who is shown dead in the bathtub.

*The Flower of My Secret* clearly incorporates iconographic and auditory references to Hitchcock, both in terms of authorial formalisation processes, such as the kiss between the couple reflected in a mirror and the materialisation of the mother's voice, and in terms of rewriting, such as the shower scene, which Almodóvar splits into segments and reverses to suit the needs of the text. However, Evans (2005, p. 155) draws attention to Almodóvar's 'anxiety of influence' – a term coined by Harold Bloom (1973) – and argues that the filmmaker's intention behind referencing earlier texts is not an act of rebellion against the power of Hollywood or to surpass the original text, but rather to execute discursive operations that form part of writing a film, which he wants to endow with its own structure and visual identity.

As mentioned previously, in addition to Hitchcockian influences, *The Flower of My Secret* also draws on a number of earlier texts, or fragments thereof, which it incorporates into its fabric, just like a transplant operation, with a view to achieving particular narrative or aesthetic goals. This is the case with two segments that include television broadcasts, one involving a screaming competition and the other a song by Chavela Vargas.

Just as Leo manages to emerge from the bathtub, a prolonged scream of terror comes from elsewhere that culminates the scene. The next shot *diegetises* the scream by linking it to television images taken from a competition held in Colmenar de Oreja, a town near Madrid. Almodóvar told EFE that he found the screaming competition fascinating and decided to include it in his film because it was 'very original, Spanish and fun' (1995, n/p). However, no matter how fascinating, original and fun he found the competition, what seems evident is that the function of the scream incorporated into the text is none other than to ratify Leo's *resurrection* from

the kingdom of the dead. Therefore, even though narratively speaking the scream is integrated into the subsequent scene featuring the television, discursively it belongs to the previous scene, where the viewer hears it just as Leo, like Lazarus, rises from the dead. The *diegetisation* of the scream in this scene enables the film to move smoothly into the next which features a television in a bar, where Leo is sitting[6] drinking a *carajillo*, her face utterly pale, her eyes expressionless from being so swollen and her hair still wet. The sound of screams coming from the television deeply distress Leo and makes her cover her ears, prompting the waiter to change the channel. Chavela Vargas then appears on the screen preparing to sing *En el último trago*. This is a noteworthy transition, which seems to seamlessly extract the essence of the singer's poetic voice from the shrill screams of the background noise.

In the film's script, Almodóvar noted that (1995, p. 115), 'with her broken voice, forged through a lifetime of hell, Chavela conveys all the pain accumulated by Leo.' Indeed, the lyrics of the song do seem to echo the feelings of the protagonist:

> Share this bottle with me/And with the last drop we'll leave/I want to see what forgetting you tastes like/…/Tonight I won't beg you/Tonight you're really leaving/How difficult it is to have to leave you/Without feeling that you no longer love me…

These verses echo Leo's marital crisis by expressing definitive loss, expanding and verbalising the emotional state in which the protagonist finds herself immersed. In doing so, the song emphasises her state of mind, thereby performing a tautological function (Aronica, 2005, p. 59). The *bolero* then continues:

> The years have taught me nothing/I always make the same mistakes/Once again, toasting with strangers/And crying over the same sorrows…

[6] Hornero (2022, p. 118) highlights that in this scene Leo is no longer wearing red, but blue, its opposite, representing her grief. The colour of the clothing gives us clues about the character's emotional state.

Alluding to a new relationship, the song's lyrics anticipate Leo's future romance with Ángel, and thus serve not only as a tautological function but also a proleptic one, even though, because the film ends abruptly – which makes it more modern than classic – the viewer never finds out whether Leo will make the same mistakes and experience the same pain in her new relationship as in her previous relationship.

This is how *The Flower of My Secret* uses television to incorporate two intertexts, in this case two texts that exist outside the film: the screaming competition and Chavela's song. This not only enriches the film visually and aesthetically, but also strengthens the narrative, by first culminating a truly harrowing scene, and second, by emphasising the extremely dramatic situation that Leo, the protagonist, is going through after avoiding the black hole of suicide.

## 7. Physical transition, life transition. The ancestral village

Broken by grief, Leo decides to leave the bar. She walks down the street in a trance until she finds herself caught up in a protest march by medical students demanding more rights from the González government. The festive atmosphere of their chanting and white lab coats contrasts with Leo's desolation, which is intensified when she sees an advertisement in a shop window for Roca bathroom suites, whose slogan '*Te quiero a ti. Roca*' (I love you. Roca) encapsulated her relationship with Paco. Swept along by the student protest, as if she were a ragdoll, Leo faints and is caught in Ángel's arms. The angle of the camera moves to a boom shot highlighting Leo's blue outfit in midst of the white sea of waving students and leaflets flying into the sky above the apartments and trees.

The scene then transitions to a birds-eye view of a billboard on the FNAC building advertising the *Amanda Gris Anthology*. This ellipsis gives way to the image of Leo tucked into bed in Ángel's apartment. Once again, the image of Amanda Gris is left behind, in this case by the camera, which quickly moves to where Leo awakens – one might say to a new life – in a bed in an

open-plan bedroom with large windows with panoramic views. Gloria Camarero interprets this as a sign of the protagonist's new situation, who seems to be regaining her personal stability and forgetting the disorientation she displayed shortly before in the bar and on the streets of Madrid amid the chaos of the student protest. The scene thus becomes 'a reflection of the situation experienced by the characters and expresses their feelings at each moment' (Camarero, 2016, pp. 31-32).

At this point, a new intertextual element is introduced in the form of the song, *Ay, amor* by Cuban singer Bola de Nieve, which reinforces and comments the transition:

> Oh love, if you take my soul/Take my pain away from me too/.../Oh love, if you leave me my life/Let me feel my soul too/If all that remains in me is pain and life/Oh love, don't let me live...

The lyrics of the song verbalise Leo's plea for love, soul/passion and life, not pain and life, in which case she would rather die. *Soul* to feel and *life* to live. And with the pain caused by Paco becoming less intense, Leo's entreaty to the universe will live on through Ángel's love. In this scene, Ángel tells Leo that last night she revealed to him 'the flower of her secret' – to paraphrase Amanda Gris. This scene is important because, in addition to being the title of the film, the viewer now realises that Ángel knows Amanda Gris intimately, as much, if not more, than Leo herself.

In a scene that seems to support the change that Leo seems willing to make in her life, she and Ángel return to Leo's apartment where Leo and Betty have a painful conversation in which Betty confesses to being Paco's lover. In a typical Almodóvarian twist, Betty reproaches Leo for not having noticed it herself, such was her blindness and obstinacy. In any event, Betty's confession was already metaphorically foreshadowed in the scene with the ankle boots, whose proleptic function is thus definitively confirmed.

Having ended her relationship with Paco, whom she had just discovered is her best friend's lover, and threatened by her publishers, Leo decides to accompany her mother to the ancestral village. They travel in Ángel's car, in a

scene where drama merges with comedy, a mixture of genres that is common in Almodóvar's writing. Leo and her mother travel in the back seat, the former with a stricken face that betrays her state of mind, even though she tries to hide it, while her mother jokes with Ángel with the charm and spontaneity of women who have always lived in Spanish villages, whether in Extremadura or La Mancha. At one point she tells him 'Ángel, don't go on a diet, you're very handsome just the way you are…' She then starts to recite a poem to the village, while leaving behind the colourful and deafening world of the city of Madrid and entering the rural horizontality of the La Mancha landscape:

> I had Leo accompany her mother to Almagro, a village thirty kilometres from mine that represents the quintessence of La Mancha. For their arrival, I chose a street that resembles the one where my mother lives. And I wrote Chus Lampreave dialogues spoken a thousand times by my own mother. I also photographed the endless fields of red earth that touch the sky. The fields of that horizonless La Mancha landscape that caught my eye as a child (…) And I saw from the car the ash-coloured olive trees dotting the endless land. And Chus recites *Mi aldea* [My Village] as they approach Almagro, a poem my mother often recites (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 161).

Here again, autofictional writing finds its way into the text. As Almodóvar himself states, the film structures Leo's journey back to her roots using dialogue taken from real life superimposed on the equally real landscapes of La Mancha (F6). In fact, the lyrics of the poem cover everything from the sun that bathes the landscape and the mountains, to the birds that flutter and chirp, and the sheep that bleat and graze, as well as shepherd huts, orchards and the houses that give it its identity. Here, then, is a fully-fledged presentation of the village, beautifully done through the poetic language recited by the mother. Almodóvar himself insisted on labelling the film his most autofictional, even though this was influenced by Leo's pain: 'Without realising it, the husband's visit was the pretext for making my most La

Mancha-esque film (to date). Leo's pain at being abandoned transported me, without asking my permission, back to my roots' (1995, p. 163).

F6. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

As the car drives down a street, which is reminiscent of the street where Almodóvar's family lived, the neighbours rush out to greet them; however, their excitement contrasts sharply with Leo's desolation, who, as a result of fainting, is carried into the house by Ángel while the church bells ring. The script notes that 'they look like newlyweds entering their bedroom on their wedding night' (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 130), given that, in a sense, it is anticipating what awaits the couple. However, before that, Leo regains her will to live under the protection of the huge vine in the courtyard. If her mother's voice gave birth (to the shot) and breathed life into her, then it is the village that nourished her, breathing joy into her. Her mother and the house, the house in the village, her origins, thus become decisive nutrients for Leo's new awakening to life, her rebirth, which culminates in Ángel's love.

During her stay in the village, Leo learns to make bobbin lace with a group of women, her mother's neighbours, in such an immersive way that her pain dissipates for good. Indeed, Leo regains her *soul* to feel and her *life* to live, just like the lyrics of Bola de Nieve's song suggested when it was introduced, as already mentioned, as an intertext.

## 8. Romance and noir, feminine and masculine. Other intertextual references

Leo is now a different woman and increasingly removed from the idea of a 'cow without a bell' i.e. disorientated, aimless and unprotected, as her mother called her with no small amount of humour; a condition that women are forced into when their husbands disappear. The fact is that during her stay in her ancestral village, Leo is finally destined to find her 'bell', the first sign of which is evidenced in the phone call Leo receives from Alicia. The publisher excitedly congratulates Leo for the two novels she has submitted, which she says are among the best ever written by Amanda Gris. Somewhat confused at first, Leo instinctively thinks about Ángel given that, as mentioned, Ángel knows Amanda Gris intimately. As she suspected, Leo finds herself with an impromptu *ghostwriter* who, without consulting her, decided to write the novels demanded by the market in her name, thus enabling her to fulfil her contract with the publisher.

Leo is therefore no longer Amanda Gris. Ángel is now Amanda Gris. This constitutes an unnatural role reversal if we consider that romantic literature, published under a pseudonym, is typically written by women as highlighted by Ángel in their first meeting. Important to note is that when Leo's publishers rejected her attempt to write another type of literature, she was able to afford the luxury of publishing a scathing column criticising her own romance novels in the *El País* literary supplement titled, *Is Amanda Gris a good typist?*, also under a pseudonym, in this case Paz Sufrategui – a name the film took directly from the press officer at Almodóvar's El Deseo production company. In parallel, Ángel also published a column, under the pseudonym Paqui Derma, entitled *Amanda Gris, the Alexandre Dumas of romance novels*, in which he passionately defends the romance genre practised by Amanda Gris. This passion leads Ángel to write novels in the name of Amanda Gris, which, due to Leo's lack of inspiration, free her from her commercial constraints.

As a result, Leo can now abandon her past as a writer of romance novels and begin a new phase dedicated to literary criticism and noir fiction. Stripped now of the mask of Amanda Gris, a new Leo emerges as a noir fiction writer, contributor to *El País* and the editor's romantic interest. The editor who, appropriating the pseudonym that Leo has discarded, establishes himself as a writer of romance novels.

In his study of cultural subtexts in *The Flower of My Secret*, José Colmeiro argues that:

> The semiotics of colour establishes a series of chromatic codes that are culturally linked to concepts of gender and literary genre, which Almodóvar exploits and subverts in his films, claiming the freedom to reinterpret these codes in accordance with opposing values that destabilise the traditional system of symbolic representation (1997, p. 117).

In fact, the romance novels, associated with femininity, are attributed to Ángel, and the noir novels, associated with masculinity, to Leo, in a subversion of established gender and literary conventions. This can even be appreciated on the film poster which depicts a large bouquet of roses enclosed in a heart-shaped outline on which the black, stylised silhouette of a woman typing is superimposed (F7). Designed by Juan Gatti, the poster perfectly sums up this dialectic between noir (black), in this case, associated with female literature, and romance (rose), associated with the (masculine) heart.

However, Ángel's connection to femininity does not end there, but continues until the end of the film, where Ángel even seems to adopt a female identity. This is evidenced in the epilogue, where, referring to a 1981 George Cukor film, Leo, sitting next to Ángel in the orange glow of the fire says: 'This reminds me of *Rich and Famous*, the two writer friends, toasting, alone, far from the world, in front of a fireplace.' Thibaudeau argues that: 'Ángel has taken on both Amanda Gris's literary identity and her sexual [gender] identity ('the two friends')' (2003, p. 199). Commenting indirectly about this, Almodóvar stated:

> The change that takes place in Leo's life is a change of colour, almost a transfer of colours between life and writing. At first, she writes romance [rose] novels, yet her life is very dark [black]. In the end, the opposite happens: her outlook on life is much warmer (not exactly rosy, that would be unrealistic, but orange, like the sky at sunset or the fire in a fireplace). As for her writing, although it is not specified in the film, I can reveal that it will be dark and grotesque, inspired by the reality that fills the pages of newspapers. Leo has several folders full of newspaper clippings about extraordinary events. They are not seen in *The Flower*, but they are on her desk. I put them there (1995, p. 174).


F7. *The Flower of My Secret*. Poster by Juan Gatti (1995)

Indeed, this would seem the case, as the change experienced by Leo in her life is not 'rose' or 'black', but 'orange', as the film indicates through the reference to *Rich and Famous*, and her writing is definitely leaning towards noir because that is what the director wanted, as indicated in the above quote.

Another constant feature of the film are references to other films. In addition to the invocation of *Rich and Famous* – and with it, the introduction of orange, rather than rose, as the colour symbolising the couple's relationship, there is another earlier scene in the Plaza de la Cebada, where a drunken Ángel, trying to seduce Leo, quotes a famous line from *Casablanca* when Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) asks Rick (Humprey Bogart) if he remembers the last time they met. He responds: 'The Germans wore grey, you wore blue' and Ángel adds 'You were wearing blue the day you ran away from your life and collided into mine…' referring to the day he saw Leo after she had tried to take her own life.

In reference to this, Almodóvar stated:

> In addition to carrying bodies, clothes carry emotions. Carriers and transmitters (…) 'You were wearing blue the day you ran away from your life and collided with mine,' Ángel says, his voice choked with emotion. Leo pulls away from him with aversion. She has been trying to forget that moment for months (it was the day her husband left her forever; she hadn't thought about it, but it was true that she was wearing blue jeans and a blue coat). Ángel, however, will never forget it (1995, p. 179).

*The Flower of My Secret* uses this new variant of intertextuality to enrich the text by incorporating dialogues (*Casablanca*) or staging techniques (*Rich and Famous*), whether to strengthen the identity or relationships between the characters or, in parallel, to establish particular possibilities for the leading couple.

However, *The Flower of My Secret* also draws on other texts that, without being intertexts per se, enrich the film with artistic and visual elements. In this case, dance. In later films, such as *Talk to Her* (2002), Almodóvar works with dance in a much more emphatic way, to the point where it can be referred to as intertextuality, as the dance segments incorporated from the work of Pina Bausch interact with the diegesis, as argued in Poyato (2015, pp. 134-139). In the case of the film in question, however, there is no interaction only incorporation, which was probably motivated by Almodóvar's prior

commitment to Joaquín Cortés and Manuela Vargas. Even though both are included as characters in the film's narrative matrix, Vargas as Blanca, Leo's domestic help, and Cortés as Antonio, Blanca's son, their narrative roles are mere pretexts for including them in the diegesis as dancers. This is apparent from the very beginning, when Antonio, to the beat of his mother's clapping, taps his heels on a platform accompanied by a Spanish gypsy playing a *cajón*. Blanca has the appearance of a sinewy, Andalusian gypsy and is serious and focused. Antonio shares his mother's dark skin tone and slender body. As noted in the script, the two make up 'an original and explosive couple' (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 139).

The film incorporates the mother and son flamenco show, which is staged in an independent theatre in Madrid, towards the end. Ángel and Leo attend as spectators and talk about the new role he has taken on as Amanda Gris. However, the focus is on the dance performance, which the script deals with in detail:

> Antonio and Blanca dance alone on stage to a *soleá* by Miles Davis…Blanca is an intense, original dancer. Her movements suggest something ancestral and at the same time highly stylised. Physically, she seems distraught…the deep flamenco sentiment is fused with swing, perfectly assembled, like two sides of the same coin (Almodóvar, 1995, p. 139).

F8. *The Flower of My Secret* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1995)

In essence, this scene showcases the beauty of the choreographed interaction between red and black (F8) portrayed in images that are almost devoid of narrative dimension but capture the plasticity of the bodies as they glide across the stage, 'stretched, torn between expressions of pain and the resistance of movement to immobility' (Seguin, 2009, p. 75).

## 9. By way of conclusion

Viewed today, thirty years after its release, *The Flower of My Secret* is a film that brings together many of the key elements of Almodóvar's later work. Among these, it is worth highlighting the use of intertextuality, both in terms of the selection of texts or fragments of texts that, woven into the film, foreshadow, ratify or reinforce particular events. They can also enrich or comment on events, as in the case of the anecdotal episodes incorporated from a literary text by Almodóvar himself, *Patty Diphusa*. Equally noteworthy is the work of creating forms around particular motifs that remain in a state of latency, that is, *suspended*, waiting to be grafted into later films where they eventually *germinate*, such as organ donation or the murder of a perfidious man who tries to rape his partner's teenage daughter as in *All About My Mother* and *Volver*, respectively.

*The Flower of My Secret* also draws on references to other films, such as *Casablanca* and *Rich and Famous*, which enrich aspects or profiles relating to the characters. Other additions, such as the flamenco performance, however, become mere aesthetic or visual embellishments, in this case a brooding study of red and black spots, even though, according to Seguin, the incestuous dimension may stir the characters' hearts. Similarly, Almodóvar's film works with *autofiction* in a series of episodes alluding to the life of the filmmaker himself – here transmuted into a writer – which he culminates in *Pain and Glory*. This repertoire of additions also includes, among others, *En el último trago*, songs that are important not only because their lyrics define the situations experienced by the character, but also because the essence of the voice of the person reciting them, in this case Chavela Vargas, tunes in to and emphasises Leo's state of mind.

Moreover, in addition to rewriting the central shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho,* at the very heart of *The Flower of My Secret* lies a series of scenes in which Almodóvar incorporates a television intertext, specifically a screaming contest, a dialectic of opposites – the most high-brow cinema in contrast to the most popular television, which finds its continuation and expansion in other examples of dialectic of opposites, such as those involving the pairs romance novel/noir novel; literature/life; love/hate; city/village; book/press (literary), etc., which feed the writing of a film that has become, in its entirety, a veritable intertextual melting pot.

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